
Book Reviews

The Method of Redemption

by William F. Wertz, Jr.

The Spiritual Exercises of John Paul II: Testimony of Hope

by Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace
Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2000
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“Look at the cross and you will find the solution to all the problems that assail you.”

—Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan

In the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II selected a humble, Vietnamese former prisoner, Msgr. Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, to preach the spiritual exercises to the Roman Curia during Lent. Van Thuan, after studying in Rome as a young man, was Bishop of Nha Trang, Vietnam, from 1967 until his 1975 appointment as coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). A few months later he was arrested, and he spent 13 years in prison, nine of which were in solitary confinement; he was then released, under house arrest. In 1991, Van Thuan was expelled from Vietnam. In Rome, he became vice president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and, since 1998, he has served as the council's president. On Jan. 21, 2001, he was named Cardinal by Pope John Paul II.

After reading the 22 spiritual exercises contained in his book, which John Paul II asked him to publish, one can only conclude that John Paul II was once more inspired when he instructed Van Thuan to submit his testimony.

What makes this testimony so powerful, is Van Thuan's profound experience in prison, of overcoming suffering with love. Having been unjustly imprisoned myself, along with

Lyndon LaRouche, whose cellmate I was for the first 6 of the 39 months of my own incarceration, Van Thuan's testimony reminded me strongly of the way in which LaRouche responded to his unjust imprisonment.

Van Thuan begins his book by echoing the Apostle Paul, saying, “I do not believe that I know many things except Jesus Christ crucified.” I recall to this day LaRouche's statement on Christ at Gethsemane to the court in 1989, before being sentenced to 15 years in prison, comments which he recently reemphasized in his essay “Jesus Christ and Civilization” (*EIR*, Oct. 6, 2000): “The lesson of Christianity over nearly 2,000 years, shows how the sense of a personal relationship to a living Christ crucified, supplied to European civilization that degree of admittedly unperfected passion for Reason, which has proven essential to bring civilization to the levels reached by the Fifteenth-Century Renaissance and its actual progress in the human condition since.”

As Pope John Paul II wrote in thanking Van Thuan for his spiritual exercises, he wanted to give particular place to the witness of people who “have suffered for their faith,” in this case for “courageously facing interminable years of imprisonment and privations of every kind.” Such a witness shows that “the merciful love of God, which transcends every human logic, is without measure, especially in moments of greatest anguish.”

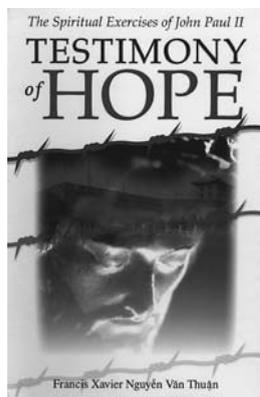
And indeed, as Van Thuan's testimony makes clear, it is this most profound ontological paradox, Christ crucified, which is the key to the capacity of humanity to achieve a true Jubilee of peace and justice.

The method Van Thuan employs in his spiritual exercises is that needed to prevent a terrible outcome in the world today—far worse than the catastrophe experienced in the 20th Century. It is a method which transcends the sense perceptions of the empiricists and materialists, and the logic of the Aristotelians and Kantians. It is a method which instead emphasizes those powers of cognition which are the characteristic of man as a creature of Reason, as made in the image of God.

One is reminded of such writings of Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa as *On Learned Ignorance*, where he distinguishes, as does Plato, among the senses, rationality (logic), and intellect (cognition). As Cusa writes, “Christ is the center and the circumference of intellectual nature,” and when one elevates one's mind above sense perception and rational logic, to the level of intellect, one becomes Christ-like (*Christo similior*).

The way in which one makes this radical change (*metanoia*) in mentality, so as to “transform the human into the divine,” is through the ironical statement of an ontological paradox, in which no deductive solution is possible, which obliges us to recognize a higher principle, which overcomes the paradox as such.

In Van Thuan's testimony, this method can be seen most clearly in his discussion of “the defects of Jesus,” a confession of faith, which, as he writes, “might sound more like a heresy.”





Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan.

