

## Venerable Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan of Vietnam



I was in prison for 13 years, 9 of which were in solitary confinement.

Two guards looked at me but never spoke to me; only yes and no. But I knew that they were my brothers after all and I had to be kind to them.

I had no gift to offer as a prisoner.

I had nothing at all, nothing that would please them. What to do?

One night a thought came to me: "You are still very rich. You have the love of Christ in your heart. Love them as Jesus loves you."

The next day I got to work, first of all showing cheerfulness and smiling.

I began to talk about my travels to countries where people live in freedom and enjoy their culture and great technical progress.

This piqued their curiosity and they asked many, many questions.

Slowly, very slowly, we became friends.

They wanted to learn foreign languages.

My guards have become my disciples!

The atmosphere of the prison changed considerably.

The quality of our relationships changed for the better.

At that time, in another area, a group of twenty people were learning Latin so they could read Church documents.

Their teacher was a former catechist.

One of my guards was taking Latin class and one day he asked me if I could teach him some Latin songs.

"There are so many," I replied, "and they are all so beautiful."

"You sing and I choose," he replied.

And so I sang Salve Regina, Salve Mater, Lauda Sion, Veni Creator, Ave Maris Stella - you will never guess the song he chose...

The Veni Creator!

I can't tell you how moving it is to be in a communist prison and hear your guard, who comes down the stairs at 7am every morning, on his way to the gym courtyard for exercise, singing the Veni Creator!

In another prison in Hanoi, I became friends with my guard and was able to ask for a piece of wire.

He was terrified.

"I learned at Police College that when someone wants electrical wire, they want to kill themselves!", he shouted.

I explained to him that Christians, and especially priests, do not commit suicide.

"So what are you doing with the electrical wire?" he asked me.

"I need a chain to carry my cross."

"But how do you make a chain with electric wire?"

"If you bring me two small pliers, I'll show you."

"Too dangerous!"

"But we're friends!"

He hesitated and finally said, "It's too hard to refuse. We'll do it tonight at 7pm. But we have to finish before 11pm.

"I'll tell my partner to take the evening off. If he knew, he would report us both."

That evening, with the tools he had brought, we cut, shaped and worked together to make my chain and finished it before 11pm!

This cross and this chain are not just my memory of captivity, however precious it may seem.

They are a constant reminder that only Christian charity can bring about a change of heart.

Not the weapons, not the threats, not the media.

It was very difficult for my guards to understand when I talked about loving our enemies, reconciliation and forgiveness.

"Do you really love us?"

"Yes, I really love you."

"Even when we make you suffer?"

"When do you suffer because you are in prison without trial?"

"Look at all the years we spent together.

"Of course, I love you!"

"And when you come out, will you tell your people to find us, beat us and harm our families?"

"I will continue to love you even if you want to kill me."

"But why?"

"Because Jesus taught us to always love; if we don't do it, we are no longer worthy of being called Christians."

There isn't enough time to tell all the other moving stories that testify to the liberating power of Jesus' love.

Wear one uniform and speak one language: charity.

Charity is the sign with which you will be recognized as disciples of our Lord.

It's a badge that costs little but is very difficult to find.

Charity is the most important language.

St. Paul considered it much more important than knowing how to "speak the languages of men and even of angels."