Our Lady of La Vang Journeys with the Nation: Marian Devotion and Pilgrimage in Vietnam

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Our Lady of La Vang Journeys with the Nation: Marian Devotion and Pilgrimage in Vietnam

Dung Trang received her Ph.D. in Theology from Villanova University. Her areas of concentration are Christian Spirituality and Historical Theology. Her primary research interest relates to the relationship between faith and culture, devotion to Mary, women’s studies, theology of Vatican II, and Vietnamese Catholicism. Her doctoral dissertation examines the relationship between Marian devotion and Vietnamese Catholic women. Sister Dung is a member of the Lovers of the Holy Cross Khiet Tam, Vietnam.
It was around 6:00 pm on August 5, 2017, during Marian Days in Carthage, Missouri. As the Marian solemn procession arrived at the ceremony site, the master of ceremonies announced reverently: “Our Mother is coming back to our congregation. Please turn on happy music. Wave your flags. Fireworks get ready. A grand applause to welcome our Mother back to us.” Then the choir began the Marian hymn “Hail Holy Queen of Peace” (Kính Mừng Nữ Vương). As the refrain was sung, “Hail Mother Mary” (tung hô Mẹ Maria), two long firecrackers were lit, followed by the release of numerous balloons of all colors tied to two flags, one of blue and white, the Virgin Mary’s colors, and the other of the Vietnamese flag before the country fell to communism in 1975. In 2017, an estimated 100,000 Catholics from throughout the United States, Canada, Australia, and Vietnam came together to make this nearly two-hour procession throughout the town of Carthage. A statue of Our Lady of Fatima was accompanying them through the two-mile journey and then returned to the main platform. Many pilgrims were moved to tears from the emotions created by the procession. Mary, as the word of the master of ceremonies announced, is like a living mother to the pilgrims. She has been journeying with Vietnamese Catholics throughout the town of Carthage, and symbolically, through their lives.

1 This paper is an excerpt from my doctoral dissertation at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University. This is not an ethnographic study. I relied on secondary literature. For example, written texts and pilgrim literature is based on some Vietnamese Catholic newspapers during the twentieth century and Trần Quang Chu’s research about the pilgrimage to La Vang and the history of the Diocese of Huế. I also draw on my observations during my participation of Marian Days, Carthage, Missouri in 2010, 2011, 2016, and 2017. Acknowledging that these are two different methodologies to collect the data, i.e., personal observation and textual analysis, I believe that the outcome of the findings is comparable because they are focused on the historical context and effects on Marian devotion rather than individual experience. While historical analysis remains a primary approach, my observation and participation in the rituals explain the different contexts between Vietnamese Catholics in La Vang and in the United States.

2 Marian Days, an annual festival of Vietnamese Catholics that takes place on the 28-acre (110,000 m²) campus of the Congregation of the Mother of the Redeemer (CRM), in Carthage, Missouri during the first weekend in August to honor the Virgin Mary. The first gathering began in 1978. The year 2017 marks its 40th anniversary. A stature of Our Lady of Fatima was enshrined there in 1984. (In many Vietnamese parishes in the United States, our Lady of Fatima was chosen in the procession because of the anti-communist sentiments of the Vietnamese diaspora). The festival includes Masses, workshops, seminars, live entertainment, confessions, and a Marian procession on Saturday afternoon.

3 A popular Marian hymn “Kính mừng nữ vương” (“Hail Holy Queen of Peace”).
It was 5:00 am in La Vang, August 15, 2017, more than eight thousand miles away from Carthage, the solemn procession with a statue of Our Lady of La Vang was slowly moving from the historic site of the three banyan trees with the statue of Mary (linh đài) to the ceremony site (lễ đài). When Mary arrived at lễ đài, the congregation was ready for a solemn two-hour mass. Because of the crowd, pilgrims must remain in place without moving around. Without grand applause, the procession was no less inspiring.

The pilgrimage festival at La Vang reveals that Mary’s presence can be felt through the rituals. She is like a living mother to them rather than just a religious symbol. Later during mass, Homilist Bishop Nguyễn Văn Khâm reminded the pilgrims to look at Our Mother at La Vang (Đức Mẹ La Vang), but more importantly, he said: “This is our mother’s home. You can come here, touch on the building and remind yourself: this is mother’s house, this is my house.” Before him, on August 22, 1961, Bishop Ngô Đình Thúc announced the decision of the Southern Vietnamese Bishops Conference that from that time on, La Vang would be the mother’s home for the Vietnamese Catholics and a national pilgrimage center.

Despite the difference in geographic location, and the statue used at the procession, a common theme can be observed: Mary journeys with Vietnamese Catholics in Vietnam as much as she does in Carthage. The pilgrimage festival makes Mary’s presence felt by the devotees. She becomes a living mother to them, her symbolic function taking on dimension and living presence with and to them rather than remaining notional. These two events, one in La Vang and the other in the Vietnamese diaspora community in the United States, reveal that Vietnamese Catholics have a living and dynamic devotion to Mary.

Marian devotion, manifested in the festival and pilgrimage at La Vang, reflects Vietnamese Catholic Bishops’ intention in 1980 “to journey with the nation” as

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4 Even though the title is Our Lady of La Vang, the translation in Vietnamese is always Đức Mẹ La Vang (Holy Mother La Vang). While “lady” in Vietnamese means bà, phụ nữ; the word mẹ (mother) in the translation seems to be more common and denotes an intimate sense to Vietnamese. The word “mẹ” resonated deeply than the word “bà” (lady).

5 The Catholic Bishop’s Conference of Vietnam (VCB), in their 1980 Pastoral Letter, stated that the task of the Church is to journey with the nation. “The Church’s responsibility is to collaborate
articulated in the pastoral letter, “The Church’s responsibility is to collaborate with all Vietnamese to build and protect this land.”

The approach of the Catholic church after the war in 1975 was to maintain a public presence with an emphasis on reinforcing a sense of Catholic identity through popular devotion and liturgy. Devotion to OLLV demonstrates the interaction of several factors: the promotion of the clergy, political influence, and the participation of the Vietnamese Catholic laity.

Building on existing scholarship that focuses on the cultural inheritance and collective identity of Vietnamese Catholics around the world, this paper explores the case study of the basilica of OLLV with an emphasis on the rituals and the institutional church’s strategy to promote the popular site. It begins by providing the context of the bishops’ statement and the importance of Marian devotion as one of the most popular religious practices in Vietnamese Catholicism. It argues that Mary’s presence at La Vang, as seen in pilgrim literature, and some devotional forms such as Marian Procession, Rosary, and Eucharist Adoration, is understood as a living mother for pilgrims. More specifically, Marian procession, oral prayers during the night, and the night performance-based prayer reflect the journey of Vietnamese Catholic pilgrims to their mother’s house. This lively devotion to Mother Mary expresses the clergy’s effort to journey with the nation and the Vietnamese Catholics and at the same time, reflects the role of the believers who keep the devotion alive.

