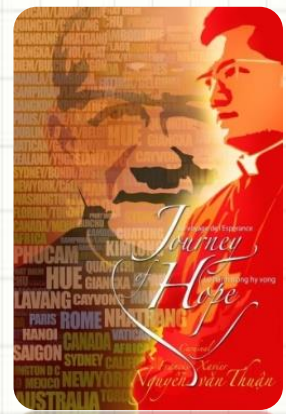




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The Word of God in the Life of Venerable Văn Thuận

Reading “Testimony of Hope” and
“The Road of Hope” in a Biblical Perspective

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This paper intends to continue my study, offered last year in the first International Symposium, organized by the FIATS – Franciscan Institute For Asian Theological Studies in Rome on the ‘Asian’ spirituality of Cardinal Van Thuận. On that occasion, I shared the research and introductory reflection on the relevant aspects of our Venerable’s inculturated biblical interpretation from the analysis of his two main courses of spiritual exercises. The first preaching was to the Roman Curia in 2000 (published afterwards also in English as “Testimony of Hope: The Spiritual Exercises of Pope John Paul II”), and the second one to the Legionaries of Christ priests in Rome in 2002, i.e. in his last year of life. I would like to look now at one of Cardinal Van Thuận’s main writings, the book “Đường Hy Vọng” or “The Road of Hope”, to examine the exhortations written in prison to his potential spiritual sons and daughters, in order to highlight his original way of reading, interpreting, and living the Word of God.

The exposition therefore has two parts. First, we recall the remarks on the Cardinal’s veneration towards Scriptures and on his original interpretation of the biblical-evangelical messages, as noted in the two mentioned spiritual exercises, especially in the “Witnesses of Hope”. Then, we will highlight some aspects of his way to read the Word of God throughout the exhortations in the mentioned book “The Road of Hope”. These findings will help us confirm, with some enrichment, the set of fundamental characteristics of the Cardinal’s biblical spirituality, which is all based on a unique and intimate communion with Christ and His teaching.

1. See D.A.N. Nguyen, “Forgiveness - Love: Introductory Remarks on the Inculturated Reading of the Gospel in the Spiritual Exercises of Cardinal Van Thuan”, in D.A.N. Nguyen – J. Winkler (ed.), *Franciscan Asian Biennial Book. Vol. II (2018-2019): Mission, Witness of Faith and Other Essays From/For Asia* (Rome: Casa Editrice Miscellanea Francescana, 2019). Fortcoming.

2. F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimonianza della speranza. Esercizi spirituali tenuti alla presenza di S.S. Giovanni Paolo II* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2001⁴). English edition: F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimony of Hope: The Spiritual Exercises of Pope John Paul II* (Trans. Julia Mary Darrenkamp and Anne Eileen Heffernan; New York: Pauline Books & Media, 2000).

3 F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan, *Scoprite la gioia della speranza. Gli ultimi esercizi spirituali predicati dal Cardinale François-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2006²). (As far as I know, there is no English edition so far).

4. Here are his own touching words of presentation in the introduction to the American edition of the book:

“I have come to tell you that I understand what suffering means. I lived through the camps, prison, isolation; in all, 13 years, 3 months, 7 days, without trial, from August 15 1975 to November 21, 1988. After that I was exiled. I come to share all your sorrows and anguish, the harm done to your body and mind. I experienced it myself and still carry the scars of those times which so profoundly marked my life. (...) For those who suffer, I have come with love, the kiss of peace, the fragrance of spring the smile of a friend and the light of hope for the future. I have a small gift, a book which I wrote in prison. It is called ‘The Road of Hope’. With it, I wish to enter the homes I cannot visit.” F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan, *The Road of Hope* (Trans. Peter Bookallil; Chicago, Federation of Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S.A.: 1995), 10-11. Italics added.



