

A book for anyone who needs to keep their courage alive....

—Sr. Helen Prejean, Author, Dead Man Walking

THE MIRACLE OF HOPE

Political Prisoner, Prophet of Peace



Life of Francis Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận

André Nguyễn Văn Châu

CHAPTER ONE

The Seeds of Faith



Their inheritance [will remain] with
their children's children.
Their descendants stand by the covenants;
their children also, for their sake.

Sirach 44:11-12

Contemplating, from my childhood,
these shining examples,
I conceived a dream.

Five Loaves and Two Fish,
F. X. Nguyen Van Thuan

FRANCIS XAVIER NGUYEN VAN THUAN was born on April 17, 1928 in the central part of Vietnam, in Phu Cam parish, a suburb of Hue. Hue had long been the capital city of "Imperial Vietnam." By 1928, however, it was not without some irony that Vietnamese continued to call their ruler "emperor" and the country he ruled an "empire."

For almost a thousand years, until the early tenth century, the Viet people had lived under Chinese domination. But in A.D. 936, with the beginning of the Vietnamese dynasties, a long line of Vietnamese sovereigns from eight different dynasties succeeded in fighting off Chinese and Mongol invasions. Except for a brief period from A.D. 1414 to A.D. 1427, the Vietnamese managed to preserve national independence until the mid-nineteenth century, and

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to expand their territory south, away from China in an en masse "March to the South" or *Nam Tien*.

Despite Vietnam's self-governance, the Chinese to the north continued to "bestow" the title *An Nam Quoc Vuong* (King of the Pacified South) upon the Vietnamese rulers. The sovereigns, however, took for themselves the title of emperor when the Chinese Emperor was not looking. Beginning with the Nguyen dynasty, founded in 1802 by Nguyen Anh (Emperor Gia Long), the country was called *Dai Nam*, rendered "Greater Vietnam," or more simply, "Vietnam." But both the ruler's title and the country's name were somewhat ridiculous by the time Thuan was born, since Vietnamese rulers were mere figureheads of the French colonial administrators, who had taken the country's reins in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Although crowned the country's ruler in 1926, Emperor Bao Dai went to study in Paris as a ward of France. He returned to Vietnam in 1932 to rule only the small, central portion of the country. The southern provinces of the country had become known as *Cochinchina* and formed a separate French colony; the Northern provinces, known as *Tonkin*, were nominally under the emperor's rule, although actually administered by French colonial officials.

This three-part division of Vietnam by the French, whose conquest began in 1858 and ended in 1885, demonstrated their strict political motto: "divide and conquer." They had dismembered Vietnam and left the Nguyen emperors with little more than symbolic power over the central third of the traditional Viet territory. By the twentieth century, the emperor of Vietnam was no more powerful than the neighboring rulers of the French colonies of Cambodia or Laos—kingdoms that together with the three parts of former *Dai Nam* made up French Indochina.



TO TRULY UNDERSTAND THUAN, one must keep in mind the profound attachment he felt for his birthplace. Hue was known as the Divine Capital, the seat of the emperor whom the people called the Son of Heaven and considered a god. Vietnam's capital had

changed many times under the various kings and emperors of successive dynasties, yet none of these ancient cities, including the northern city of Hanoi, preserved as much of their past glory as Hue—the only city in Vietnam whose impressive, centuries-old monuments have not been irreparably damaged.

From the heights of Hue's Phu Cam suburb, one could see the outline of the walls of the Citadel of Hue, and the city's Flag Monument. By ascending the pine-covered Ngu Binh Mountain, a half mile southwest of Phu Cam, one had a panoramic view of the Perfume River, which flowed through the center of Hue, and of the European City on the river's right bank and the Imperial City on its left. From that height, at the top of the mountain, the upper parts of various buildings of Hue's Imperial Palace could be seen emerging from behind a second set of defensive walls and moats. A string of imperial tombs dotted the banks of the Perfume River further south, the farthest away being the tomb of the first Nguyen emperor, Gia Long.

For the natives of Hue, these palaces, monuments, pagodas, and temples added to their city's natural beauty. Hueans believed that they were born to be poets and artists, and the environment was truly conducive to poetic and artistic aspirations. This native environment exerted a great influence on Thuan, who loved nature, the arts, poetry, and whose refined taste was born of the very air he breathed and water he drank in Hue.

Thuan's first love was not exclusive, however. Thuan grew to love intensely all the provinces of Central Vietnam, the rugged land where a resilient and passionate people lived, and later, as he traveled through it, all of his country.