The paradox is, isn't it a heresy to suggest that Jesus, who is divine, has any defect? But, as he develops the idea, Jesus is only defective from the standpoint of the logic of human practice. By posing this paradox, Van Thuan compels the reader to elevate his own mind Socratically from an actually defective human logic, to harmony with the divine intellect. As he develops this exemplary exercise, he forces us to see that Jesus has a terrible memory, and thus forgets transgressions; he doesn't know math, when it comes to saving another human being; Jesus doesn't know logic, witness the Beatitudes, which are a paradox from beginning to end; Jesus is a risk-taker, who in contrast to the publicity manager of a company or a poll-driven election campaign, promises trials and persecutions for those who follow him; nor does he understand finances or economics, from the standpoint of predatory capitalism.

The Same Method Applied to Physical Science

Ironically, although Van Thuan does not develop this point in his exercises, this same method is lawfully applicable not only in respect to theology, but also to the physical sciences, including physical economy. As Van Thuan points out in respect to the Eucharist, we must not only serve our fellow man spiritually, but also materially. "The Church that celebrates the Eucharist is also to be capable of changing the unjust structures of this world into new social forces, into economic systems where the sense of communion rather than profit prevails."

As LaRouche has demonstrated, we must look at the non-living, the living, and human cognition as a multiply-connected manifold. All discoveries of universal physical principles employ this same principle of paradox employed in the spiritual exercises. Two examples suffice: Kepler discovered, when confronted with the fact that the orbit of Mars could not be derived on the basis of reductionist doctrines of pre-existing mathematical physics, that the orbit was characterized by non-constant curvature. Similarly, Fermat discovered for the case of refraction of light through different media, that the determinant of that refraction was not the shortest distance, but the least time, again because the pre-established forms of deductive mathematics left an unexplained gap, based upon a pervasive, false-axiomatic assumption of linearity in the small.

As LaRouche has argued, life represents a principle that exists, even pre-exists, independently of the principles of the non-living. Thus, the living cannot be derived from the false-axiomatic premises used to misdefine the origin of life as located causally within the category of non-living processes.

Similarly, individual cognition, as through Van Thuan's spiritual exercises, exists as a physically efficient principle above the principles of both the non-living and the living. The human personality, in the image of God, is superimposed on the living, which serves as the medium of its mortal existence, but its origin is not from within the domain of living processes *per se*.

The point to be made here is identical to that made by Nicolaus of Cusa in *On Learned Ignorance*. Just as one cannot square a circle, because the square is an inferior geometrical species characterized by linearity, and the circle is a higher order (transcendental) species characterized by curvature, so neither does the living derive from the non-living, nor the human cognitive personality, in the image of God, derive from the living.

Hence, the true scientist knows, as did Leibniz, as opposed to Newton, Descartes, Kant, et al., that without God, man could not exist; without God, there could be no life, and without God there could be no universe.

Since man participates in God through his intellect, his responsibility is to exert dominion over the physical universe and thus to contribute to the continued perfection of God's creation, as His instrument and companion. This is the fundamental principle of all physical science, including the science of physical economy.

Mechanisms of Control

Having been imprisoned by a Communist regime, Van Thuan had to discover within himself the means by which to liberate himself from the mechanisms of social control. This experience of his, of discovering and relying on the power of love, gives him the capacity to speak with authority not only of the means by which the enemy exercises social control, but also of how to unlock the mental shackles by which we are enslaved.

In the third exercise, he tells the story of an Asian kingdom in which no one dares to speak the truth except a mandarin, who finally says: "I'm afraid that our nation is in great danger and risks downfall!"

Van Thuan then reports the state of the seven churches of Asia Minor, addressed by Christ in the Book of Revelation. One church has lost the fire of its first love; a second tolerates idolatry; a third is given to compromises in morality; a fourth sleeps and relies on the glories of the past; and a fifth, having become wealthy, is tepid. In contrast, Van Thuan says, Christ does not reprove the final two churches. The sixth church is persecuted and poor, and the seventh is small, but faithful.

As he stresses from his own experience, one has to make a radical choice between God and the works of God. One must make a categorical rejection of idolatry and trust alone in the power of love, as Paul argues in *I Corinthians* 13.

