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OUR LADY OF LA VANG, MODEL OF CHRIST'S DISCIPLES AND MODEL OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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Introduction

Toward the end of his 1999 apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, Blessed John Paul II entrusted the Church in Asia to Mary, the "bright Star of Evangelization," using these words:

Faced with such a challenging mission, we turn to Mary, for whom, as the Synod Fathers said, Asian Christians have a great love and affection, revering her as their own Mother and the Mother of Christ. Throughout Asia there are hundreds of Marian sanctuaries and shrines where not only the Catholic faithful gather, but also believers of other religions too. To Mary, model of all disciples and bright Star of Evangelization, I entrust the Church in Asia at the threshold of the Third Millennium of the Christian era, trusting absolutely that hers is an ear that always listens, hers a heart that always welcomes, and hers a prayer that never fails. (no. 51)

Following John Paul II's recognition of the many Marian sanctuaries and shrines in Asia, we will examine the significance of the Vietnamese shrine of Our Lady of La Vang for the new evangelization. This shrine is very important to the faith of Vietnamese Catholics because it commemorates the apparitions of the Blessed Mother during the great 1798-1801 persecution of Christians in Vietnam. We begin with a quick look at the social context of Vietnam at the end of the eighteenth century, followed by a brief historical summary of the Shrine of La Vang.

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Then we contemplate Mary, the Mother of God as the bright Star of Evangelization.

I. Social Context

On August 17, 1798, the young King Canh Thinh (1792-1801), under the influence of an anti-Christian advisor named Le Van Loi, issued a royal edict ordering the destruction of all Catholic churches and seminaries. The edict stated that Christianity was a "*ta dao*" (literally, left [perverse] religion) preached by European foreigners.

A. Religions in Vietnam

Portuguese missionaries introduced Catholicism in the country as early as the thirteenth century. In the sixteenth century, Dominican and Franciscan missionaries attempted again the evangelizing work, but only with the arrival of the Jesuits, in 1615, did Christianity begin to take root. Yet under the reign of Canh Thinh, it was considered a newly imported religion, compared to *Tam Dao* (literally, three religions), including Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, which came from India and China in the first century A.D. These religions firmly settled in Vietnam, along with the indigenous cult of Heaven and Spirit. The general characteristics of the latter religion were the belief in the immortality of the soul and the reunion with dead members of the extended family in the realm of spirits. At the head of the hierarchy of spirits, *Ong Troi* (Mr. Heaven) is the transcendent and benevolent god, the creator of the universe, source of all life, and supreme judge. To this god, only the emperor as "son of god" (*Thien tu*), who has received a mandate from heaven (*thien menh*), assumes duties to offer the solemn sacrifice (*te*) of *Nam Giao*. The popular practice among citizens, however, was the cult of *tho ong ba*, which can be translated as "worshipping ancestors," but it can also be argued that traditional Confucianism *venerates ancestors* rather than worships them. This ambiguity of the Vietnamese word "*tho*" led to a serious conflict with Christianity for its worship of the only God and to a false accusation of the abandonment of the traditional virtue of *dao bieu* (filiality) against Vietnamese Christians.

B. Political Context

The issuance of the decree of persecution in 1798 occurred when the recently unified country (1789) was in chaos due to insurgencies by Nguyen Anh, a descendant of the previous Nguyen Lord in the South, who tried to re-take the throne. The latter obtained help from King Louis XVI of France through the connection of Bishop Pierre Pigneau de Behaine of the Society of Foreign Missions.¹

When a letter from Nguyen Anh to Bishop John Labartette, successor of Pigneau de Behaine, was confiscated, the royal court of King Canh Thinh blacklisted “foreigners” as dangerous adversaries. Having difficulty in understanding the complex connection in the “three C’s” of colonialism: Christianity, Commerce and Civilization,² the officials suspected that local Christians, under the authority of French missionaries, would give assistance to their opponent, Nguyen Anh, whose armies had been launching attacks in many places.

On the one hand, the anti-Christian decree emphasized the traditional practice of Confucian *Tam cuong* and *Ngu thuong*. On the other hand, it accused Christianity of being a “left (perverse) religion” taught by foreigners. The Confucian *Tam cuong* consisted of three basic relationships or bonds of loyalty: subjects to king, wife to husband, and children to parents. *Ngu Thuong* are five “virtues”: *Nhan* (Humaneness), *Nghia* (Righteousness or Justice), *Le* (Propriety or Etiquette), *Tri* (Knowledge), and *Tin* (Integrity). Citing the traditional praxis, the decree insisted on the citizens’ total obedience to the king, even to the point of death—a loyalty that the government needs most during war-time. Any relation to foreigners fueled the confused patriots’ hatred against Christians and escalated the persecution to an extreme vigor.

¹ Bishop Pigneau de Behaine was a teacher of Nguyen Anh’s son, prince Canh, who stayed five years at Versailles, France, for education. He accompanied the nine-year-old prince on his return home and enjoyed Nguyen Anh’s warm welcome in 1789. He, again, traveled with the prince to Qui Nhon in 1799, while Nguyen Anh’s army besieged the city: Lange, Claude. *L’Église catholique et la Société des Missions Étrangères au Viet Nam: Vicariat Apostolique de Cochinchine XVII et XVIII siècles* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004), 179–181, 204.

