

HOLY THURSDAY 2020

By Father Joe Shea

Some of you here may have read about the heroic life of Bishop Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan. He was the Catholic Bishop of Saigon when that city fell to the Communists on April 30, 1975. The Communists immediately arrested Bishop Van Thuan for the crime of being the head of the Catholic Church in Saigon. They threw him into prison and subjected him to cruel treatment, especially by placing him into solitary confinement. For nearly 13 years, Bishop Van Thuan was isolated from most of the other prisoners so that he could not contaminate them with his subversive beliefs about Jesus Christ.

When Bishop Van Thuan was arrested, he was taken so suddenly that he had no opportunity to gather any of his things. During his first weeks in prison, the one question that dominated his mind was: would he ever be able to say Mass again.

Soon after his imprisonment, the Communist authorities gave Bishop Van Thuan permission to write a letter to his people to ask for only the most basic necessities: some clothes, toothpaste, and medicines. In his letter, Bishop Van Thuan also requested a little wine as medicine for his stomach aches. Along with the wine and the other things that Bishop Van Thuan requested, his parishioners secretly sent some hosts, hidden in a flashlight tube.

Each night, with a few of the faithful gathered close by in their cells, Bishop Van Thuan would place three drops of wine and a drop of water in the palm of his left hand and a host in his right

hand. Then, reciting the Eucharistic Prayer from memory, he was able to give the Body and Blood of Christ to himself and to his fellow prisoners so that they were not alone or abandoned in their trials. Bishop Van Thuan wrote that the opportunity to say Mass was his “*opportunity to extend my hands and nail myself to the cross with Jesus, to drink with him the bitter chalice.*”

If Bishop Van Thuan had been caught saying Mass, and there were many close calls, the consequences would have been immediate and severe. But Bishop Van Thuan said that it gave him the greatest joy to run that risk—simply because that was his life—he was a priest, and God had created him so that he might make His Son present in that prison camp and to make our Eucharistic Lord the companion of those who suffered there.

Bishop Van Thuan said that he always loved the Holy Eucharist, but never like he did when he was imprisoned and could not celebrate the Eucharist every day. After being freed from prison, Bishop Van Thuan wrote, “*Those were the most beautiful Masses of my life.*” Bishop Van Thuan’s isolation in prison developed an even a greater love for the Holy Eucharist than he had before.

That’s my prayer for all of us on this Holy Thursday night when we celebrate once again that moment when Jesus gave us the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper. I know that many of you who truly love the Holy Eucharist are really missing the opportunity to share physically in this precious gift because of your self-isolation during this coronavirus crisis. I am hoping that this isolation which prevents you from receiving Jesus in the Holy Eucharist physically will deepen in you a hunger for this

heavenly bread and develop in you an even greater love and appreciation for this treasure, that, sadly, many people miss often—even when they have the chance to go to Mass.

I remember reading a story about a young woman who took care of an elderly aunt for several years. The aunt had inherited a fair amount of money from her deceased brother, but never mentioned it to anyone. On her death bed she summoned her niece. *"You've been so good to me. I want to reward you for your goodness and your care of me. Take this frayed sweater of mine and wear it until you become rich."*

The niece expressed her gratitude, but was really disappointed. She felt

that her aunt could at least have left her a watch or a ring in gratitude for all she did for her. The niece buried the sweater in the bottom drawer of her bureau and went about her life.

A year after her aunt died, the niece dug out the sweater from the bottom of her drawer and wore while she did some yard work. She felt something in the sweater pocket. She found a key wrapped in a note that directed her to a safety deposit box at the local bank. When she opened it, she discovered that her aunt had given her legal title to a fortune of \$300,000.

How many people are like that young woman—often missing the glorious treasure that had been passed on to them because they never took the time to reflect on this holy mystery and the meaning of this most perfect GIFT that God has given us—the Holy Eucharist.

Tonight I would like to use the word GIFT as an acronym to assist us in our understanding and to develop a deeper love and appreciation for the Holy Eucharist, instituted on this holy night long ago.

The “G” of GIFT stands for GOD’S GENEROSITY. Outside the gift of the Holy Spirit, the most wonderful, beautiful, glorious gift that Jesus gave to us was the Holy Eucharist.

The gifts we give are symbols of our love, and there’s always a limit to what we can give. But, in the Eucharist, Jesus Christ doesn’t give us a symbol of Himself. Jesus, the divine Son of God, actually gives us the gift of Himself—Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

And this gift is priceless. If I told you that I was going to give away for free a million dollars to every person who came to St. Rose of Lima Church on the first Sunday we are allowed to open our church, I guarantee you, people would fly from all over the world to be here on that Sunday. Brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ, the Son of God—the One who made all the money, all the stocks and bonds, all the jewels and property in the

world, He is right here, every day, for us. That’s how generous God is.

