

## The Virgin Mary with an Asian Face

“Just as Our Lady of Fatima had saved Russia from communism in 1989, so too will she save Vietnam,” said a priest in his Sunday Vietnamese mass sermon at the 2011 Annual Marian Festival in Carthage, Missouri. On the altar next to him and facing toward more than 5000 thousand attendees were statues of Our Lady of Fatima in a white robe and Our Lady of Lavang<sup>1</sup> as a Vietnamese woman dressed in *áo dài*, a Vietnamese traditional costume. This was no ordinary Catholic event. The 3-day festival attracted more than 700,000 people. They were mostly Vietnamese Catholics who drove from the two coasts of the USA to this small town of approximately 15,000 residents. Many also flew in from other countries, including Vietnam, Canada, France, and Australia. They described themselves as the children of the Virgin Mary who have been dispersed throughout the world, isolated from each other, and recently reconnected through her. They had come together to pray for her blessings to heal the historical wounds that have dispersed their community throughout the world and placed their country of origin under communism.

Marianism has a strong and long history in Vietnam and overseas within the ethnic Vietnamese Catholic communities in the USA and Cambodia (Phan 2005). As I illustrate in this chapter, within the past approximately 10 years, Vietnamese Catholics in these countries have become reconnected to each other through a global circuit of Vietnamese Marianism. “home” where they can claim belonging. I argue that their shared experiences of racialization as ethnic minority Catholics are the

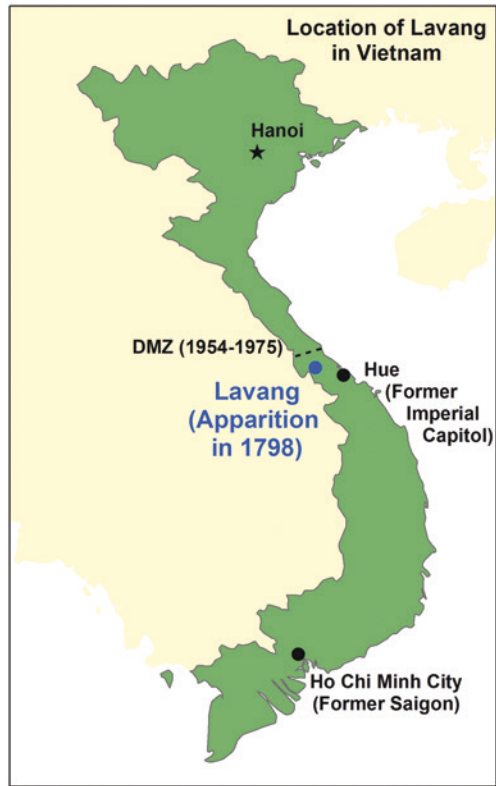
impetus for their transnational reconnections. They want to create a de-territorialized.

In the following section, the chapter provides the historical context of religious persecution in which the Virgin Mary appeared in Lavang, Vietnam (Our Lady of Lavang or *Đức Mẹ Lavang*), and was symbolized as a European woman. Next, the chapter illustrates that, within the context of multiculturalism in the USA and the Catholic Church, Vietnamese Catholics in the USA have visually re-imagined Our Lady of Lavang as a Vietnamese woman. This is an effort to preserve their distinctive form of Catholicism, one that is intermittently linked to their history of religious persecution and displacement from Vietnam. This image has been introduced into Vietnam and has become a global icon of Vietnamese Catholicism. However, as the following section reveals, this Vietnamese-looking Virgin Mary has not been transplanted into Cambodia due to anti-Vietnamese hostility in the country and “ethnic purification” efforts by the local church hierarchy. Instead, Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia have been worshiping a gray, oxidized cast-iron statue of the Virgin Mary (Our Lady of the Mekong River). She represents their unique history of religious erasure in Cambodia and has attracted sympathy from Vietnamese Catholics in the USA and other countries.

### OUR LADY OF LAVANG: HER APPARITION AND EUROPEAN IMAGE<sup>2</sup> (1798–1998)

According to an oral tradition, in 1798, the Virgin Mary appeared in a small village named Lavang, 60 km north of Hue, the former capital of Vietnam (Tran 2009, Fig. 2.1). She comforted several Vietnamese Catholics of the nearby Co Vuu parish had fled to the village to escape anti-Catholic persecutions under the order of King Canh Tinh (1792–1802). The king feared that Catholics would support one of his opponents, Nguyen Anh, who had received support from the French to re-establish his dynasty. One evening, while Vietnamese Catholics were praying, the Lady appeared under a banyan tree with the baby Jesus in her arms and two saints standing on her sides. She comforted them and said, “My children, have faith and be brave. I have heard your prayers. From now on, I will grant the wishes of all who come to me” (Tran 2009). The Lady appeared again several more times until Nguyen Anh’s

**Fig. 2.1** The location of Lavang, Vietnam



reign (1802–1820), which allowed Catholics to freely practice their religion and built the first chapel for Our Lady of Lavang on the land where she appeared.

The chapel gradually became popular as a sacred land and drew visits from Catholics and non-Catholics alike in large number. However, it was abolished under King Minh Mang's (1820–1840) anti-Catholic rule. Thereafter, according to one popular oral account, Buddhists built a pagoda with the statue of Buddha on the land where Our Lady of Lavang had appeared (Phan 2005). One evening, three local Buddhist leaders dreamt that Buddha requested them to replace his statue with one of the Lady. On the following day, they had the same dream. Soon after, they donated the pagoda to local Catholics.

The second chapel for Our Lady of Lavang was converted from the pagoda and lasted until 1885, when it was burned down by anti-Catholics (Tran 2009). Afterward, during the same year, Catholics built the third chapel on a nearby ground. As the political climate became more peaceful by 1886, Bishop Louis Casper led the construction of the first church for the Lady of La Vang on the site where she had appeared. The project was completed in 1901 on the occasion of the first annual Lavang Convention that concurred with the Feast of the Assumption. At this historic event, Bishop Casper placed a French-modeled statue of Our Lady of Victories (*Notre-Dame des Victoires*) in the new church (Phan 2005, Fig. 2.2). For nearly than a century, this statue of a Western-looking



**Fig. 2.2** Before her re-visualization as a Vietnamese woman in 1998, Our Lady of Lavang was represented as a European woman, modeled after Our Lady of Victories (Lavang, Vietnam)

Mary was associated with Our Lady of Lavang. Since then, approximately every 3–4 years, Catholics throughout Vietnam re-congregated at the chapel for the Lavang conventions.<sup>3</sup> In 1928, a larger chapel was built to accommodate the growing larger number of visitors (Tran 2009).

Although she gradually grew in popularity, Our Lady of Lavang was not as widely known among Vietnamese Catholics as Vatican-endorsed Marian figures such as Our Lady of Fatima and Our Lady of Lourdes until 1954 (Hansen 2009). This was when communist North and anti-communist South Vietnam were divided at the 17th parallel, about twelve miles north of the Our Lady of Lavang sanctuary. As more than 50% of the Catholic population in the north fled to the south, many of them migrated by foot to escape communist surveillance. Among these individuals, a few resettled in the Lavang area between 1954 and 1956 (De Jaegher 1962, 8). They rebuilt their religious communities and often renamed them after Our Lady of Lavang.