II. A Historical Summary of La Vang

The official anti-Christian edict forced the faithful to leave their homes and take refuge in remote jungles. In the wilderness, persecuted Christians in the region of Quang Tri gathered together, and every day they worshiped God and implored the Blessed Mother under the shade of a big banyan tree in front of a worn image of Mary.

One day, while the community was praying the Rosary, Our Lady surrounded by two angels and bearing the Child Jesus in her arms appeared to them for the first time, assuring them that their prayers would be heard and promising them her protection and relief from their afflictions. Other apparitions followed.³

The Lady taught them to boil leaves from the bushes around the area as medicine to cure illness. In the article "Le grand pèlerinage de Notre Dame de La Vang in 1932," Fr. Jean Baptist Roux (1875-1955), a missionary in Cochinchina, wrote that the Lady of a ravishing beauty appeared in a white robe (*ao dai*) surrounded by brilliant lights.

After having paced back and forth several times in front of the assembly (her feet touched the ground as to claim ownership/possession), the Lady halted and in a very tender tone said the following words that everyone clearly heard and the tradition has treasured with devotion: "My children, I have already granted your prayers. Henceforth, to all those who come to pray to me in this place, I will fulfill their petitions." Then she disappeared, and lights enrobed her from behind.⁴

After the persecution ended in 1802, Christian believers returned home with the story of Our Lady's apparitions. They referred to the place as La Vang. The word La Vang carries two different interpretations. It is popularly commented upon as

² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 302-313.

³ "The Catholics of Viet Nam Pay Homage to Our Lady of La Vang, *L'Osservatore Romano* (Eng. ed.), Dec. 8, 1998.

⁴ J. B. Roux, "Le grand pèlerinage de Notre Dame de La-Vang," in the Archives of Missions étrangères de Paris (1932). Hereafter Archives MEP.

the name of a type of fern which used to grow in great quantities in the region. The second interpretation says that the name was derived from actions of *La* (crying) *Vang* (loud) in order to chase wild animals away (tigers, wild boars) for safety. La Vang became more than the name of a geographic place sixty kilometers north of Hue, the former capital of Vietnam at the end of the eighteenth century. It is a Marian shrine for Vietnamese Catholics and *linh dia* (a sacred place) for non-Christians, since the heavenly Lady promised maternal care to all those who come to pray to her at that place.

A. Traditional Approval of the Apparitions at La Vang

With respect to the La Vang apparitions, people, of course, desire documentation. In this regard, it should be noted:

Unfortunately, there is no written documentation of these apparitions; such documents were perhaps kept in the Hue church archives, which were destroyed during two local wars: in 1833, under King Minh Mang, and, in 1861, in the reign of King Tuduc.⁵

Despite the lack of surviving documentary evidence and with the experience of persecutions and wars, since the time Mary is believed to have first appeared at La Vang, Vietnamese Catholics have persistently upheld the shrine as an icon of their Christian faith. Through generations they have manifested their love for the Blessed Lady as Mother of God and as their own mother by visiting and maintaining the place, either individually or in groups.

B. Chapels and Pilgrimages

The very first "oratory" was a small hut built under a big banyan tree by persecuted Christians in 1798. But under the reign of King Minh Mang (1820-1840), who began another great anti-Christian persecution (1820-1885), Buddhist believers from three villages in the vicinity (Thach Han, Co Thanh and Ba Tru) claimed the "sacred place" as their own. So they built a pagoda at the spot. The following story was compiled and preached by

⁵ "The Catholics of Vietnam pay Homage . . ."

Bishop Ho Ngoc Can (1876-1948) during the great pilgrimage in 1932.⁶ The morning after the dedication of the pagoda, officials from the three villages ran back to La Vang and shared with one another their dreams from the previous night. Each official reported exactly the same story: the Buddha appeared to them and asked them to remove his statues from the pagoda, because he said that there was a mighty "Lady of the Christianity" beating and chasing him away. To their surprise, when they entered the main room, they saw incense bowls, Buddha statues and their ornaments all over the floor. They picked everything up and put them back in their places. That night, these officials had the same dream again. The following morning, they witnessed the same scene. They withdrew all their objects. Christians then converted the pagoda into a Catholic chapel. The vicar at Co Vuu parish donated a cross, a picture of the Blessed Mother, and some candle stands. He also assigned a keeper to take care of the chapel. The story spread and strengthened the faith of Vietnamese Catholics in the almighty Christian God. They also reserved a deeper love for Our Lady, who unceasingly fulfilled her promise of maternal care and protection.

The first organized pilgrimage to the La Vang Shrine was initiated by a lay person in the 1865 Lenten season. Mr. Francis Xavier Le Thien Thin, a leader in the parish of Co Vuu, who had recently returned home with the words *ta dao* branded on his face, led a group of thirty parishioners to La Vang. With the blessing of the pastor, Fr. Jean Patrice Desvaux, they traveled half a day through the jungle; they prayed with deep devotion in the converted chapel and went home with some leaves.