THE CONTEXT OF OUR LADY OF LA VANG AND THE VIETNAMESE CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ APPROACH IN THE 1980 PASTORAL LETTER

Roman Catholicism is the second largest religion in Vietnam, and Vietnam has the second largest number of Catholics in Southeast Asia (after the Philippines), although it is a minority within the population (6.1%).

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7 The government census of April 1, 2019 report shows that there are about 5.9 million Catholics.
connection to the history of French colonialism makes some see it as a foreign religion. Despite the minority position of Catholicism, there is great love for Mary all over Vietnam. During the annual gathering at La Vang, ritual acts like processing with statues of the virgin, offering gifts of flowers, and praying with the rosary attract significant numbers of passionately engaged participants. The diocese of Huế, where the main shrine to Our Lady of La Vang (OLLV) is located, hosts Marian pilgrimages year-round, with special large pilgrimages on Marian feast days.

In Vietnam, the rituals performed at La Vang have strong ecclesial endorsements. Mary’s official titles in Vietnam, and particularly at La Vang, for example “Mary, Helper of Christians,” reflect a strong sense of belief in her power of healing and mercy, and her role as a protector and divine mother. These characteristics seem to reveal a similarity to Marian devotion all over the world with Marian devotion as a dominant form of popular practice in Vietnamese Catholicism.

La Vang is situated in the central part of Vietnam, in Quảng Trị Province, about eighty miles north of Hue, the former capital, where King Cánh Thịnh organized an anti-Catholic campaign of persecution in 1798 (1792–1802). According to oral tradition, the Virgin Mary appeared to a group of people who fled from Cô Vụt Parish to La Vang to seek protection from their persecutors. Our Lady offered them assurance and gave them comfort during this challenging period by saying,


8 According to Phan, the persecution was the result of palace intrigue and perceived threats to the king’s power: “[T]he King suspected that Nguyễn Anh, his opponent, was helped by the French bishop Pigneau de Behaine (d.1799), who had recruited French officers and arms to help Nguyen Anh re-establish his dynasty. Fearful that Catholics would collude with his enemies, the king ordered them to be killed as a preventive measure.” See Peter Phan, “Mary in Vietnamese Piety and Theology: A Contemporary Perspective,” Ephemerides Mariologicae 51, no. 4 (2001): 457-472.
“My children, what you have asked of me, I have granted you, and henceforth, whoever will come here to pray to me, I will listen to them.”

Mary’s Journey with the Nation: The Institutional Efforts

Beginning in the early 20th century, La Vang has become a popular pilgrimage site for Catholics in both the north and the south, partly through efforts by the clergy to organize pilgrimages to the site. Until 1954, more pilgrims from the north attended the La Vang celebrations. In 1954, Northern Vietnamese Catholics relocated to the South following the signing of the Geneva Accord on July 21, 1954 that partitioned the country. The Geneva Accord allowed Vietnamese to choose which part of the country they wanted to live in, resulting in this mass migration. Before 1954, devotion to OLLV remained largely regional. The partition and migration in 1954 popularized OLLV and helped speed its transformation into a national devotion.

The shrine has been known for hosting high-profile political and ecclesiastical figures since the early twentieth century. Nguyễn Hữu Bài (1863–1935), a Minister of the Interior of the Nguyễn dynasty supported pilgrimage festivals from 1907 to 1935 when he was serving under Emperor Bảo Đại. He donated to the church and invited the emperors Khải Định and Bảo Đại to La Vang. Patronage was an important factor in the successful effort to raise national awareness of the La Vang pilgrimage. The site was thus transformed from a small chapel into a national basilica.

9 See Peter Phan, Vietnamese-American Catholics (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 113.
13 Charles Keith, Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 64.
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The first small chapel at La Vang was built in 1901 under the guidance of bishop Louis Caspar Lộc (1841–1917). The first national pilgrimage to the shrine of La Vang was in 1928. Since then, the La Vang festival has been organized every three years. During the migration of Northern Vietnamese Catholics to the South in 1954, some Catholics chose areas around La Vang to build a community. The Church at La Vang was named a national Marian center of pilgrimage in 1959 and a minor basilica in 1961 by the Vatican. The Vietnamese Catholic bishops dedicated the La Vang Shrine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1961, an important marker for Vietnamese Catholic national identity.

In 1972, during “the Red Summer Battles” (Mùa Hè Đỏ Lửa), the national Marian pilgrimage center at La Vang was destroyed. The OLLV sanctuary is located twelve miles north of the seventeenth parallel that divided the north and the south. The war, concurrent persecution from North Vietnamese communists, and the destruction of the shrine caused many Catholics in the region to move south. A few months after the 1975 fall of Saigon, Bishop Nguyễn Kim Điền, of Huế Diocese, sent Father Nguyễn Vinh Gioang to serve as pastor at La Vang. The Catholics who had remained in La Vang slowly rebuilt the pilgrimage center and the statue of Our Lady.

During the period of partition, the Church in the north and the south cultivated

14 Ninh, “The Blessed Virgin Mary Wears Áo Dài,” 221.
15 See Trần Quang Chu, Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang 1, chapter 3. According to Chu, this occurred during the last day of La Vang Festival XV, 1961.
16 In the Vietnam War 1972 witnessed many airstrikes sponsored by the U.S to defend South Vietnam against the invasion of North Vietnam.
17 The Geneva Accord signed on 21 July 1954 that divided Vietnam in two parts: the north and south. This Accord allowed Vietnamese to choose which part of the country they want to belong to. For more detail, see Marvin E. Gettleman et al., eds., Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War (New York: Grove Press, 1995).
18 Trần Quang Chu noted that in 1995, La Vang parish has 65 families with 292 parishioners. See Trần Quang Chu, Hành Hướng Đức Mẹ La Vang [Pilgrimage to La Vang] 1, chapter 3.
vastly different relationships with their respective governments. The relationship between the Church and the Vietnamese government has fluctuated since 1975, especially given the varied attitudes of the state toward the Church in the north and the south. As Lan Chu has described, the hierarchy in the south, influenced by Vatican II, perceived a vision of cooperation with the state as the only means for survival, while the Church in the north suffered under communist control for more than twenty years and was skeptical toward a dialogical approach with the state.20 The hierarchy, bishop Nguyễn Kim Điển of the Huế Diocese, and Nguyễn Văn Bình of the Hồ Chí Minh City Diocese remained consistent in offering an official voice in support of dialogue with the state.21 The Catholic Bishop’s Conference of Vietnam (VCB), in their 1980 Pastoral Letter, stated that the task of the Church is to journey with the nation.

