

Our Lady of La Vang

Our Lady of La Vang is the central and national shrine of Vietnam, approximately 60 kilometers from the former capitol Huê. The name is derived from a type of fern which used to grow in great quantities in the region. During the great persecution (1798-1801) many Christians took refuge in the deep forest of La Vang, situated in proximity of Quang Tri, a village in central Vietnam, where they prepared themselves for martyrdom. 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.

After the persecution in 1802, the Christians left their jungle hiding place and returned to their villages. However, the story of the apparition and its message was passed on. In 1820 a chapel was built at the apparition site. From 1820-1885 still another wave of persecution decimated the Christian population. More than 100,000 Vietnamese Christians died as martyrs. 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 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.