Moreover, Vietnamese Catholics' devotion to Our Lady of Lavang was further bolstered by the re-invigorated Marianism within the global Catholic Church. The Holy Father had declared 1954 as a Marian Year, the first of its kind in the history of the Church. He encouraged the faithful throughout the world integrate Marian initiatives into their religious and social life. In 1958, four years later, the Catholic Church celebrated the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes to commemorate the centenary of Our Lady's apparitions. Although their country was still in a civil war and in chaos, most Vietnamese Catholics in southern Vietnam were able to participate in the Marian spirit because of the Catholic-friendly Diem regime. As a result, by the end of the Feast in February 1959, Vietnamese Catholics organized the historic National Marian Congress in Saigon that was visited by a cardinal representative from the Vatican.

Six months after the Congress, Our Lady of Lavang pilgrimage center was consecrated as a national shrine (Tran 2009).<sup>4</sup> As the first Vietnamese institution to hold such a rank in one of the most heavily bombed areas of Vietnam, Our Lady of Lavang was further solidified as a source of comfort, solace, and resilience for Vietnamese Catholics who had become refugees in their own country. As published by a Our Lady of Lavang English-language booklet, an entry highlights this significance with reference to an oil painting hung at the Our Lady of Lavang church: "The Virgin Mary is holding the child Jesus clad in a light yellow robe, on a dark background depicting the forests. *The Vietnamese refugees*—already existing—encircle them on their knees" (No Name 1961: 34). Furthermore, she was a symbol of unity among Vietnamese

Catholics caught in a violent civil war involving the Americans. As published in the same pamphlet, the Our Lady of Lavang church is “the expression of the fervor of two million Catholics—proclaims to the sky the desire for national reunification” (28).

Within the context of a civil war, Vietnamese Catholics’ claim for unity through Our Lady of Lavang was gradually aligned with the latter. As Nguyen (2010) has claimed, under the Catholic-controlled regime of the Republic of South Vietnam, Our Lady of Lavang sanctuary was “(turned) into an outpost against communism” (64). At the 1961 grand celebration, Vietnamese Catholics directly linked Our Lady of Lavang to Our Lady of Peace (*Nữ Vương Hòa Bình*). A photograph shows that there was a large “Our Lady of Peace” sign on the main stage at the event (No Name 1961: 12). This was the same title that the Vatican gave to Our Lady of Fatima in 1952, calling her to protect Russia from communism.

The title also alluded to the French-made granite statue of Our Lady of Peace statue centrally located in Saigon (Ngoc 2005). The statue had an engraving of “Queen of Peace, Pray for Us” (Elegant 1970) to pray for the end to the war in Vietnam. It was first displayed to the public upon the 1959 National Marian Congress in Saigon.<sup>5</sup> At the event, Vietnamese Catholics first recited the “Prayer to the Holy Mother to Ask for Peace in Vietnam” (*Kính xin Đức Mẹ cho Việt Nam được hòa bình*) that soon became very popular.<sup>6</sup> Among the attendees at the ceremony included the Catholic President of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, and Cardinal Agagiania, a representative from the Vatican (Ngoc 2005).

From Our Lady of Lavang to Our Lady of Peace and Our Lady of Fatima, Vietnamese Catholics stood side by side with co-religionists around the world and the Catholic Church against communism. As the war was being fought in their country, they became the crucible of the Church’s testament of faith. Consequentially, in 1961, the Vatican established the dioceses in Vietnam and Our Lady of Lavang church became the home of the Archdiocese of Hue. During the following year, it was consecrated as a minor basilica (Tran 2009). Our Lady of Lavang church became the most important and highest-ranking church in Vietnam.

Partially because of its association with anti-communism in an area close to communist-controlled North Vietnam, Our Lady of Lavang center became a prime target of violent aggressions as the war escalated during the 1970s. The “Red Summer Battles” (*Chiến Thắng Mùa Hè Đỏ*) of 1972 nearly destroyed the sanctuary and killed many Vietnamese

Catholics in the area while forcing others to flee (Tran 2009). The only church structures that survived were statues of three banyan trees that were part of the Our Lady of Lavang shrine. This immediately halted the important annual tradition of the Lavang Convention that concurred with the Feast of Assumption.

After South Vietnam fell into the hands of communists in 1975, Vietnamese Catholics continued to worship Our Lady of Lavang with another smaller replacement statue of Our Lady of Victories (Tran 2009). However, their religious practices were also severely restricted under the Vietnamese communist government. In 1978, they resumed the Lavang Convention tradition but on a very small and local scale. There were approximately 10,000 attendees who were mostly from the Hue and Quang Tri areas, in comparison with the 300,000 visitors who represented different regions of Vietnam and Cambodia in 1961 (Tran 2009).

During the 1990s, Vietnam became more tolerant toward religions in order to liberalize its economy. Vietnamese Catholics were able to slowly rebuild the pilgrimage center and the number of pilgrims continued to grow (Tran 2009). In the Jubilee Year closure mass in 2011, there were more than half a million who attended the event (Union of Catholic Asian News 2011). These collective acts of reconstruction and religious practices not only commemorated their history of suffering and separation. They also spoke volumes about Vietnamese Catholics' resilient faith under continuing harsh treatment from the new communist-led government and isolation from the Catholic Church outside of Vietnam since 1975.

Vietnamese Catholics' sustained strength through Our Lady of Lavang has attracted people worldwide to seek blessings at her pilgrimage center. According to a local Vietnamese priest in central Vietnam, Our Lady of Lavang sanctuary will become as popular as famous Marian sites in Europe, especially the ones for Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of Fatima. Recently, the Vietnamese government has been turned on its heels in order to capitalize on the popularity of the pilgrimage center. In 2008, it returned a plot to the church and initiated plans to build an airport nearby.<sup>7</sup> These are investments toward the building of a tourist center that could lure in local and overseas money. The government has already accomplished this goal at other mother goddess devotional centers throughout Vietnam, including the Hon Chen pagoda in Hue that attracted thousands of tourists over the course of its one-week summer pilgrimage festival.

Vietnamese Catholics' relationships with Our Lady of Lavang have manifested distinctive Vietnamese characteristics through processes of localization and transformations. Indeed, Marian devotion and piety in Vietnam partially owe their roots to Portuguese, Spanish, and French influences of Catholicism introduced to Vietnam by European missionaries (Phan 2005). However, Vietnam's conditions of religious persecutions, continuing political conflicts, and poverty under which the Virgin Mary emerged have reconstituted her into a uniquely Vietnamese religious icon. Our Lady of Lavang has become a symbol of mercy, divine power, and guide for navigating through religious diversity for Catholics in Vietnam. These culturally grounded meanings were further localized when the church in northern Vietnam became isolated from the rest of the world beginning in 1954 (when communists took control of the area) and then in 1975 (when communists took control of the rest of the country). Although the communist government of Vietnam loosened restrictions toward religious practices beginning in the late 1990s as it opens up the country's border to economic globalization, the Vietnamese Catholic community in Vietnam had already developed its own distinctive relations with the faith, tangentially to the Vatican II transformations that fundamentally re-interpreted Catholic practices and beliefs in many parts of the world since the 1960s.