“The Church in Vietnam will be journeying with its people in a new situation; it will embrace the whole human community in this land because we are called to serve as its citizens and as God’s people. The Church’s responsibility is to collaborate with all Vietnamese to build and protect this land. We [bishops] are convinced that our love for the homeland and its people is not merely human natural affection but to live out the Gospel’s counsel.”22

The pastoral letter of 1980 marked a period in Vietnamese Catholic history when Catholics in the north and the south were able to gather at La Vang again. The gathering at La Vang resumed in 1978, but remained a small and local gathering. During the first meeting of the bishops between the north and the south in 1980, La Vang was chosen as a national Marian center of pilgrimage. The reconstruction of the pilgrimage center began in 1995 under the guidance of the Vietnamese Catholic Bishops.

OLLV is a religious symbol. It represents the historical struggles of Vietnamese Catholics to maintain their faith. The government that unified the country after

1975 did not face strong opposition from the Catholic Church, as the bishops chose to be more cooperative in political interactions with the state. During the 1990s, the Vietnamese government became more tolerant of religious practice in its efforts to become more open to international standards of religious liberty in the global community. During this time, the shrine of OLLV became a place of peaceful mass gathering. Encouraging devotion to OLLV, then, reflects the recent strategy from Vietnamese Church leaders to maintain a public presence with an emphasis on reinforcing a sense of Catholic identity through popular devotion and liturgy.

Besides focusing on the building project of the National Basilica of La Vang, the Vietnamese Catholic Bishops also emphasized the importance of knowing the history of La Vang. The Vietnamese clergy continuously invite Catholics to renew their Catholic faith and their love for Mary. For example, in the opening mass in commemoration of 200th year La Vang apparition on August 13, 1998, Bishop Nguyễn Văn Hòa reminded the congregation of the history of La Vang and the title “Our Lady of Christian Help.” He then invited Catholics to renew their faith, trust, and love in Mary.

MARIAN DEVOTION: THE MOST POPULAR FORM OF VIETNAMESE RELIGIOSITY

Marian devotion must be examined in the larger framework of Vietnamese Catholicism to be fully understood. Most scholars explain the popularity of this faith practice, especially a special interest in Marian pilgrimage at La Vang, in two ways. First, from a historical, political, and theological perspective, there was an effort from the institutional church to promote this form of devotion since the late nineteenth century. Second, from a cultural and sociological perspective, devotion to Mary has its inheritance from Vietnamese cultural and religious tradition: devotion to Guanyin (Quan Âm), a mother goddess.

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Pilgrim literature shows that the first official pilgrimage organized at La Vang was the La Vang festival in 1901, but organized pilgrimages to La Vang also took place earlier. A priest from Cô Vuu guided a group of pilgrims to the site in the 1860s. Much earlier than the pilgrimage is the Iberian characteristic of Marian devotion that could date back to the missionaries of the early seventeenth century. This Iberian layer favors popular devotion in which Marian devotion is a dominant form. At La Vang, devotion to Mary, in the form of pilgrimages, is organized structurally in connection with the Eucharistic celebration, the sacrament of reconciliation, the procession of the Eucharist, and a Marian procession as well.

As Peter Phan has noted, popular devotion is “popular” not in the sense of “in fashion” but in the sense of “the people in general.” Popular devotions, as article 13 of Sacrosanctum Concilium states, “provided they conform to the laws and norms of the Church, are to be highly commended, especially where they are ordered by the Apostolic See.” Popular devotion, as mentioned in article 13 of Sacrosanctum Concilium, should be in harmony with the liturgy because the liturgy, by nature, exceeds popular devotion. Thus, from the perspective of the clergy, popular devotion should exist at a lower level of importance compared with the liturgy.

This evaluation can be examined for the situation of the Church in the West to illustrate how the reforms of Vatican II affected popular devotion. For example, in the United States, devotion to Mary in the form of the Rosary declined after Vatican II. Paula M. Kane argues that Marian devotion in the United States reached its peak from 1940 to 1960 and declined thereafter. Even though American Catholic devotion to Mary was not entirely suppressed, Vatican II’s emphasis on the

24 Trần Quang Chu, Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang 1: 237-238.
28 See “Rosary Since Vatican II,” University of Dayton: All About Mary, previously published in The Marian Library Newsletter (Spring 1995), https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/library/rosariesince-vatican-ii.php, accessed April 4, 2022. As this writer pointed out, popular devotions (the rosary) declined in the West following Vatican II since devotional activities such as “Marian devotions were replaced by an evening mass.”
Mass does not provide a supporting structure for Marian devotion. However, in some countries that have been strongly influenced by Iberian religious culture, popular devotion, particularly Marian devotion, remains an important aspect of spirituality. In La Vang, devotional activities have been encouraged by the clergy alongside the liturgy.

Some scholars link the Marian devotional landscape with the political influence and historical development of Vietnam. Tuan Hoang argued that there are many layers of Marian devotion that include devotion to Our Lady of La Vang and Our Lady of Fatima that carried a strong connection with the movement of anti-communist nationalism from 1940 to 1975. Moreover, devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of Perpetual Help often promotes help for health and the individual’s well-being. Thien-Huong Ninh and Thao Nguyen examined the historical roots of OLLV and how the image of OLLV becomes a marker of national identity and a global icon for Vietnamese Catholic in both Vietnam and diaspora.

It is impossible to understand the development of Marian practices at La Vang apart from the influence of politics, the history of Vietnamese Catholicism, and the role of the clergy. While scholarly explanations focused on historical developments that credit the promotion of Marian devotion to both the local hierarchy and the global impact in which several notable lay Catholics contributed their roles significantly to the process, more research remains to be done to analyze the religious practices at La Vang from the perspectives of lay Catholics.

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30 These cultures included Vietnam, Philippines, and Mexico. Phan also noted that recently there has been a resurgence of popular religion among many third world and for Christians in the West. See Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 275.

31 Tuan Hoang examined the period of 1940–1975 in the south, at this time, the image of OLLV was the lady of Victories. See Hoang, “Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart Will Prevail,” 126–157.