Pilgrimages to La Vang in following years attracted more and more Christians from the whole vicariate of Dinh Cat. Fr. Peter Do Khac Nhon, pastor of Co Vuu (1867-1874) assigned Mr. Le Thien Thin to organize two annual pilgrimages to La Vang. These took place during the Lenten season and on the third day of the Oriental New Year. They solemnly carried the statue of the Blessed Mary from the parish of Co Vuu to the shrine while singing and praying the rosary.

⁶ Phat Huon Phan, *The History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam* (Long Beach, CA: Cuu The Tung Thu, 2000), 314.

On September 7, 1885, a group of Can Vuong besieged Co Vuu and set the church on fire, killing four hundred people who had taken refuge in the structure. The following day, the group marched to La Vang and set the deserted village on fire, but the villagers had withdrawn deep into jungle. The chapel was spared until a man, named Tho, son of Mr. Meo from Phu Long, who did not belong to the group of Can Vuong, burnt it down after the group had withdrawn. He and the family were later burnt in their own house by Can Vuong for some undisclosed reasons. A mysterious thing or miracle happened in the fire of the chapel: while the entire structure was "reduced to ashes, the altar was almost untouched by fire."⁷

C. The Support of Missionaries

After the persecution, in 1886, missionary priests Fr. Bonnard, Fr. Patinier and Fr. Bonin carried forward a long-term project to build a new, bigger and more splendid chapel at La Vang. In the meantime they were searching for documentary evidence of the apparitions. Since no such documents could be found, missionaries in Vietnam concentrated their research in the local oral tradition. Fr. Claude Bonin diligently questioned aged parishioners to whom he ministered the sacrament of anointing of the sick or viaticum. These dying individuals testified sincerely that their parents had narrated to them their actual experiences.

In 1901, the new chapel was completed. Fr. Bonin organized the first great tri-annual pilgrimage at the diocesan level with about twelve thousand participants. Bishop Marie Antoine Louis Caspar, the Apostolic Vicar of Cochinchina, blessed the new sanctuary and a beautiful statue of Our Lady. He solemnly dedicated the shrine to Mary the Auxiliatrix.

In 1919, Bishop Eugene Marie Giuseppe Allys (*Ly*, in Vietnamese) promoted the tri-annual pilgrimage to the Triduum celebration. He himself took the train from Hue and stayed among about twenty thousand pilgrims, many of whom came from both southern and northern dioceses of Vietnam. Among the dignitaries present were civil authorities and judges from different provinces.

⁷ Ibid., 318.

On February 11, 1924, Fr. Morineau, pastor of Co Vuu, began another construction project in order to accommodate the crowd of pilgrims, because the chapel built in 1901 became too small. A larger chapel and a monument of three huts were completed in 1928. Bishop Allys, who was then Vicar Apostolic of Hue, solemnly blessed the new shrine during the great pilgrimage of that year.

In great pilgrimages, missionaries continued the investigation of the apparitions. Again and again, they received confirmations from the faithful, who were one hundred to one hundred fifty years old. Fr. J. B. Roux summarized the research in his article about the great pilgrimage in 1932 as follows:

At any rate, investigating as far back as possible in the tradition, we learned that pilgrims were running to the humble oratory of La Vang and several blessings were granted to those who prayed to Our Good Mother of Heaven.⁸

The great pilgrimage in 1938 was blessed with the presence of the Apostolic Vicar, Antonin Fernand Drapier, and Bishop Alexander Paul Chabanon. New participants were pilgrims from the highland dioceses of Kontum and from Laos, the neighboring country to the west. The number of participants increased to fifty thousand.

In the period from 1938 to 1955, no great tri-annual pilgrimage was possible due to heavy wars in the country. Annual pilgrimages, however, took place at the local level. The great pilgrimage to La Vang resumed in 1958, with Bishop Jean Baptist Urrutia (1901-1979) who was Vicar Apostolic of Hue. The celebration lasted six days, hosting about fifty thousand pilgrims and welcoming special gifts. The first gift was the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes donated by the Marian Organization of Italy and blessed by Pope Pius XII. The second gift was the presence of Apostolic Vicar Caprius and Bishop U Win, the first Bishop of Myanmar. The third gift was a group of two hundred Catholics from North Vietnam; Vietnam was officially divided into two states by the treaty of Geneva in 1954. This was the

⁸ Roux, "Le grand pèlerinage," in Archives MEP.

last pilgrimage to La Vang from North Vietnamese Catholics under the Communist government (1954-1975).