1. Cardinal Van Thuan's attitude towards the word of God

As mentioned in my previous study, here is the Cardinal's testimony before the Roman Curia about his attitude towards the Word of God: "I would like to tell you about my experience in this regard. When I lost everything and I was in prison, I thought about preparing a *vademecum* that would allow me to live the Word of God even in that situation. I had neither paper nor notebooks, **but the police provided me with papers on which I would have to write the answers to the many questions they asked me.** Then, little by little, I began to steal some of those pieces of paper and managed to make a tiny agenda on which day by day I could write, in Latin, more than 300 sentences of the Holy Scriptures I remembered by heart. **The Word of God, so rebuilt, was my daily *vademecum*, my precious casket from which to draw strength and food.**"

Besides the clarity of the testimony on the communion the Cardinal had with the Word even before being put in prison (he indeed remembered more than 300 phrases from the Scriptures), for a Vietnamese reader, especially for those who had to live that dramatic period after 1975 in Vietnam, the mention that "the police gave me some papers on which I would have to write the answers to the many questions they asked me" certainly recalls not only the unhappy memories of a situation experienced by many at that time, but also a great admiration for the Cardinal's enterprising character. One can ask spontaneously, why did the Cardinal have that kind of thought, while many others did not think about it because of the enormous material, psychological, and spiritual difficulties? The answer can be found in his human qualities, in his ingenious spirit, in an extraordinary intelligence or a courageous character. However, deep down there was in him a strong desire to live with God and His Word every day as before. This prompted our Cardinal to 'move' in his ingenuity to continue the active and visible communion with God in the midst of the everyday life vicissitudes.

In this way, his concrete life was the place of the incarnation of the Word of God and particularly of the Gospel that turned out to be the rule and compass of life. Life itself became the realization of the Word and the Gospel. This exactly is the Cardinal's goal in every situation, which he reiterated for himself in the dark moment of prison: "When I was in prison, I wrote: «Observe one rule: the Gospel. This constitution is superior to all others. It is the rule that Jesus left to the apostles (see Mt 4:23). It is not difficult, complicated or legalistic like the others: on the contrary, it is dynamic, gentle and stimulating for your soul. A saint far from the Gospel is a false saint»."

The text affirms the fundamental and foundational importance of the Gospel for the spiritual life. Additionally, the description of the characteristics of the Gospel, (called the Constitution), is precious. This evaluation with the three negative and three positive aspects allows us to glimpse into the Cardinal's consideration of the Gospel texts: not difficult, not complicated, not legalistic (like the others), but dynamic, kind, stimulating for the soul. Here, the Vietnamese original still sounds more poetic and more convincing, at least for the Vietnamese ears! Moreover, let us not forget that the Cardinal wrote these words beforehand, in the first period of his imprisonment.

5. See Nguyen, "Forgiveness - Love", *forthcoming*.

6. Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimonianza*, 85-86. Bolds added.

7. Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimonianza*, 87.

8. Cf. the original Vietnamese words in F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan, *Đường Hy Vọng*, n. 986: "[Phúc Âm] không khó khăn, phức tạp, gò bó như các hiến pháp. Ngược lại, linh động, nhân hậu, làm phần khởi linh hồn con".





Right here, behind the six adjectives appears a convinced mind, and the observation came probably in a natural way from his experience as a child, when his mother Elisabeth taught him the stories of the Bible every evening (as the Cardinal confessed with gratitude at the dedication of the Italian publication of his preaching to the Roman Curia). Yes, since that time from his mother's mouth every biblical or Gospel page certainly sounded for him "dynamic, kind, stimulating for the soul."

With this conviction, the Cardinal then emphasizes the need for himself, as well as for every believer, to get "the thought of Christ" by means of an intense life with the Gospel: "The Word of God, entering into us, in fact contests the human way of thinking and acting and introduces us into the new lifestyle inaugurated by Christ. Whoever lives the Gospel can arrive with Paul to have "the thought of Christ" (1Cor 2:16); it acquires the ability to read the signs of the times with the same gaze of Christ and therefore affects with creativity in history."