When Thuan was born in 1928, Phu Cam was a sparsely populated community with fewer than a hundred houses surrounded by vast gardens and orchards. Its only distinction was that almost all of its residents were Catholics—a miracle since only forty years earlier Catholics were still being persecuted throughout the empire.

For over two centuries, from 1644 to 1888, Vietnamese kings and emperors, ruling princes and their mandarins (who were officials of the imperial administration), as well as misguided scholars

(the *van than*), had lashed out at Catholics. They carried out persecutions sometimes lasting a few years, occasionally for decades, but always fueled by a fear and hatred of the little-understood new religion introduced to Vietnam by sixteenth-century European missionaries. These persecutions, however, were not religiously but politically motivated, for the rulers and the mandarins foresaw that the new Catholic religion would bring cultural, social, and political changes, which would eventually threaten the established order.

Within these official periods of persecution, bloodthirsty mobs, encouraged by the silent consent or whispered prompting of the Vietnamese Imperial Court and mandarins, went on rampages against Christian communities. Thus, Christians were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and executed by authorities, as well as humiliated, terrorized, and massacred by frenzied mobs.

For 244 years, these persecutions raged, subsided, and then raged again, resulting in a total of 150,000 martyrs: bishops, priests, religious, and lay men and women. More than 3,000 Catholic churches were burned to the ground, entire Christian communities slaughtered, and their homes plundered and torched.

Yet, after the most violent and vicious persecutions under the Emperors Minh Mang (1820–1841) and Tu Duc (1847–1883), Phu Cam parish still stood proudly on the southern hills of the capital city and testified to the resilience of Vietnamese Catholics. For Thuan and his parents, the survival of the parish also testified to the power of their crucified and risen Lord.



THE YEAR 1885, WITH THE FRENCH MILITARY conquest of Vietnam, proved a fateful and disastrous one for both Vietnam and Vietnamese Christians. The French conquest, begun in 1858 with the excuse of intervening in the persecutions, had met with stiff, but ineffective resistance. Though the Vietnamese army fought valiantly, they were no match for France's "modern" rifles and cannons; one province after another fell to the French advance. The Vietnamese signed treaty after disastrous treaty, which only served to sanction the *fait accompli* and expand the French hold on the remaining territory.

By 1885 North and South Vietnam were firmly in the hands of the French, although the Vietnamese Imperial Court was permitted tenuous control over North Vietnam. The provinces of Central Vietnam were given the status of a protectorate, which meant that the Vietnamese emperor and his mandarins had power there, although it was extremely limited, and the French continued to gradually reduce the remnants of the emperor's authority. The emperor still possessed the semblance of a treasury, absolute power within the walls of his palace in Hue, and a small army—weak as it was.

On July 4, 1885, in the face of the arrogance of new demands made by the French, the two regents of the child Emperor Ham Nghi ordered the imperial army to launch an all-out attack on the French garrisons in Hue. It was an unfortunate decision. The poorly planned attack was doomed to fail from the start. The antiquated "gun gods" of the Vietnamese roared throughout the night, with most of the cannonballs flying into the Perfume River. Damage to the French garrisons was negligible. At daybreak, the outcome of the battle was immediately clear even to the most hardheaded of mandarins. Then the French launched a counter attack. The young emperor was hurriedly escorted out of Hue and taken on an exhausting march to the surrounding mountain strongholds. He was finally captured and exiled in 1888.

The mandarins who had accompanied the emperor into the mountains appealed to the village people to fight the French. Overnight, armed bands sprang up all over the country and formed a somewhat cohesive network of resistance against the French. At the same time, the mandarins spread rumors, blaming the recent defeat of the Vietnamese imperial army on Christians. The *van than* joined in, accusing the Christians of being traitors of the nation; they were the country's "inner enemies" who had to be exterminated. From 1885 to 1888, the *van than* militia killed tens of thousands of Catholics.

One night in the autumn of 1885, the people in the village of Dai Phong heard rumors that a *van than* raid had been planned against the Catholics in their village. Having no time to arm themselves to fight or to take flight, they rushed to the small thatched-roofed church, all the while knowing that they would probably not

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escape death. Among the Christians gathered in the church that night was most of the family of Ngo Dinh Kha, Thuan's future grandfather.