C. Vietnamese Bishops

Inheriting the La Vang tradition from European missionaries, the Vietnamese hierarchy, established in 1960, consistently gave their approval to the tradition (not its historicity). The Bishops of South Viet Nam (then divided from North Viet Nam by the 18th parallel) gathered in Hue on April 13, 1961, and they

made a vow to the Immaculate Heart of Mary to consecrate a temple to the Blessed Virgin when circumstances permitted, asking Our Lady for freedom for the Church and peace for both parts of Viet Nam. In their joint Letter of the 8th of August of the same year, La Vang was recognized as a national Marian Centre.⁹

The shrine was enlarged and embellished with a Holy Rosary square, fifteen statues representing the mysteries of the Rosary, a statue of the Blessed Virgin, and retreat houses. In 1972, various buildings of La Vang were destroyed during the war between the Communist North and the Republic of South Vietnam. The only construction that remained standing was the bell tower which had been severely damaged. After the country's reunification in 1975, all the bishops of Viet Nam solemnly renewed the recognition of La Vang as a national Marian center on the first of May, 1980, in Hanoi. In unison on their knees, they sang the *Salve Regina* with great faith and devotion.

D. The Holy See and La Vang

In June 1958, Pope Pius XII blessed the statue of the Lady of Lourdes which was donated to the shrine of La Vang by the Marian Organization of Italy. At the opening ceremony of the pilgrimage in August of that year, the statue was solemnly carried in procession and subsequently placed in the chapel. On the 22nd of August 1961, Pope John XXIII raised the church of La Vang to the dignity of a Minor Basilica.

⁹ "The Catholics of Viet Nam Pay Homage . . ."

In an excellent article, "The Catholics of Viet Nam Pay Homage to Our Lady of La Vang," in *L'Osservatore Romano* (Eng. ed., Dec. 8, 1998), the author states that "for his part, [Pope John Paul II] has shown many signs of affection for Our Lady of La Vang." The article lists major moments at which John Paul II referred to La Vang. In his Angelus talk on Sunday, June 19, 1988, the Pope included La Vang in the list of the most significant Marian shrines in the world. He linked the shrine of La Vang to the newly canonized 117 Martyrs of Viet Nam, and he expressed the wish that the shrine would become a symbol of the Church's unity and of national solidarity without religious distinction.

In 1998, before the bicentennial anniversary of the apparition of Our Lady of La Vang (1798), the Holy Father referred to the La Vang Shrine and entrusted the Vietnamese Church to the Blessed Virgin's protection on several occasions. These included the General Audience of Wednesday, November 25, 1992, with the presence of Etienne Nguyen Nhu The, then Archbishop of Hue; a one-hour meeting with the Vietnamese group at the World Youth Day in Denver (August 15, 1993); the General Audience of Wednesday, October 26, 1994; and again on the occasion of the *ad limina* visit of the Vietnamese Bishops in 1996. In a letter to Cardinal Paul Joseph Pham Dinh Tung of Hanoi in 1997, Blessed John Paul II wrote that "despite the great trials which have marked it in the course of its history, it [La Vang] has now become a national Marian centre which has been able to keep alive the tradition of pilgrimages."¹⁰

On December 16, 1997, His Holiness sent a spiritual message to Cardinal Paul Joseph Pham Dinh Tung, Archbishop of Hanoi, president of the Episcopal Conference, and appointed him as his Special Envoy for the celebrations of the bicentennial anniversary of the apparitions of the Blessed Mary at La Vang. In a letter to Archbishop Etienne Nguyen Nhu The of Hue, the Cardinal Secretary of State sent the Apostolic Blessing to the

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, "Letter addressed to Cardinal Paul Joseph Pham Dinh Tung of Hanoi to mark the 200th anniversary of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin in La Vang (December 16, 1997)," in *L'Osservatore Romano* (Eng. ed.), no. 32/33 (August 12-19, 1998).

Archdiocese in preparation for the feast of the 15th of August with a solemn triduum. The Apostolic Penitentiary had granted the possibility of earning a plenary indulgence to pilgrims who visited La Vang between January 1, 1998 and August 15, 1999. In 2011, Pope Benedict XVI sent Cardinal Ivan Dias as Papal Delegate to bless the first stone of another new church of La Vang. Cardinal Ivan Dias was Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (May 2006–May 2011).

La Vang is the national Marian shrine of the Church of Vietnam, which has been growing under the maternal protection of the Blessed Mother Mary with the sweat and blood of European missionaries and of Vietnamese martyrs through the centuries. La Vang is very dear to all Vietnamese Catholics, both those in the country and those abroad all over the world. Most of all, La Vang as a shrine is

a place for the proclamation of a message of life: the “Gospel of God” (Mk 1:14; Rm 1:1), or the “Gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mk 1:1), that is the good news coming from God about Jesus Christ: He is the Savior of all mankind, by whose death and resurrection heaven and earth have been reconciled forever.¹¹

III. Mary, the Bright Star of Evangelization

In the apparitions at La Vang, the heavenly Lady brings Jesus Christ to persecuted Christians. The vision of the Child Jesus in Mary’s arms manifests a mother-and-son relationship between the bearer and the Savior of the world. Intimacy with Jesus Christ is the fundamental element of Christian discipleship.¹² It urges Christians to carry out the mission of bringing the Good News to the world. With this in mind, we first turn to the Scriptures to reflect on Mary’s bond with Jesus; then subsequently, we study her role as model of evangelization.

¹¹ Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines* (2001), 274. The DPPL includes La Vang in the partial list of other shrines in the world (DPPL, 285).

¹² John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 77. Hereafter RM.