Seemingly, we have here an indication of the indirect cause of his attitudes and transformation of the spiritual life that the Cardinal acquired in prison. Was his well-known motto "to choose God and not the works of God" not born in that critical period? (...) As he himself has shared, after the light that illuminates his mind and inspires him to choose God rather than His works, "I understand the words of the Holy Scripture more clearly every day: 'as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are... my thoughts higher than your thoughts' (Isa 55:9). I understand that my life is a succession of choices, in every moment, between God and the works of God. An ever new choice that becomes *conversion*." Here we can see the strong link between the life of faith and the Word that grows more and more through constant reflection and rumination, provoked by the concrete situations of everyday life.

Obviously, for our Venerable, the communion with God is nourished and determined by the Eucharist, as Fr. François-Marie Léthel underlined in his study. Nevertheless, such a life with and in the Eucharist for Cardinal Van Thuân is totally and inseparably connected with the life with and in the Word of God in the biblical writings. These sacred texts become then the key for interpreting the situation of personal and collective history. For this reason, he himself coined for his spiritual sons the motto of the three expressions that always go together and are part of the compass for the Christian life: *Thánh Thể, Thánh Kinh, Thánh Nguyện* [Sacred Eucharist, Sacred Scriptures, Sacred Prayer]. The Word of God itself actually enabled his continuing conversion to God's plans, for an ever-new love for the Lord, and for the intelligence of faith incarnate in the situation and culture in which he lived. It is curious that St. Joseph was for our Venerable the model of life with the Word of God, as he himself explains: "I always asked St. Joseph to help me put the Gospel into practice. Although he was a putative father of Jesus, he received no sacrament throughout his life - the sacraments had not yet been established - (note: Mary, on the other hand, certainly participated in the Eucharist after Jesus' resurrection!), but lived only with the Word: he listened to it, welcomed it, put it into practice, communicated it and shared it, so that his carpenter's shop became a school of the Gospel. This is why I consider St. Joseph as the patron of all those who live the Word." (Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimonianza*, 90). How delightful and original is such a reasoning on the Gospel data!

⁹Cf. Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimonianza*, 9.

10. Cf. Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimonianza*, 87.

11. Significant and at the same time touching is the Cardinal's testimony regarding that fundamental moment of his discovery of choosing God and not His works: "This light brought me a new peace, which totally changed my way of thinking and it helped me overcome physically almost impossible moments. From that moment a new strength filled my heart and accompanied me for 13 years. I felt my human weakness, I renewed this choice in the face of difficult situations, and I have never lacked peace."

And since he sees so much importance in this discovery, our Venerable feels obliged to conclude his testimony with a more general look: "To choose God and not the works of God. This is the foundation of Christian life, in every age. And it is, at the same time, the truest answer to today's world. It is the way for the Father's plans to be realized on us, on the Church, on the humanity of our time" (Van Thuan NGUYEN, *Testimonianza*, 62).

1. Cf. Nguyen Van Thuan, *Đường Hy Vọng*, 39 [n. 129].





We can summarize his attitude towards the Word with his own testimony in which we see clearly his particular veneration, formed in the concrete tradition of his country: “When I was a student in An Ninh’s minor seminary, a Vietnamese priest, professor, made me realize the importance of always having the Gospel with me. He had converted from Buddhism and came from a mandarin family; he was an intellectual: he always wore the New Testament hanging from his neck, as when one carries the viaticum. When he left the seminary for another assignment, he gave me this book, his most precious treasure. The example of this holy priest named Giuseppe Maria Thich, always alive in my heart, helped me a lot in prison, during the period of isolation. In those years, I went on because the Word of God was “a lamp to my steps”, “a light for my path” (see Ps 119: 105). It is known that St. Jerome and St. Teresa of the Child Jesus always carried the Gospel with them, close to the heart. But it is my own culture that underlines the unique value of Scripture. In Asia the words of Confucius and Mencius, his disciple, were greatly venerated. They cannot be kept out at any place, but are kept on the head, as a sign of veneration.”

