

## WILDERNESS OF TEMPTATIONS, TRIALS & SELF-DISCOVERY

The story of Cardinal Van Thau is one that sends shivers down the spine of anyone who heard it or have read about it. Born in Vietnam and spent most of his life there, on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1975, he was appointed the Co-adjutor Archbishop of Saigon and on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1975, he was arrested by the Communist Government who targeted him personally. Immediately after his arrest, he was imprisoned for 13 years; while nine years of that was spent in solitary confinement, the other four years were spent in a Communist Re-education Camp. Cardinal Thau was subjected to all manner of inhumane treatments from being locked up in a cell without any space to let in sunshine, being beaten with sticks and irons by the prison guards, to being starved of food and drinks for days. While he was in solitary confinement for 9 years, Cardinal Thau had all the time to think about his life, and the call to follow Christ. According to him, those years were dreadful years and many times, he came close to walking out on God and giving up on himself. He was helpless, and at the lowest point in his life. When he was questioned on what sustained him those years, his simple answer was – The Eucharist and The Cross.

After his imprisonment, Cardinal Thau was asked to write home and request for some basics such as clothes, toothpaste and so on; he wrote this – “Please, could you send me a bit of medicine for my bad stomach?” The person who received the note knew exactly what he was asking for; hence, a little bottle of altar wine and some scraps of bread were smuggled through to his prison cell. With no table to celebrate Mass, Cardinal Thau transformed his body into an altar in the form of a cross. Every day at 3pm - the hour of Jesus’ expiration on the cross, with three drops of wine and one drop of water on one hand and some scraps of bread on the other, Cardinal Thau celebrated Mass alone and carried some of the consecrated hosts in his pocket for daily adoration at 9pm. According to him, each day, although he was in the wilderness of solitary confinement, the above spiritual practices gave him peace of spirit and of heart as well as joy and serenity of the companionship of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. He equally rediscovered the truest meaning of the Cross as God’s weapon of revolution and God’s own cathedral; hence, he understood his prison cell and camp as God’s mission lands and carried on with the work of evangelisation therein. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 1988, he was released by the Communist Government and placed on house arrest, thereafter, he was exiled to Rome in 1991 where he lived as a witness of Hope. Throughout his wilderness of temptations and trials, he refused to hate his captors and the soldiers who maltreated him; he loved them dearly, prayed for them and educated them. According to him: **“Only Christian love can change hearts, not weapons, and not threats... it is love that prepares the way for the announcement of the Gospel. Omnia Vincit Amor – Love conquers everything.”** It is this same type of wilderness that is full of temptations and trials but ultimately leads to our self-discovery that we encounter today.

On this First Sunday of Lent, today's Gospel according to Mark presents us with the account of Jesus' own desert experience which comes immediately after His baptism. The Greek word used there for wilderness is *eremos*. Although *eremos* means desert, wilderness, a secluded place, and a place lacking population; the proper meaning of the word *is a solitary place which also provides the needed quiet and serenity*. When God created man (Adam), He placed him in *eremos* to enable Adam to have a personal encounter with Him. This garden/solitary place that God placed man is what Pope John Paul II in his Theology of the Body called **ORIGINAL SOLITUDE**. It is because God from creation placed man in *eremos* that the same God always sends his people into *eremos* to have a personal encounter with them. The Bible is replete with people who spent time in the wilderness with God before God made use of them, such as: Joseph, Moses, Israelites, Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Paul and so on. To reverse the downfall of Adam in the desert, Christ was sent into the desert as well. Yes, the wilderness is a place of encounter with God, the devil and self. The wilderness/solitary place is equally a place of temptation. The Greek word used for temptation in today's Gospel pericope is *peirazomenos* which has both a positive and negative connotation. Negatively it means to test someone maliciously to prove the person's unsuitability, while positively it means to test someone for the purpose of ascertaining the person's quality and suitability.

My friends, as we begin our 2024 Lenten Journey, we are asked to do 2 crucial things:

1. **To enter that Wilderness/Solitary Areas of our lives** that we have been afraid of and stay there with Christ for 40 Days. That wilderness/solitary place of our lives might be our childhood, teenage years, adolescence, adult, and old years and take charge of those areas that frighten us. God wants to enter a new Covenant with us like he did with Noah in today's First Reading from the Book of Genesis Chapter 9; however, unless we confront our wilderness/solitary areas, we might be going round a vicious circle.
2. **To confront those Temptations in our lives** that we are afraid of. These could be addictions to various substances, drinks, food, persons, situations, addictions to our phones, the internet; it can equally be laziness, the dread of silence and stillness, holding onto past grudges, unforgiven spirit, and the need to wield power and authority. The fact is, no temptation is beyond us if we are truly ready to confront them; Christ died once for our sins, led us to God, and has made all dominations and powers His subjects as we hear in today's Second Reading from 1Peter Chapter 3. Because we are sons and daughters of God, all temptations are our subjects and not our masters.

Like Cardinal Van Thun who confronted his wilderness of temptations and rediscovered himself, let us do so in confidence during this Holy Season of Lent.

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Homily for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent, Year B (18/02/2024)