### EUROPEAN-LOOKING OUR LADY OF LAVANG BECAME VIETNAMESE IN THE USA

This section examines the "Vietnamization" of the image of Our Lady of Lavang by Vietnamese Catholics in the USA and how it has become a global icon of Vietnamese Catholicism. During decades of geographical isolation and separation from their homeland following their exodus to the USA since 1975, Vietnamese American Catholics have prayed to the Virgin Mary for hope, forgiveness, and solace to reconcile with their displacement. They re-imagined her as a Vietnamese woman and, after Vietnam normalized relations with the USA in 1995, influenced the remodeling of the European-looking statue of Our Lady of Lavang. Since the statue of Our Lady of Lavang in Vietnam represented a Vietnamese woman in 1998, it became synonymous with Vietnamese Catholicism.



*From Exodus to Resettlement: Marianism Transplanted (1975–1984)*

As they struggled to rebuild their lives in the USA, Vietnamese Catholics continued to pray to and venerate the Virgin Mary and, arguably, did so more fervently because of their traumatic experiences of coerced displacement and difficulty integrating into the USA as refugees (Dorais 2007). For example, as a reflection of his devotion, famous Vietnamese Catholic sculptor Nhan Van immediately created a statue of the Virgin Mary looking like a Vietnamese woman upon his arrival in the USA in the early 1980s.<sup>8</sup> This was the first statue of its kind. He did not give the statue a special name although it did later serve as a model for him to create the Vietnamese-looking statues of Our Lady of Vietnam and Our Lady of Lavang. The sculptor simply wanted to thank the Virgin Mary for protecting him during his boat escape. Like him, other Vietnamese Catholics most likely also worshiped the Virgin Mary, but did not have devotion specifically to Our Lady of Lavang. Historical evidence has revealed that Vietnamese Catholics focused primarily on Our Lady of Fatima in their yearning for the homeland. The popularity of Our Lady of Fatima—possibly more than Our Lady of Lavang—immediately after Vietnamese refugees arrived in the USA may be because of her official Vatican recognition and therefore greater universal appeal.

As Nhan Van exemplifies, since the early years of their arrival in the USA, Vietnamese Catholics concentrated on homeland orientation and anti-communism in their Marianism. In 1976, only a year after the beginning of their population influx, they came together to pray for the freedom of Vietnam from communism after Our Lady of Fatima appeared in Saigon although the Vatican did not verify the appearance (Tran 1994: 299–323). During the same year in August, they celebrated the Feast of the Assumption with Bishop William Johnson, the first bishop of Orange, at Saint Barbara's Church in Santa Ana. In addition to being a holy day of obligation, the celebration was an important tradition that had become popularized in Vietnam through devotion to Our Lady of Lavang.

In 1978, more than 15,000 Vietnamese Catholics across the USA attended the largest Feast of Assumption celebration in the isolated town of Carthage, Missouri during the desert-heat month of August (Phan 2005: 457–472). The pilgrimage event became popularly known as “Marian Day,” attracting mostly Vietnamese throughout the USA and Catholics and non-Catholics alike for several days of prayers. In

addition to a statue of Our Lady of Fatima, attendees also worshiped a statue of Our Lady of Peace (*Đức Mẹ Nữ Vương Hòa Bình*). She was adopted as the patroness of the Vietnam-founded religious order that organized the event, the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix.<sup>9</sup> As I have noted earlier, the Our Lady of Peace title was also associated with Our Lady of Lavang and the Virgin Mary statue Saigon. For several times during the multi-day festival, Vietnamese Catholics also recited the “Holy Mother Bring Peace to Vietnam Prayer” (*Kính xin Đức Mẹ cho Việt Nam được hòa bình*), which was imported from South Vietnam. Thus, in many ways through the Feast of Assumption celebration in local churches in Orange County and at the national Marian Day festival, Vietnamese Catholics in the USA continued—and, arguably, intensified—the struggles against communism that began in South Vietnam.

### *Community Centralization*

The shared transplanted Marianism reminded them of the significance of depending on each other in order to preserve their memory, history, and culture while navigating through adaptation in the new land. As illustrated in a steering committee reported submitted to the bishop of Orange in 2010: “As in many other societies, religion and culture are tightly intertwined...thus, the (Vietnamese Catholic Center) should not be viewed as just a ‘cultural’ center; the weekend Vietnamese classes at the parishes ought not to be viewed as just ‘language’ classes...there is a strong desire of the young Vietnamese Americans to explore the value and beauty of Vietnamese culture and heritage” (Vietnamese Catholic Center Steering Committee 2010: 5). Because of the integral and intertwining role of religion in all aspects of life, Vietnamese Catholics placed a strong focus on re-institutionalizing their religious communities in order to adapt to their new home.

Centralization had been central to their religious identity and vital to their survival throughout periods of trials and tribulations in history. By the nineteenth century, Vietnamese Catholics had already established a system *chrétienté* or *họ đường* (Keith 2012; Hanson 1978). These were tight-knit religious communities in remote areas in which members protected each other from religious persecutions and non-Catholics. They often named their communities after a saint in order to call on him or her for protection. They honored the saint by giving his or her name to most (if not all) boys and girls, depending on the saint’s gender, upon their baptism.<sup>10</sup> The cultural and religious life within a Catholic village

was perpetuated through family generations as children and grandchildren usually end up marrying within the religion.

When they had to flee communism in North Vietnam in 1954, Vietnamese Catholics were able to rely on their religious communities to facilitate their exodus. They usually followed the lead of a religious leader, especially a priest. In refugee camps, they re-concentrated in enclaves to help each other. As they resettled to life in the new area, many of them rebuilt their community structures as they were in the north.

Historical antidotes have revealed that this pattern of community centralization also occurred when a large number of Vietnamese Catholics fled to the USA after 1975. Priests and religious professionals were central in reviving religious activities on boats, including masses and sacraments. Among the first wave of refugees, there were approximately 200 priests and 250 sisters who accompanied their followers on boats. As in their homeland, they established pastoral committees with assigned roles and responsibilities. The re-institutionalization also expanded to the collectivization of instrumental living activities such as cooking, cleaning, and schooling in refugee camps (Tran 1994: 304).