If I told you that the next Sunday our church is open that LeBron James would be here to sign and give away a free pair of his basketball shoes, or that Taylor Swift was going to perform a free concert here on church grounds, I guarantee you, our entire Church property would be swarming with people. But the God who created Lebron James and Taylor Swift—and everyone

else—is here to give us Himself at Mass. That’s how incredible God’s generosity is.

The “I” of GIFT stands for INCORPORATION. Every time we receive Christ in Holy Communion, we are supposed to become more and more incorporated into Christ and the mystery of salvation. At Baptism, we were initiated into the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s one Death and Resurrection—a divine mystery is renewed, fully realized, and made present in every Eucharist.

So, at every Mass, when we receive Jesus in Holy Communion, we should become more and more incorporated into the mystery of Christ and become more and more like Christ. Physical food transforms into our physical bodies, but the heavenly food of the Eucharist is meant to transform us into the Person of Christ. Ludwig Feuerbach once said: “*We become what we eat.*” That’s absolutely true with the Eucharist. . We are to become His Real Divine Presence in the world—the selfless love and care Jesus demonstrated when He washed His disciples’ feet. The more we partake of Jesus Christ worthily in Holy Eucharist, the more we will be incorporated into Christ and become His Real Divine Presence in the world.

The “F” of GIFT stands for FOOD—the heavenly food. When God created the universe, God established a universal law called the Law of Communion. This law states that every living creature needs food in order to live and that the food must suit the nature of the creature.

So, a canary is one kind of creature. It needs food to live, but the food must suit its nature. So a canary lives on seeds, vegetables and fruit. A snake is another kind of creature that survives on a diet of birds, other small reptiles, and small mammals.

Human beings are unique creatures because humans have a body and a soul, and each has a hunger. Each needs a food that fits its nature. For the physical body, because of its unique nature, we have physical food such as steak, mashed potatoes, beans, corn, hamburgers, pizza, lumpia, pan sit, tacos, enchiladas, and fruit to survive on.

Our soul has a unique nature, too, so it needs a unique food that fits its nature. God is so loving and wise and knows that need. So, for the hunger of our soul, God has given us the soul food of the Holy Eucharist.

And, just as our physical bodies will grow faint and even die if we do not provide our bodies with enough physical food, so it is with our souls. If we do not have spiritual food for our soul, then we will not have the strength to live Christ and the Gospel.

St. John tells in his Gospel, “*Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within in.*” This doesn’t mean that if we don’t go to Mass and receive Jesus’ Body and Blood at Communion that we will die physically. But it does mean that if we do not receive Holy Communion regularly, we eventually will die spiritually.

Brothers and sisters, there is a direct correlation between Mass attendance and the worthy reception of Holy Communion and

the decline of morality in our lives and in our world. The less we go to Mass faithfully when we can, the less spiritual strength we will have to avoid evil and to do the right.

Why has sin increased dramatically over the past three decades—lying,

cheating, stealing, pornography, adultery, fornication, graft, blasphemy and sacrilege, corruption, divorce, abortion, infanticide, murder, violence, mutilation, and mayhem? It's because Mass attendance, the worthy reception of Holy Communion, and living what we celebrate has declined dramatically in the same period of time. When we do not celebrate the Eucharist when we can, we simply do not have the spiritual strength to resist evil.

Finally, the “T” of GIFT stands for THANKSGIVING. One of the titles we use for the holy Mass is *Eucharist*—a Greek word that means “*giving thanks*” or “*thanksgiving*.” We come to Mass to give thanks to God in this perfect prayer of thanks for all His blessings and gifts, especially the gift of His beloved Son and the saving grace He won for us on Calvary.

Imagine if you gave me a gift every day for a year and I didn't say thanks to you even once, how would you feel? Hurt, and rightly so! Well, brothers and sisters, God gives us hundreds of thousands of gifts every day—every breath we draw, every heart beat, everything we see, smell, hear, taste and touch, our families and friends, this great country and all the opportunities it affords us, not to mention all the spiritual gifts which are far more important. God has given us everything. And God asks us

to “*keep holy the Lord’s Day*” by giving God one hour of our week to come and give Him thanks—one hour out of 168! Let’s not be ungrateful.

Bishop Van Thuan’s isolation in prison and his inability to celebrate Mass regularly developed in him an even greater love and appreciation for the Holy Eucharist than he ever had before. Like Bishop Van Thuan, I am hoping and praying that the isolation this coronavirus crisis has forced on us and the inability to celebrate Mass and receive Holy Communion regularly will give all of us a chance to renew our love and to deepen our hunger and appreciation for this most precious GIFT of the Holy Eucharist.