

The Road of Hope and Faith: Cardinal Francois Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan

I. Introduction

- A. We began today the season of Advent, which is a time of hope as we stoke our desire for Jesus Christ in history, mystery and majesty: history at Christmas; mystery on the altar; and majesty as he comes for us at the end of time or the end of our life. And we're called to approach each of these realities with hope, prepared to run out to meet the Lord who out of love runs out to meet us.
- B. And we live this Advent in the midst of the Year of Faith, in which we're called to focus on growing in the type of confident trust in God that leads us to believe in everything he said and did so that we might follow him faithfully to Bethlehem, to the altar and to the celestial Jerusalem.
- C. So, tonight, I want to talk a little bit about this connection between faith and hope and then illustrate it in the life of someone whom Pope Benedict lifted up before the entire world as an icon. It's someone I had the great grace to know personally: Vietnamese Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen van Thuan, who died 10 years ago on September 16, and whose cause for canonization is well underway.

II. Connection between faith and hope

- A. In his second encyclical, called *Spe Salvi* (Saved by Hope), Pope Benedict stressed that there's a great connection between faith and hope.
- B. He pointed out that in the Bible, "faith" and "hope" often seem interchangeable. In the letter to the Hebrews, the "fullness of faith" is linked to the "confession of hope without wavering" (Heb 10:22-23). To be hopeless, according to the Letter to the Ephesians, was to be "without God in the world," which is what secularism is and leads to, to live as if God were not a given. To have hope, on the other hand, means to live with God in the world. This life with God in the midst of day-to-day realities is faith.
- C. The letter to the Hebrews defines faith as the "*hypostasis*, the substance, of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). Faith already gives us in the present something of what we hope to be fulfilled forever. Pope Benedict says that St. Thomas Aquinas, based on this thought, taught that "faith is a habit, a stable disposition of the spirit, through which eternal life takes root in us and reason is led to consent to what it does not see. In "embryo," the things hoped — true life — for are already present in us. Because this is already present within us, we have a certainty about what is to come." Pope Benedict commented, "Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent; it gives us something. It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a 'proof of the things that are still unseen." The present is touched by the future reality. It is no longer simply a "not yet." Faith gives us a new foundation for life, a new freedom with regard to material necessities such that, as the Letter to the Hebrews mentions about those who have suffered for the faith, that they allowed their property to be plundered since they knew they had a better and more abiding possession. Faith gives us this better possession, this real and abiding substance. We already have a little taste of the things that are to come. That's what gives us endurance even through crosses and trials, because we already have now through faith a part of the Communion with God we hope to enjoy in its fullness in heaven.

- III. In this beautiful encyclical letter, given to us five years ago on Friday and something that I've tried to read every Advent and I've encouraged every adult Catholic with the ability to read to ponder in prayer, Pope Benedict highlighted several people who put these truths into action. But he focused considerably on Cardinal Van Thuan as an icon of the way to pray and live by faith even in the midst of great difficulty. Pope Benedict wrote, "If I pray I am never totally alone. The late Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, a prisoner for thirteen years, nine of them spent in solitary confinement, has left us a precious little book: *Prayers of Hope*. During thirteen years in jail, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that he could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope—to that great hope which does not wane even in the nights of solitude." Cardinal Van Thuan was a witness to the faith that faith fills us with hope, even in the midst of the worst suffering.

IV. I'd like to present to you a little bit of the biography of Cardinal Van Thuan. It's available in biographies of him and in several of his books, but much of what I'm going to tell you I heard straight from his lips. When he was in the Vatican after 13 years of being jailed for his faith in Vietnam, I was able to meet him through a good priest friend of mine who was trying to help Cardinal Van Thuan build a better library for the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. I was brought in to help on the ground. And so regularly the three of us would have dinner at a fish restaurant in Trastevere. Over the course of our time, I asked him to talk about what had occurred to him, something that he was very happy to do, in order to help out the faith of someone who would become a priest. He really grew to like me and I grew to like him. One of the greatest regrets of my life is that I never followed through on his invitation when he gripped my hands in his and he said, "Roger, you must come to visit me more often at my apartment so that we can continue our conversations. We don't need to wait until Fr. Robert is here to join us for dinner!" But over the course of several dinners and some time together at his office in the Vatican, I learned a ton. We also hosted him for a few dinners with pilgrimage groups where I heard him give the story of his imprisonment several times.

