

## Catholic Priest Nguyễn Văn Lý, a Prisoner of Conscience

Sentenced to a total of 53 years for demanding social justice and religious freedom



*Rev. Nguyễn Văn Lý was prohibited from speaking at his own trial held on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007.*

Reverend Thadeus Nguyễn Văn Lý was born in 1947 and ordained in 1974 by the martyred bishop Philip Nguyễn Kim Điền. The government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam sentenced him to twenty years in prison in 1977 for “anti-government propaganda.” The government released him after a relatively brief internment period, but arrested him again in 1983, charged him with the same offense, and sentenced him to ten years in prison. The government released him in 1992 after he had served most of the sentence, but placed him under probationary house arrest and forbade him from carrying out his priestly duties.

Rev. Lý resumed his struggle in 2001, first for his freedom of religion, and, secondly, to make all the Vietnamese aware that everyone is entitled to such freedom. With the motto “Religious Freedom or Death”, he lit and held up a new torch rallying Vietnamese intellectuals, clergy of various faiths, and the international community. The government arrested him for the third time and sentenced him to fifteen years in prison. (Note that the government also detained three of his nephews in 2001-2004 in an attempt to pressure him to give up his fight for human rights and religious freedom, but Rev. Lý was undaunted and continued his advocacy). International human rights groups and the governments of several countries, particularly the U.S., weighed in. The Vietnamese government released him from prison in 2005 and put him under probationary house arrest. While on probation, Rev. Lý resolutely pursued his advocacy of freedom for the Vietnamese people.

Rev. Lý disseminated contemporary thoughts on human rights to all elements of society, including farmers, students, teachers, the clergy, and even government employees. His activities on behalf of freedom and democracy prompted the government to arrest him for the fourth time in 2007. The government prohibited him from using lawyers, and forbade his relatives and Catholic Church representatives from showing up in court during the trial. When Rev. Lý tried to speak, a public security officer placed his hands over the priest's mouth to silence him. As the officer committed the outrageous act, someone snapped the photo that has since become a symbol of “justice” under the Communist regime in Vietnam. The court sentenced Rev. Lý to eight years in prison, followed by five years of probationary house arrest.

Rev. Lý turned 65 in 2012. The government has sentenced him four times, adding up to 53 years in prison and over 10 years of probationary house arrest; he has actually spent over eighteen years in prison, primarily in solitary confinement.

In late 2009, he suffered a stroke, one in a series of strokes that he had while in prison; the government granted him temporary medical parole on 15/3/2010. In November 2010, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued its finding that the arrest and detention by the Vietnamese government of Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly was without legal justification and in violation of international law.

The cumulative effect of five strokes is a brain tumor, paralysis of his right leg and arm, and difficulty in daily activities such as walking, eating and bathing. Nevertheless, the government interned him once more on 25/7/2011.

On 3/11/2011, diplomats from the U.S., Canada and Australia met with Rev. Lý in Nam Hà Prison and discussed with him the option of going abroad for medical treatment. Based on communications sent by his relatives, the world learned that Rev. Lý said this to those diplomats: "I only wish to live in Vietnam when freedom reigns; until then, I am willing to serve the rest of my sentence. I have no desire to go abroad for medical treatment."

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*Rev. Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly during his brief release in 2010, calling for "pluralism, a multi-party system, and peace."*

Rev. Lý has communicated his views in over 100 essays and notes from 1992 on. Several of these are featured in *The Collected Work of Catholic Priest Nguyễn Văn Lý*, the 651-page document that the Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam published in 2001.

His life's motto, "*Distribute every last benefit, blessing and pleasant thing in life to others, but hang on to all the sufferings, pains and unpleasant things in life,*" adorned his desk. He had it printed in large font and plastic wrapped, and would hand it out to his visitors.

#### **Act Now:**

- You can help promote religious freedom in Vietnam by bringing up the case of Rev. Nguyễn Văn Lý in all public forums attended by representatives of the Vietnamese government and by demanding his immediate release.