When Vietnamese Catholics transitioned to their new home in Orange County, they immediately organized themselves as a community. In 1976, there was already a formative community with a structure of leadership at St. Barbara parish in Santa Ana. A year later, Vietnamese Catholics began publishing the Hiep-Thong (*Hiệp Thông*) Weekly Bulletin that printed news about religious and community life (Vietnamese Catholic Center 2013). By 1978, they had already formed four distinctive communities informally named after the city of residence or the name of their parish: Anaheim, Costa Mesa, Huntington Beach, and St. Barbara. As in Vietnam, these communities also adopted a patroness who they were formally named after, such as the Community of Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Anaheim (*Cộng Đoàn Đức Mẹ Mông Triệu*) and the Community of St. Joseph at St. Barbara Parish (*Cộng Đoàn Thánh Giuse*). Each community had a pastoral committee; a laity organization consisted of between three to five members who were representatives and leaders of their respective group (Vietnamese Catholic Center 2013). These four original Vietnamese Catholic communities probably had several hundred—if not thousand—members. Their population influx was one of the main reasons why the Diocese of Orange was established and became separated from the Diocese of Los

Angeles on March 30, 1976 (Krekelberg and Glacomi 2007). Although employment opportunities and favorable climate may also be motivating factors, as scholars have argued (Zhou and Bankson 1998), the institutional strength of the Vietnamese Catholic community consequentially attracted more ethnic co-religionists to Orange County. The area gradually became home to the largest number of Vietnamese Catholics outside of Vietnam.

The four original Vietnamese Catholic communities became the foundation for further centralization and expansion in Orange County. In June 1978, their leaders voted to form an umbrella leadership council, the Pastoral Committee of Vietnamese Catholics in Orange County (*Ban Thường Vụ*). In July 1978, this group, along with representative leaders of different ministries and religious associations, formed the Executive Council of the Vietnamese Catholic Community (*Ban Chấp Hành Cộng Đồng Công Giáo Việt Nam*). The Executive Council worked under the leadership of the Committee of Vietnamese Priests. The priest who served as the president of this committee represented all Vietnamese Catholics within the diocese. The formation of this structure also created the “Vietnamese Catholic Center” as the place of administrative meetings. It was housed at the primary residence of priest members in the Committee of Vietnamese Priests.<sup>11</sup>

### *Racialized Multiculturalism*

However, the Diocese of Orange’s policy of multiculturalism has restricted Vietnamese Catholics’ community-building efforts. In 1976, in response to the large arrival of Vietnamese Catholic refugees, the US Catholic Church publically announced that it embraces assimilation in the form of respecting the “mosaic” makeup of different communities (Tran 2004:307). However, this was interpreted variably at the local diocese level.

While other dioceses had permitted smaller Vietnamese Catholic communities to establish their own national parishes during the 1980s,<sup>12</sup> the Diocese of Orange did not give such approval to its Vietnamese Catholics. This disappointed many of them. Although Vietnamese Catholics could be served by any Vietnamese priest regardless of their city of residence and parish affiliation, according to the diocese’s approval in 1978 (Vietnamese Catholic Center 2013), the lack of a shared national parish further hindered their ability to freely come together and pool in resources across congregations. Many also did not understand why, on the other hand, the diocese had permitted the Polish

and Korean Catholic communities to build their own national parishes during the 1980s (Krekelberg and Giacomi 2007).<sup>13</sup> Despite their much larger number and significant representation among the religious vocations,<sup>14</sup> Vietnamese Catholics were prohibited by the diocese from constructing their own religious institution.

In 1983, in alignment with the diocese's multicultural platform, Vietnamese Catholics were granted permission to establish a new Vietnamese Catholic Center to showcase the Catholic Church's ethnic diversity (Fig. 2.3). The center replaced the old one housed at the primary residence of a number of Vietnamese priests. Its primary purpose was to facilitate social functions and community services, such as serving as the meeting site for different religious associations. The bishop of

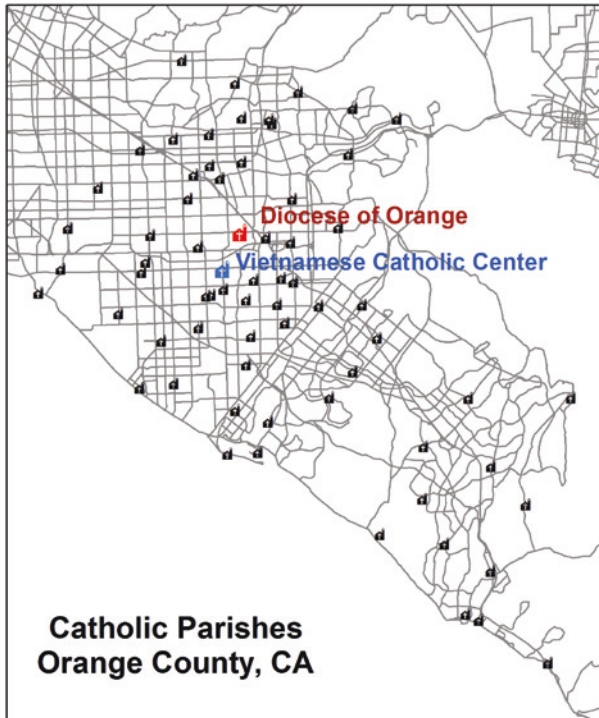


Fig. 2.3 Locations of the Vietnamese Catholic Center and the Diocese of Orange and its parishes (Orange County, CA)

the Diocese of Orange prohibited Vietnamese Catholics from using the center to hold masses, sacraments, and other religious services other than prayers. These religious activities generated the most financial contributions. Without these sources of incomes, the Vietnamese Catholic Center had to depend mostly on individual donations or payments received from non-religious programs, such as English-as-a-Second-Language classes and tutoring services.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese Catholics had to continue to be affiliated with local parishes, which were usually led by non-Vietnamese pastors although Vietnamese Americans were significantly overrepresented among the religious vocations.<sup>15</sup> As members, they were obligated to cover the expenses of their affiliated parishes. These responsibilities created resentments among Vietnamese American Catholics. They saw the diocese as using them for financial benefits while restricting them from realizing the full promises of multiculturalism through the establishment of a national parish. As in Vietnam, Vietnamese American Catholics viewed the church primarily as a social institution, which “exaggerates the role of visible and canonical structure and the importance of the hierarchy” (Phan 2003: 162). Moreover, because they stood “between a more conservative Tridentine Catholicism and a more progressive Vatican II Catholicism” (Phan 2000: 22), Vietnamese American Catholics valued religious rituals and population devotions, including Marianism and pilgrimages, much more than community service programs. A part of this was due to the fact that, within the contexts of war and religious suppression, their Church in Vietnam was isolated from the Vatican II transformations that swept across other parts of the world. Thus, although the construction of the cultural center was a significant stepping stone for them, it was not as important as having their own national parish.

Prompted by these experiences of structural marginalization within the church hierarchy and institution, Vietnamese Catholics began to mobilize outside of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy. In 1980, Vietnamese American Catholics established the Federation of Vietnamese Catholics in the USA (Phan 2000: 19–35). The organization expanded the Community of Vietnamese Clergy and Religious in the USA founded in 1976 to include the laity. At its second biannual meeting in 1984, fifteen thousand Vietnamese Catholics from thirty states congregated in New Orleans (Tran 2009). This grassroots organizing created networks among Vietnamese Americans dispersed throughout the USA and

mobilized their representation within the Catholic Church.<sup>16</sup> It occurred more than a decade before the Vatican and the USA. church systemically created a mechanism to outreach to Vietnamese Catholics, when the former established the Center of Pastoral Apostolate for Overseas Vietnamese in 1988 and the latter followed with its US counterpart in 1989.