V. Arrest toward five loaves and two fish

A. He was arrested on the feast of the Assumption in 1975, just a short time after the Americans had abandoned South Vietnam and the Viet Cong had come in. A short time before he had been named the coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon, but because he had been related to the former leaders of South Vietnam, the communists feared that he might cause them a lot of trouble. So he was arrested and brought to a series of places, both far away hidden places where he was placed under house arrest, as well as prison camps. Little did he know when he was first arrested that he would spend so much time as a prisoner, and nine years in solitary confinement. For long lengths of his time, he was put in cells with no windows with the only light and air entering through a small crack at the bottom of a door. The lack of light, the lack of human interaction, the other affronts against human dignity — because of the humidity, mushrooms and other fungi would grow on his bed, and he never had a chance to wash up — he slowly began to lose his mind — and his faith began to get severely challenged.

B. He wondered what sense it made for God to allow him to be in prison, meeting no one, incapable of fulfilling all his duties as an Archbishop. He knew that the Catholic people needed hope and leadership. Why was he still in prison? He heard the Lord respond to him that he was too focused on the "works of God" and not enough on God. It is God who acts in all our good works, but we need to have the focus. He challenged the future Cardinal to that faith. The inmate wondered, however, how he could even focus on God since he could barely focus on anything. Without any light, he didn't know what time of the day it was, what day of the week it was. In many of his prisons, he didn't even know clearly where he was. He couldn't concentrate. He worried that if he had to endure too much of that, he would succumb to despair. It was at that time that in prayer he recognized that if he couldn't give God the type of loving prayer and service he wanted, he could at least give him what he could. And so he focused on the example of the young boy in the Gospel who gave Jesus his five loaves and two fish. That was a small offering, especially to feed a crowd of 5,000 men, probably the same amount of women and many more kids. But he would give the Lord the best he could, all he had, and then the Lord could do whatever he wanted with him.

C. The only writing material he had in his cell was a used calendar. But he said that, with the few moments of concentration he had each day, he would try to write down a spiritual thought that could be copied to give hope to others. There was a young boy who would walk by his prison cell each day. One day he called out to the boy, whose name was Quang, and finding he was a Catholic, he asked if he would ask his parents if it would be okay for him to be able to do two favors, to get him some more used calendars and to bring the little thoughts he would make each day to his parents so that they could copy them into a book. Quang said his parents would agree. Thuan insisted that he actually ask them, because he said that helping him could be dangerous. The parents agreed. So each day Quang would bring one or two little thoughts and copy them into a notebook. When it got to be 1001 points, Thuan told them whom to contact in order to have them published in a book. That book gave a tremendous amount of hope to beleaguered Vietnamese Catholics. It was soon translated into other languages and a copy was soon given to the Pope John Paul II. It was called "The Road of Hope." I'll be quoting some of his thoughts about faith from that book a little later.