As the people prayed, encouraged by their pastor, an armed mob encircled the church. Suddenly flaming torches were thrown onto the roof of the building that quickly caught fire and spread to the mud and bamboo walls. Inside, the chanting of prayers could no longer be heard above the screams of children. Parents frantically tried to save their children by throwing them out of the windows. Most of these unfortunate children were immediately caught by members of the militia and thrown back into the inferno. But some, thanks to the darkness of the night and the billowing screen of smoke, did escape.

One who escaped in this way was Kha's younger cousin, ten-year-old Lien. "Aunt Lien," as Kha's cousin was later known, moved to Phu Cam and lived there until her death in 1938. Children and adults would often come to hear her tell, in simple words, her account of what happened on that terrible night in Dai Phong.

Another who escaped was Kha's mother, who had been away from the village. Fortunately, Kha had also been away, studying at the seminary in Penang, Malaya (now Malaysia). Due to difficulties in communication, he learned only several months after the tragedy that almost his entire family had been wiped out.

Kha's teachers at the seminary encouraged him to return home to marry and carry on the family name. While the idea of perpetuating a family's name was certainly a more traditional Confucian duty than a Christian concept, Kha's teachers understood its importance. Kha accepted this advice and headed home. He knew that he would have to provide for his ailing mother, now left without any resources.

Much later Ngo Dinh Kha would play an active role in the Imperial Court as a close advisor of Emperor Thanh Thai. He carried out several major functions during his service to the court: he was the Grand Chamberlain (*Thi Ve Dai Than*) to the emperor, and as such, also the Palace Marshal in charge of protocol, and the Commander of the Imperial Guards. In 1902, the Emperor granted Ngo Dinh Kha the title of Great Scholar Assistant to the Throne (*Hiep Ta*

Dai Hoc Si), actually placing him in the ranks of the court's permanent ministers. Kha also held the title of Imperial Tutor (*Phu Dao Dai Than*), making him the emperor's personal instructor and advisor, especially in the subjects of the French language and Western philosophy. In 1903, the emperor no longer required Kha's instruction, but allowed him to keep this position and title. Whenever possible, Emperor Thanh Thai would ride to Phu Cam on horseback to enjoy a few hours of relaxation with his old and loyal friend under the pretext of seeking information from the learned man.

Kha represented a very small number of Catholics who achieved some of the highest positions at the Imperial Court. His presence at court, in fact his very life, which had been spared in the great massacre, was a miracle.

Until his death Kha's mind was constantly haunted by the memory of the holocaust that had consumed the Dai Phong church and his family. His veneration of all the martyred Christians never waned. He permanently displayed on his desk the first edition of Father Alexander de Rhodes' *La Glorieuse Mort d'André, Catechiste de la Cochinchine, qui a versé son sang pour la querelle de Jesus-Christ, en cette nouvelle Eglise* (The Glorious Death of Andre, Catechist of Cochinchina, who shed his blood for the cause of Jesus Christ in this new Church), printed in Paris in 1653. In it, Father de Rhodes offered a terrifying eyewitness account of the execution of the first Vietnamese martyr in 1644. Like many Vietnamese Christians of his day, Kha especially venerated the martyr André who had survived savage beatings and stabbing only to finally be beheaded.

Kha's daughter, Elizabeth Ngo Dinh thi Hiep, grew up listening to Aunt Lien's story of the night massacre. She marveled at the Dai Phong parishioners' courage under persecution and was appalled by the ugliness of religious intolerance. Hiep could not have known that a few decades later her own son, Thuan, would become a victim of such intolerance and would spend thirteen years suffering a living martyrdom for his faith.

As a child Thuan himself also had many opportunities to hear Aunt Lien speak of the events in Dai Phong some fifty-two years before his birth. He took pride in being related to martyrs, but could never have imagined that he would one day suffer in his soul and

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flesh for the cause of Christ, or that the glorious canonization of 117 Vietnamese martyrs in Rome by Pope John Paul II on June 19, 1988, would adversely impact his own imprisonment.

Born into this tradition of Christian pride and resilience and in a land filled with centuries-old memories of persecution and martyrdom, Thuan could later write in his brief and exquisite *Five Loaves and Two Fish* how “contemplating from my childhood these shining examples, I conceived a dream.” Indeed, from his early childhood, Thuan dreamt about following the footsteps of Vietnamese martyrs and joyfully serving God in the most distressful circumstances. Incredible odds would at times challenge this dream, but the models he contemplated as a child would never fail to urge him on amidst disaster and tragedy; and these examples shone forth on both sides of his family.