Within these contexts of multiculturalism, structural inequality within the local ecclesiastical hierarchy, and grassroots organizing, Our Lady of Lavang emerged as a unique cultural representation of the collectivity by the early 1980s. She was not commonly known outside of Vietnam and her lack of recognition from the Vatican had restricted her popularity to Vietnamese Catholics. However, it is precisely because of these particular associations with Vietnam and Vietnamese identity that Our Lady of Lavang has become a symbolic ethnic marker for Vietnamese Catholics to distinguish themselves from other Catholics on US soil. As early as 1982, Vietnamese Catholics began using her name to label their ethnic-based religious organizations (e.g., “Our Lady of Lavang Association” and “Our Lady of Lavang Prayer Group”) (Dinh 1995). Within the next decade, the representation of Our Lady of Lavang for Vietnamese ethnicity had achieved full momentum, reaching beyond local recognition and toward international acceptance, with significant implications for how Vietnamese Catholics have been able to advance and experience reconciliation on multiple levels.

### *Our Lady of Vietnam: Ethnic Identity and Homeland Ties (1985–1994)*

Beginning in 1985, 3 years after Vietnam liberalized its economy with *Đổi Mới* (Renovation), Vietnamese Catholics in the USA used their organizational prowess to globalize the status of Our Lady of Lavang. In November 1985, upon the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Vietnamese Bishops’ Conference, Cardinal Trinh Van Can submitted a letter to Pope John Paul II requesting him to canonize 117 Vietnamese martyrs (Nguyen and Chau 2011). As the president of the Vietnamese Bishops’ Conference, he signed the letter representing all his bishop brothers. The Holy Father was probably touched by the request. In 1984, he had given a radio address expressing his sorrow that he could not visit the faithful in Vietnam during his recent trip to several Asian countries (Pope John Paul II 1984). Vietnamese Catholics in the USA quickly received news about the petition and, like many other



Catholics worldwide, poured in their letters and petitions of support to the Vatican. For the first time in a decade, they were symbolically reconnected to co-religionists in the homeland.

During the Marian Year of 1987, as the case for canonization underwent investigation, Pope John Paul II formed the Coordinating Office of the Apostolate for the Vietnamese in the Diaspora (*Văn Phòng Phối Kết Tổng Đồ Mục Vụ Việt Nam Hải Ngoại*) to create an institutional bridge between the Vatican and the overseas Vietnamese community.<sup>17</sup> The first director of the center was Monsignor Philippe Tran Van Hoai, a staunch anti-communist priest with a long history of working with Vietnamese refugees throughout the world.<sup>18</sup> In the spirit of the Marian Year as the Church prepared for the turn of the millennium, Monsignor Tran undoubtedly informed the Holy Father about the 200th year of commemoration of Our Lady of Lavang's apparition in 1998. Born and raised in central Vietnam not far from the Our Lady of Lavang sanctuary, Monsignor Tran had close historic and personal ties to Our Lady of Lavang. In 1959, he became the first priest to be ordained at Our Lady of Lavang church. His ceremony occurred during the same year that the pilgrimage center was consecrated as a national shrine and became the most important Catholic religious center in Vietnam.

As a result of influences from Monsignor Tran and the Center of Pastoral Apostolate for Overseas Vietnamese, Pope John Paul II publicly discussed the significance of Our Lady of Lavang with Vietnamese Catholics on June 19, 1988 (Tran 2009). This was the first time in history that the Pope had emphasized Our Lady of Lavang. The meeting occurred immediately after the ceremony of canonization for the 117 Vietnamese martyrs in Rome. By the early 1990s, Pope John Paul II referred to Our Lady of Lavang much more frequently in public addresses in anticipation of the celebration (Tran 1994: 299–323). One of his most popular presentations of Our Lady of Lavang was at World Youth Day in 1993 in Denver, which was attended by many Vietnamese American Catholics. In his address, he commended “the whole *Vietnamese Catholic community* to the intercession of Our Lady of La-Vang” and encouraged them to prepare for the bicentennial commemoration of Our Lady of Lavang's apparition in 1998 (Pope John Paul II 1993). He also blessed them for “*an even brighter future for the new generations of Vietnamese*” (ibid). He said, “May they grow up with healthy pride in their national origin, the riches of their culture, the spiritual greatness of their forebears who stood firm in the face of trials of all kinds” (ibid).



As I have illustrated earlier, Vietnamese American Catholics have had a long history of linking Our Lady of Lavang to martyrdom in the contexts of religious persecution, violence, and war. However, their faith was most definitely re-invigorated when the Pope recognized their unique form of Marianism in the global stage. Such an affirmation further mediated relations among Vietnamese Catholics dispersed throughout the world. In a magazine published in 1995, when Vietnam–USA just became normalized, a Vietnamese American urges his ethnic co-religionists to make efforts to visit the Our Lady of Lavang pilgrimage center in Vietnam. He writes,

Each overseas Vietnamese Catholic has to save only a little money, give up one meal, or sacrifice one less fun occasion, in order to save enough money ...to visit the (Our Lady of Lavang) pilgrimage center, which is very beautiful...I know that Mother does not need money, does not need a beautiful house. Mother only wants her children (Vu 1995: 30).

Within the context of her growing global popularity and validation by the Vatican, Our Lady of Lavang became an important bridge for Vietnamese American Catholics to reconnect to their homeland. She is not only their spiritual mother but also the mother of their homeland, as another Vietnamese American Catholic writes in the same publication: “Our Lady of Lavang, the mother of my homeland and my own mother” (40). These ties were further intensified as they approached the 200-year commemoration of Our Lady of Lavang’s apparition. In a magazine published in 1996, a Vietnamese American Catholic writes,

Now [in preparation for the 200 year anniversary] is the time for overseas Vietnamese Catholics to be spiritually united and connected with the Catholic Church in the homeland. This is our affirmation that, despite being far away from the homeland, we will never forget our spirituality as a Vietnamese faithful and a citizen of a country and a peoplehood (Bui 1995: 14).

In an email exchange, the former and last president of the Center of Pastoral Apostolate for Overseas Vietnamese further affirmed that “Our Lady of Lavang...symbolizes Vietnamese Catholics in Vietnam’s connections to co-religionists abroad and the Catholic Church of Vietnam.” This transnational mediation through the Virgin Mary has also been

observed by other studies of immigrants in the USA (Tweed 1997; Horsfall 2000; Duricy 2008).