VI. The Eucharist

- A. Those thoughts gave him a little something to do each day to grow in his own faith and prayer and share what the Lord was teaching him with others. But it wouldn't have been enough to sustain him over all those years. He needed the Lord and he knew it.
- B. After his release, he was asked by the media how he was able to stay alive and sane. His answer was "the Eucharist." He explained how when he was arrested, he had to leave immediately, empty-handed. The following day he was allowed to write to his faithful to ask for some personal effects. He wrote: "Please send me a little wine as medicine for my stomach pain." He had no physical ailment of the stomach, but he did have a deep hunger, and the people guessed correctly what he was asking. A few days later, the guards handed him a small container addressed to him, and labeled "Medicine for stomach ailments." It was a bottle of wine. They also sent him a flashlight hoping that he would recognize that within the battery compartments there were crumbs of bread. With three drops of wine, a drop of water and a couple of crumbs in the palm of his hand, he would celebrate Mass. Those Masses, he told me, with tears in his eyes, were the most beautiful Masses of his life.
- C. When he was sent to a reeducation camp, they were divided into groups of 50 prisoners. They slept on a common bed, and everyone had the right to 50 cm of space. They managed to make sure there were Catholics around him. At 9:30 pm, they had to turn off the light. It was then that he would bend over the bed to celebrate Mass by heart, and he distributed communion by passing his hand under the mosquito net. They even made little bags with the aluminum foil from cigarette packs to preserve the Holy Host and take it to others. The Eucharistic Jesus was always present in his shirt pocket.
- D. In the Vinh Quang Prison Camp, the prisoners would take turns for adoration. With His silent presence, the Eucharistic Jesus helped them in unimaginable ways. Many Christians returned to a fervent faith life, and their quiet display of service and love had an even greater impact on other prisoners. Even Buddhists and other non-Christians joined in the faith. The strength of Jesus' loving presence was irresistible, he said. The darkness of prison became a paschal light, and the seed germinated in the ground during the storm. The prison was transformed into a school of catechesis. Catholics baptized fellow prisoners and became godparents to their companions,
- E. During his 9 years in solitary, he tried to celebrate Mass everyday around 3 pm, the hour of Jesus' agony and death on the cross. He was alone, so he could sing the Mass as he wished in Latin, French, or Vietnamese. He always carried in his shirt pocket the little container holding the Blessed Sacrament. He would repeat "Jesus, You in me and I in You" adoring the Father. Van Thuan would remind us, throughout his writing, that it is not enough to celebrate the Eucharist strictly according to the liturgical rites. He would point out that Christ offered his sacrifice with immense fervor, as in the hour of His passion and crucifixion, when He obeyed the Father; and this, even to the point of His humiliating death on the cross to bring back to the Father a redeemed humanity and a purified creation. In prison with the Eucharistic Jesus in their midst, Christian and non-Christian prisoners slowly received the grace to understand that each present moment of their lives, even in the most inhumane conditions, can be united with the supreme sacrifice of Jesus and lifted up as an act of solemn adoration to God the Father. Together each day, Thuan would remind himself and encouraged everyone to pray: "Lord, grant that we may offer the Eucharistic sacrifice with love, that we accept to carry the cross, and to be nailed to it to proclaim Your glory, to serve our brothers and sisters."

VII. Pectoral Cross

- A. One of the most powerful stories he ever told me was about his pectoral cross. In one of his times in a prison camp, he had to work as a farmer and as an apprentice carpenter. So he began to use the tools and the wood to make a cross. He ended up making a small wooden one and hid it within a bar of soap, since crosses were forbidden. He also got a guard to give him a few pieces of scrap wire that he used to make the chains of a cross. Even though he couldn't wear it at the time, if he ever escaped, he wanted it to be a reminder for him of how the Lord taught him what the Cross really is. He took off his cross and showed it to me with the chains. He had made a metal container for it with holes so that you could see the wood within. Normally with bishops' pectoral crosses, many are made out of gold and jewels and they're ornate. None was ever as beautiful as that one, which was a real sign of how much he had suffered for the Lord.
- B. He said in the retreat he preached to JP II in 2000, "Each time I celebrated Mass, I had the opportunity to extend my hands and nail myself to the cross with Jesus, to drink with him the bitter chalice. Each day in reciting the words of consecration, I confirmed with all my heart and soul a new pact, an eternal pact between Jesus and me through his blood mixed with mine."

- C. At his funeral Mass, John Paul II remembered those words and added, “During the last days, when he could no longer speak, he fixed his gaze on the Crucifix before him. He prayed in silence while he consummated his last sacrifice, crowning a life marked by *heroic configuration with Christ on the Cross*.”

VIII. Forgiveness

- A. That time with Jesus on the Cross throughout his imprisonment and in his battle with cancer at the end, taught him about how important mercy is to Jesus that Jesus would have suffered so much to forgive our sins. Cardinal Van Thuan, in faith, tried to live by that mercy.
- B. With his guards, many of whom were brutal to him, he tried to respond with kind words and to do favors for them. Some took him up on the offer to have him teach them foreign languages, like French or English. He gave others advice. Over the course of time, his charity toward those who were uncharitable to him, began to wear them down. He would say that the greatest way to love your enemies is to love them in such a way that they cease to be enemies but become friends.
- C. He would also preach this message to others. I saw him once in Rome speaking to a group of American pilgrims to Rome and he talked about what he said was one of the hardest things he needed to confront now. He described that he was visiting the Vietnamese Communities in the US and elsewhere and trying to get them to live the Gospel by forgiving the communists who had murdered members of their families, tortured some of them and caused some much pain and trouble. Many didn’t want to forgive. Like one of the confessors of the early Church — those who were tortured but not martyred for the faith who would then show their scars begging for mercy to be shown by the Church to those who needed to do severe penances — he would describe his own sufferings, show his own journey of forgiveness and ask them to follow. He knew that unless we forgive others their sins, we won’t be forgiven and the great temptation the Vietnamese were susceptible to was not to forgive those who had done evil. Many, moved by his own example of mercy, found a reason to forgive.