33 See Thao Nguyen, Thien-Huong Ninh, and Tuan Hoang, articles quoted above.
Second, from a cultural perspective, the deep love for Mary can be seen as a continuation of the Vietnamese indigenous and Buddhist traditions. Religious studies scholar Nguyễn Hồng Dương makes two key arguments relating to the claim that Marian devotion in Vietnam has been influenced by a strong emphasis of Vietnamese indigenous cult of the Mother Goddess (including mother, virgin mother, and goddess). First, the importance of mother has its origin from Vietnamese ancient matriarchal society. Second, some male Bodhisattvas from India become female Bodhisattvas when arriving in Vietnam. Nguyễn continued, Mary in Vietnam was named Thánh Mẫu (holy mother), or Mẫu (mother). Thus, devotion to Mary as mother has three characteristics: a protective mother (ché chở), a powerful mother (ban ơn), and new life (sinh sôi), all of which are prevalent in the cult of the Mother Goddess.

This cultural inheritance from the cult of the Mother Goddess, Nguyễn Hồng Dương argues, is expressed through love for Mary such that some Marian devotional practices don’t seem to reflect the Catholic Church’s official teaching on Mary’s role. Some popular Marian devotional activities, like chanting, procession, dancing, and offering flowers, were practiced in the cult of the Mother Goddess before the arrival of Christianity in Vietnam. Vietnamese cultural anthropologist Trần Ngọc Thêm, in his studies of Vietnamese feminine characteristics, makes the connection between the important role of mother in the family with the

34 For reference, a Bodhisattva is a Buddhist understanding of one who is continuously reborn to be of service to others. See Eleanor Rosch, “Peace is the Strongest Force in the World: Buddhist Paths to Peacemaking and Nonviolence,” in Peacemaking and the Challenge of Violence in World Religions, edited by Irfan Omar and Michael Duffy (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 170. There are two main factors that contribute to the interaction such as the characteristics of Vietnamese women that play an important role in nurturing their children, and the agricultural culture. See a detailed explanation in Thao Nguyen, “Quan Am and Mary: Vietnamese Religious, Cultural, and Spiritual Phenomena,” Buddhist-Christian Studies 37 (2017), 193–195.


36 Nguyễn Hồng Dương refers to the Catholic Church’s teaching on Mary’s role as indicated in Lumen Gentium, Chapter VIII, #62: “therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.” See Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents, 419.

worship of Mother Goddess. Rooted in an agricultural culture, ancient Vietnamese worshiped many female deities such as Mother of Sky, Mother of Land, and Mother of Water. Some female deities later became local goddess in the South. For example, Bà Chúa Xứ (Our Lady of the Realm). Another example is that the female deities of the Cloud-Rain-Thunder-Lightning interacted with the Buddhist “Tứ Pháp” (Four Powers) to create a new form of Vietnamese Buddhism.38

Building on scholarship of Vietnamese cultural anthropologists and historians, Thao Nguyen acknowledges the cultural interactions between the cult of the Mother Goddess, Buddhism, and Marian devotion. He searches for commonalties among religious practices of the two feminine deities in Buddhist and Catholic communities, namely Guanyin (Quan Âm) and Mary. Thao Nguyen’s finding shows that despite the theological differences between the two religions, there are important similarities in spirituality, religious practices, and ethical applications.39

Peter Phan, from a historical and theological perspective, argues that a Vietnamese Mariology follows a traditional model of Western Marian devotion, and her Vietnamese nature has been manifested in the figure of a mother of mercy who is also protective of her children, with her compassionate power, and her ability to reach out to non-Catholics.40 Phan’s argument summarizes the traditional mode of Marian piety in Vietnam.41

This research is building on the work of other scholars that emphasize the role of the state, the clergy, the theological and cultural characteristics of Our Lady of La

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38 Trần Ngọc Thêm, Cơ Sở Văn Hóa Việt Nam, 132-134. “Chất âm tính của văn hóa nông nghiệp dẫn đến hậu quả trong quan hệ xã hội là lối sống thiên về tình cảm, trọng nữ, và trọng tín ngưỡng là tính trạng các nữ thần chiếm ưu thế. Và vì cái đích mà người nông nghiệp hướng tới là phồn thực, cho nên nữ thần của ta không phải là các cô gái trẻ đẹp, mà là các bà mẹ, các mẫu. [Because of the nature of the agricultural culture, one characteristic in Vietnamese social relation is emotional and relationship focused. Our Goddesses are often Mothers who play an important role in Vietnamese religiosity.]” (133). Thao Nguyen also analyzes this interaction in Thao Nguyen, “Quan Am and Mary,” 193-204.


40 Phan, “Mary in Vietnamese Piety and Theology: A Contemporary Perspective.”

41 Phan notes that Vietnamese Marian piety is traditional in the sense that it follows the tradition of European Catholicism.

42 It is important to note that Thao Nguyen and Peter Phan provide a context to understand the characteristics of Marian devotion in general and at La Vang.
Vang. I focus on the rituals at La Vang and the participation of the lay believers to demonstrate a strong love of Mary among the pilgrims who perceived her as a divine and a living mother. After exploring the religious activities at La Vang, with a strong support from the clergy that remain committed to their approach of “journeying with the nation,” I argue that the clergy’s promotion of religious activities at the basilica of La Vang, as a mother’s home for Vietnamese Catholics, reinforces a sense of religious identity. At the same time, a strong emotional effect during the pilgrimage festival at La Vang and healing powers ascribed to Mary reveal the role and participation of the Catholic laity, who strongly believe that Mary journeys with them in their everyday lives.

PILGRIMAGE AT LA VANG: JOURNEY TO A SACRED PLACE (LINH ĐỊA)

Vietnamese Catholics call La Vang “linh địa” (sacred land) (linh: sacred, địa: land). This understanding of sacredness refers to the areas where there were many martyrs and to the spiritual power of Mary. Olga Dror connected linh thiêng to Rudolf Otto’s mysterium tremendum in the sense of the divine efficacy.43 Even though Dror mentioned this term in the context of the goddess Liễu Hạnh, an aspect of this understanding can be useful for OLLV, especially since many devotees come to her to ask for healing. Insights from contemporary examinations of Marian pilgrimages help with understanding the meaning of the many healing miracles at La Vang. For example, Robert Orsi emphasizes the importance of presence by noting that places of modern apparitions and religious pilgrimages are sites “where the transcendent breaks into time and comes face to face with humans in the circumstances of their everyday lives.”44

Expanding beyond the concept of presence, other chapters in this examination of Marian pilgrimages in the modern world consider a variety of contemporary factors. The authors emphasize the power inequalities that arise from modernity and

43 Olga Dror, Cult Culture and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 4.
how these encourage Marian devotion and an understanding of the healings and miracles that occur at Marian shrines. The book seeks to “understand the continual power, meanings, and popularity of Mary in modern societies” through lived religious experience.45 The sense of the sacred is not only presence but is lived out in the movement of the pilgrims, through the rituals, in Mary’s own movement, and through the tangible visible results of miracles and healings that occur through Mary’s intercession.46 One important aspect of this is that different meanings can be a result of different interpretations. For example, this text notes the reimagining of Mary by feminist theologians who describe Mary as “an alternative role model for women” who acts with strength to overcome injustice.47 There is no doubt that this variety of interpretations is conveyed into a variety of understandings of the meaning and efficacy of the healings and miracles at La Vang.