In response to Our Lady of Lavang's growing global popularity following the canonization of Martyrs of Vietnam, Vietnamese American Catholics in Orange County was inspired to re-imagine the Virgin Mary in their ethnic image. In 1994, they created a statue of "Our Lady of Vietnam" (Fig. 2.4) and placed it at entrance to the Vietnamese Catholic Center (1998) and referred to her as "Our Lady of Vietnam." The bishop of Orange Diocese permitted this project as it fitted very well within the church's promotion of multiculturalism. A Vietnamese Virgin Mary would expand upon the collection of "ethnic" religious figures already present at various Catholic sites in Orange County, including Our Lady of Guadalupe, Korean-looking St. Thomas, and Our Lady of Czestochowa from Poland.

Our Lady of Vietnam is a white statue, which was sculpted by Vietnamese American Catholic Van Nhan. The statue represents the Virgin Mary dressed in Vietnamese traditional clothes (*áo dài*) and her head adorned by a traditional rounded headdress. She holds a miniature statue of Jesus in front of her, "as if she wants to hand her most beloved child to Vietnamese people in order to save them and their race" (Vietnamese Catholic Center 1998: 17). Her statue aims to bring "peace and tranquility" to Vietnamese faithful who are adapting to life in a new country (*ibid*).

At the same time, Our Lady of Vietnam emphasizes Vietnamese American Catholics' lingering connections and ethical responsibilities to co-religionists in Vietnam. She stands on a grotto in the shape of an S that represents Vietnam and its mountainous ridges. According to a publication by the Vietnamese Catholic Center, this representation of the Virgin Mary "guides the spirit of Vietnamese people to return to their homeland roots" and to pray for their co-religionists who are suffering from communism (Vietnamese Catholic Center 1998: 17). This is why they also referred to her as "Our Lady of Peace." The title is associated with other forms of the Virgin Mary worshiped among Vietnamese Catholics, particularly the statue of the Virgin Mary at Marian Day's home site in Carthage, Missouri, and the one in the center of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Vietnamese Catholics have also placed vivid symbols of martyrdom around the statue of Our Lady of Vietnam. On a nearby wall, there are brass-painted panels depicting eight methods of torture that Martyrs of Vietnam endured (e.g., beheading, head-restraining yoke around the



**Fig. 2.4** Our Lady of Vietnam, the first Vietnamese representation of the Virgin Mary, was created in 1994 (Santa Ana, California)

neck, trampling by elephants, and suffocating by ropes). Sculptor Van Nhan had created these works. In a 1998 booklet about the Vietnamese Catholic Center, the reliefs are highlighted: “A special feature of these reliefs is that the faces of martyrs are peaceful and serene, bearing no grudge against their tormentors. The tormentors themselves also show no anger nor vengeance as they only carried out the order of their

superiors” (Vietnamese Catholic Center 1998: 20–21). Moreover, the main chapel at the Vietnamese Catholic Center is dedicated after the Vietnamese martyrs. On the center main stage, there is a large painting of Vietnamese martyrs being received by Jesus. The publication further explains: “The Church in Vietnam has a long history of persecution. Thousands and thousands of people have shed their blood as witnesses to Christ.” In a Vietnamese section, the pamphlet continues: “To commemorate the Vietnamese martyrs and yet forget their sacrifices is a deep loss to our veneration of them” (19).

These representations clearly show that, despite decades of isolation from Vietnam, Vietnamese American Catholics have not waned their ties to the homeland. Instead, they have intensified these relations through devotion to the Virgin Mary. Vietnamese Catholic youths, many of whom were born in the USA, have shown signs that they will inherit and perpetuate this homeland orientation in their faith. They have been involved in youth programs that often evoke their background as refugees with a biblical mission, as evidenced by the themes “Promised-Land I” and “Promised-Land II” for their summer camps (Eucharist Youth Society 2013).

*Our Lady of Lavang: From a European Symbol to a Global Icon  
of Vietnamese Catholicism (1995–Present)*

After Vietnam re-established diplomatic ties with the USA in 1995, its economic integration and globalization had created more channels for Vietnamese American Catholics to reconnect to co-religionists in their homeland. For example, they could easily send remittances and fly directly to Vietnam on a US carrier. Meanwhile, the government of Vietnam was also loosening strictures toward religious practices as part of its agenda to create friendlier economic ties with Western countries (Bouquet 2010: 90–108). It formally recognized Catholicism as the second-largest religious group in Vietnam (Vietnamese Committee for Religious Affairs 2006).

Within the context of economic globalization and religious tolerance in Vietnam, a delegation of Vietnamese priests was able to visit their ethnic co-religionists in Orange County during the mid-1990s. Nhan Van, the sculptor of Our Lady of Vietnam, volunteered to guide them.<sup>19</sup> Since the 1970s, he had been very involved in the Orange County Vietnamese Catholic community. In 1978, he as was representative leader for

Vietnamese Catholics in Orange County while they were trying to form a multi-parish umbrella leadership organization (Vietnamese Catholic Center 2013).

During the tour, Mr. Van showed the Vietnamese priests statues of Our Lady of Vietnam and his original statue of a Vietnamese-looking Virgin Mary at his home. They were impressed and delighted by his works. This news reached the ears of the bishop of the Hue Archdiocese. He was preparing for the 200th commemoration of the apparition of Our Lady of Lavang in 1998. It was an important event not just for Catholics in Vietnam but also around the world. Between 1996 and 1998, he had received many letters of blessings from Pope John Paul II in reference to the upcoming historic ceremony (Tran 1994: 299–323).

Consequently, the bishop of Hue Diocese and other church leaders in Vietnam decided to invite Van Nhan to create a Vietnamese statue of Our Lady of Lavang (Fig. 2.5).<sup>20</sup> Like the image of Our Lady of Vietnam, the new representation of Our Lady of Lavang depicts the Virgin Mary dressed in white Vietnamese traditional clothes (*áo dài*) and wearing a golden headdress. Like Our Lady of Vietnam, she also holds a statue of baby Jesus. However, it arguably portrays Vietnamese traditions much more poignantly than the former because of its added colors. Certainly, the blue cloak that is on top of Our Lady of Lavang's white *áo dài* alludes to the conventional representation of the Virgin Mary. However, because the cloak is a Vietnamese traditional dress reserved for special Vietnamese occasions, such as weddings, the new image highlights important references to Vietnamese culture.

On July 1, 1998, this statue received blessings by Pope John II in Rome (Tran 2009). At this celebrated event, the Holy Father also proclaimed Our Lady of Lavang as the patroness of the Catholic Church of Vietnam. Although this religious honor did not officially recognize the historical accuracy of the apparition of Our Lady of Lavang in 1798, it was a source of inspiration for Vietnamese Catholics throughout the world. For the first time in history, a Vietnamese icon of the Catholic faith was officially introduced to the global Catholic community. On August 13, 1998, two hundred years after her apparition, more than 200,000 attendees gathered in Lavang to worship Our Lady of Lavang in the representation of a Vietnamese woman.<sup>21</sup>

Since the 1990s, Vietnamese Catholics throughout the world have increasingly integrated Our Lady of Lavang into their religious practices.