From this attitude of profound veneration towards Sacred Scriptures, our Venerable was able to enter appropriately (with due respect to the Sacred), I would say in a very Asian Vietnamese way, in intimate communion with God and with the divine message. As a result, he was able to live in everyday life, always listening and practicing the Word of God. Every new situation in life, including the most tragic one in prison, has always provoked and aroused in him new and original answers, deeply rooted in Scripture. From here came his original of reading the Bible, which I exposed in the conclusion of the previous analysis of his spiritual exercises. Without going into the details of the analysis, let us recall here the four final points:

* The Venerable Van Thuân seems to have practiced a reading of the Bible that starts from the commitment to memorize the single sentences to taste its beauty and spiritual depth again and again in the various situations of life.

* He offers a biblical reading by intuition, the simple one to grasp the immediate meaning of the faith the Word of God transmits, often through the comparison between various evangelical passages.

* Notably, it is a kind of reading that goes together and grows with the experience of life. It is actually life itself. Moreover, it is precisely here that emerges the perspective of inculturation. Since his life is deeply rooted in that of his Vietnamese people, his reading of the Gospel, determined by this life, bears the natural imprint of the local culture. This happened in a simple and natural way like life itself. It is not the fruit of philosophical reflections or of the effort on how to inculturate the truths of the Gospel in society. It is the fruit of an authentic commitment to live the Gospel first in the life conditions God let him go through, that is, to listen more assiduously to the Spirit who speaks in the heart and to put into practice with courage and personal creativity what he learned.

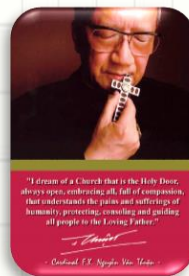
* He did not make interpretative treatises, but simple mottoes of actions in life.

With these observations, let us now examine the book “The Road of Hope” from a biblical perspective, in order to confirm and complete the above observations concerning the way to live the Word of God in our Venerable’s life.

13. It is curious that St. Joseph was for our Venerable the model of life with the Word of God, as he himself explains: “*I always asked St. Joseph to help me put the Gospel into practice. Although he was a putative father of Jesus, he received no sacrament throughout his life - the sacraments had not yet been established - (note: Mary, on the other hand, certainly participated in the Eucharist after Jesus’ resurrection!), but lived only with the Word: he listened to it, welcomed it, put it into practice, communicated it and shared it, so that his carpenter’s shop became a school of the Gospel. This is why I consider St. Joseph as the patron of all those who live the Word.*” (Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimonia*, 90). How delightful and original is such a reasoning on the Gospel data!

14. Cf Nguyen Van Thuan, *Testimonia*, 81.





2. Reading the Road of Hope from a Biblical Perspective

2.1. General remark

Right from the outset, the work demonstrates a clear biblical background. The author, in effect, begins with an observation that contains the quotation-paraphrase of the words of Christ in the Gospel of John, even if the biblical reference is not explicitly indicated: “Chúa dắt con trên đường, ‘để con ra đi, và thu được nhiều hoa trái.’” “Our Lord guides you onto this road so that you will ‘go out and bear fruit’” (cf. Jn 15:16).

Thus, always in this approach, the second instruction sounds like an echo of Christ's recommendation in the Gospel: 2. Bí quyết của đường hy vọng gồm ba điểm: A. Ra đi: “Bỏ mình”; B. Bôn phận: “Vác thánh giá mình mỗi ngày”; C. Bền chí: “Theo Thầy”. (The ground plan of this Road of Hope has three points: (1) Departure: “Renounce self.” (2) Duty: “Take up your cross daily.” (3) Perseverance: “Follow me”).

To offer what he called “secret” or “ground plan” of the road of hope, the author is totally based on the words of Jesus in Lk 9:23: “If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross every day and follow me”. On the other hand, he shows his original understanding / interpretation of the mentioned Jesus’ saying: to deny himself for the disciple would be the starting point for the journey; taking one's own cross every day would correspond to the commitment to fulfil the duty (of a state of the consecrated or family life); and “follow me” indicates perseverance in the journey. One can guess that such an interpretation was first applied to his life and then proposed to all. Jesus' phrase is so dear to our Servant of God that he repeats it later in n.63, when he speaks of vocation.