Since the early festivals, the shrine has been known for its healing water such that it is also known as the Virgin’s Garden (vườn cua me). There were booths that instruct pilgrims to take water from OLLV’s well. This well was established in La Vang as early as the second La Vang festival to accommodate the needs of pilgrims. A common rule for Vietnamese is that when children are going to their mother’s house, they are expected to enjoy their mother’s cuisine. During the first three-day festival of the sixth festival (1917),48 various kinds of food services were there for the pilgrims, and it helped to transform the deserted place of La Vang into a popular religious pilgrimage site.49 Similarly, pilgrims also explored the Virgin’s Garden during their stay at La Vang. The custom of bringing home the leaves (lá vàng)50 and water from La Vang dated back to the time of persecution

46 Hermkens et al., Moved by Mary, 7.
47 Hermkens et al., Moved by Mary, 5.
48 Before that, the first to the fifth La Vang festival occurred in one day.
49 “Quảng Trị: Vài nét sinh hoạt tại La Vang trong Tam nhất Đại hội 1917 [Activities at La Vang During the La Vang festival of 1917],” Nam Kỳ Diệ Phận 452 (October 4, 1917): 416–417.
50 Là vàng is the name of a type of leaves La Vang that was known for curing various diseases as many people believed that the Virgin instructed them to boil the leaves and drink it to cure their illness. This version of the La Vang legend states that La Vang is distorted from the toponym Lá Vằng. Là means leaves and vàng refers to Jasminum subtriplinerve, a special tree whose leaves are used to make tisane and served as a drink in Vietnam.
and was formally observed in the early Marian festivals, especially at the sixth festival (1917) as described in Nam Kỳ điạ phần (1917). The most sought-after items at La Vang included water and the leaves. Pilgrims have their own bottles to take water from La Vang to use for themselves or as gifts for others who couldn’t go to La Vang. Besides water, lá văng was known to cure many diseases during the period of official persecution of the Church, and so many pilgrims take the dried leaves in various packages home, to use for themselves or as a gift for others. This custom is maintained until this day.

Many healing stories were documented in the weekly magazines Nam Kỳ Địa Phần and Vì Chúa, the monthly magazine Đức Mẹ Hằng Cứu Giúp, and the book Sông Tin Mừng, authorized by Father Nguyễn Vinh Gioang. In the early twentieth century, the narratives were predominantly about the healing power of the leaves in the mother’s garden at La Vang and prayers to Mary. Sometimes the cure was for a physical illness, other times Mary’s power helped to cure infertility of married couples. One account was from bishop Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, who narrated the miracle of a deathly sick boy named Luật, who was cured due to the prayer at the church of La Vang and eating the grass in the garden. Another account was from Lê Thiện Bá, a Vietnamese priest at La Vang, who wrote a story about a couple

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52 The pilgrims’ habit of bringing home water from Mother’s well as a gift for others who could not go probably began from the 1900s, especially on the second La Vang Festival in 1904 in the writings of Vietnamese priest Joseph Trang, see Trần Văn Trang, Tu Tích Tôn Kính Đức Mẹ La Vang [Legends about Devotion to Our Lady of La Vang] (Imprimerie de Qui Nhon, Annam, 1923).
53 Nam Kỳ Địa Phần was published weekly from 1908 to 1945 in Saigon, it was the first Catholic magazine published in Vietnamese script. Bishop Luciano Mossard was the editor. It was the most important Catholic magazine at the time, partly because it was the official publication of the Catholic Church and the Catholic values it conveys. Other publications were more local since they were published by the diocese or some religious congregations. Đức Mẹ Hằng Cứu Giúp is a monthly magazine belonged to the Diocese of Hà Nội in 1929. Vì Chúa is a weekly magazine belonged to Huế Diocese, first published in 1936. See Đỗ Quang Hùng, “Bảo Chí Công Giáo Ở Việt Nam Thời Kỳ Đầu,” in Hướng Dẫn 400 Năm Văn Học Công Giáo Việt Nam (1632–2032): Sưu Tập Những Nhận Cứ và Chứng Từ Về Văn Học Công Giáo, edited by Trần Thập Tứ and Bùi Công Thuận (Tư Sách Nước Mặn, 2022), 579–589. Nguyễn Vinh Gioang, a pastor at La Vang parish, documented many healing stories in the book Sông Tin Mừng (Diocese of Huế, internal circulation).
who struggled to have a child. The husband then went to La Vang to pray and brought the leaves from the garden home to his wife. They had a son shortly after that. Then the son got seriously sick, and the family prayed fervently to Mary. The son regained his strength and the parents noted that this son was given to them by Our Lady of La Vang. Stories like these are common and have helped to reinforce the belief in Mary’s healing power. The leaves and grass are effective because of the pilgrims’ faith connected to both Mary and the land of La Vang—which has been infused with divine presence.

Beyond Mary’s healing power, the popular perception that this site is sacred comes from collective memory transmitted through stories about La Vang. This collective memory transcends religious differences between local Catholics and Buddhists. The Buddhist narrative of the apparition denotes the encounter with Mary:

There were three villages near La Vang, namely, Cô Thành, Thạch Hãn, and Ba Trù. The Buddhists there heard that a lady named Thiên Mụ (literally: the Heavenly Lady) had appeared in La Vang under the banyan tree (which is considered a sacred tree) and that those who went there to pray were miraculously healed. During the persecution of Catholics under Emperor Minh Mạng (1820–40), the Buddhists took over the place and built a pagoda in honor of the Buddha. The night after the dedication of the pagoda, so the story goes, the leaders of the three villages had a dream in which the Buddha appeared to them and told them to remove his statue from La Vang, because, he said, there was a lady more powerful than him occupying the place. The following day they went to the pagoda and saw that the Buddha statue and its ornaments had been moved outside and so they brought them in. Again, that night they had the same dream and received the same message. As a result, the Buddhists donated the pagoda to the Catholics, who converted it into the first chapel of Our Lady of La Vang.56

56 Phan, Vietnamese-American Catholics, 113.
The story, narrated from a Catholic perspective, noted the sacredness of the banyan tree, an aspect in Vietnamese religious belief. The banyan has been known for carrying mysterious power, and its root is where the spirits often live. The presence of the banyan tree reflects the Vietnamese way of thinking about sacredness. The land previously belonged to the Buddhists since Buddhism was in Vietnam long before Catholicism. The event that happened there represents the healing power of Mary who miraculously saved those who came to her.

