

Pope praises late Vietnamese cardinal

VATICAN CITY - As church officials prepared to open the sainthood cause for Cardinal Francois Nguyen Van Thuan, Pope Benedict XVI praised the late Vietnamese cardinal as a "singular prophet of Christian hope."

"This heroic pastor" left behind a legacy that included his "shining witness of faith" in God's plan for humanity, the pope said in a Sept. 17 audience with members of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the office Cardinal Thuan headed from 1998 until his death in 2002.

The audience at the papal summer villa in Castel Gandolfo, south of Rome, came one day after Cardinal Renato Martino named Silvia Monica Correale as postulator for the cardinal's sainthood cause. The Vatican released a copy of the papal remarks.

Correale told Catholic News Service Sept. 17 that the Diocese of Rome formally will open the canonization process "very soon." Church law calls for a five-year waiting period between the time of the candidate's death and the cause for canonization to begin.

The first step in the canonization process is the declaration of a person's heroic virtues, then beatification. In general, the church must confirm two miracles through the intercession of the sainthood candidate before canonization.

Pope Benedict said the cardinal "was a man of hope; he lived (a life) based on hope and he spread it among everyone he met."

"Hope sustained him" in his many years of detention in communist Vietnam, and it helped him "catch a glimpse of the absurdity in events," such as his never receiving a trial during his 13 years of imprisonment, the pope said.

The pope, who said he knew Cardinal Thuan well because they worked together in the Roman Curia, recalled how the cardinal loved to say that a "Christian was a person of the hour, of now, of the moment, ready to welcome and live with the love of Christ."

His capacity to live in the present was seen in the way he gave himself completely over to God as well, said the pope.

The pope remembered the cardinal's "simple and immediate cordiality," his ability to communicate and be close to people, his fervid dedication to spreading the church's

social teachings to the poor, his “yearning for the evangelization of his continent, Asia,” as well as his efforts in promoting and supporting charitable works and human development in “the farthest-flung places on earth.”

Cardinal Thuan died in Rome Sept. 16, 2002, at the age of 74 after an extended battle with cancer.

Vietnam’s communist regime jailed the cardinal in 1975 when he was the newly named coadjutor bishop of Saigon, later renamed Ho Chi Minh City. He was never tried or sentenced and spent nine of his 13 years of detention in solitary confinement. His uncle was South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic who was assassinated in 1963.

After Cardinal Thuan’s release in 1988, the communist authorities refused to let him resume his post or to be reassigned to the Archdiocese of Hanoi. The prelate fled to Rome in 1991 after a Vietnamese government official “suggested” he leave.

His prison experiences shaped his spiritual outlook and were a constant theme in his numerous public speaking engagements around the world.

Even after leaving Vietnam, he continued to wear a pectoral cross and chain he fashioned in prison out of wood and electrical wire and which he hid from guards in a bar of soap.

“I wear this cross and this chain every day,” he said at a conference in Los Angeles in 2000, “not because they are reminders of prison, but because they indicate my profound conviction, a constant reference point for me: Only Christian love can change hearts; neither weapons, nor threats nor the media can do so.”

He repeatedly said he bore his guards no ill will and even tried to become friends with them, answering their questions about the Catholic Church in an attempt at evangelization.

He also published several books about his detention, including “Five Loaves and Two Fish,” “The Road of Hope: A Gospel From Prison” and “Prayers of Hope: Words of Courage.”