

### The Message of La Vang

Our Lady visited the persecuted Vietnamese Catholics only once in 1798 and spoke very few words. She appeared standing among the branches of a large tree, in a glow of light, holding her infant son in front of her. An angel stood on either side of the Queen of Heaven and Redeemer of the World. What, then, is the “message” that Pope St. John Paul referred to in his 1998 letter to the Bishop of Hanoi?

First, the name “La Vang” refers both to the leaves of the tree which Our Lady asked the refugees to boil for healing. “La Vang” refers to this forest of trees whose leaves heal the people. La Vang, therefore, means “healing.” The word also means “crying out,” perhaps referring to the way forest dwellers had to cry out loudly to communicate with each other. The persecuted and hunted people who took refuge in La Vang forest, gathering every evening to pray the rosary at the foot of a large tree, were “crying out” to heaven for help. Our Lady, “Help of Christians” (the first title given to this Lady) appeared to them and said: “I have heard your cries for help.”



New La Vang church. Photo: Phong Nha Explorer

### Exiles and Pilgrims

The Vietnamese people, in a particular way, are *refugees*. They have been exiled from their homeland to every part of the world. Purified by persecution, they have learned to depend entirely on God, to cry out to their Mother in their need, and to keep the faith. You will see Vietnamese Catholics praying the rosary together faithfully after Mass (they have developed a striking way of *singing* the rosary, as they sing the Mass). The message of La Vang, then, is that God can be trusted, even in desperate circumstances, and that He sends His Mother to hear the cries of His people.



Shrine of the 117 Vietnamese martyrs at La Vang

### Ecclesiastical Approval

Our Lady of La Vang has never been formally approved either by the local bishop or the Vatican. But the popes have encouraged devotion to this apparition. John XXIII elevated the chapel at La Vang to a basilica, and John Paul II asked that a larger basilica be built on the site. Vietnamese diaspora communities have built large shrines to La Vang and bishops have named parishes after her. The biggest shrine to La Vang is in Orange County, at Christ Cathedral, which is 40% Vietnamese.

### Recommended reading

I have not found any books on La Vang in English. Philip Jenkins, for example, wrote a good article in the June 2022 issue of *The Christian Century*.

## Our Lady of La Vang Historical Facts and Essential Messages of Our Lady in 1798



Shrine of Our Lady of La Vang at Our Lady of the Visitation Parish, San Francisco

*Welcome to Our Lady's Shrine here in San Francisco. In this pamphlet, prepared by our pastor, Fr. Joseph Illo, you will learn the basic facts and message of this apparition. You are encouraged to spend some time in quiet prayer and perhaps go to confession. Please keep a reverent silence in the Church, especially when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed.*

### Star of the Sea Church

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**What:** One appearance of Our Lady  
**Where:** La Vang Rain Forest, Vietnam  
**When:** 1798

**To Whom:** a group of Catholics hiding in the jungle from government persecution

Around 1790, an edict by Emperor Cảnh Thịnh made Catholicism illegal in Vietnam. Suffering severe persecutions, a group of Catholics in the Quảng Trị Province in central Vietnam (today the Archdiocese of Huế) fled to the rainforest of Lá Vằng. This jungle was named for the large Jasmine trees,

whose leaves can be used for tea. Life in this wilderness was very difficult, and many became ill from lack of food and medicine, and from drinking contaminated water. In their misery, the people would gather at the foot of a large Jasmine tree to pray the rosary.

One evening in 1798 they began praying as usual when a beautiful woman, clothed in the traditional Vietnamese áo dài gown, appeared in front of the tree. She held a child in her arms, with two angels keeping watch to her left and to her right. "I have received your prayers," she told them. "From now on, I will answer those who come here seeking for my help, and I will bless them."



*Shrine at La Vang today, showing Our Lady and Jesus appearing on a huge Jasmine tree. Photo: Phong Nha Explorer*

The Lady also told them to boil the leaves of the Jasmine tree for a tea that would heal their sicknesses and purify their water. The refugees got better and stayed in the jungle another four years, returning to their homes in 1802.

News of the apparition spread, such that not only Catholics but Protestants and Buddhists visited the site. In 1820 they built a chapel, but the building was destroyed in the persecutions of 1830-1885. In 1886 the faithful built a larger chapel with a stately tower, and in 1961 Pope John XXIII elevated the shrine chapel to Basilica status. This church was mostly destroyed, however, in the "Easter Offensive" of the Vietnam War in 1972, such that only the bullet-marked tower remains.



*Basilica of 1886, destroyed in 1972. Photo: Phong Nha Explorer*



*American GI's with Vietnamese children pass by the abandoned shrine. Photo: Phong Nha Explorer*

In 1998, Pope St. John Paul II sent the following words to Paul Joseph Cardinal Pham Dinh Tung of Hanoi, marking the 200th anniversary of the apparition:

"For two centuries [Our Lady's] message has been fervently welcomed in La Vang. Despite the great trials which have marked its history, it has now become a national Marian center. Many people, of all origins and conditions, come here to entrust their troubles and hopes to their Mother in heaven. Bishops, priests, religious, and lay people find in her the welcoming presence of the One [Jesus Christ] who gives them the courage to bear an admirable witness of Christian life in often difficult circumstances. I bless God who never abandons the people who seek him and who, with the motherly assistance of the Virgin Mary, continues to guide them. I hope that the faithful who come here to pray to Our Lady of La Vang ... will find a new apostolic impetus for their Christian life and receive comfort and strength to face life's trials."

Pope John Paul went on to express his desire that a large shrine be built at La Vang. That shrine now stands, funded by Vietnamese all around the world, with a church seating 5000 and welcoming five million pilgrims a year.



*La Vang pilgrims, with the ruins of the 1886 chapel behind them. Photo: Phong Nha Explorer*