THUAN'S FATHER, NGUYEN VAN AM, was a descendant of Christians who had suffered greatly for their faith. Am's grandfather had become a legend in his own time because of his courage during the persecutions under Emperor Tu Duc. In 1860, Emperor Tu Duc attempted to wipe out Catholicism, but in his reluctance to shed blood, the emperor devised his *phan sap* (divide and integrate) policy. It was a despicable scheme that violated the most basic principle of Vietnamese society: the sacredness of the family.

Under the *phan sap* Catholic families were split up; the heads of families and other male adults were taken away to serve as unpaid laborers on farms owned by non-Christians. Non-Christian landowners were expected not to feed their laborers well and that large numbers would either die of starvation or exhaustion, or that this harsh treatment would cause them to renounce their faith. Meanwhile, their wives and children became servants in non-Christian households with the hope that they would forget their faith.

The emperor believed that his policy would eradicate the “imported” religion in a few years, and it might have worked, except for the compassionate and humane treatment of Christians by non-Christians who did not starve their laborers. However, the main rea-

son for its failure was that the Christians endured that period of forced separation and servitude with heroic courage and resilience.

As a child Thuan listened to his father Am describe the horror of the *phan sap* policy and the pain and suffering his great-grandparents endured when they were forced to separate—his great-grandmother and her younger children were sent into servitude; his great-grandfather, Nguyen van Danh, worked as an unpaid laborer. Am told his son that it was thanks to Am's grandfather Nguyen van Vong that his great-grandfather Danh managed to survive.

Vong had been separated from both his parents and worked on a rice field some six miles away from his father, Danh. Somehow, Vong heard of the terrible conditions his father suffered under his cruel landlord. When Vong learned that his father was being starved, the young boy of fourteen approached his own landlord and asked permission to bring food to his father every morning. Vong did not stop to consider that he hardly received enough food to eat himself. Every morning, while it was still dark, Vong woke up, cooked his small ration of food, and carried half of it to his father. He had to run the twelve miles back and forth to be in the rice field on time to begin work alongside the other laborers at sunrise. He did this for several years.

Eventually the emperor realized the uselessness of *phan sap* policy and abandoned it altogether. Nothing seemed to break the courage of the Christians, and a growing number of non-Christians sympathized with and showed mercy toward the Christians, sometimes even at the risk of antagonizing the local mandarins.

When Nguyen van Danh, sick and emaciated, was at last reunited with his family, he was proud that none of his children had renounced their faith and that his wife had steadfastly continued to teach their children to fear God and love their neighbor. He also proudly admitted that he owed his survival to his eldest son. Not only had Vong brought him food every day, but the boy had also encouraged his father. Danh said that his son's indomitable courage had made his hell endurable.

Eventually Vong married Tong thi Tai, a close relative of Paul Tong Viet Buong, a military commander martyred under Emperor

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Minh Mang on October 23, 1833. Buong was beatified by Pope Leo XIII on May 27, 1900, and canonized by Pope John Paul II on June 19, 1988.

The young couple moved to Phu Cam where they met Father Joseph Eugène Allys, the future bishop of Hue. Father Allys recruited Vong as a unique kind of missionary. He was not to preach, but to settle in a small village, live the life of a virtuous Christian, and convert others through his example. Once there were enough converts in a village, he was to move on to a new village. This novel evangelization technique took Vong from village to village in a region located more than forty miles south of Hue.

Vong, Thuan's future great-grandfather, spent fifteen years evangelizing in this way. He was so enthusiastic that he would have spent his entire life as a missionary had not Father Allys asked him to return to Phu Cam to spend more time with his extended family.

Father Allys lent Vong some money to establish a farm and he became a prosperous farmer, the chairman of the parish council, and one of the most honored men in the Christian community of Hue. Later, Vong became a builder and constructed the landmark Pellerin Institute for the Brothers of Christian Schools and the Joan of Arc Institute for the Sisters of Saint Paul of Chartres, both inaugurated in 1904. These two institutions attracted elite students from Hue and all over the country. Vong and his son Dieu left their architectural imprint on the major public, religious, and private buildings of the city. They also did the maintenance and renovation work on most of the city's ancient monuments.



THUAN WOULD NEVER FORGET ALL THAT his family had endured, that he descended from martyrs. Later, when he suffered in his own flesh and soul for the Christian faith during thirteen years of detention, he would recall hearing about the martyrdom of his forefathers ever since he was a child. Strengthened by this example, he would embrace his own "martyrdom" as a cherished heritage. Thuan would venerate his ancestors, along with all the Vietnamese martyrs, until the day he died.