

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 5, 2018

Spiritual Ponderings

Cardinal Thuận's Ten Rules of Life

One of my spiritual heroes is Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận. He was a Vietnamese bishop that was captured by the communist when they took over the country. He was held in prison for many years with a significant amount of that time being in solitary confinement. In prison he wrote books to inspire Vietnamese Christians on the back of Vietnamese calendars. The Vatican eventually negotiated his release and John Paul II made him the head of the Congregation of Peace and Justice. He became truly famous when John Paul II asked him to lead the Papal Lenten Retreat in the year 2000. After his captivity he spoke of "Ten Rules of Life" that he adopted in prison that helped him survive and remain faithful to the Catholic Faith. Quotes from his "Ten Rules of Life" will be in bold and my commentary will be in the regular font.

I do not wish to speak about the negative aspects of captivity. I offered all that up to Jesus, Mary and Joseph. What will interest you most is sincere, fraternal sharing of my experience - understanding God's liberating power in my day to day existence.

Even in his introduction to his writing, I find Cardinal Thuận to be inspiring. His refusal to focus on the negative aspects of his captivity invites me to focus on the positive things in my life and not on the negative. He does not deny his past but rather realizes that God has allowed these horrible things to happen to him for a reason and therefore his suffering has not been in vain. His suffering has turned himself into the person that God needed him to be now because he offered his suffering up to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

During those thirteen years I became aware of all my weaknesses, physical as well as mental. There were moments when I could not concentrate at all, when I could not even pray. Jesus then sent me light. "I must live the testament of Christ" - In his testament, just before dying, Jesus left me his word, his body, his mother, his Church, his priesthood, his new commandment, his mission, the duty to make all things one. Several times a day, I repeated to myself, "I must live the testament of Christ" - It's simple, it's inexhaustible.

Our world encourages us to overlook, ignore, and disregard our weaknesses but Cardinal Thuận discovers the strength to survive by acknowledging his weaknesses.

1. I WILL LIVE THE PRESENT MOMENT TO THE FULLEST

From the very first moment of my arrest, the words of Bishop John Walsh, who had been imprisoned for 12 years in Communist China, came to my mind. On the day of his liberation Bishop Walsh said, "I have spent half my life waiting" It is true. All prisoners, myself included, constantly wait to be let go. I decided then and there that my captivity would not be merely a time of resignation but a turning point in my life. I decided I would not wait. I would live the present moment and fill it with love.

The first thing that struck me about the above quote was how Cardinal Thuận was inspired by the heroic life and death of Bishop John Walsh and now I am inspired by Cardinal Thuận's life and death. This makes me question who are my role models and what do they inspire me to do. What am I willing to die for?

The second thing that inspires me is that Cardinal Thuận made a decision to be an active person and not a passive person. He might not be able to control what was going to happen to him but he was going to control how he responded to it.

Day and night I was obsessed with the thought of my people (the people of his diocese). How was I going to stay in touch with my people? Just at the time when they needed their pastor most. The separation was heart-breaking. One night, light came: "It's simple, imitate the example of Saint Paul when he was in prison. He wrote letters to the various communities. The very next morning, I called to Quang, a little boy who was coming home from Mass. "Go and tell your mother to buy some old calendars".

Cardinal Thuận discovered a small way to love the people. I love the fact that he kept trying till he found away instead of just giving up.

2. I WILL DISCERN BETWEEN GOD AND GOD'S WORKS

Alone in my prison cell, I continued to be tormented by the fact that I was forty-eight years old, in the prime of my life, that I had worked for eight years as a bishop and gained so much pastoral experience and there I was isolated, inactive and far from my people... (1700km). One night, from the depths of my heart I could hear a voice

advising me: "Why torment yourself? You must discern between God and the works of God. Everything you have done and desire to continue to do, pastoral visits, training seminarians, sisters and members of religious orders, building schools, evangelizing non-Christians. All of that is excellent work, the work of God but it is not God! If God wants you to give I all up and put the work into his hands, do it and trust him. God will do the work infinitely better than you; he will entrust the work to others who are more able than you. You have only to choose God and not the works of God!"