A. Union with Jesus Christ

In the mystery of the Redemption, Mary is bonded with the Incarnate Word by a permanent mother-son blood relationship: Mother of the Son of the Most High (Luke 1:26-38). Mary's motherhood of the Incarnate Word came about precisely because of her faith in God. This model of her genuine discipleship shines as a guiding star for every one of Jesus' disciples in all times.

To God's initial invitation at the fullness of time, the Virgin Mary offered a *fiat* in a total obedience that remains forever unconditionally available for God's will. Her response was bridal, in a completely submissive mode in love. With the humility of a "handmaid," she opened herself entirely to God's mystery of love to be the carrier of Jesus (*Theotokos*) (Luke 1:38). Thus Mary became the first "disciple" of her Son as a humble instrument for God's work. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, she bore Jesus in her virginal womb to her pregnant cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45). The title "Mother of my Lord" was pronounced by Elizabeth (Luke 1:43), indicating Mary's identity as forever attached to her most blessed Son. All the way to Jesus' final destiny on Calvary, their union remained inextricable, just as Simeon prophesied to the mother when she brought the Child to the Temple: "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34-35).

The personal relationship between Mary and Jesus was deepened through life experiences. The Gospel of St. John records the presence of Mary in two important moments of Jesus' public life: his first sign at Cana (John 2:1-12), and his last hour on Golgotha (John 19:25-26). In a certain way, Mary was with her Son in his evangelizing work. In the joy of a wedding feast as well as in his suffering and death, Mary remained faithful to her Son throughout his entire life.

Pondering Mary's indissoluble bond with Jesus Christ, the Second Vatican Council re-affirms the Church's Tradition in proclaiming Mary to be the Mother of God, the mother of Christ and mother of men, particularly of the faithful in the mystery of the Incarnate Word and the Mystical Body (*Lumen*

Gentium, nos. 53-68).¹³ As Mother of the Redeemer, Mary accepted, under the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciple's task in bringing her Son, the Savior of the world, to her other children with a maternal love.

Mary's personal union with Jesus becomes the ideal of Christian spirituality. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Blessed John Paul II writes: "In this way 'being the bride,' and thus the 'feminine' element, becomes a symbol of all that is 'human,' according to the words of Paul: 'There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28)" (MD, 25). The Pope teaches: "all human beings—both women and men—are called through the Church, to be the Bride of Christ, the Redeemer of the world" (MD, 25).

Christian discipleship begins with a definite response to God's call to follow Jesus and to remain united with Him in self-surrendering faith. It was Jesus who would illuminate his disciples with a better understanding of the mystery of the Redemption.

The light that Jesus brings is so new, so unique, that we can only be initiated into it by Jesus, by that experience which we have of him. He himself is the way we must tread if we want to understand the truth and the life. In living and following this "way," Mary too had to be initiated into what she was unable to understand (Lk 2:50).¹⁴

In brief, Christian discipleship must be rooted in intimate communion with Christ, the source of all graces, which is an essential characteristic of missionary spirituality (RM, no. 88). Our late popes emphasize that evangelizing is the essential task of the Church (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntianti*, no. 14) and of all baptized (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 77; Benedict XVI, *Message for World Mission Sunday, 2011*). Fr. Anthony J. Gittins, professor of mission and culture at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, reminds us: "The purpose of discipleship is mission."¹⁵

¹³ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)—hereafter LG.

¹⁴ Brendan Leahy, *The Marian Profile in the Ecclesiology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (New York: New City Press, 2000), 88.

¹⁵ Anthony J. Gittins, *Called to Be Sent: Co-Missioned as Disciples Today* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Pubs., 2008), 15.

B. Disciple's Mission

Our Lady of La Vang appeared to the community praying the Rosary with the only gift that matters in her arms: Jesus. It is the crucified and risen Lord, the subject of evangelization, whom Mary brings to her children with a motherly love. She performs the Christian disciple's mission—a right and duty of Christian communities and individuals which consists of two main tasks: witnessing to and proclaiming God's merciful love for the world (RM, no. 7) under the power of the Holy Spirit. Both tasks are rooted in the universal call to holiness of true disciples of Jesus in communion with the Savior (LG, nos. 39-42).

C. Witnessing

Pope Paul VI teaches that Christian life as witness is the *fundamental* proclamation of the Gospel: "Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness . . . All Christians are called to this witness, and in this way they can be real evangelizers" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 21). Witnessing is a way of Christian life: "Even before activity, mission means witness and a way of life that shines out to others" (RM, no. 26).

Our Lady of La Vang appeared to the persecuted community while they were devoutly praying: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." Her apparitions served as a proof of affirmative response to Christians' absolute trust that "hers is an ear that always listens, hers a heart that always welcomes, and hers a prayer that never fails."¹⁶ Mary is a witness of the mission of all disciples in two ways: her prayer life and salvific co-operation in her Son's redemptive sacrifice. Her exemplary life shines out to others brilliantly, with the powerful mediation of the Mother of the Savior of the world.

