

Fr. Curtis Miller August 1-2, 2020 Homily for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

In the seminary during Lent, some of our meals were silent, and one of us would have to read aloud to everyone from a life of a saint or another spiritual book. One Ash Wednesday, it was my turn to read and I was given a book by Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, a Vietnamese bishop who had been imprisoned for many years by the Communists. The only problem with my reading was that I didn't know how to pronounce all the Vietnamese names, and I realized then that a large number of the seminarians in front of me were, in fact, from Vietnam. I tried my best, but I still left the Vietnamese seminarians laughing at my failed attempt to say Vietnamese words. Afterwards, my classmate, Huan Ngo, told me that it sounded like I was speaking Chinese.

In spite of my terrible pronunciation, the power of Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan's story came through. He took the title of his book, *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, from the Gospel passage we just heard because he thought that this story described his experience of offering up the little that he had to God during the time of his imprisonment. Cardinal Van Thuan was named a bishop in Saigon in 1975, just a week before the Americans withdrew and South Vietnam fell to the Communist North. Van Thuan was arrested and placed in prison for thirteen years, nine of which he spent in solitary confinement. During that time, he felt that there was nothing he could do and little that he could offer to God, but he offered all that he had. Unable to preach to large crowds, he smuggled out little scraps of paper with messages of faith and hope. Unable to celebrate Mass in his cathedral, he instead offered Mass at night, laying quietly on his bunk, with a few crumbs of bread and drops of wine in the palm of each hand, praying the words from memory. He crafted a little crucifix from bits of wood and wire. He was finally released in 1988, but exiled from his homeland in 1991, spending the final decade of his life as a cardinal in Rome, promoting peace and justice.

Another man who served in Vietnam at this time, offering the little he had completely to Jesus, was Brother William Gagnon. Brother William was actually once a parishioner at St. Paul's, from 1922-28, from age 17 to 23, living in Barton with his family. (I have to thank our parishioners, Kevin and Judy Coy, for introducing me to his incredible story). He was born in New Hampshire in 1905, and his French Canadian family moved around a lot, from New Hampshire to Canada and Barton, wherever they could find work.

As a young man, he dreamed of entering religious life, but the first order he approached turned him down because he suffered from kidney disease. Then he read a newspaper article about St. John of God, and felt called to join his order, which he did in 1931. The same year, his sister Marie-Eva, joined the Sisters of the Assumption, who ran St. Paul's School. Brother William dreamed of becoming a missionary and petitioned to be sent to French Indochina, now known as Vietnam. His request was granted, and he

travelled to North Vietnam in 1952, building a hospital in Bui-Chu. Unfortunately, war with the French had already broken out there. They did the best they could to help the poor and the sick, always short of funds and medical supplies. But Brother William was content to depend completely upon God and offering the little they could with love, writing, "Man may indeed have excellent programs and all the necessary materials, but if there is no charity, nothing can be done."

Eventually driven from the North, the brothers built another hospital in the South, near Saigon. By this time, America had become ensnared in the Vietnam War. Brother William was always gathering more supplies to provide for his patients. American soldiers laughed when they saw this strange, robed figure carrying their discarded supplies through the jungle. The war came closer, with bullets often riddling the hospital. A bomb blast destroyed it, and Brother William set about rebuilding it, cheerful to have more to offer God. The brothers tended the sick refugees, and wounded soldiers from both sides of the conflict. After two decades of service, Brother William was worn out by his labors. Still, he continued to serve as much as his strength would allow, until he passed away in 1972.

Both Cardinal Van Thuan and Brother William Gagnon have been declared Venerable, just two steps away from being canonized as saints. By offering the little they could give to Jesus, their five loaves and two fish, these men lived lives of extraordinary holiness. The stories of their lives can inspire us and nurture our souls.

In the story from today's Gospel, Jesus accepted the humble offering of five loaves and two fish. With these, He performed a miracle of love, and fed the multitudes. Perhaps you and I feel like we don't have much to offer God. That's alright. What's important is that we hand it all over to Jesus, so that He can bless it, multiply it into something greater, and then share it with more people than we could have possibly imagined.