One of the terms you've probably heard as a Catholic is "The Church Militant," and it's a reference to how we go into the world to do battle, but not the kind of battle of a traditional army. Rather we go out into the world to change this world for the better; to do battle with the Devil, with temptation, with the forces of evil, and in so doing we are bring God's love and mercy into this world by helping keep evil out, and bring the good in; namely helping others (after of course starting with ourselves) to see what it means to choose the good and what true happiness is. It's why, as I've said before, we are sent at the end of Mass; namely to, as we sometimes sing "go and make a difference."

And the way this is done is through exercising our kingship as a Christian, for what a difference we can make when we do just that.

About a week before Saigon fell to North Vietnam, a new Archbishop became the leader of the faithful there, Francis Xavier Nguyen van Thuan, who is on the road to sainthood, currently given the title of "Venerable." Recently he's been in the news a bit as his cause for canonization is gaining more traction.

Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyên Van Thuân was born on April 17, 1928 in Central Vietnam. He was the second of nine children; four brothers and five sisters.

Raised in a profound Christian household, he received guidance from his mother, Elisabeth. Every evening, she would recite various biblical accounts to him, speak of the lives of the Vietnamese martyrs (in particular, the martyrs that belonged to their family line), and describe the lives of the saints. She taught him to love others and to forgive always and everyone, at the same time instilling in him a profound love for his homeland, Vietnam.

At the age of thirteen, he entered into the Minor Seminary. Afterwards he continued his studies at the Major Seminary.

After his priestly ordination, he carried out his pastoral ministry in some parishes, eventually becoming a professor and canon lawyer.

On April 13, 1967, he became a bishop of the Diocese of Nha Trang and, for a period of eight years, sought to develop its pastoral life before the oncoming of difficult times.

During his pastoral service, vocations rose sharply, and he greatly helped the people with many programs to help the laity on their faith journey as well, publishing 6 pastoral letters on top of this to help guide people.

Eventually he was appointed to Saigon. Once known as “Paris of the Orient”— it fell to the advancing forces of the North Vietnamese Army in April 1975, thus signaling the end of an independent South Vietnam, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians were routinely rounded up and placed in so called re-education camps, where many of them languished for years.

One of these was Archbishop Van Thuan, who, besides being targeted as a man of profound and resolute faith, was the nephew of the nation’s first president, and thus a presumptive enemy of the state. The Communists were determined to bully into silence all opposition. To that end, the archbishop would spend 13 years in prison, nine of them in solitary confinement.

It’s hard to imagine what it would have been like to have been taken captive, put on a boat, and then placed in a prison, seemingly powerless and conquered by the forces of evil.
At first, he was crushed. In his words:

“Alone in my prison cell,” he recalls, “I continued to be tormented by the fact that I was 48 years old, in the prime of my life, that I had worked for eight years as a bishop and gained so much pastoral experience, and there I was isolated, inactive and far from my people.”

It was the lowest moment of his life.

“The hardest thing above all,” he later on admitted, “was that I began to feel helpless. My plans, my activities, my efforts, were all for nothing. This practical helplessness described my condition for 13 years. I wanted to do so many things to serve my people, but I could not.”

But then he began to look at things differently. He saw this prison camp as his church, and his flock. It was then that he began to think in a new and

deeper way about the Cross, of the sheer helplessness of the God-Man who hung in mortal agony upon it. That here was a kindred soul, indeed, Someone who had plunged even deeper into the slough of despond than he had.

“He (too) was immobilized. He could neither preach, nor administer any sacrament. He too was helpless.” And yet, notwithstanding the profound impotence and pain Christ Himself bore, “it was from there that he performed his greatest deed: He redeemed us sinners. Thanks to his help I have never regretted my destiny.”

Indeed, it all crystallized for him one night when, deep within his own heart, he sensed a voice, clear and unmistakable, directly asking him —

“Why torment yourself? You must discern between God and the works of God. Everything you have done and desire to continue to do, pastoral visits, training seminarians, sisters and members of religious orders, building schools, evangelizing non-Christians. All of that is excellent work, the work of God, but it is not God! If God wants you to give it all up and put the work into his hands, do it and trust him. God will do the work infinitely

better than you; he will entrust the work to others who are more able than you. You have only to choose God and not the works of God!

“This light,” he says, whose source could only have been God Himself, “totally changed my way of thinking. When the Communists put me in the hold of the boat, along with 1,500 other prisoners, and moved us to the north, I said to myself, “Here is my cathedral, here are the people God has given me to care for, here is my mission — to ensure the presence of God among these, my despairing, miserable brothers. It is God’s will that I am here. I accept his will.”

It became, he says, the moment of his liberation. “And from that moment onwards, a new peace filled my heart and stayed with me for 13 years.”

Every moment thereafter, for all that was trying to kill his spirit on the outside, he would anneal his will, now fortified more than ever the grace of God, “to live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love.”

Isolated and without contact with his people, he looked for a way to communicate with them. One morning he said to Quang, a seven-year-old

boy: "Tell your mother to buy me old calendar pads". In the evening the boy brought him the notebooks, and so "I wrote to my people my message from captivity". The bishop returned the writings to the boy who gave them to his brothers. The latter were in charge of copying and distributing them to the Catholics who had to act clandestinely.