1. Prayer Life

The evangelist Luke describes Mary's prayer life as deeply meditating on all the events of Jesus' life: "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Luke 2:19, 51). Her

¹⁶ John Paul II, apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* (Nov. 6, 1999), no. 51: "Prayer to the Mother of Christ for Asia."

silence, according to John Paul II, "is especially a wise capacity for remembering and embracing in a single gaze of faith the mystery of the Word made man and the events of his earthly life."¹⁷ The Pope embraces this exemplary prayer life of the Virgin as a great treasure:

Mary passes on to believers this silence as acceptance of the Word, this ability to meditate on the mystery of Christ. In a noisy world filled with messages of all kinds, her witness fosters a contemplative spirit and enables us to appreciate a spirituality rich in silence.¹⁸

Contemplative prayer nourishes Christians' will to accept Jesus spiritually being formed and growing in their beings, that is, to become "carriers" of Christ. Meditating on the fact that Jesus was literally growing in the womb of Mary, the *Theotokos*, Msgr. Keith Barltrop reminds us that "evangelization is something that grows slowly within us, as Jesus, the Savior, grew within Mary's womb."¹⁹ Undoubtedly, it is necessary for evangelizers to bear Jesus inside of their beings in order to bring Him to others.

2. Salvific Co-operation

Salvific co-operation in Jesus' redemptive Passion is another dimension of witnessing. Mary's salvific co-operation is unique on Golgotha, by joining herself in the sufferings of Jesus the Crucified.

There could be no greater test than this—to consent to total abandonment of her Son and by her Son . . . Paradoxically, now both the forsaken Son and the forsaken Mother are united in a mutual forsakenness . . . Hers is a spiritual death, a non-bloody martyrdom.²⁰

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Theotokos: Woman, Mother, Disciple: A Catechesis on Mary, Mother of God* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2000), 38.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Msgr. Keith Barltrop, "Mary Star of the New Evangelization and the Doctrine of Marian Coredeemption," in *Mary at the Foot of the Cross—III: Mater Unitatis* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2003), 456.

²⁰ Leahy, *The Marian Profile*, 91-92.

Martyrdom is the strongest witness of faith. By her unbloody martyrdom, in co-suffering with the Redeemer, Mary is the Queen of Martyrs. After Jesus' death, she remained present among her Son's disciples who suffered oppression at the hands of the Jews and Romans. Mary prayed with them in the Upper Room, not simply as a member of the community but particularly as "Mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14). She holds a special love for the persecuted Christians, because her Son identified himself as one with the persecuted faithful (cf. Acts 9:4-5).

Our Lady of La Vang appeared and strengthened the young Vietnamese Church to remain faithful with the Crucified Jesus. She prepared them to undergo another wave of "great persecutions" (1820-1885) that resulted in more than 100,000 martyrs.²¹ John Paul II remarks that "throughout Christian history, martyrs, that is, 'witnesses,' have always been numerous and indispensable to the spread of the Gospel" (RM, no. 45). This insight was exemplified in June 19, 1988, when the Pope canonized 117 Vietnamese martyrs. In the Angelus message of the same day, he included La Vang in the list of the most significant Marian shrines.

Reflecting on salvific cooperation in the mystery of the Redemption, the Holy Father invites the faithful to offer themselves along with Christ, especially in the Eucharistic celebration.²² He teaches that by uniting themselves to Christ's sacrifice on Golgotha, Christians "preserve in their own sufferings a very special *particle of the infinite treasure* of the world's Redemption, and can share this treasure with others."²³

²¹ Catholic Online notes in the article "Martyrs of Vietnam": "The Vatican estimates the number of Vietnamese martyrs at between 130,000 and 300,000. John Paul II decided to canonize those whose names are known and unknown, giving them a single feast day ... The tortures these individuals underwent are considered by the Vatican to be among the worst in the history of Christian martyrdom. The torturers hacked off limbs joint by joint, tore flesh with red hot tongs, and used drugs to enslave the minds of the victims. Christians at the time were branded on the face with the words '*ta dao*' (literally 'Left (Perverse) religion'; cf. *Les missions étrangères: trois siècles et demi d'histoire et d'aventure en Asie*, ed. Marcel Launay and Gérard Moussay [Paris: Perrin, c2008], 291), and families and villages which subscribed to Christianity were obliterated" (Donald Attwater and Catherine Rachel John, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993). http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=4951, accessed January 10, 2012.

²² John Paul II, encyclical letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (April 17, 2003), no. 13.

²³ John Paul II, apostolic letter, *Salvifici Doloris* (Feb. 11, 1984), 27.

We need to distinguish the difference between Mary's co-operation and that of other believers. Following John Paul II's reflections, Mark Miravalle explains that Mary's motherly collaboration in the actual sacrifice of her Son, the only Redeemer, is unique in a total dependence and submission: "She, alone, is Co-redemptrix, whereas the participation by all other Christians 'takes place after the historical accomplishment': they are 'God's co-workers' (1 Cor 3:9)."²⁴

3. *Powerful Mediation of Mary*

In the apparitions at La Vang, Mary brings Jesus Christ to persecuted Christians with the love of a mother. She is a powerful Mediatrix because she intercedes with her Son in the role of a mother. As Mother of mankind by the will of the Crucified Son: "Behold, your son" (John 19:26), Our Lady of La Vang addressed persecuted Christians in a tender tone: "My children." She instructed them to boil leaves for medicine to cure their sicknesses in the jungle. She spoke in that same manner when she instructed the servers at the wedding feast in Cana: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). Mary spoke as "the spokeswoman of her Son's will," but in the position of a mother (*Redemptoris Mater*, no. 21).