**Fig. 2.5** Since 1998, Our Lady of Lavang has been re-visualized as a Vietnamese woman (Santa Ana, CA)

However, there has never been large-scale mass production of Mr. Nhan Van's patented original model, as Kendall (2013) has observed with statues of Catholic saints in northern Vietnam. Instead, there have been various reinterpretations and negotiated visual art forms of Our Lady of Lavang, each with its own special meanings and expresses connections within the global Vietnamese Catholic community despite local diversities and differences. For example, upon the occasion of Marian Day in 1999, a year after the Vatican publically recognizes the Vietnamese





Fig. 2.6 Our Lady of Lavang Congress in 2010 (Lavang, Vietnam)

portrayal of Our Lady of Lavang, the site of the festival displayed a large painting of Vietnamese martyrs with Our Lady of Lavang and baby Jesus in the center by artist Vivi (Dongcong.net 2013). Previously, these types of portrayals did not illustrate Our Lady of Lavang but a middle-aged figure of Jesus as the central figure. Vivi's painting has inspired other works throughout the world to similarly replace Jesus with Our Lady of Lavang.

In 2010, the main statue of Our Lady of Lavang at her pilgrimage center in Vietnam was replaced. Instead of highlighting her distinctive blue, gold, and white Vietnamese dress, the new statue is in more subdued colors: light green, light gold, and white. According to a local priest, the colors of the new statue emphasize Our Lady of Lavang's purity and simplicity (Fig. 2.6).

In addition to her distinctively Vietnamese attire, the Vietnamese depiction of Our Lady of Lavang's symbolizes the Vietnamese global diaspora with the twelve stars that decorate her headdress. Although these twelve stars have been argued as allusions to the original twelve followers (apostles) of Jesus, Vietnamese Catholics in Vietnam and

abroad have re-interpreted them as the guiding stars of the Big Dipper (seven stars) and the Small Dipper (seven stars) that Vietnamese boat refugees used to guide themselves to their new homes. In the National Shrine of Our Lady of Lavang in Washington, D.C., which was completed in 2005, the stars are decorated throughout the sanctuary as sacred reminders of the Vietnamese global dispersion (Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception 2013).

However, despite differences, changes, and isolation from each other, Vietnamese Catholics around the world have mediated reconnection and a sense of collectivity through Our Lady of Lavang. Today, statues of Our Lady of Lavang have become a popular diplomatic gift from a Vietnamese Catholic community to another in a different country, as I have observed in Taiwan and Japan. In 2002, Pope John Paul II blessed six statues of Our Lady of Lavang in Rome (Coordinating Office of the Apostolate for the Vietnamese in the Diaspora 2002). He gave the statues to Vietnamese American Catholics in Orange County, who were responsible for distributing them to respective representatives of different continents. In 2010, a stone engraved with “Overseas Diocese” (*Cộng Đồng Hải Ngoại*) was placed at the Our Lady of Lavang pilgrimage center during the opening ceremony of the Holy Year (Publicity Committee for the 2010 Holy Year Mass 2010). It recognizes Vietnamese American Catholics and other overseas Vietnamese Catholics as the twenty-seventh diocese of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. Although symbolic on some levels, these transnational exchanges have also exposed the limits and violence of nation-state projects of ethnic order for reconciliation. For refugees who have continued to witness and experience vestiges of past trauma and violence, their reconciliation must cross multiple places, time, and peoples.

Through these global ties manifested through Our Lady of Lavang, Vietnamese American Catholics have been able to leverage their continuing ethnic marginalization within the church hierarchy in Orange County. In 2001, after more than two decades of battle, the bishop of Orange finally gave them approval to construct a parish named after Our Lady of Lavang on a 4.5-acre plot of land located in a poor part of Santa Ana. This was the first church in southern California that was given a Vietnamese name. The bishop announced, “The Vietnamese Catholic community is the second-largest ethnic community [behind Latinos] in the Diocese of Orange...Yet they were the only ones who didn’t have the privilege of having a parish named after their patron—or in this case,



patroness” (Lobdell and Tran 2003). On August 20, 2006, after 3 years of delays due to opposition to the \$10 million project, the architectural “Vietnamese and Hispanic” Our Lady of Lavang Church opened to serve a multi-ethnic congregation that is predominantly Latino, Vietnamese, and White (Diocese of Orange 2006). The event coincided with the year in which the first Vietnamese American bishop, Dominic Mai Luong, was ordained and represented the Vietnamese American community in the area. Today, the church is one of fifteen Vietnamese American Catholic parishes dedicated to the Vietnamese form of the Virgin Mary, making “Our Lady of Lavang” more popular than other Marian names such as Our Lady of Fatima and Our Lady of Lourdes (Federation of Vietnamese Catholics in the USA 2009).

However, despite being a historic accomplishment, a number of Vietnamese faithful also felt that the project came too late for the largest Vietnamese Catholic community outside of Vietnam. As early as 1985, Vietnamese Catholics in other dioceses have already had a parish named after Our Lady of Lavang.<sup>22</sup> A number of my informants shared with me that the parish is now very well financed because of donations from Vietnamese Catholics throughout the diocese. However, under this seemingly temperate comment is their skepticism toward the diocese: Why did the bishop wait until 2001 to permit a parish be constructed and named after a Vietnamese Virgin Mary? Some of them suspected that the diocese needed their financial support as its budgets were suffering from sex abuse legal cases while struggling to accommodate a growing local Catholic population that is predominantly poor and Latino in Santa Ana. The Our Lady of Lavang Parish alleviated this problem because it attracted the large contributions from Vietnamese Catholics from neighboring towns, including the affluent community at St. Bonaventure in Huntington Beach that donated half a million toward a parish hall (Lobdell and Tran 2003). Not soon after Our Lady of Lavang parish opened, it immediately became the largest parish in the diocese primarily because of the Vietnamese population.

The continuing exclusion of Vietnamese Catholics in the church hierarchy has been further attested by the Vietnamese Catholic Center’s threatened closure. In addition to the lack of financial support from the diocese and deferred contributions to parishes, the center has been tightly controlled by the church hierarchy in response to its continuing ties to Vietnam. This is part of the diocese’s plans to eventually terminate the center. During the twenty-first century, one of its former Vietnamese

priest directors was pivotal in organizing many large-scale protests against human rights abuses, especially religious freedom, in Vietnam. In 2005, an event at Mile Square Park attracted nearly 5000 protestors (Nguyen 2010).

The diocese did not favor these mass demonstrations. As a result, the bishop assigned the priest to a remote parish with few Vietnamese members. Thereafter, he made the center be directly under the authority of Bishop Dominic rather than the center's director. However, as Bishop Dominic personally informed me in a private interview, he is usually at the diocese's office and does not know much about the activities at the Vietnamese Catholic Center. Nevertheless, he has the highest and final authority over it rather than the priest director who is at the center full-time during the weekdays.