I think this is one of the most important lessons that I have learned in life. Doing does not always equal loving. For example, I could do a lot of chores for my mother but I am not really loving her unless I also take time to talk and listen to her.

This light totally changed my way of thinking. When the Communist put me in the hold of the boat, the HAI-PHONG along with 1500 other prisoners and moved us to the north, I said to myself, "here is my cathedral, here are the people God has given me to care for, here is my mission: to ensure the presence of God among these, my despairing, miserable brothers. It is God's will that I am here. I accept his will". And from that minute onwards, a new peace filled my heart and stayed with me for thirteen years.

I have to remember that God places me where he needs me.



Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
August 12, 2018
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3. I WILL HOLD FIRMLY TO ONE SECRET: PRAYER

When I was let out of prison, several people remarked that at least I had had lot of time to pray! It's not as simple as you may think. God allowed me to see all my weaknesses, both physical and mental. Time passes so slowly in prison, particularly during solitary confinement. A week, a month, two months are exceedingly long but as they turn into years, it becomes an eternity! There were days when I was not able to recite a single prayer.

One of the key things that I have learned from Cardinal Thuận is that God loves us even when we can offer nothing to God in return. God's love for us is pure love and is not tainted by self-interest at all. In fact our God loves us even when we hate Him. Cardinal Thuận experienced God's love even when he was not able to pray.

A story came to my mind, the story of old Jim. Every day at twelve o'clock, Jim went into church and after not more than two minutes, he left. The sacristan was intrigued. One day, he grabbed Jim and asked, "What do you come in here for every day?"

"I come in say prayer"

"That's impossible. What kind of a prayer can you say in 2 minutes?"

"Me ignorant old man; pray to God my own pray."

"But what do you say?"

"I say, "Jesus, here Jim" and I go out"

Years go by. Jim grows old becomes ill and enters the hospital, in the ward for poor people. After a time, they see that Jim is going to die and the priest and a nurse are with him at his beside.

"Tell us, Jim, why is it that since your arrival in the ward everything has changed for the better? The men are happier and friendlier."

"Dun no. When I could walk, I went around and visit everybody, say hello, talk a bit. When I'm laid up. I call to everybody from my bed, laugh a lot, make everybody happy. Jim always happy."

"But why are you always happy?"

"When you get a visit every day, you happy, right?"

"That's right. But who comes to see you? We've never seen anyone."

"Jesus. He come every day at twelve o'clock."

"And what does he say to you?"

"He says, Jim, here Jesus!"

As Jim was dying, he gestured and smiled broadly and pointed to the chair beside his bed, inviting someone to sit down. After a short time, he smiled again, closed his eyes and died.

At times, when my strength failed and I could not even recite my prayers, I repeated, "Jesus, here Francis". Consolation came and I knew that Jesus was replying, "Francis, here Jesus".

Praying is being with someone, with Jesus.

4. I WILL SEE IN THE HOLY EUCHARIST MY ONLY POWER

"Were you able to say Mass in prison" - is a question I have been asked many, many times and when I say "Yes", I can foretell the next question, "How did you get the bread and wine?" I was taken to prison empty-handed. Later on, I was allowed to request the strict necessities like clothing, toothpaste, etc. ... I wrote home saying "Send me some wine as medication for stomach pains". On the outside, the faithful understood what I meant. They sent me a little bottle of Mass wine, with a label reading "medication for stomach pains", as well as some hosts broken into small pieces. The police asked me: "Do you have pains in your stomach?" "Yes" "Here is some medicine for you!" I will never be able to express the joy that was mine: each day, three drops of wine, a drop of water in the palm of my hand. I celebrated my Mass.