Moreover, repeated religious activities and personal witnesses of miracles make the place more sacred. The narratives of the healing power of Mary were repeated in the homilies of the bishops and priests, in the newspapers, and in the living witnesses of those being healed. However, the most important repeated act is the coming together of pilgrims at La Vang over the years, for it is pilgrimage that most sacralizes the place. Thus, the journey of Catholic pilgrims to La Vang is a journey to a sacred site that reinforces and intensifies the holiness of the place.

If Mary is understood as a sacred and powerful mother among Vietnamese Catholics, a question arises about the difference with the understanding of divine efficacy among worshipers of the mother goddess. There are significant theological points that distinguish the difference. However, from the standpoint of religious practices, the understanding of Vietnamese Catholics about the sacredness of place is continuous with non-Catholic Vietnamese religiosity. Olga Dror argues that an important aspect of Vietnamese religious beliefs and practices is the preference of divine potency over the meaningful story and moral norms of that deity. The pragmatic nature of worshipping a deity, as Dror states, can also be observed in the religious practices at La Vang.

It is safe to assume that the wealth of material about Mary’s healing power, her divine nature, and the sacredness of the place reveals the deep love for Mary and her significance in the lives of Vietnamese Catholics. Mary’s presence with Vietnamese Catholics is like a powerful mother who heals and lovingly engages with them in their daily struggles. The next section will examine her presence in the rituals.

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57 Dror, *Cult Culture and Authority*, 7–8.
MARY’S JOURNEY WITH THE NATION: HER PRESENCE FELT IN VARIOUS RITUALS

Whenever pilgrims arrived at La Vang, they made themselves known to Our Lady. This is their mother’s house. Pilgrim literature shows that political leaders and the clergy came to greet Mary as soon as they arrived at the sacred land of La Vang to thank her for a safe journey. In Vietnamese custom, greeting the head of the household is a common practice.

Upon arriving at La Vang, pilgrims find several tables set up for people to have their memorial mass (xin lê) said for their loved ones or for any intentions they have during the pilgrimage. Sometimes, pilgrims request a mass to thank the Virgin for providing them with what they need, or to grant them peace in what they do. The Vietnamese devout maintain this custom to honor their loved ones and to entrust their daily needs in the healing power of Mary. This practice relates to ancestor worship in some ways because it reflects the way Vietnamese Catholics remember their deceased family members. La Vang becomes a meeting place not only of living Catholics but also deceased loved ones, through Mary’s intercession. These examples confirm Orsi’s understanding of religion as “a web not of meanings but of relationships between heaven and earth.”

Similar elements of the rituals can be observed at both La Vang and Marian Days in Missouri, USA. What can be observed in both is a sense of sacrifice among pilgrims. The pilgrims at La Vang offered their sacrifices in various forms: walking barefoot in early festivals and camping at the site with limited living conditions. In the early festivals (1918–1945), pilgrims were seen walking barefoot with a traditional hat and saying the rosary on their way to La Vang. In the areas around La Vang, many pilgrims walked for hundreds of miles with the priests as their guides to the pilgrimage site. After 2000, most pilgrims travel by car or by public

60 Trần Quang Chu, Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang 4: 97.
transportation to La Vang. What can be observed in the festivals is their sacrifice as they slept in tents with limited amenities and, particularly as they dealt with the changing weather: the summer heat or the sudden rain. The homilies during mass at the site often reminded them of the nature of their lives as a pilgrimage to the Father’s House. Furthermore, the vows that pilgrims make to OLLV urge them to come back every year. Even during the time when the war prevented pilgrims from going to La Vang, they found other ways to fulfil their vows to Mary. Many stories of healing and fulfilling promises reflect this practice. Even though Mary never asks for sacrifice during the apparition, the sacrificial mode reflects the Christian tradition of self-sacrificial love.61

The celebration at La Vang is one aspect in the community structure that the Vietnamese diaspora rebuilt as they arrived in the U.S. in the years after 1975 through the recapitulation of La Vang in Marian rituals and pilgrimage in the United States.62 From the experience of many Vietnamese refugees, Mary journeyed with them through their suffering and distress to the new land. When the rituals are enacted in various Vietnamese diaspora communities in the United States, the collective memory of La Vang is kept. This is true for the structure of religious activities such as the sacrament of penance, procession of the Eucharist, and Marian procession.

1. Solemn Procession of the Marian Statue

The solemn procession of the Marian statue, a highlight of Marian Days in Missouri and at the La Vang festival, is heavily attended and strongly engaging. The lively participation in Carthage, Missouri on August 6, 2017, was in the afternoon. The statue of Our Lady of Fatima was welcomed back in a highly emotional gesture. Her appearance evokes the most emotional response from the partici-


62 The structure of community can be seen in the rituals, but also in the way many Vietnamese refugees escaped Vietnam. They had the priests to administer sacraments and masses for them. There were around 200 priests and 250 sisters who went with the refugees on boats during the first wave of refugees. See Ninh, “The Virgin Mary with an Asian Face,” 67.
pants. At La Vang, the procession occurred before early morning mass in 2017, and with a short distance from the sacred site (linh đài) to the ceremony site where mass was celebrated (the distance is less than a mile), there were only delegates from different groups, it was more like an entrance procession. This creates a different visual and emotional effect, compared with other festivals at La Vang when the procession was from Cơ Việt parish to La Vang (nearly two miles) and its surroundings. In early festivals at La Vang, the procession occurred in the early morning (usually with mass at around 3 am, followed by the procession). Historically, the Marian procession at La Vang during the ninth festival in 1928 began from Cơ Việt parish to La Vang for two miles and lasted nearly four hours. Since the eleventh La Vang festival in 1935, the procession occurred around the area of La Vang. During recent festivals, because of a building project, the procession was a much shorter distance.

The procession route is altered for each festival, but what is always true at La Vang is a sense of reverence in the pilgrims. As the statue of Mary moves slowly through the streets around the La Vang shrine, the devout standing on the sidewalks all kneel to show reverence. The procession includes various musical ensembles, for example, traditional drumming groups, brass bands, and indigenous musicians. The Marian procession occurs in the morning, expressing its magnificence through the ritual aesthetics, the lively decorations of flowers and colorful flags, the rhythms of Marian hymns, and the harmonious collaboration of the whole team. Each procession is made of hundreds of members of bands and orchestras to provide music that guide the procession and maintain the rhythms of the ritual. Historical accounts express how the security guards were in awe with their sense of reverence while keeping the crowd in good order.