IX. Cardinal Van Thuan on faith

- A. After having had a chance to experience a little of Cardinal Van Thuan’s faith and hope in the midst of trial, it’s a little easier to trust in his credibility when he talks about faith. I’d like to turn to several of the small thoughts he scribbled on the back of old calendars that were copied in a book and eventually published under the title of “The Road to Hope,” something that would make a great gift for others for Christmas.
- B. I’ll focus on seven of his thoughts there and make applications to us.
- C. “As you travel along the Road of Hope, you will need a light to show you the way during times of darkness and difficulties. That light is your faith, which the Church passed on to you on the day of your baptism. If you are faced with the most desired of promises or the most fearful of threats, you must remind yourself: “I am a child of the Church, I am a descendant of the saints, I follow the faith which guides me.””
1. Cardinal Van Thuan’s faith is a lamp for our steps and a light for our path. It guides us. We received it as an unmerited gift the day of our baptism and the Lord who gave us that gift, gave us the gift of his Son, and will give us everything else besides. That’s why we should never forget that we are a child of God, a child of the Church, a descendent of the saints.
 2. Many today have lost this sense of faith in the power of our divine filiation in baptism, of the great gift we have in knowing and being able to practice the Catholic faith. Many try to say “yes” to Christ and “no” to his Church, but our faith in Christ must lead to a faith in the Church he founded, because he founded it to be his body and his bride. To believe in Christ without the Church is to believe that spiritual decapitation and divorce are both good things. Cardinal Van Thuan helps us to see that the Church is not comprised only of sinners who commit scandals, but of the greatest heroes that have ever existed, the saints, the martyrs, the apostles, so many.
 3. He’d add, “There is no peace compared with the confidence which comes from living as a member of the Church. In the heart of the Church mental anxiety is calmed and the soul is filled with hope.” This is something he experienced. That the Church is the rock, it’s Noah’s ark, if we stay with the Church, we’ll stay on the path to God.
- D. “If you wish to hold firmly to your faith, then choose the Road of Hope which was followed by Christ’s disciples, not the road to death offered by “the world.” Many people say, “I have the faith; I still have the faith.” Perhaps this is true, but their daily lives are often at variance with the faith they profess. Few people live in complete accord with faith. An examination of your actions and reactions will suffice to indicate whether yours is a living, vibrant faith, or simply a label.”