The six Catholics in my group of fifty prisoners tried to stay together. We lined up the boards we were given as beds; they were about 20 inches wide. We slept close together in order to be able to pray during the night. At nine-thirty every evening when lights out rang everyone had to be lying down. I bent over my wooden board and celebrated Mass, by heart of course, and distributed Communion to my neighbors under their mosquito nets. We made tiny bags from cigarette paper to protect the Blessed Sacrament... At night, the prisoners took turns and spent time in adoration. The Blessed Sacrament helped tremendously. Even Buddhists and other non-Christians were converted. The strength of the love of Jesus is irresistible. The darkness of the prison turned into light, the seed germinated silently in the storm. I spent nine years in solitary confinement and during that time I said Mass every day at three o'clock, the hour of Jesus death on the cross.

It saddens me that so many Catholics who have the ability to go to Mass each week chose not after hearing stories like the one above. People in our world feel so unloved and yet God desires to love us in the Eucharist. People feel lonely and yet God invites us all to His Eucharistic table. People are looking for purpose in life and God through the Eucharist desires to help them discover why they were created.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 19, 2018

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Let us continue to look at Cardinal Thuận's Ten Rules of Life. His writings will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font.

5. I WILL HAVE ONLY ONE WISDOM: THE SCIENCE OF THE CROSS

When I look back on my past, it's hard to understand the meandering of the path I traveled. I walked on nettles and rocks, I sang with joy as I moved ahead, groping my way in the darkness. Yet Jesus was there, walking with me, guiding me, carrying me when I could no longer move, when I was inches from death. It was at those moments that I would turn my thoughts to Jesus crucified and abandoned. He could no longer teach or cure the sick or raise his friend from the dead. He was in absolute immobility. In the eyes of the world he had lost, he was useless and frustrated. But in God's eyes, Jesus, on the Cross, had accomplished the greatest act of all; he had shed his blood to save humanity. I was liberated by the thought of Jesus crucified. When I was crushed by pain, disdain, unjust accusations, ingratitude and incomprehension, I prayed to unite myself to Jesus on the Cross and I knew that this was the most important act of my life. I often sang "O crux ave, spes unica mundi salus et gloria!" . Jesus, save the World! You have one wisdom: the science of the Cross. (1 Cor 2:2). Look to the Cross and there you will find the solution to all the problems which are worrying you. If the Cross is the standard by which you make all your choices and decisions, your soul will be at peace (RH 989).

The cross is the source of power in my life. I have learned that happiness does not come with money or fame or success but has everything to do with loving and being loved.

What is foolishness in the eyes of men is wisdom in the eyes of God. 1 Cor 3:19 and 1 Cor 1:27 (RH 106). The Church was born on the Cross. The Church grows by continuing the passion of Jesus until the end of time. If you put your trust in money, in diplomacy, in power and influence, or in campaigns of any kind, you will be very sadly misled.

Money, diplomacy, power and influence are not the things people appreciate about me. They love me because they see the gifts and talents God has given me.

6. I WILL REMAIN FAITHFUL TO MY MISSION IN THE CHURCH AND FOR THE CHURCH AS A WITNESS OF JESUS CHRIST.

In his testament, Jesus left me his Church but at the same time he entrusted me with a mission. "Be my witness unto the ends of the earth." (Act 1:8). I cannot be faithful to the testament of Jesus unless I carry out my mission within the Church and for the Church: "Love the Church. Obey the Church. Be loyal to the Church. Pray for the Church (RH 253). There are various kinds of Catholics, the Catholic who makes use of the Church, the Catholic in name only; there is the opportunist and the honorary Catholic looking for status. But Our Lord accepts only those who are one hundred percent Catholic, those who accept him unconditionally. "They left all and followed him" (Lk. 5:11).

The following quote from Christopher West helps me understand the role of the Church:

In recent times, the term "hierarchy" has become a bad word. Many seem to think it's somehow synonymous with inequality. But as we noted before, hierarchy simply means sacred order.

To reject hierarchy, then, is not to reject inequality. To reject hierarchy is to reject God's ordering of the universe. Not a good idea. The opposite of hierarchy is not equality but anarchy—no order at all, chaos...

