Cardinal Francois Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan
President of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace

Cardinal F.X Nguyen Van Thuan was born at Phu Cam in the diocese of Hue, Province of Thua Thien, Vietnam, on April 17, 1928. He was the eldest of 8: 3 boys and 5 girls. His father, Mr Nguyen Van Am passed away on July 1, 1993 in Sydney, Australia. His Mother, née Ngo Dinh Thi Hiep, daughter of the late Mr Ngo Dinh Kha, is now 100 years old and living in Sydney, Australia with her daughter Anne Ham Tieu.

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From early age Fr. Thuan was brought up in a Catholic environment with deep faith, owing much to his exemplary holy mother Elizabeth. Every evening she told her son stories from the Bible and those of the martyrs of Vietnam, especially of his ancestors, introduced him to the example of St Theresa of the Infant Jesus, taught him to love and forgive, and she also taught him to cherish his homeland of Vietnam.

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Later he was sent to study Canon Law at the Pontifical University Urbaniana, the Propaganda Fide in Rome from 1956-59. He was awarded Doctor of Canon Law with High Distinction maxima cum laude for his thesis on Military Chaplaincy in the World. While studying in Rome Fr Thuan accompanied his uncle Bishop Peter Mary Ngo Dinh Thuc to the audience with His Holiness Pope Pius XII.

Upon his return to Vietnam, he was Professor and from later 1962 Director of the Minor Seminary Hoan Thien, and at the same time Vicar General of the Diocese of Hue from 1964-1967.


He was consecrated Bishop on June 24, 1967, the solemnity of St John the Baptist, at Hue by H.E. Angelo Palmas, Apostolic Delegate for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. He took as his motto: Joy and Hope (Gaudium et Spes).

His installation took place on July 10, 1967. During his eight years in Nha Trang he spared no effort in the development of the diocese before the advent of difficult times. He focussed on training the grassroot cadres, increasing the number of seminarians from 42 to 147, and of minor seminarians from 200 to 500 in four Seminaries, organized Inservice Courses for priests of 6 dioceses in Central Viet Nam. He also organized other formation courses, such as: development and training of Youth associations, the laity, parish associations and parish councils with training courses for the Justice and Peace Movement, Cursillos and Focolare, and founded the Community of Hope and the Lavang Community.

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Awake and Pray (1968)
2. Strong in Faith, Advance with Serenity (1969)
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It was during these meetings that he had the opportunity to meet Pope John Paul II, then Archbishop of Cracow, and to learn from him of pastoral experiences during the most difficult period in Poland under the communist regime. He was also appointed Advisor, then member of the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples, and member of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of Sacraments.

On April 23, 1975 Pope Paul VI named him Archbishop Coadjutor with rights of succession to the Archbishop of Saigon, and at the same time named him titular Archbishop of Vadesi. However the Communist regime did not approve this nomination and forced him to return to Nha Trang.

On the solemnity of Assumption, 15.8.75 he was detained and escorted to Nha Trang where he was held in house arrest at Cay Vong, but was later taken to North Viet Nam where he was imprisoned for more than 13 years, 9 of which were spent in solitary confinement at Vinh Quang (Vinh Phu) prison, then in the prison run by the Hanoi Police. Later, he was again held under house arrest at Giang-Xa. During his years of imprisonment he wrote The Road of Hope, the Spiritual Testimony (Will) to all the Catholic Vietnamese in Viet Nam and abroad.

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In 1991 he was allowed to travel to Rome but was not allowed to return Ever since that time he lived in exile, though his heart was always with the Church in Viet Nam and his homeland. He spared no efforts to assist social services in Viet Nam, for example leprosariums, Charitable organizations, research programs to promote the culture of Vietnam and of the Catholic Church in Viet Nam, reconstruction of churches, the training of seminarians as conditions allowed. In spite of the persecutions imposed on the Church and on himself personally, he always lived and preached forgiveness and reconciliation.

On November II, 1994 the Holy Father named him Vice President of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, and subsequently President of the same on June 24, 1998 replacing Cardinal Y. R. Etchegaray, who had retired. He remains in this position until today.

Since his release from prison, he had undergone 7 operations, 3 of which he suffered infections and was critically ill. The second last operation was on April 17, 2001 at the Saint Elisabeth’s Medical Center, Boston, USA, and the last operation was on May 8,2002 at the Centre of Research for Tumors in Milan, Italy.

His condition worsened at the beginning of June 2002 and received treatment at Agostino Gemelli Hospital, a teaching hospital attached to the Catholic Sacred Heart University in Rome. He was later transferred to Pio XI hospital for further treatment.

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Escrito por VietCatholic News
Viernes 17 de Septiembre de 2004 11:31 -

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Rome, 16 September 2002.

Coordinating Office of the Apostolate for the Vietnamese in the Diaspora
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