Being Mother of the triumphant risen Lord, Mary is crowned as "Queen of Heaven and Queen of the world" (Pius XII, *Ad Caeli Reginam*; also LG, no. 59). The mediation of the heavenly Queen Mother reaches the sublime power of the Queen Mother (*Gebirah*, "Great Lady") as seen in the Old Testament: "Make your request, my mother, for I will not refuse you" (1 Kings 2:20). Kevin Clarke notes that in Lourdes on September 14, 2008, "the Pope [Benedict XVI] stated that the Blessed Mary offered her body so as to receive the Body of her Son, and further stated in markedly Montfortian language: "Everything came from Christ, even Mary; everything came through Mary, even Christ."²⁵

²⁴ Mark Miravalle, "In Continued Dialogue with the Czestochowa Commission," in *Mary at the Foot of the Cross—III: Mater Unitatis* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2003), 368.

²⁵ Kevin M. Clarke, "Divinely Given 'Into Our Reality': Mary's Maternal Mediation according to Pope Benedict XVI," in *De Maria Numquam Satis*, ed. Judith Marie Gentle and Robert L. Fastiggi (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 162.

At La Vang, Our Lady, surrounded by two angels and with Jesus in her arms, spoke in a very tender tone, but in the power of a mother: "My children, I have already granted your prayers. Henceforth all those who come to pray to me in this spot will see their wishes fulfilled." Vietnamese people who lived under the government of kingship since the establishment of the country are well aware of the power of the king's mother (*Hoang Thai Hau*). In the position of a heavenly Mother of the glorious King, Our Lady of La Vang spoke as a Distributrix of graces according to God's generosity.

It is important to note, however, that the Second Vatican Council emphasizes that "Mary's maternal function towards mankind in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its efficacy," because "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). The maternal role of Mary "flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it" (LG, no. 60). Though being subordinate to the primary mediation of Jesus Christ, Mary's mediation is exceptional.

In evangelizing work, prayer and salvific cooperation are fundamental ways of witnessing in the Christian life before any activity. By her silent prayer life, her unique collaboration in Christ's sacrifice as Co-redemptrix²⁶ and her powerful mediation as the Mother of the only Savior, Mary stands out as the most fruitful agent under the power of the Holy Spirit in the Christian mission.

²⁶ Although Vatican II, in *Lumen Gentium*, chapter VIII, chose not to use the term "Co-redemptrix," the term was approved in 1914 during the pontificate of Pius X for use in a prayer with an indulgence attached. Pius XI and John Paul II both referred to Mary as "Co-redemptrix" in several public addresses, and, in 1953, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith approved a Vietnamese religious community known as "the Congregation of Mother Co-redemptrix." The term, of course, must be properly understood. It does not mean there is an equality between Mary and Jesus. Rather, the term highlights Mary's unique cooperation in the work of redemption with and under her divine Son.

4. Proclamation

"Proclamation is the permanent priority of mission . . . The subject of proclamation is Christ who was crucified, died and is risen" (RM, no. 44). Fr. Anthony J. Gittins explains:

Evangelization (preaching the Good News) then is, first and foremost, what Jesus does. It describes him in his ministry as the "Good Newser" — as the very embodiment of "Good Newsing," so to speak. So the subject of evangelization is not primarily the Church or even disciples (in the time of Jesus or today). The subject, or agent, of evangelization is Jesus himself.²⁷

In her fabulous *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), Mary praises the greatness of the Lord. She identifies herself as the "lowly handmaid" (*doule*), the same title she had used in her reply to Gabriel in the Annunciation (Luke 1:48; 1:38). Fr. Bertrand Buby, S.M., stresses the depth of Mary's poverty in reflecting on Christ's kenosis in the Christological hymn (Phil 2:7):

Jesus took his human nature from his Mother, Mary. Like her who called herself the "handmaid" (*doule* is used in Lk 1:48 in her hymn) of the Lord, this hymn [Phil 2:7] calls Christ the *doulos* or servant. The "emptying out" of Jesus is complemented by the humility, openness, and poverty of Mary who totally emptied herself out to God to be filled with his word.²⁸

a. Preferential Love for the Poor

Appearing to a group of poor persecuted Christians in a remote spot in the deep jungle, Our Lady of La Vang proclaimed God's greatness and his preferential love for the poor. "Blessed are you who are poor for the kingdom of God is yours" (Lk 6:20; Mt 5:3). In terms of mission, Pope John Paul II reflects: "It follows that the poor are those to whom the mission is first addressed, and their evangelization is *par excellence* the sign and proof of the mission of Jesus."²⁹

²⁷ Gittins, *Called to Be Sent*, 15.