The Church simply cannot change what the Holy Spirit has revealed to be true. It's not a matter of stubborn unwillingness, it's a matter of impossibility...

God does not change for us. We must change for him. How our pride rebels. But until we come to grips with this fundamental reality—that we are not God—then we're living an illusion.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 26, 2018

Spiritual Ponderings

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Let us continue to look at Cardinal Thuận's Ten Rules of Life. His writings will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font.

7. I WILL SEEK THE PEACE THE WORLD CANNOT GIVE

When I began to discern between God and God's works, when I chose God and his will and left everything else in his hands when I learned to love others, especially my enemies as Jesus loved me, I felt great peace in my heart. Deprived of freedom, of absolutely everything and living in extreme poverty in my dark cell, I was at peace because I could say, "My God and my all". The peace that the world cannot give brought me great joy. "Holiness consists in being continuously joyful because we possess God".

When I believe that God loves me then I am much more peaceful in handling difficult situations. When I am doubting God's love for me then I am more likely to lash out at people and get frustrated.

8. I WILL CARRY OUT A REVOLUTION BY RENEWAL IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus Christ came into the world to bring fire to burn all waste, a sword to cut all the bonds that hold us in slavery. He brought Truth because Truth alone can set us free. He died to free us from death. He rose from the dead to give us life in abundance. How do we carry out this revolution? "You desire to carry out a revolution, namely the reform of the world. You will carry out this precious and noble mission which God has entrusted to you by the power of the Holy Spirit. Every day, prepare a new Pentecost around you".

I truly believe the Catholic Church is called to change the world by treating one another with love. At one time the Roman Empire had infanticide, slavery, and gladiatorial games and they disappeared because of Catholic teaching of love your enemies. We should be able to end racism, abortion, and the death penalty.

9. I WILL SPEAK ONE LANGUAGE AND WEAR ONE UNIFORM: CHARITY

Prisoners held captive for very long periods, without trial and in oppressive conditions retain bitter memories and sentiments of hate and vengeance. That's a normal reaction everywhere. I was in prison for 13 years, 9 of which in solitary confinement. Two guards watched me but never spoke to me; just yes and no. But I knew that after all, they were my brothers and I had to be kind to them. I had no gift to offer as a prisoner I had nothing at all, nothing to please them. What to do? One night, a thought came. "You are still very rich. You have the love of Christ in your heart. Love them as Jesus loves you". The next day I set to work, first, by showing gladness and by smiling. I began to tell stories about my journeys in countries where people live in freedom and enjoy their culture and great technical progress. That stimulated their curiosity and they asked many, many questions. Slowly, very slowly, we became friends. They wanted to learn foreign languages. My guards became my disciples! The atmosphere of the prison changed considerably. The quality of our relationship changed for the better.

If Cardinal Thuận could treat his guards with love, I can love my brothers, sisters, and coworkers.

"You wear one uniform and speak one language - Charity." Charity is the sign by which you will be recognized as one of our Lord's disciples. (John 10:10). It is a badge which costs little but is most difficult to find. Charity is the most important language. Saint Paul regarded it as far more important than being able "to speak the languages of men and even of angels" (1 Cor 13:1) (RH 984).

10. I WILL HAVE ONE SPECIAL LOVE: THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

The harsh years in prison pass very slowly. While suffering humiliation and abandonment, my only support and hope was the love of Mary, Our Blessed Mother. The wonderful servants of Mary, Grignon de Montfort, Don Bosco, Maximilien Kolbe were my companions on the road of hope. They inspired me and gave me unwavering trust in the love of Mary, the Queen of the Apostles and Martyrs. I said this prayer to Mary. "Mary, my Mother, if you know that I cannot be of any more use to the Church, grant me the grace to die here in prison and consummate my sacrifice. If you know that I can still be of use to the church, grant me the grace of freedom on one of your feast days.

Blessed Virgin Mary can be a great spiritual assistance and role model for all believers. I challenge people who are struggling in life to pray the Memoare.