One must examine whether perhaps there is a lack of justice in one's work, a lack of objectivity, a willingness to yield to favors, the need for the esteem of the powerful, a desire for approval of others even at the risk of consenting to corruption. He points out, "The martyrs taught us to say yes without conditions and limits to the love of the Lord. But the martyrs also taught us to say no—no to flattery, to compromises, to injustice—even with the intent of saving one's own life and having a little tranquillity."

At one point, he stresses that without the witness of mutual love, our work would be like that of a business. He further reports that the laity asked the Asian bishops "not to trust only in their organizational abilities, acting like good *managers*, but to be true *fathers*." When the fullness of communion is lacking, he writes, "this is in a certain sense, worse than a Nazi or Communist persecution, since this is an attack on the Church that comes not from without, but from within."

He warns that this corruption occurs in the infinitesimally small: "Communion is a battle of every instant. Even one moment of neglect can shatter it; a trifle is enough; a single thought against charity, an obstinately held judgment, a sentimental attachment, a mistaken premise, ambition or personal interest, an action done for self and not for the Lord."

'Collective Dark Night'

As Van Thuan points out, throughout history the Church has been a minority in the presence of evil, for example, under Imperial Rome, during the French Revolution, and under Nazism, Communism, and now consumerism. Among the characteristics of the current age, which has the traits of a "collective dark night," are the prevalence of rationalism and a moral relativism, which denies the existence of truth itself.

The 20th Century was characterized by two world wars, genocide, the nightmare of the Cold War, and the threat of nuclear war. Van Thuan reports that as we enter the Third Millennium, we see a sad land in which many people are marginalized and discriminated against. We see "unimaginable things," poverty, disease, prostitution, drug-trafficking among children, illiteracy, a vicious spiral of foreign debt,

and armed conflict. The gap between the rich and the poor becomes greater every day.

Van Thuan writes: "While on the one hand there are grandiose overall designs for globalization, on the other hand millions and billions of people remain excluded. It is as if from humanity and from the Church of today there arises an appeal, almost a cry, that calls for globalization of another kind, one not guided by the logic of profit but by the law of love."

Despite this cry, there are those who argue, like King Saul to David, that "you cannot go out against this Philistine." As Van Thuan points out, the giant, Goliath, "represents evil, or rather, anti-evangelical ideologies and values." But, "every giant has a weak point. It suffices to look carefully, for a little stone well aimed defeated the giant, and his own sword was used to cut off his head."

Van Thuan uses the story of David, as well as that of Gideon's army, to make the point that the wall of the new Jericho will fall, because "the ways of evil and injustice end up destroying themselves," if we arouse in the individual the power of Christ, the power of the *logos* and love.

The Mind of Christ

To accomplish this is the purpose of the spiritual exercises. As he writes: "Discerning the voice of God among the many inner voices, so as to accomplish His will in the present moment is an ongoing exercise that the saints undertook willingly. With continual exercise, discernment becomes always easier because the voice of God within us grows louder and stronger."

The voice of God, or, as St. Augustine writes in *The Teacher*, "the teacher who teaches us from within," is Christ, is the *logos*, the living image of God within each human being. As Van Thuan points out, "for those who live the Gospel it is possible to arrive, with Paul, at having 'the mind of Christ' " (*I Corinthians* 2:16).

In the fight to save humanity from a terrible outcome, that is all we have, "the mind of Christ." That is our true power, the power of David and of Gideon's army. As Van Thuan says, Jesus appears as a man of few numbers. His attention is on the individual, on things humble and essential. That is the lesson he clearly learned as a prisoner, stripped of all externalities, his prison his "most beautiful cathedral." From this standpoint, and this standpoint alone, it is possible "to acquire the capacity to read the signs of the times with the gaze of Christ himself and, therefore, to creatively affect history."

To accomplish this, one must learn to live in the eternally present moment, or as LaRouche has often emphasized in his writings, in the "simultaneity of eternity." From this standpoint, as Van Thuan writes, "every word, every gesture, every telephone call, every decision we make should be the most beautiful one of our life. . . ."