From the spiritual point of view, the three aforementioned points are particularly important. First, the spirituality of Cardinal Van Thuan is all Christocentric. It is a matter of following Christ with perseverance and according to His teaching. Here we enter into the second characteristic of the spiritual path, traced by our Venerable. It is the fundamental option for the Word of Christ and of God in Holy Scripture. This is the Logos-centric dimension. Finally, the third aspect of the Cardinal’s spirituality can be described as “immersed in everyday life” by performing “việc bôn phận”, that is to say the spiritual “duties” of every state every day.

We can therefore speak of the “incarnation” perspective of the spiritual life, which finds thus its concrete realization and fulfilment through practicing what is learned from God and from his Word through constant meditation.

This is the effective verification of what is true of life in communion with God in the following of Christ. Our Venerable seems to stress particularly on this third aspect of incarnation in his “Road of Hope”.

He dedicates, in effect, an entire chapter, the second one just after the introductory chapter, on performing the “duties” of the state in the lives of Jesus’ followers (nn.16-38). Significantly, Cardinal Van Thuan sees Jesus’ exhortation to “carry the cross every day” equivalent to that of performing daily duties (of life). He insists on this again at the conclusion of the chapter on duties: “Đối với mỗi người, con đường thánh giá đi theo con đường bôn phận.” “For everyone, the path of the cross follows the path of duties” (n.37).

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15. The paper uses, with minor changes, the English translation of Peter Bookallil in F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan, *The Road of Hope* (Chicago, Federation of Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S.A.: 1995).



The Christ-centric and logos-centric orientation of spirituality emerges clearly, as well as the original and life-based interpretation of the Bible by our Servant of God.

The aforementioned features are then found in all the chapters that follow in the book. Their rich content and various spiritual nuances certainly require a more in-depth analysis. Due to the time limit, we will focus here only on some more original topics from the biblical-spiritual perspective.

2.2. The “Gospel” in the exposition of spiritual themes

In “The Road of Hope”, Venerable Van Thuân deals with the varied themes of spiritual life and the following of Christ. There are about 36 titles that correspond to the chapters grouping the exhortations on the single topics. In all these, however, there is a term that repeats usually in each chapter: it is the word “Gospel” (“Phúc Âm” or “Tin Mừng”), which is found near to 40 times. This actually represents the founding theme permeating all others, even if it is not dealt in a separate chapter. Following the mentions of the term “Phúc Âm” in the “Road of Hope”, we can see how our Cardinal lived and applied the Gospel in the various concrete aspects of life and how evangelical his spirituality is.

First, our Venerable refers to the “Gospel” in the most important recommendations, when he presents his thoughts on the totalizing and fundamental aspects of the way of hope for Christians - disciples of Christ. Thus, in the last chapter of the book, which summarizes the fundamental characteristics to be memorized, Cardinal Van Thuân emphasizes for his reader-disciple: “With giữ một Nội Quy: Phúc Âm. Đó là hiến pháp trên tất cả mọi hiến pháp.” “You observe one Rule - the Gospel. This is the constitution which is superior to all other constitutions” (No. 986). The Venerable himself had recalled this exhortation in his preaching to the Pope and to the Roman Curia in 2000, as we have reported previously to highlight his attitude towards the Word of God. The Gospel is therefore the message in the individual gospels and generally, in the biblical books, which find their fulfilment in the words and actions of Christ. These all together represent the Norm, the *forma vitae*, the form of life, for the disciple.



16. To be precise, in the Vietnamese original text, the term “Phúc Âm” occurs 34 times, and “Tin Mừng” – 5 times (with one occurrence in no. 752 with ironical meaning: “Tin Mừng của con!” “your own Gospel!”). Both can be translated as “Gospel”, but the first term is in old Vietnamese language and has a more nuance of Document (book), whereas the second one is in simple modern speech and refers to Gospel more as Good News, literally “Good Message”. Additionally, there are also 7 mentions of “Thánh Kinh” “Sacred Scriptures” in nos. 128, 129, 136, 174, 269, 527, 639.



