



The Prayer of Old Jim

Prayer, fasting, works of mercy – on the surface the Lenten agenda stays the same every year. But a fresh perspective on what we're used to doing can help us get beneath the surface and go deeper than we're used to going.

This thought came to me as I read *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, a little book by Cardinal Francois-Xavier Nguyen van Thuan of Vietnam. Ordained priest in 1953 and bishop in 1967, he was thrown in prison by the communists in 1975, and they kept him there for the next thirteen years – nine of them in solitary confinement. Exiled in 1991, he spent the rest of his life in Rome.

As his tiny book testifies, Cardinal van Thuan's long and bitter suffering proved to be a great school of Christian discipleship.

"Imagine a week, a month, two months of silence," he writes. "They are terribly long, but when they are transformed into years, they become an eternity. . . . There were days when, worn out by tiredness, by sickness, I did not get even so far as reciting one prayer!" On those days when strength failed him, the imprisoned bishop learned from a story about an old man he calls Jim to pray much differently than he had before.

Each day at noon Jim showed up at the church, went inside for just a few minutes, and then left. His visitations piqued the curiosity of the sacristan, who finally asked him why he came so faithfully. "I come to pray," Jim said. "For just two minutes?" the sacristan replied. "How can you pray in so short a time?" "I am an old, ignorant man," Jim answered; "I pray to God in my own way." "What do you say?" the sacristan asked. "I say, 'Jesus, here I am. I'm Jim.' And then I leave."

Years went by, and so did Jim's health. He ended up in the poor ward of a hospital. As he was about to die, a priest and a nurse came to his bed in an attempt to satisfy their curiosity. They had noticed that since Jim had entered the ward, everything changed for the better. "What have you done to make these patients happier, contented, and friendly?" they asked. "I don't know," he replied. "When I can walk, I go around here and there, visiting everyone. I greet them, talk a little bit. When I'm in bed, I call everyone over, make them all laugh, make them all happy. With Jim, they are always happy."

"But you, Jim, why are you happy?" the nurse asked. "Well," he answered, "when you receive a visit every day, aren't you happy?" "Of course," she answered; "but who comes to visit you? We've never seen anyone." "If you remember when I came to this ward," Jim answered, "I asked you for two chairs, one for you and one reserved for my guest. Don't you see?" "No we

don't. Who is your guest?" she asked. "Jesus," Jim replied. "Before, I used to go to church to visit Him; now I can't do that anymore; so each day at noon Jesus comes here." "What does He say to you?" the priest inquired. "He says, 'Jim, here I am. I'm Jesus!'"

In his last, dying minutes old Jim smiled and swept his hand invitingly toward the empty chair by his bed, as if he were beckoning someone to sit down. Then he smiled again and closed his eyes.

In the unrelenting loneliness of his prison cell, Cardinal van Thuan had plenty of time to think of old Jim. "When my strength failed me and I could not even say my prayers, I repeated: 'Jesus, here I am. I'm Francis.' Joy and consolation came, and I experienced Jesus responding, 'Francis, here I am. I'm Jesus.'"

Lent is a time to get beneath the surface and go deeper.