Some rituals were added during the time of Bishop Nguyễn Như Thế, a strong promoter of inculturation. For example, before the procession in 2017, bishop Nguyễn Chí Linh offered incense before the statue of Mary. The procession then included the rosary and singing of Marian hymns. Another example was during

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63 Trần Quang Chu, Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang 2: 69.
64 Trần Quang Chu, Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang 2: 171.
65 Trần Quang Chu, Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang 6: 110.
the 200th anniversary ceremony in 1998 when the procession occurred with many music bands representing various ethnic groups. There were representatives from the three parts of the country, ethnic minorities, children, youth, religious sisters, religious brothers, married men, mothers, pastoral councils, seminarians, acolytes, and other members of the Church.\(^66\) One special characteristic of the 200th anniversary Marian procession was the presence of the drum team from Kontum and Bùi Chu dioceses. Trần Quang Chu described the sound of the drum as reminding pilgrims of the loud voice (\textit{la vang}) two hundred years ago at La Vang that kept the wild beasts away.\(^67\)

2. Procession of the Eucharist

While the Marian procession often occurs in the early morning, the Eucharistic procession often takes place in the evening of the La Vang festival. During the evening of the second day, there is a solemn procession of the Eucharist, followed by adoration of the Eucharist through the night in a small chapel for perpetual adoration. The first formal Eucharist Procession occurred at the tenth festival in 1932.\(^68\) Bishop Chabanon Giáo (1873–1936) promoted this form of procession since it reflected the role of Mary (\textit{ad Jesum per Mariam}). At this time, both Marian and Eucharistic processions were practiced among the organizations of Catholic Action that was introduced to Vietnam in 1934 especially in the north.\(^69\) Pilgrim literature shows similar organizing structure compared with Marian procession. In early festivals, when the procession was from Cô Vút parish to La Vang shrine, the procession lasted for more than three hours. It included the bishop with the monstrance, the music group, the choir, followed by the priests, women religious, and representatives from different parishes. The pilgrims in the procession carried candles that produced a light, which was described as a “moving dragon along the hills,” a moving scene that was often seen in the festival.\(^70\) During the twenty-fifth

\(^{66}\) Trần Quang Chu, \textit{Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang} 4: 71.

\(^{67}\) Trần Quang Chu, \textit{Hành Hướng Đức Mẹ La Vang} 4: 71.

\(^{68}\) Trần Quang Chu, \textit{Hành Hướng Đức Mẹ La Vang} 2: 129.


\(^{70}\) Trần Quang Chu, \textit{Hành Hướng Đức Mẹ La Vang} 2: 179–182.
festival in 1999, there were estimated 200,000 pilgrims, and the procession was described as “a gentle river of fire moving in the night.”

3. Prayer Night (Đêm Diện Nguyệt)

Another highlight of the festival is đêm diển nguyện (night of performance-based prayer service through songs, sacred dance, and play). The procession brings pilgrims to a journey with Mary, but the prayer night is a time where memory of Mary is ritualized and enacted. It is the time for pilgrims to recall the stories of Mary, her miracles, the history of the place, and her healing power for many Catholics. The prayer night celebrations in La Vang are more solemn and elaborate than those in Carthage. The first reason is that there are many religious communities in the Huế Diocese and throughout the country to contribute to the prayer service, compared with many scattered Vietnamese parishes in the United States that might be limited in preparing for the event.

From the organizer’s perspective, đêm diển nguyện is an opportunity for pilgrims to pray through ritual performance. At La Vang’s 200th anniversary, the event was described as a vigil night with Mary, to pray with her in the atmosphere of a family. The main purpose of the performance is not beauty, which would focus on the talents of the performers, but that attention should be directed to prayer. Đêm diển nguyện offers a various form of performance that could help to direct the pilgrims to know more about the history of La Vang through the play, or to learn about the virtues of Mary through the songs. La Vang Festival organizers often invite groups of local women religious communities, such as Lovers of the Holy Cross Huế (Dòng Mẹ Thánh Giá Huế), Daughters of the Immaculate Conception (Dòng Mẹ Vô Nhiễm), Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation (Dòng Mẹ Đi Viêng), Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres (Dòng Thánh Phaolô Thành Chartres) to perform songs, dances, and plays. These performances reflect the feminine emphasis and also the collaboration between the clergy and religious sisters. During special celebrations, such as the 200th anniversary fes-

71 Trần Quang Chu, Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang 4: 114.
72 Trần Quang Chu, Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang 4: 68.
73 Sacred dance is primarily to honor Mary. For the martyrs, incense veneration is often used, as it
tival, the program included various forms of ritual dance from various groups in the country. These elements reflect diversity and an inclusive attitude for Catholics within the country. The event at La Vang can be categorized as a prayer service. As described, the celebration was full of emotion and spiritually moving. However, the scene at La Vang is more than just a celebration. It was time for prayers and spiritual enrichment. It is also time for family reunion and for joining other pilgrims in praying. The festivals reinforce family relationships and communal identity, from parish to diocesan, regional and national level.

4. From the Legend of La Vang to La Vang-ness

Three aspects of a La Vang festival that is worth discussing are the tradition of oral prayer, the popularity of La Vang, and the sacrifice among pilgrims.

First, one version of the legend of La Vang states that La Vang is a combination of two words la (shout out), and vang (loud). La Vang, taken together, means “shout out loud.” This story is based on the historical evidence of early pilgrims to La Vang who had to use their voices to keep the wild beasts away since La Vang was a deserted place. A consistent attribute of each festival is what has been described as the effect of vocal prayer. Pilgrims pray continuously through the night. The pilgrims raise their voices in a religious manner, which is the uniqueness of the La Vang festival. It is the effect of oral prayer that echoes through the surrounding area of La Vang.

The importance of oral prayer at this site is taken up by the planning committee, who promote prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament throughout the night. At the end of the Eucharistic procession in 1932, Bishop Hồ Ngọc Cẩn offered a homily about the relationship between Mary and the Eucharist, then the Eucha-

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74 I want to draw a little comparison here in terms of ritual performance. While the event at La Vang can be categorized as a prayer service the Marian Days in Carthage, Missouri seems to be focused on live entertainment. The performance is often from some Vietnamese parishes in the United States, but the performers are often professional singers and performers who entertain the crowds with folk and popular Vietnamese music.

75 This is unique in La Vang, for practical reason. In Missouri, the lights must be turned out by midnight and activities resume in the morning.
rist was put outside for pilgrims to adore until 3:00 am. The crowds were ready for Marian procession and mass for the next day.\textsuperscript{76} In addition, during the festival, the priests said mass continuously. Although the bishop’s promotion of the relationship between Mary and the Eucharist is important, the tradition of oral prayer is what most defines the event. It is the habit of praying out loud and singing in front of the statue of Mary as a group that Vietnamese Catholics have practiced since the beginning.