This vision of the Gospel is confirmed not only by the numerous evangelical and biblical quotations and allusions in the book, but also by at least two other instructions that explain the same exclusive role of the Gospel in the Christian life. The first recommendation is in the chapter on fortitude / determination (“Chí khí”) which begins with the subtitle: “Quyết mê một cuốn sách: PHÚC ÂM. Quyết theo một lý tưởng: CUỘC ĐỜI CHÚA GIÊSU.” “Resolve to immerse yourself in one book: THE GOSPEL. Resolve to follow one ideal: THE LIFE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.” This evangelical passion, according to our Venerable, is necessary to win the hearts, as explained later in the mentioned chapter: “Làm thế nào mà tư tưởng ngôn ngữ, hành động con khiến người ta phải phản ứng: Con người này đã say mê một cuốn sách: PHÚC ÂM, đã bị lôi cuốn bởi một lý tưởng: CUỘC ĐỜI CHÚA GIÊSU.” “Act in such a way that your thoughts, words and deeds will cause others to remark, ‘This person is steeped in one book, THE GOSPEL, and inspired by one ideal, THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST.’” (No. 227). From here, we see the intrinsic connection between the “Gospel” and the person of Jesus Christ.

The second instruction is also found in the subtitle of another chapter, which focuses on the examination of conscience and spiritual renewal (chapter 34). Thus, it gives a oriented programmatic orientation to all the exhortations that follows in the chapter: “Kiểm Điểm. Đọc lại đời sống dưới ánh sáng Phúc Âm.” “Examination of Conscience. Review your life in the light of the Gospel.” Then, the gospel is mentioned among the means to follow in the apostolate which a disciple of Christ disposes like the first apostles. In the end, the teaching poses a rhetorical question: “Chúa Giêsu đã trao cho con, con cho là ít sao? Thế gian có gì sánh được không?” “Jesus has given you all this; is that too little for you? Does the world have anything to appear with it?” (cf. no. 906).

Thought on the gospel as the necessary point of reference for a renewal is made even more explicit in chapter 27 dedicated to the theme “Canh Tân” (Renewal), at number 646. Here is the cordial and inspiring text: “Mỗi ngày ‘Phúc Âm hóa’ lại trí óc và quả tim con, bằng cách đọc, suy ngẫm, say sưa uống lấy lời hằng sống, để từ từ Phúc Âm thấm nhuần sâu xa vào mỗi tế bào, mỗi thớ thịt của con, đó là canh tân, cách mạng chắc chắn nhất.” “Every day, reevangelize your mind and heart by means of reading and meditation; immerse yourself in the everlasting Word I know that the Gospel will gradually permeate and take root in every cell of your body. That is renewal; the most enduring revolution.” Always with this conviction, our Venerable shares with readers in chapter 33 on Leadership (“Lãnh đạo”), the secret of the spirit of dialogue in evangelization that will be able to obtain wisdom to open many cold souls closed in themselves: Tim đâu ra bí quyết của đối thoại làm tâm hồn được giải thoát, cởi mở, trí khôn sáng suốt? - Hãy tìm trong Phúc Âm. (no. 879) Where will you find the guiding principle for dialogue by which the heart can be liberated and open to others, and the mind wise and perceptive? You will find it in the Gospel.

Finally, Cardinal Van Thuan also specifies the true core of the Gospel in his understanding and proposes to readers the duty to proclaim this Gospel to the world that Christ himself left to his disciples: “Con phải loan Tin Mừng trên thế giới, không phải chỉ tiêu cực giữ giới răn, nhưng loan báo một sứ điệp lạ lùng: Chúa thương yêu ta, Chúa yêu thương trần gian và cứu trần gian.” (no. 955) “You must proclaim the Gospel to the world, not just negatively as observance of commandments, but proclaim the extraordinary message that God loves us. God loved and redeemed the world.”





As one can note, this message of love, which Cardinal Van Thuân speaks of, actually reflects the phrase of Jn 3:16 which scholars rightly define as the gospel in miniature: “God indeed loved so much the world, which gave his Only Begotten Son so that anyone who believes in him does not perish, but has eternal life.” Thus, we can glimpse the exact understanding of the content of the gospel by our Servant of God, whose teachings are imbued with the words from the Gospels, even when he does not quote them explicitly. This biblical-evangelical spirituality reflects in numerous other recommendations, which should be object of further investigations in the future.

