

Father O'Connor's Homily for 18 August 2024  
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time-B

Proverbs 9: 1-6  
Ephesians 5: 15-20  
John 6: 51-58

For five Sundays – and this is Sunday number four – we read from Saint John's Gospel, chapter 6, about Jesus, the Bread of Life. Perhaps you are getting tired of passages that sound so much alike each Sunday. So today I thought that I would share three reflections on the Eucharist by a bishop from Viet Nam, Archbishop Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan [*WIN van TWAHN*] [1928-2002], that I found very moving. And I hope that you do too. His book is called **Five Loaves and Two Fish**. He was declared "Venerable" by Pope Francis in 2017, meaning that he has been judged to have lived a life of heroic virtue. His cause for canonization as a saint continues.

Archbishop Van Thuan was the Coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon. When the Communists took over South Viet Nam, he was imprisoned in 1975 for thirteen years – nine of which were in solitary confinement. And he had a lot of time to pray about and reflect on his belief in Jesus' presence in the Eucharist: Jesus, the Bread of Life. The archbishop writes:

1) *"Were you able to celebrate Mass in prison?" is the question that many people ask me. And they are right. The Eucharist is the most beautiful prayer. It is the culmination of the life of Jesus.*

*When I answer, "Yes, I did celebrate Mass in prison," I already know their next question: "How were you able to get bread and wine?"*

*When I was arrested, I had to leave immediately with empty hands. The next day, I was allowed to request in writing the things that I needed most – things like clothes and toothpaste.*

*I wrote, "And please, could you send me a little bit of wine as medication for my bad stomach?" The faithful understood my request, and they sent me a small bottle of wine for Mass, labeling it "stomach medicine" and some hosts they sealed in a dehumidifying pouch [a flashlight].*

*And then the police asked me, "Do you have a bad stomach?"*

*"Yes," I said.*

*"Well, here's a little medicine for you."*

*And I will never be able to express my immense joy. Every day, with three drops of wine and one drop of water in the palm of my hand, I celebrated Mass by memory... and the Catholic prisoners around me received Holy Communion.*

*We made little containers from the paper of cigarette boxes to reserve the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus in the Eucharist was always with me, in my shirt pocket. At night the prisoners would take turns keeping adoration. Many Christians regained the fervor of their faith, and many non-Christians converted.*

*The strength and love of Jesus is irresistible. The darkness of prison became light. And the seed of faith germinated underground.*

Here is Archbishop Van Thuan's second reflection:

2) *Of my thirteen years in prison, I spent nine years in solitary confinement. During this period, I celebrated Mass every day about 3:00 in the afternoon, the hour of Jesus' agony on the cross. I was alone and could say Mass as I wished – in Latin, French or Vietnamese. I always carried with me that little container with the Blessed Sacrament –remembering His promise: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” [John 6: 56]. These were the most beautiful Masses of my whole life.*

*In the evening, from 9:00 to 10:00, I had an hour of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, during which I sang Eucharistic songs in Vietnamese, despite the noise of the loudspeaker that blasted Communist propaganda to me every day from 5:00 in the morning until 11:30 at night. I felt a singular peace of spirit and of heart and the joy and serenity of the company of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.*

Archbishop Van Thuan wrote this prayer while he was in solitary confinement:

3) *Jesus, beloved, this evening in the back of my cell – without light, without window, and stiflingly hot – I think with overwhelming nostalgia of my pastoral life. Eight years ago as a bishop, I was remembering that I used to celebrate Mass with a gold-plated chalice. And now your Blood is in the palm of my hand.*

*Once I used to travel the world for conferences and meetings, and now I am confined in a narrow cell without a window.*

*Once I used to go and visit you in the tabernacle in church. And now I carry you with me, night and day, in my shirt pocket.*

*Once I used to celebrate Mass in front of thousands of faithful people. And now, in the darkness of night, alone in this prison.*

*Once I used to preach spiritual exercises to priests, religious and lay people. And now a priest, who is also a prisoner, preaches to me through a crack in the wall.*

*I am happy here in this cell because you are with me. Because you want me to live here with you. I have spoken a lot in my lifetime, and now I speak no more. It is your turn, Jesus, to speak to me, for I am listening to you.*

*If you were to permit me to choose, I would not change anything because you are here with me. I am not afraid anymore. I have understood. I am following you in your Passion and in your Resurrection.*

These and other reflections from Archbishop Van Thuan in his book, **Five Loaves and Two Fish**, really moved me – and I hope they touched your heart too.

You and I have the opportunity to celebrate Mass so often and so freely. We can come to church and pray before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle without fear. We have the opportunity and we have the freedom, but do we make the most of these gifts?

*Jesus said to the crowds: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. And the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” [John 6: 51, 56].*

Yes, Jesus, we believe and we are most grateful that you are our Bread of Life.

And that you are with us here in the Eucharist, now and always. Amen.