"The result is that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who comes to live in us. Through the words of Scripture, the Word makes his home in us and transforms us into *verba* *in* *Verbo*, 'word into the Word.' "

In his *On Catholic Concordance*, Nicolaus of Cusa had similarly stressed that the only basis for peace and justice is for the many individuals, created in the image of God, to come into cognitive harmony with the One Word, or *Logos*.

Van Thuan stresses that this is also what it means to pray constantly. As he writes, "Perhaps Augustine gives the key when he affirms: 'Your *desire* is your *prayer*; if your desire is constant, your prayer is constant.' For Augustine, that *desire* is identified with *charity*, and *charity* leads us to do good. Thus, another way of rendering prayer continual is by doing good. . . . The last stage of continuous prayer . . . is when we not only pray always, but when we become prayer." If our life reflects Jesus, the *Logos*, in each moment, then our life becomes "a unique act of love extended through time."

By thus transforming (converting) our human selves into the divine, we empower our fellow man to free himself from the mental shackles, which otherwise guarantee the perpetuation of a "collective dark night," or worse, a New Dark Age, as Lyndon LaRouche has forecast, if policies are not changed.

Citing Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (*I Corinthians* 13), "if I do not have love, I am nothing," Van Thuan demonstrates both by his spiritual exercises and by his own experience in prison, that not only must I have love — "even more I must be love." Since God is love and we are created in His image, then we must become love ourselves. As Van Thuan writes, what hampers evangelization and the accomplishment of peace and justice in the world, is the fact that one does not always find love as one found it in the face of Mother Teresa or Pope John XXIII, but "instead one finds faces that appear sad or annoyed by everyday routine."

Beyond the Walls

Van Thuan points out that one must "*carry the burdens of all humanity* in its fundamental needs, not only through the good example of Christians, but also by means of their undertakings on the social, economic, and political levels." But, unfortunately, as he acknowledges, "We all know how, in the last two centuries, many who felt the need for true social justice, not finding a clear, strong witness within Christian environments, turned to false hopes."

As Van Thuan relates, before his imprisonment, he had launched various initiatives for the evangelization of non-Christians, but his experience in prison thrust him "beyond the walls" to be a witness of hope for all people, such as Christ, who was crucified outside the sacred gates of Jerusalem for all humanity.

In contrast to the Desert Fathers of the first millennium, who thought that one could only be saved by fleeing the company of men and the world, Van Thuan says: "Here is the novelty: the other person is not an *obstacle* to holiness, but is the *way* to holiness." And the social doctrine of the Church, the instrument of evangelization, is the means to ensure that those, who are beyond the walls, do not turn to false hopes, but rather are aroused to help their nations turn back from the brink of general self-destruction.

As we enter the new millennium, as Lyndon LaRouche has said, the resolution of the conflict between the old form of society, based upon an oligarchical (Roman-Babylonian) principle, which degrades man to a savage condition, and a new form of society, based on the common good of peace and justice for all mankind, requires a radical mental change, beginning with oneself. One must find a pathway for all mankind from within one's self. All that we have, our only true power to do such good, is the spark of Reason, the image of God within us. Ultimately, man's redemption is to know himself to be such an individual being and to act accordingly.

We must arouse humanity to a great mission of bringing economic and social justice to where oppressive ruin predominates today. A new international monetary system and long-term economic development projects of an ecumenical form are required to free entire nations and peoples from the prevailing, oligarchical misconception of the nature of man.

This is the great mission, which must be undertaken at this crucial moment in history, and it must be undertaken "beyond the walls" for all humanity. But, for this mission to succeed, as both Van Thuan and Lyndon LaRouche have emphasized, each in their own spheres, it must be done in the spirit of Christ crucified. To quote Van Thuan: "For the Christian, protecting one's own life, is not the absolute value. Love for the poor counts more than saving self."

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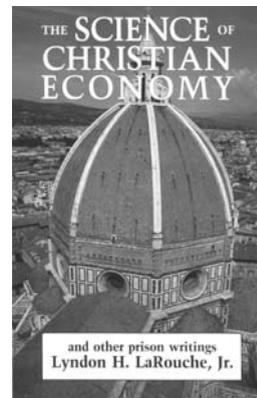
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