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Our Lady of La Vang

A Vietnamese Virgin Mary, made in California

Every two years, more than 200,000 pilgrims make their way to La Vang, a poor farming village in central Vietnam. They come from the around the world to pay homage to the Virgin Mary, whose apparition visited the village in 1798 and gave comfort to persecuted Catholics. From Vietnamese American Catholics to Thai Buddhists, they come seeking her blessings, solace, and comfort.

“She is not just the mother of Catholics in Vietnam but also anyone who comes and prays to her,” an Indonesian Protestant once told me during a visit to La Vang. His comment echoed the feelings of many who made the long, arduous journey to the Minor Basilica of Our Lady of La Vang. Although the Vatican has not recognized the historical apparition, Our Lady of La Vang has become a global religious and spiritual symbol.

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Over the course of a few days, pilgrims pray to a large statue of Our Lady of La Vang holding a figure of the baby Jesus. She stands under three large banyan trees, adjacent to an old church building, wearing traditional Vietnamese attire composed of an *áo dài* and a crescent-shaped headpiece. With her black hair, dark eyes, and porcelain skin, she reflects an ideal image of beauty in Vietnamese society.

This Vietnamese representation of Our Lady of La Vang can now be found wherever Vietnamese people have emigrated, including: Japan, Taiwan, Canada, France, Australia, and the United States. This Vietnamization of the Virgin is a recent development. Until 1998, statues of Our Lady of La Vang were modeled on French representations of another Virgin Mary figure, *Our Lady of Victories*. But the new *Our Lady of La Vang* did not come from Vietnam. She came from Orange County, California.

Vietnamese Americans represent the largest Asian American Catholic group in Orange County. In 2010, there were nearly 70,000 Vietnamese Catholics in the region, according to the secretary of the Bishop of Orange. They constitute the largest Asian Catholic group in Orange County. The community has been growing since the fall of Saigon in 1975, when the first large wave of 125,000 Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States.¹ Many Vietnamese chose to resettle in Orange County due to its warmer climate, employment opportunities, and close proximity to Camp Pendleton, where many Vietnamese refugees first arrived.

As Vietnamese Catholics struggled to rebuild their lives in the United States, many sought comfort from the Virgin Mary. In 1978, more than 1,500 Vietnamese Catholics across the country attended the largest Feast of Assumption celebration in Carthage, Missouri, during a blazing hot August.² The multiday pilgrimage became known as “Marian Day,” attracting mostly Vietnamese of different religious backgrounds from throughout the world. In Carthage, pilgrims worshipped a statue of Our Lady of Fatima and one of Our Lady of Peace (*Đức Mẹ Nữ Vương Hòa Bình*). For many Vietnamese Catholics, the statues symbolize miracles but also have strong anticommunist connotations.

Like the original *Our Lady of La Vang*, the statues of Our Lady of Fatima and Our Lady of Peace depicted the Virgin Mary with European features. European images of the Virgin Mary had long been the norm in Vietnamese Catholicism.

Then in the 1990s, when multiculturalism was being promoted by the Catholic Church in the United States, the

bishop of Orange County permitted Vietnamese Americans to create a Vietnamese statue of the Virgin Mary. In 1994, this image, known as *Our Lady of Vietnam*, was completed and placed at the entrance to the Vietnamese Catholic Center in Santa Ana. *Our Lady of Vietnam* joined a growing collection of ethnic representations of the Virgin Mary in Orange County, including *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, a Korean Virgin Mary, and *Our Lady of Czestochowa* from Poland.

Created by sculptor Van Nhan, the white statue represents the Virgin Mary dressed in the Vietnamese national costume. She holds the baby Jesus in front of her with both hands, “as if she wants to hand her most beloved child to Vietnamese people in order to save them and their race,” according to the Vietnamese Catholic Center. She represents the “peace and tranquility” that Vietnamese American faithful seek as they adapt to life in a new country.

Our Lady of Vietnam also reflects Vietnamese American Catholics’ connections to coreligionists in Vietnam during a time in which the country was isolated from the United States after the Vietnam War. She stands on a grotto in the shape of an S that depicts Vietnam and its mountainous ridges. The Vietnamese Catholic Center explains that this representation of the Virgin Mary “guides the spirit of Vietnamese people to return to their homeland roots” and to pray for their coreligionists who are suffering under communism. This is another reason she is referred to as *Our Lady of Peace*.

