

THE HERO OF HOPE

Illustrated biography of Cardinal Van Thuân

Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuân was born on April 17, 1928, in the city of Hue, the old capital of Vietnam. His father was named Am and his mother Hiep. Thuân was the oldest of eight brothers and belonged to one of the most important families in his country.

Thuân loved his family very much, and above all, he felt great pride in having martyred ancestors. Thuân admired in a special way his uncles Thuc, who was a priest, and Diem, his godfather, with whom he had long conversations about many things, especially about God, life, the history of their family, and their country.

When Thuân was 13 years old he asked his parents to enter the seminary because he felt that God was calling him to be a priest. His parents warned him that life at the seminary was very demanding and that he certainly would not like the food. But Thuân was determined and, from the first day, he got used to the new life and he always accepted everything they gave him to eat. Thanks to his excellent memory, he memorized everything he read and learned and quickly became one of the best students at the seminar. He was also very good at sports especially playing football with his colleagues and he enjoyed swimming too.

Thuân grew up and was ordained a priest on June 11, 1953. Thuân's dream was to work in a small village parish, but his Bishop, D. Urrutia told him that this would probably never happen because he recognized in Thuân great qualities to be a good leader. So, the young Father Thuân worked in large parishes in Vietnam, studied in Rome and he was the rector of the seminary.

Thuân loved Our Lady very much and went to Lourdes and Fátima whenever he could. One day he felt that Our Lady was preparing him to suffer a great deal. In fact, Vietnam was on the verge of a huge war and the Communists were trying to dominate the country. Some of his uncles

fought hard for independence of Vietnam and were eventually killed, including Diem, Thuân's godfather. It was very hard for him.

In 1967 Thuan was ordained a Bishop and his motto was: "Joy and Hope". At that time, his city was attacked by communists, who persecuted Catholics, wanted to destroy the Church, and make anyone believe in God. Thuân encouraged people not to give up on Jesus and dedicated himself wholeheartedly so that the Church would become more and more alive and strong. He trained many young men to be priests so that there was no shortage of priests during the war, and he also taught many men and women to be able to collaborate in the various services of the parishes. He wanted everyone to be prepared for difficult times. In addition, he helped refugees by sending them medicine, rice, bread, and milk.

Thuân was a very courageous bishop who was not afraid of enemies and was therefore arrested. They took him to a very poor house, where he could only celebrate Mass in private and he was not allowed to speak to anyone. Thuân felt very sad that he could not help the faithful. He then decided to write a book in secret. He used the back of old calendar sheets, where he wrote messages of hope for Catholics. Then, with the help of a little boy who was copying them on the sly, his texts were spreading everywhere. When the communists found out it was too late ... the book had already been sent to other countries to be translated and known around the world! That book still exists today and is called "The Way of Hope".

Because of this, Thuân was taken to a much worse prison. He spent the whole day alone in a very dark, cramped, smelly, windowless cell. He could never go out or talk to anyone. He was very hungry and thirsty and when the guards appeared, it was always to insult and mistreat him. Thuan felt fear and anguish. He prayed and asked God why he allowed him to waste so much time in prison. He realized then that even there, he could continue to love God and that this was more important than all the good things he could do if he were not in prison. He discovered that God could never be taken from him and his heart was filled with joy and hope.

Then Thuân was transferred to another prison, where he comforted and encouraged the other prisoners and offered to do the toughest jobs. At that time, he managed to sculpt a small wooden cross, which he started to use on his chest until the end of his life. He also persuaded the guards to let his friends send him a "medicine" for his stomach, which in reality was mass wine. Thus, full of joy, Thuân could celebrate the Eucharist on the sly, with a drop of wine and a tiny piece of bread, in the palm of his hand. As Thuân became friends with all the prisoners and even the guards already liked him, they closed it again ... but Thuân was no longer afraid and, in the new prison, he even taught Latin songs to the guards.

After thirteen years Thuân was released, but he was not allowed to live in his country. He went to Rome and there he collaborated with Pope St. John Paul II and wrote several books full of wisdom. One day the Pope asked him to preach the retreat for the Pope and all Curia of the Vatican! Thuan accepted and humbly spoke to them about hope and told them of his experience in war and in prison. Shortly afterward he was appointed cardinal. In 2000 Thuân became seriously ill. He accepted all suffering with great patience and always thanked God for everything that had happened to him during his life. When he could no longer speak, he would look at the crucifix on the wall. Thuân passed away peacefully on September 16, 2002. In 2018 he was proclaimed venerable by Pope Francis.