1. Cardinal Van Thuan points out that there's a choice for us, the choice to live as Jesus lives, as the saints live, the path of the beatitudes, the way of the commandments and virtues, or the path of the world. To live faithfully, we must live according to the faith of the Church. There are many Catholics who don't pray, who don't forgive, who don't live according to Jesus' teachings on marriage, who don't live a sacramental life. Is our life at variance with our faith? Or is our life consistent with the faith?
- E. "If you have strong faith, you can do anything. Each time the Lord performs a miracle in the Gospels, he says: "Your faith has healed you." The Lord lays down very easy conditions for our faith to accomplish great things: "If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed you'll say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there!' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you" (Mt 17:21). Why? Because it is God who performs the action and not ourselves."
1. A life of faith is one in which God acts and reigns. That's when all things become possible for us. We need to give God permission to act. Faith is not something in which we just turn to God and say, "Move these trees", but a life in which we turn to him and say, "I'm stiff as a tree. Move me!"
- F. "In the Gospels the apostles humbly related their own weakness of faith so that we may believe more strongly. Like the apostles, pray sincerely: "Lord, increase our faith!" (Lk 17:5)."
1. The Holy Father has not chosen an official theme for the Year of Faith, but I'm convinced that if he does, the best candidate would be, "Auge nobis fidem!" "Lord, increase our faith" (Lk 17:5), the plea the apostles made to Jesus after they realized how much they needed his help in order to live up to his call to forgiveness. There are no plateaus in the spiritual life; we're either going up hill or sliding down hill, and hence this upcoming holy year is an opportunity for each of us to look candidly at the vitality of our faith and ask the Lord's assistance that this great gift may grow.
 2. The greatest compliments Jesus ever gave were about faith. "O Woman, great is your faith," Jesus said to a pagan woman in Tyre after she with beautiful perseverance begged Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus publicly marveled about the deep faith of a Roman centurion who showed total confidence that Jesus could heal his servant simply by saying a word a great distance away. He likewise praised the faith of his own mother as one who heard, believed, and put into practice the Word of God (Lk 11:28), indicating, as the early saints of the Church beautifully noted, that before she had conceived the Word of God in her womb, she had already conceived him in faith in her heart.
 3. In contrast to these great icons of faith, there are also figures of little or no faith. Jesus reproved the apostles on four occasions because of their "little faith." Jesus wasn't able to work miracles in various places, including his hometown of Nazareth, because he was amazed at their lack of faith. He candidly called out many of his contemporaries for being a "faithless and perverse generation" (Mt 17:7). And forebodingly, Jesus wondered aloud about his second coming: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Lk 18:8).
 4. At the beginning of this Year of Faith, it's important for us to ask: Would the Lord compliment us for our "great faith" or reprove us for our "little faith"? If he were to come today, would he find faith in us? All of us this year in the Church — whether we're fervent or tepid — need to imitate the apostles and beg, "Lord, increase our faith!" Even better, we should say with the father of the stricken boy, "Lord, I do believe. Help my unbelief!"
- G. "Don't be satisfied with a theoretical and formal faith. Rather let your faith be living, genuine, loving, and loyal."
1. Many times Catholics simply recite the Creed. Many will say that they learned the Catechism inside out and they do know the truths of the faith, but it's dry. It doesn't bring life and joy because it's remained fundamentally intellectual.
 2. Cardinal Van Thuan says that our faith should be:
 - a. Living — Our faith is dead if there are no works. Living faith always works through love.
 - b. Genuine — Sincere. That we mean what we say. Do we mean our prayer or just say them? Do we really pray the prayers of the faithful? Do we really pray the words, "And with your spirit!" "We have lifted them up to the Lord!"
 - c. Loving — There must be affection for God in our faith. We live by faith not just out of duty, not just out of a fear of hell, but because we love God, we love him more than a loving husband loves his wife.
 - d. Loyal — We defend the Lord. We don't betray him when we may have to suffer for him. Cardinal

Van Thuan called upon the witness of Eleazar in the Book of Maccabees. “Do not pretend in order to escape dangers and difficulties. Remember the example of Eleazar: ”Such pretense is not worthy of our time in life,’ he said, ‘for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to an alien religion, and through my pretense, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they would be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age.’” (2 Mac 6:24-25). We could also point to Polycarp.

