

A refugee's gift

In offering another refugee his citizenship, Chuong Nguyen is not submitting a transactional sort of sacrifice. He is giving a gift of selfless love.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 15, 2017](#) issue



A U.S. ship approaches a boat carrying Vietnamese refugees.

Refugees who journey from deprivation and vulnerability to eventual security carry the imprint of their experience for life. Chuong Nguyen is one of those refugees. Loaded with his siblings into an overcrowded boat the day before Saigon fell in 1975, Nguyen was one of the luckier boat people to escape Vietnam. Hundreds of thousands of others died at sea. He made it to Subic Bay in the Philippines under

what he calls the “warm welcome” of the U.S. Seventh Fleet. Eventually he arrived in the United States, where he became a Catholic priest.

Nguyen made news last month when he wrote Donald Trump on the day the president signed his executive order banning entrance to the United States for Syrian and other refugees. “My heart and my soul were frozen,” he writes. “I am a refugee. . . . Becoming a refugee is a choice one makes when there are no other options.” Nguyen, who has spent his life shaping young people and strengthening communities, considers his story to be one of many that has helped make America great.

In his letter, Nguyen offered to relinquish his U.S. citizenship so that the president could offer it to a Syrian refugee. While the president has no power to bestow citizenship, the priest’s offer received praise from many quarters for its sacrificial character. But there’s something deeper happening.

In traditional understandings of sacrifice, one gives something up for the sake of another’s well-being. This transactional view has a long history, from animals being slain on altars to exact the favor of gods, to soldiers giving up their lives to provide fellow citizens with freedom. The church’s idea of sacrifice has always underscored a similar exchange. Something must die (often a brutal death) or suffer greatly in order for some other good to emerge.

Yet Jesus showed no interest in the glorification of death or veneration of suffering that had long fueled people’s understandings of sacrifice. “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” was his way of grounding a moral life in generous love instead of tit-for-tat exchanges where something must die or be given up. Other words of Jesus—“This is my body, given for you”—suggest a gift of unbounded love rather than a bloody sacrifice.

Nguyen’s unique proposal may look like a crass exchange. But he also told the president that he wants his superiors to relocate his life of service to one of the seven predominantly Muslim countries named in the executive order. We can call that generous love or deep mercy. Nguyen is not requiring something to die; he is giving a gift of selfless love.

A couple of weeks ago I spoke with Nguyen by phone. His utter joy for life is apparent. He loves with abandon. “I receive so much. I want to give back. When you are a refugee you are nobody. America has allowed me to be somebody.” His offer

to replant his life in a war-torn country is a fresh reminder that when Jesus says, “No one has greater love than this, but to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” our Lord may not be talking about the sacrifice of dying so much as the gift of giving one’s life away.

A version of this article appears in the March 15 print edition under the title “A refugee’s gift.”