

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2024 B

“Get up and eat, or else the journey will be too long for you.” The angel’s words to Elijah will be the subject of thousands of homilies today, I imagine. They naturally invite us too, to nourish ourselves and be strengthened along the way. But WE are welcomed here to something far greater than the bread and water that miraculously sustained the prophet’s 40 days’ walk to Mount Horeb. The Eucharist is not earthly food, even if it begins with ordinary bread and wine. But these elements – “which earth has given and human hands have made” – are here changed by Christ Himself, and they become His Body and Blood. And, as we receive Him, WE are changed as well into the Living Body of Christ, the Church.

Some 25 years ago, Bishop Kinney sent the priests of our diocese a small book by the Vietnamese Cardinal, Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan. His is not perhaps a familiar name, but he inspired thousands of young people by speaking at the 1997 World Youth Day in Paris, just five years before his death. Cardinal Van Thuan was the archbishop of Saigon when he was arrested in 1975 by the Communist government in Vietnam. He spent the next 13 years in prison, nine of those years in solitary confinement. Needless to say, his faith was tested far beyond what most of us will ever experience – as he says, *“seeing only two guards every day, enduring mental torture, absolute emptiness, with no work to do, having to walk back and forth in my cramped cell from morning to night so that I would not become crippled by arthritis. I was on the brink of insanity.”*

And indeed, it was the intention of his captors to break his mind and spirit. But what sustained him in all those years was faith, prayer, and above all, the Eucharist. Friends smuggled in wine labeled as “stomach medicine” and hosts sealed in a flashlight. His chalice was the palm of his hand, with three drops of wine and one drop of water. He hid the reserved Blessed Sacrament in what might be called a portable

tabernacle, made out of a cigarette package; as he says, *“Jesus in the Eucharist was always with me in my shirt pocket.”* Later, in a concentration camp with other prisoners, this little container that held the Eucharist was passed around secretly; he writes: *“they all knew that Jesus was among them, He who could heal all their physical and mental suffering. At night, the prisoners took turns for adoration; Jesus helped us in a tremendous way with His silent presence. Many Christians regained the fervor of their faith during those days, and those who were not Christians were converted. The strength of Jesus’s love is irresistible. The darkness of prison became light; the seed of faith germinated underground during that storm.”*

We are not imprisoned for our faith, but there are many things that COULD keep us away from the Eucharist if we allowed them to – indifference, distractions, suffering, doubts, the sense of gloom that is all too common in today’s world. ***Cardinal van Thuan’s hope in Jesus was not in vain, and neither will ours ever be.*** It is precisely in those moments when the journey seems so long, so exhausting, so overwhelming, that we need to hear again the angel’s words to Elijah, but this time spoken to us by Jesus Himself: ***“Whoever eats this bread will live forever ... Get up and eat, or else the journey will be too long for you.”***