In the La Vang church during the festival, each group takes turns to pray the rosary and even if there are many people around them praying, the latecomers just join in. The most popular forms of Marian devotion include the rosary, the litany of Loreto, and individual prayers according to the group’s needs.\textsuperscript{77} The two most common forms are the rosary and the litany of Loreto. The rosary is an important tool for Catholics to obtain protection. Since it was first introduced by the missionaries, it became widespread in practice among Catholics. The rosary is also seen as a sign of holiness. In the 17th century, the martyrs often said their rosary on their way to be put to death. Furthermore, in early festivals, pilgrims were seen walking barefoot to La Vang with rosaries in their hands. The rosary is a common prayer in every procession. The litany of Loreto, however, is often recited in the church. This form of prayer is commonly used in family prayer during the month of May or October. Perhaps the words in the litany relate directly to the daily needs of people. During a time of need, Catholics come to Our Lady and invoke a prayer from the litany.

The second aspect of La Vang that defines the success of a festival or a pilgrimage is \textit{Lá Vàng}. As mentioned above, it is a remedy of OLLV. Pilgrims feel that their journey is not fulfilled if they do not get these leaves from the mother’s garden.\textsuperscript{78} One interpretation of the popularity of \textit{Lá Vàng} is its connection to Mary’s original message. The Catholics witnessed the apparition interpreted that Mary com-

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{76} Trần Quang Chu, \textit{Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang 1}: 138.
\item\textsuperscript{77} Nguyễn Tử Do (CSsR): \textit{Đức Mẹ La Vang 200 năm [Our Lady of La Vang: 200 Years Anniversary]} (Huế Diocese: internal circulation), 52. As quoted in Trần Quang Chu, \textit{Hành Hướng Đức Mẹ La Vang 2}: 72.
\item\textsuperscript{78} This is based on my personal interview with the sisters who worked in the Hospitality Pilgrimage Center at La Vang for a couple of years.
\end{itemize}
forted them and told them to boil leaves from the trees of medicine to cure the illness. Another way to understand the popularity of Lã Vàng could relate to the Vietnamese Catholics’ need for supernatural help to heal their illnesses in the early 20th century.

The third important component of La Vang festivals is the sacrifice (*hy sinh*) of pilgrims. Pilgrims accept the harsh living conditions without complaining and receive it joyfully. This sacrifice adds to the success of many La Vang festivals in La Vang, Việt Nam and Marian Days in the United States. There are two possible interpretations. First, the Christian ideal of sacrifice originates in the call to follow Jesus by carrying one’s cross, to lose one’s life (in order to save it), and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Second, the ethic of sacrifice has been a cultural learned virtue that can be observed in the daily lives of the Vietnamese people.

PILGRIMAGE AT LA VANG: GOING TO THE MOTHER’S HOME (VỀ NHÀ MẸ)—JOURNEY TO MARY TO BRING HER HOME

A popular saying in Vietnam is “quê cha đất tổ” (father land) or “về quê” (going to father land). However, the bishop encouraged the faithful to về nhà Mẹ (going to the mother’s home). The reiteration of the statement of Bishop Ngô Đình Thục in 1961 reminds Catholics of the national identity and at the same time, carries a personal message. The personal invitation creates a strong emotional effect since the symbol of the mother provokes intimate feelings in the mind and heart of many Vietnamese, về nhà mẹ bringing back many good memories of childhood.

Rituals at La Vang have been organized around important occasions such as Tết ceremonies (Lunar New Year). There is a solemn Marian procession at La Vang during the Lunar New Year for local people. In addition to the annual pilgrimage around August 15 and the festival that is held every three years, several important

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gatherings at La Vang during the year include the New Year Procession, Flower Offerings during the month of May, a procession during the feast of the Assumption, and mass on the feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8).

Aspects of religious ritual at La Vang can be seen in local parishes throughout the country. La Vang reflects Catholic identity or what happened at the local church. The miraculous intervention of Mary for the healing of Catholics inspired the recipients to spread the news to non-Catholics. Whoever came to Mary and received what they needed would often promote the spread of this religious practice. When pilgrims return to their local parishes, whether in Hà Nội or Hồ Chí Minh City, these rituals are organized in their region. In the South, at Kỳ Đồng Church, a pilgrimage center with special devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, promoted by the Redemptorists, organizes a pilgrimage to Mary during Tết celebrations. In Hà Nội, at the shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help of Thái Hà, popular devotion to Mary includes flower offering, a pilgrimage to Mary, and mass.

Về nhà Mẹ also means to contribute to the building project. Since the basilica was restored in 2012, the Vietnamese Catholic Bishops asked Vietnamese Catholics around the world to help. The name of donors has been published on the website of Huế’s Diocese. As mentioned above, Bishop Khâm, in his homily during mass at the thirty-first festival, stated that a unique characteristic of La Vang is that it is a home for everyone. “Anyone who comes here can touch the building and say this is my home.” He meant both physically and symbolically the building and the place that many Vietnamese Catholics call home. Religiously, he refers to the role of the church and each Catholic as a contributing stone. Moreover, a message that is often repeated is that La Vang belongs to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. When saying this, the organizers refer to the miracles or healing graces that many Catholics and non-Catholics asked Mary. Those who receive these graces often return to the shrine.
CONCLUSION

Mary’s presence at La Vang is indicated by how the Vietnamese pilgrims embrace her as a living mother. Pilgrims in La Vang are reminded of the sacredness of the place through the historical narratives, the stories of healing miracles, and the rituals during the festival. The lively devotion to Mother Mary expresses the clergy’s effort to journey with the nation and the Vietnamese Catholics. The history of pilgrimage at La Vang since the late nineteenth century shows the development of devotion to OLLV from a regional movement to a national symbol of Vietnamese Catholicism. The clergy play a crucial role in promoting the pilgrimage, but it is the believers who keep the devotion alive. The success of pilgrimage festivals at La Vang reveals the role of the Vietnamese Catholic Church to maintain peace and unity among Catholics in the north and the south.

The Marian procession, oral prayers during the night, and the night performance-based prayer reflect the journey of Vietnamese Catholic pilgrims to the mother’s house. From the pilgrims’ experience, they symbolically journey with Mary to her home, and physically journey around her garden to bring healing water and leaves to their home. As Mary has journeyed with them throughout the century, they too come to Mary and bring her home with them. She will journey with them in their daily life for the rest of the year, even after they leave La Vang.
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