²⁸ Bertrand Buby, S.M., *Mary, the Faithful Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 28.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Documents of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops* (Puebla, 1979), 3757 [1142]; RM, no. 60.

b. Inculturation

The Holy Father gives further remarks that "Evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 21). In *Redemptoris Missio*, he quotes the definition from The Final Report of the Extraordinary Assembly of 1985:

It is not a matter of purely external adaptation, for inculturation "means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures." (RM, no. 52)

Our Lady of La Vang is a model of inculturation, for she appeared with Jesus in her arms under a banyan tree, wearing Vietnamese traditional dress and speaking the language of the people.

1) Role of women in maintaining the culture

Bearing a child in her arms, Our Lady of La Vang displays an image of a Vietnamese mother in local culture. In Confucian culture, women's role is restricted to the sphere of domesticity. But it is women who play a key role in the transmission of cultural and religious values.

2) Traditional dress

In a simple traditional dress (*ao dai*), Our Lady of La Vang appeared as an indigenous woman. Our Lady of La Vang is one of them, while being a model of all the faithful.

3) Language

Our Lady of La Vang speaks the language that everyone in the persecuted group understands. Mary expresses the importance of language because "the Church can accomplish her mission only in a way that corresponds to the way in which God acted in Jesus Christ: he became man, shared our human life and spoke in a human language to communicate his saving message" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 29).

4) Banyan tree

"The foot of a banyan tree was believed to be a residence of some spirit or of a ghost. That is why a temple, or a pagoda is usually built by the tree."³⁰ Choosing a banyan tree, Our Lady of La Vang purifies the Vietnamese culture and at the same time "Christianizes" their belief. The true God, whom the Vietnamese indigenous religion calls "*Ong Troi*," is the God of the Christians and Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world.

5) Inter-religious dialogue

In the history of La Vang Shrine, Buddhist people in the area had once tried to claim the "sacred spot" for their own. The reason behind this controversy was that they wrongly believed that the heavenly Lady was *Kwan Yin*, a goddess of mercy in their tradition. Since our Lady of La Vang appeared as a merciful Mother to persecuted Christians, she could be a good topic of interreligious dialogue.

Pope John Paul II holds that "Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission" (RM, no. 55) and "dialogue leads to inner purification and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful" (RM, no. 56). For the Spirit is the principal agent of the Evangelization (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 75; cf. RM, no. 21). The Pope insists that a life of complete docility to the Spirit is the necessary spirituality of evangelizers (RM, no. 87).

In summary, rooted in the "intimate and indissoluble bond" (LG, no. 53) with Jesus Christ, the greatest Evangelizer, and evangelized by the mystery of Incarnation, Mary completed her faith journey in witnessing and proclaiming God's love. She did this in joyful docility to the Holy Spirit Who overshadowed her at the Annunciation, and in Whom she prayed with Jesus' disciples at the beginning of the Church's mission. Pope Paul VI says: "[Mary] is worthy of imitation because she was the first and the most perfect of Christ's disciples" (*Marialis Cultus*, no. 35). Pope Francis issued a tweet in the morning of May 5, 2013, urging the faithful to imitate Mary in her

³⁰ Phan, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 314.

discipleship of Christ: "We must learn from Mary," he wrote, "and we must imitate her unconditional readiness to receive Christ in her life" (Vatican Radio, 2013-05-18).

Conclusion

Our Lady of La Vang continues drawing Christians and non-Christians as well to her Son Jesus at the shrine of La Vang in Vietnam and at her many other shrines built by Vietnamese immigrants around the world. In the United States, popular shrines of La Vang can be found in New Orleans, Louisiana (1992), Atlanta, Georgia (1996), Las Vegas, Nevada (2003),³¹ and Washington, D.C., in the lower level of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (2006).

In Vietnam, the pilgrimage of Our Lady of La Vang in 2011 assembled forty two Vietnamese bishops, a thousand priests and about five hundred thousand pilgrims.³² In the United States, the Marian Days in August at the Vietnamese Congregation of Co-Redemptrix in Carthage, Missouri, draw an increasing number of pilgrims every year (60,000 in 2011, more than 70,000 in 2013).

Our Lady, bearing the Child Jesus in her arms, as she appeared to persecuted Christians at La Vang, is the bright Star of Evangelization (*Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 51). In her motherhood, the Blessed Mother unceasingly intercedes with her triumphant Son for her children—that we may advance in holiness, be bold witnesses, and proclaim the crucified and risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. With our beloved Mother, let us go into the world proclaiming the Good News.

³¹ The shrine of La Vang in Las Vegas (located at 4835 S. Pearl St., Las Vegas, NV), was built in the model of the original shrine in Vietnam. The pilgrimage in 2011 gathered about seven thousand Vietnamese under the spiritual care of Bishop Joseph Pepe of the Diocese of Las Vegas, Bishop Vu van Thien of the Diocese of Hai Phong, VN, and Bishop Joseph Fiorenza, former bishop of Houston, Texas. http://www.lasvegas-diocese.org/parishes_shrine_la_vang.html, accessed February 14, 2012.

³² Statistics from <http://www.dunglac.org/index.php?m=module3&v=chapter&ib=624&ict=9305>, accessed January 10, 2012.