The Lord has risen from the tomb. Alleluia, alleluia!! “The earth quaked, rocks were split, tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming forth from their tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many” (Mt 27:51-53).

We rejoice that our Lenten journey has ended. We celebrate Christ’s victory over sin and death. But our joy is tempered by extreme caution. With prayer and care we continue to stay in place in order to keep death and the spread of the coronavirus at a distance.

In his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul tells us that: As to his death, Jesus died to sin once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God. Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:10-11). In the midst of this worldwide pandemic, with many restrictions on our movement, one might ask how am I to live for God under these severe constraints?

Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan was consecrated as Bishop of Nha Trang on 4 June 1967 in the midst of the Viet nam War. On April 23, 1975 Pope Paul VI named him Coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon. However, the communist regime did not approve of this nomination and forced him to return to Nha Trang. On the Solemnity of the Assumption, August 15, 1975, he was detained and held under house arrest. 15 days later, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese Army and many Christians faced a long period of religious persecution.

The bishop had a burning desire to feed his sheep. He was quite anxious about his confinement. (I’m sure you can appreciate his position). In isolation, he meditated on the Word of God. The fruits of his prayer were short inspirational thoughts that he wrote on the back of a calendar. For example:

If God desires it to rain, desire the same. If God desires the sun to shine, desire the same. If God desires to make things pleasant, desire the same. If God desires to visit you with hardship and travail, desire the same. And rejoice, for to have but one will with God is the secret to happiness.

When a young man came to bring him food each day, he had him take out the trash … his discarded calendar page. The inspiration from God which fed the bishop spiritually was thus smuggled out of confinement, copied by hand, and circulated among the faithful. In time, these daily spiritual insights were collected into a book, The Road of Hope: A Gospel from Prison. The underground publication of his spiritual thoughts fed and nourished his flock. It gave them hope. But once discovered, his enemies stripped him of what little freedom he had under house arrest and placed him under lock and key in solitary isolation for the next 9 years.

At times, Francis had tense words with our Lord. He prayed for liberation and could not understand why his prayers were not answered. The Lord never abandoned Francis and in time helped him to understand that Francis was exactly where the Lord wanted him to be. With understanding, comes acceptance.

I am happy here, in this cell, where white mushrooms are growing on my sleeping mat, because You are here with me, because You want me to live here with You. I have spoken much in my lifetime: now I speak no more. It’s Your turn to speak to me, Jesus; I am listening to You.

Thirteen years after he was first confined, Bishop Francis asked the Blessed Mother for a special favor. It was the 21st of November, the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin. Almost immediately, he was released from detention. The day of his freedom was like Easter, he rejoiced and sang the praises of God.

Four months later, he was able to visit his aging parents in Australia. The bishop’s mother noticed that he was a different man. Humbled by his experience, he was kinder, gentler, more at peace.

We do not know when the pandemic will end, and all will rejoice at our restored freedom. We do know that the Lord is with us each day and every step of the way. “Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). If we allow him, He too will help us to be kinder, gentler, and more at peace.

The Lord has risen from the tomb. Alleluia, alleluia!!

Sources: card-fxthuan.org/about-cardinal/bio-english.php; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nguyen_Van_Thuan