From these brief messages a book was born, "The Path of Hope". He wrote it quickly - in a month and a half - because he was afraid that he would not be able to finish it if he was transferred to another place. In the same way, new books came out later on.

Van Thuan knew that the strength he needed to sustain his soul and his state of mind could only come from an encounter with the Lord. He said, in code, asking the people for a little wine for his stomach, that this was for Mass. He'd use that with tiny bits of bread, saying the Mass from memory. This was used for his spiritual health. He said: "I will never be able to express my great joy: daily, with three drops of wine and a drop of water in the palm of my hand, I celebrated Mass (...). The Eucharist became for me and for other Christians a hidden and encouraging presence in the midst of all difficulties".

Then came even more dramatic moments. He was transferred to another place on a grueling boat trip with 1,500 other starving and desperate prisoners. There he was imprisoned again, but now in solitary confinement. A new and long period began, even more painful than that of the previous years. His unusual attitude of respect for the guards in charge of controlling him allowed a relationship that could be described as surprising.

At the beginning, his dealings with them were non-existent; they did not speak to him, they answered only "yes" or "no"; it was impossible to be nice to them. So he started smiling at them, exchanging kind words and telling them stories of his travels…he even taught them languages like French and English: "my guards become my students!” he said. He thus improved relations with them and the atmosphere in the prison, and then took the opportunity to talk to them also about religious topics.

His freedom came suddenly on November 21, 1988, and was a great joy for Vietnamese Christians, but he could not stay long in his homeland. He was soon exiled to the West. Is.

His story goes to show you what Christian kingship truly looks like; namely how we order things to the end of God's Kingdom. How do we love God with our whole heart, mind and soul? How do we change this world for the better? This is what Christian Kingship is all about. His story shows us how to live out that part of our baptism, contrary to the ways of the world which are so often misguided.

Today we celebrate Christ the King, the end of the Liturgical Year, where we think again about how Jesus is king of our world - and how with Him, we can change the world, not through political power, but through the power exhibited by the Cardinal as a political prisoner, the power that can change this world for the better.

What it comes down to is really two areas of focus: namely ourselves and one another.

With respect to ourselves, we look at how our lives are ordered, and is Christ King over the various parts of them and how we engage with others. A good starting point is to look for the serpents, meaning Adam was the first human king if you think about it - king over the garden. But he allowed the serpent in and was deceived. We do this too when we aren't king of our

minds and souls working with Jesus to safeguard it and have the right mentality towards others.

There is the family; for the Cardinal, his spiritual family were the people in those prisons. For us, it's often our parents, our spouses, our children. So if Jesus is King over our family life, we treat family members with love. We do things with a good attitude. We give guidance when needed. If one has children they help them follow their own dreams, not their own.

If Jesus is King over our minds and we have a good theology of the body, we'll also make sure we don't abuse it. Everyone has temptations and thoughts they don't will; but society often says a person should look a certain way and focuses on external beauty. In can come the serpent in the mind; it's just a look, no one knows, it doesn't hurt anyone, it's not really cheating or adultery because it's just on a computer. Deep down we know these are wrong though.

And if Jesus is King over our emotions and how we deal with others, it will help us to see as Jesus does - with love. Cardinal Nguyen had every reason to be full of anger or even hate toward the guards. But instead of

allowing wrath, a deadly sin, to take over, he treated them with compassion and engagement, converting several. We can do this too when we allow political divisions, family divisions, old grudges, or racism to take over in our hearts.

So many things can sneak into our lives little by little. To live out our kingship, we listen to the voice of God, much like Cardinal Nguyen did throughout his life from discerning his vocation to sitting in a jail cell, and God never abandoned him, but rather used him to change that prison and the world.

This is the power we have too. When we get our spiritual house in order, keeping out what needs to be kept out, and are focused on God, we can then go out and, like a king, go on offense. We don't pick up weapons of war, but we go out and evangelize, from at home with our families, reminding especially kids that God is at the center of our lives; to how we treat others in the greater world, changing hearts and minds like Cardinal Van Thuan did in that prison. Every day there are so many opportunities to do (or not do) things; to respond to nastiness with kindness; to lift people up; to engage with people who maybe have lost their way a bit; to pray with

someone; or to be the one to speak up for what is right when everyone else takes the wrong viewpoint on a matter of faith and morals.

A quick look around and at first it might seem the forces of evil are doing quite well with all the things we see in the world. And there is truth in that yes, the devil has won some battles. But he will never win the war, because Christ is King. The Devil was defeated on that Good Friday, because Jesus gave His life out of love for us all and when we look into our hearts and see our mistakes, like the Good Thief, all we need say is “Jesus remember me” and He will gaze at us with the same gaze He gave Him - the one of love and mercy. Our part is to open our eyes like Dismas, and see the truth of that love and what it means - mercy, yes, but also a call to action. A call to change our lives for the better. A call to receive that mercy in Holy Communion and then go out with our King to change the world.