- H. “Faith is the unconditional acceptance of Jesus Christ the Lord, and the determination to live and die with him.”
1. This is a short sentence, but it contains within the seed of a profound conversion.
 2. Faith is first the unconditional acceptance of Jesus. We don’t believe because we think he’ll bless us here on earth or in the next world. We don’t accept Jesus to get ahead. We accept him even though he says we’ll be hated by all because of him, that the servant is not greater than the Master and what they did to the Master they’ll do to us, that we’ll need to pick up our Cross each day and follow him. We’re not supposed to be a fair-weather disciple, but a true one.
 3. And that includes the determination to live with him. Jesus is not supposed to be someone we visit, but we’re called to live with him and him in us all our days. That requires clean souls. It requires commitment to try to bring everything into communion with him.
 4. But it’s also the determination to die with him, whether we die of natural causes painlessly in our sleep at the age of 111 or through cancer at the age of 12 or of martyrdom at any age. We are determined to persevere in faith with Jesus until the end.
 5. Sometimes when I’m preparing people for baptism, I’ll ask them, “Do you have the commitment to come to Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation for the rest of your life?” That’s a clear commitment we make and a lot of them, in this age of weak or no commitments, are hesitant. But to remain faithful we need to commit ourselves to live and die with Christ.
 6. At a practical level, this means we need to have the commitment to be a martyr or our faith will be eventually weakened. Van Thuan says,
 - a. “Have the courage to live the life of faith every day, just as the martyrs courageously held firmly to their faith.”
 - b. “Even though you are not being forced to deny the Lord, you may be under pressure to act in opposition to his teaching in the mistaken hope of preserving your faith. But don’t be deceived – faith that fears death, suffering, or hardships surely dies.”
 7. In the early Church, adults weren’t ready to become catechumens until they were prepared to die for Christ, and until the Church was confident they’d remain true under fire. That’s still what it means to be a Christian, even though many of us are tempted to water it down.
- I. “God is supreme not only because he is almighty, but especially because he is all-loving. As a follower of Christ, believe — have faith — above all that you have been redeemed, forgiven, and are infinitely loved by God. The Lord is not a Savior who forces us to love and reverence him; rather he is the Savior who invites us to love him without reservation.”
1. The deepest aspect of our faith is that we are loved by God, redeemed and forgiven. To walk by faith means to walk in this confidence of his mercy, never presuming it, never thinking it comes on the cheap, but always full of thanksgiving because we never merited such a gift.
 2. And we’re loved by God not just when we’re healthy, winning awards, and everything seems to be going great, but also when we’re in solitary confinement for nearly a decade or longer, when we’re suffering, when we feel abandoned by everyone.
 3. And the Lord, in response to his love, hopes that we love him in turn without reservation, without limits.
 4. There was a survey I saw yesterday by Dr. Philip Schwadel of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that showed that Catholics now have the lowest percentage of “strongly affiliated” followers among major American religious traditions. Only 1/3 of Catholics “strongly affiliate” with the practice of the faith, compared to 56% of evangelicals. That put all types of reservations in the practice of the faith. Hestitation. Lukewarmness.
 5. Pope Benedict talked about the crisis of tepidity right before the Year of Faith launched. He said: “There’s a passion of ours that must grow from faith, which must be transformed into the fire of

charity. Jesus said: I came to cast fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. Origen has conveyed us a word of the Lord: "Whoever is near me is near the fire." The Christian must not be lukewarm. The Book of Revelation tells us that this is the greatest danger for a Christian: not that he may say no, but that he may say a very lukewarm yes. This being lukewarm is what discredits Christianity. Faith must become in us flame of love, flame that really fires up my being, becomes the great passion of my being, and so it fires also my neighbor. ... The Year of Faith is not just for the fallen away, for "others." The Year of Faith is for all of us. We all need it. And those of us who don't think we need it need it most of all.

6. And the way to overcome our lack of fire is to allow the fire of God's love for us to ignite us.

X. Mary

A. We finish tonight by turning to our true model in faith, Mary. She is one who:

1. Chose the way of God rather than way of death offered by the world, whose entire life was in complete accord with her fiat.
2. She had faith much greater than the size of a mustard seed and she changed human history, recognizing that if a virgin could become pregnant with God the Father's own Son then nothing was impossible, including our becoming saints.
3. She was the one who helped the apostles grow in faith especially as they awaited the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
4. Her faith was living, genuine, loving and loyal, all the way to the Cross and through the Cross to her Son's right side.
5. She was determined in faith to live and die with her Son, even if her heart would be pierced seven times or 70 times 7 times by a sword.
6. And she lived without reservation in the love of the Lord such that her entire being magnified that divine love and her spirit rejoiced in it.

B. Mary, especially under the title of Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of La Vang, always inspired Cardinal Van Thuan in his own pilgrimage of faith along the Road of Hope. As we prepare in this Novena to celebrate her Immaculate Conception and ask her to help us grow in faith like she helped the early Church, I want to finish with what Cardinal Van Thuan said about her: "If you wish to live faithfully, imitate Mary. ... On the Road of Hope, hold on to Mary's hand. God has given her to you as your Mother. You are not alone. She is 'our life, our sweetness, our hope.' No matter how tepid, sinful, or hopeless you may feel, entrust yourself into her hands. Jesus bequeathed her to you; how could she abandon you?"

C. O Mary, Pillar of Faith, pray for us!