3. Conclusion

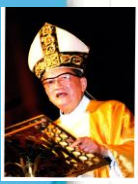
The reading of “The Road of Hope” in a biblical perspective helps us to find in the book the characteristics of Cardinal Van Thuân’s particular and, to some extent, original interpretation of the Gospel and the Bible. On the other hand, we have also been able to point out some complementary aspects for the framework of our Venerable’s “exegetical method”. To sum up, the following points are in order.

1. Cardinal Van Thuân demonstrated that he had memorized the most important phrases of Sacred Scripture and, in particular, of the Gospels, and he knew how to apply them in various situations of life and for various themes of his spirituality. This is probably the fruit of his theological study, combined with an intense and profound meditation he practised every day.

2. Our Venerable’s biblical reading reveals completely oriented towards the Gospel and the person of Jesus Christ. As we saw in the analysis, the Gospel in its entirety effectively represents for Cardinal Van Thuân the foundation of Christian life and apostolate. It is the compass for the Christian life journey, the norm for activities, the secret for an affable open-minded soul, the means for spiritual renewal, and the message to be proclaimed to the world according to the recommendation of the Lord Jesus.

3. The following of Christ is hence expressed through the concrete aspects of daily life according to the Gospel teachings. These are exposed, explained, interpreted in the book in an immediate and quite intuitive way, as we have seen previously from the analysis of the Venerable’s preaching. The Gospel sentences are often used at the beginning to open an instruction or at the end to crown a thought or an exhortation.





4. Finally, our Venerable exposes the meaning of biblical phrases and messages with a simple language, deeply rooted in the Vietnamese culture in which he lived. Here we are dealing with a quite important aspect of a true inculturated biblical apostolate (which must embrace both the content and the way of exposing the Bible). Like any experienced oriental master, the Cardinal likes to build his sentences based on the stylistic figures of assonances, consonances, and repetition of sounds, whose nuances immediately capture the Vietnamese ears (this aspect often escapes the foreign ears and therefore represents a challenge for translation). Thus, for example, he emphasizes the three important things for Christian life in no. 136: “Người ta sống không chỉ nhờ bánh mà còn nhờ lời Chúa”: Thánh Thể, Thánh Kinh, Thánh Nguyện. Nếu không, with không có sự sống Thần Linh.” “Man shall not live by bread alone - but by word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4: 4), that is, the Blessed Eucharist, the Sacred Scriptures and sacred (liturgical) prayer. Without these, you will have no spiritual life.” Such a triad, which resonates in Vietnamese as music to the ears with the thrice repetition of the word Thánh “Sacred,” certainly cannot be rendered in other languages like English. The author himself seemingly liked such a formula that he also recommends in the instruction concerning the choice of Mary at the feet of Jesus: “Cha nói: ‘thứ nhứt là cầu nguyện’, không phải là vô căn cứ; Chúa Giêsu đã bảo: ‘Maria đã chọn phần nhứt’, ngồi dưới chân Chúa, nghe lời Chúa, mến yêu Chúa, Maria đã được Thánh Thể, Thánh Kinh, Thánh Nguyện. (no. 129) It is not without foundation that I say, “Prayer is of prime importance.” Jesus told us, “Mary has chosen for herself the best part of all, that which shall never be taken away from her” (Lk 10:42). As she sat at Our Lord’s feet listening to his words and loving Him, Mary had the Blessed Eucharist, the Sacred Scriptures and the sacred prayer.

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The example given illustrates once again the vision of Cardinal Van Thuận on the fundamental role of the Word of God in the life of every Christian. It therefore appropriately serve to end our first exploration of our Venerable’s biblical spirituality with a special focus on his book “The Road of Hope”. The topic certainly needs further examinations, because many aspects were discussed only in passing (*en passant*). We hope that there will be subsequent works to help Christians of every time and nation to know, appreciate, and increasingly follow the extraordinary spiritual heritage of Venerable Van Thuận and, in particular, his original way of living the Word of God in various adventures of the Christian life full of hope.

