

Our Lady of La Vang



The Saint of Vietnam

In 1552, the Le family, ruling dynasty of Vietnam was manipulated by its chief Regent, Mac Dang Dung. It took combined efforts of two political elite families to oust the usurper. As rewards, Vietnam was divided into two regions under the ruling families Trinh and Nguyen. The Trinh family ruled the northern region. The southern region was under the Le and Nguyen families. Several years later, wars broke out between the Trinh and Nguyen families. The Nguyen Lord set up the capital in a remote location called Dinh Cat, distant from the feuds. The Nguyen opened their domain to foreign merchant ships in exchange for guns and ammunitions against their northern adversaries. In 1593, Catholics was introduced into Vietnam by Father Diego Aduarte, a Dominican, who came onboard a Spanish merchant ship. He established a mission in Dinh Cat.



Years later, Father Francisco Buzoni, a Jesuit, maintained his predecessor's mission through good relations with the Nguyen family. With the arrival of Father Francisco de Pina, an Italian Jesuit who was fluent in Vietnamese language, many people converted to Catholicism, including the king's aunt. Thirty-seven parishes were established around Dinh Cat, near the coastal line of Vietnam as the Jesuits continued the Dominican works. In 1624, Father

Alexander de Rhodes, a French Jesuit, arrived and initiated the Vietnamese alphabets that are being used today. For more than forty years, Catholicism was marginally tolerated to flourish due to the opened relations with European powers, such as Spain, France and Portugal. In 1788, the Nguyen dynasty expanded their territory southward and re-united the north and south regions into what is now Vietnam. The capital was moved once again, sixty kilometers southward, to Hue, and became the official capital of Vietnam in 1789.



The persecution of Catholicism dated back in 1640, when the Nguyen lords grew dissatisfied with the Spanish merchants and killed two missionaries. In 1645, Father Alexander de Rhodes was extricated out of Vietnam after a number of parishioners in the Dinh Cat area were killed during a skirmish with the local bandits. The periodic persecutions of the Vietnamese Catholics continued and escalated in 1798, when the Nguyen Dynasty decreed Catholicism as a religious sect, introduced by foreigners, with the purposes to recruit and influence the working class to revolt against the Nguyen dynasty. A few months later, direct attacks were aimed at all thirty-seven parishes in Dinh Cat with the purpose of exterminating the misled commoners and leveling the parishes. More than 100,000 Vietnamese Catholics died as martyrs.

The first apparition of the Lady of La Vang to the Vietnamese people was noted during this great persecution in 1798. This was the year, when King Canh 'Minh issued an anti-Catholic edict and an order to destroy all Catholic churches and seminaries. Many Christians took refuge in the jungle situated in proximity of Quang Tri, a village in central Vietnam, where they experienced hunger and sickness, and prepared themselves for martyrdom. Many Catholics from the nearby town of Quang Tri sought refuge in the deep forest of La Vang. A great number of these people suffered from the bitter cold weather, lurking wild beasts, jungle sickness and starvation. At night, they often gathered in small groups to say the rosary and to pray. Unexpectedly, one night they were visited by an apparition of a beautiful Lady in a long cape, holding a child in her arms, with two angels at her sides. The people recognized the Lady as Our Blessed Mother. Our Blessed Mother comforted them and told them to boil the leaves from the surrounding trees to use as medicine. She also told them that from that day on, all those who came to this place to pray, would get their prayers heard and answered. This took place on the grass area near the big ancient banyan tree where the refugees were praying. All those who were present witnessed this miracle.

From the time the Lady of La Vang first appeared, the people who took refuge there erected a small and desolate chapel in her honour. During the following years, her name was spread among the people in the region to other places. Despite its isolated location in the high mountains, groups of people continued to find ways to penetrate the deep and dangerous jungle to pray to the Lady of La Vang. Gradually, the pilgrims that came with axes, spears, canes and drums to scare away wild animals were replaced by those holding flying flags, flowers and rosaries. New pilgrimages went on every year despite the continuous persecution campaign. After the persecution had officially ended, Bishop Gaspar ordered a church to be built in honour of the Lady of La Vang. Because of its precarious location and limited funding, it took 15 years for the completion of the church of La Vang. It was inaugurated by Bishop Gaspar in a solemn ceremony that participated by over 12,000 people and lasted from August 6 till 8, 1901. The bishop proclaimed the Lady of La Vang as the Protectorate of the Catholics. In 1928 a larger church was built to accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims. This church was destroyed in the summer of 1972 during the Vietnam War.



The history of the Lady of La Vang continues to gain greater significance as more claims from people whose prayers were answered were validated. In April of 1961, the Council of Vietnamese Bishops selected the holy church of La Vang as the National Sacred Marian Center. In August of 1962, Pope John XXIII elevated the church of La Vang to the Basilica of La Vang. On June 19, 1988, Pope John Paul II in the canonizing ceremony of the 117 Vietnamese martyrs, publicly and repeatedly recognized the importance and significance of the Lady of La Vang and expressed a desire for the rebuilding of the La Vang Basilica to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the first apparition of the Lady of La Vang in August of 1998.

Our Lady of La Vang continues to be an inspiration for those who suffer for their faith, and she continues to invite people to pray and make sacrifices for the love of their Faith. We are all encouraged to come to Mary, that she might draw us to her Immaculate Heart, and encourage us in our times of suffering to be united to the sufferings of Christ her Divine Son. **Our Lady of La Vang, pray for us.** The Holy Father recently said, "In visiting the shrine of Our Lady of La Vang, who is so loved by the Vietnamese faithful, pilgrims come to entrust to her their joys and sorrows, their hopes and sufferings. In this way, they call on God and become intercessors for their families and nation, asking the Lord to infuse in the heart of all people feelings of peace, fraternity and solidarity, so that all the Vietnamese will be more united every day in the construction of a world based on essential spiritual and moral values, where each one will be recognized because of his dignity as a son of God, and be able to go in freedom and as a son toward the Father of Heaven, 'rich in mercy' "