In 1995—three years before the two-hundredth anniversary of the apparition of Our Lady of La Vang—the United States reestablished diplomatic ties with Vietnam. This timing helped to revive interests among Vietnamese American Catholics to reconnect to their homeland. In an article published in 1996, Vietnamese Americans were urged to visit the *Our Lady of La Vang* in Vietnam: “Now is the time for overseas Vietnamese Catholics to be spiritually united and connected with the Catholic Church in the homeland. This is our affirmation that, despite being far away from the homeland, we will never forget our spirituality as a Vietnamese faithful and a citizen of a country and a peoplehood.”³

Our Lady of La Vang became Vietnamized through collaborations and agreements that reached across the Pacific. Clergy from Vietnam had seen the *Our Lady of Vietnam* statue during a visit to Orange County following the US-Vietnam normalization. They were impressed by

Vietnamese Americans' commitment to the well-being of Catholics in Vietnam, and their commitment to the preservation of Vietnamese Catholic culture and history despite decades of separation from their homeland. As a result of the trip, the visiting Vietnamese clergy commissioned Nhan Van, creator of *Our Lady of Vietnam*, to create another *Our Lady of La Vang* for the anniversary of her apparition.

Pope John Paul II blessed this Vietnamese *Our Lady of La Vang* statue in Rome on 1 July 1998. He also proclaimed Our Lady of La Vang the patroness of the Catholic Church of Vietnam. Although this religious honor did not officially recognize the apparition of Our Lady of La Vang, it was a source of inspiration for Vietnamese Catholics throughout the world. For the first time in history, a Vietnamese icon of the Catholic faith was officially introduced to the global Catholic community. On 13 August 1998, two hundred years after the apparition, more than 200,000 attendees gathered in La Vang to worship Our Lady of La Vang as represented by a Vietnamese woman.

Since her transformation, there have been several visual reinterpretations of Our Lady of La Vang to represent the unique faith and experiences of Vietnamese Catholics. In La Vang, in 2002, the Vietnamese *Our Lady of La Vang* was replaced with a new version wearing a headdress decorated with twelve stars. Although some believe that the stars are an allusion to the twelve apostles of Jesus, Vietnamese Catholics abroad have interpreted them as the stars that Vietnamese refugees used to guide themselves to their new homes. In the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Vang in Washington, D.C., completed in 2005, stars are used as a decorative motif throughout the sanctuary as reminders of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Today, statues of the Vietnamese Our Lady of La Vang are popular diplomatic gifts often exchanged between

Vietnamese Catholic communities in different countries. In 2002, Pope John Paul II blessed six statues of Our Lady of La Vang in Rome and gave them to Catholics in Orange County, who were responsible for distributing them to representatives of six different continents. Through the Vietnamese representation of Our Lady of La Vang, Vietnamese Catholics throughout the world have become reconnected to each other and have transformed the face of the Catholic Church in their image. In 2010, a stone engraved with the phrase *Cộng Đồng Hải Ngoại* (Overseas Diocese) was placed at the Our Lady of La Vang Pilgrimage Center during the start of the Holy Year. It recognizes the Vietnamese Catholic diaspora as the twenty-seventh diocese of the Catholic Church in Vietnam.

The growing global popularity of Our Lady of La Vang has spurred the construction of a number of parishes named after her outside of Vietnam, including two in California. These transnational ties are not simply nostalgia for the homeland but an effort among Vietnamese Catholics to heal the wounds of war and displacement. The Vietnamese *Our Lady of La Vang* represents reconnection among Vietnamese Catholics in the diaspora and the homeland after decades of separation. **B**

Notes

- ¹ Min Zhou and Carl I. Bankston, *Growing Up American* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), 29.
- ² Peter Phan, "Mary in Vietnamese Piety and Theology: A Contemporary Perspective," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 51(2005): 457-472.
- ³ Van G. Bui, "Huong Ve La Vang" [Toward La Vang], *Kỷ Niệm 12 Năm Thành Lập Công Đoàn La Vang [12 Year Anniversary of the Establishment of the La Vang Community]* (Orange County, CA), 13.