This reorganization has further forced the Vietnamese Catholic community to be restrained within the ecclesiastical hierarchy and marginalized their representation. In addition to the prohibition of religious sacraments and services, it has also been restricted from engaging in homeland politics. However, the structural containment within the diocese has not guaranteed equal representation for Vietnamese Americans. Whereas Hispanics have a designated ministry within the diocese's organizational structure and Koreans and Polish each have their own parishes, Vietnamese Catholics have been only symbolically represented by Bishop Dominic (Diocese of Orange 2012). In order to assert their voices, they have to organize among themselves and the Catholic Center is the only available meeting point shared across the diocese. Thus, the construction of the Our Lady of Lavang parish does not attest to the inclusion of Vietnamese American Catholics in the Diocese of Orange. On the contrary, it is an extension of the ecclesiastical hierarchy's continuing policy of racialized multiculturalism. It embraces the displays of culture while simultaneously turning a blind eye to structural inequality.

## US-CAMBODIA RELATIONS FACILITATED THROUGH MARIANISM

While Vietnamese Catholics throughout the world have adopted the US-made Vietnamese-looking version of the Virgin Mary, this section shows that ethnic co-religionists in Cambodia have not participated in this movement. Within the contexts of anti-Vietnamese animosities and statelessness, they have been worshipping an oxidized cast-iron gray statue of Our Lady of Lourdes that they have named "Our Lady of the

Mekong River.” However, despite being a locally situated representation, I illustrate that Our Lady of Mekong has reconnected Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia to ethnic co-religionists in the USA.

*Historical Trajectory of Vietnamese Marianism on Cambodian Soil:  
From Transplantation to Erasure (1860–1994)*

During the first 100 years of their arrival in Cambodia from 1860 to 1961, Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia most likely did not worship Our Lady of Lavang on a large scale. Although long-distance communication and transportation improved under French colonialism, they remained geographically distant from her sanctuary in central Vietnam. Instead, these Catholics most likely developed their own tangential course of Marian worship under the leadership of the religious orders that served and led them. Historical records show that the first or one of the earliest Marian statues that arrived in Cambodia was in 1555, brought into the country from Madagascar by Portuguese missionaries (Ponchaud 1990: 31). However, the statue did not have long-lasting impacts in Cambodian society because the missionaries soon left the country within several decades.

Marianism was not transplanted into Cambodia until the mid-nineteenth century, when Catholicism expanded rapidly under French colonialism. In 1869, the Sisters of Providence of Portieux arrived in Cambodia from Vietnam to serve the growing Catholic community, which was in large part due to the sizable influx of Vietnamese Catholics since King Norodom gave them a piece of land in Russey Keo (the present-day second-largest district of Phnom Penh) 4 years earlier in 1865 (Ponchaud 1990). The sisters belonged to the first religious order that arrived in Cambodia. They brought with them their patroness, Mary Help of Christians, who most likely shaped their religious outreach and solidified Marian piety among Vietnamese Catholics. Although the Providence of Portieux came from France, many Vietnamese participated in it. From 1880 to 1925, its novitiate near the border between Vietnam and Cambodia trained 333 sisters, all of whom were Vietnamese. It was probably also during this period that the Legion of Mary gained momentum in Cambodia (Ponchaud 1990).

Beginning around the 1880s, ethnic Vietnamese began worshipping Our Lady of Lourdes in greater number and intensity. In front of the newly built Phnom Penh Cathedral, there was a new and large

French-made statue of her with an engraving of “Queen of Justice, Love, and Peace” (Elegant 1970). The statue was near four of the largest and original ethnic Vietnamese Catholic communities in central Phnom Penh. Moreover, ethnic Vietnamese’ devotion Our Lady of Lourdes was probably also encouraged by the religious professionals, who saw it befitting with the Catholic Church’s recognition of her apparition two decades earlier.

Ethnic Vietnamese further strengthened their Marian devotion with the arrival of Carmelite sisters from Vietnam in 1919. These sisters had strong devotion to the Virgin Mary and also worshiped her as “Our Lady of Mount Carmel.” The community grew rapidly and led to the development of other communities in Asia (Ponchaud 1990). Thus, they were most likely were able to build a small chapel in the Chruichangwar (Kamm 1970)<sup>23</sup> peninsula part of Phnom Penh soon after their arrival.

During the 1940s and 1950s, when many foreign missionaries began to gradually return to Europe as a result of the French defeat in the Indochina War, Vietnamese sisters of Providence of Portieux and the Carmelite sisters continued to perpetuate Marianism on Cambodian territory. Although they returned to Vietnam in 1959, after the diocese of Phnom Penh separated itself from two Vietnamese provinces following the end of the Indochinese War, the Daughters of Mary continued to develop Marianism in Cambodia partially through its patroness (Ponchaud 1990). The religious order was established in 1943 in the heart of the Vietnamese Catholic community, Russey Keo, and was made up of mostly Vietnamese.

Since the first Lavang Convention in 1901–1961, ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia participated in at least two out of fifteen conventions. The first time was in 1928, when the convention first became a national event upon the opening of a new chapel. The last recorded year of their participation was 1961, which was the most popular convention up to that time because it coincided with the elevation of Our Lady of Lavang church to a minor basilica (Tran 2005). It is quite possible that ethnic Vietnamese from Cambodia had attended several other preceding Lavang conventions. However, as the Our Lady of Lavang pilgrimage center began gaining international recognition in the late 1950s, the Catholic Church in Cambodia was undergoing Khmerization during the following decade. There is a surviving statue of the Virgin Mary depicted as a Khmer woman in Battambang. This suggests that, in Phnom Penh,

the Khmerization in the 1960s also entailed the visual transformation of the Virgin Mary as a local although there is no evidence confirming this. Because of this drastic change in religious devotion to the Virgin Mary, ethnic Vietnamese were unable to explore and integrate Our Lady of Lavang into their faith.

During the next 2 decades of anti-Vietnamese Khmer nationalism, violent political bloodsheds, and chaotic displacement, ethnic Vietnamese were restricted from opening venerating any form of the Virgin Mary. Ponchaud (1990) has claimed that the Legion of Mary was “particularly well adapted in times of persecution of the Vietnamese mentality... allow(ing) (the) structuring the faith for their participants” during the early 1970s, the religious movement probably gradually became fragmented as violence intensified by competing political factions. For a while, ethnic Vietnamese had to flee to Vietnam, especially between 1975 and 1978 when Cambodia was under the Pol Pot government. However, they still did not learn much about the Our Lady of Lavang. They had limited level of interaction with local Vietnamese co-religionists because they were mostly placed in refugee camps in remote rural areas (Tran 1979). Moreover, the climate of war and the transition to a communist government in South Vietnam further restricted religious life. Between 1979 and 1989, when Vietnamese communists expanded their authority to Cambodia, ethnic Vietnamese Catholics returned to Cambodia but continued to practice their religion underground. As a result, they did not have statues of the Virgin Mary or other religious objects.

*The Return of the Cambodian Catholic Church: The Khmerization of the Virgin Mary (1995–Present)*

Beginning in 1995, with the official recognition of Catholicism as a religion in Cambodia, the MEP-led Catholic Church began the campaign to localize the Virgin Mary as a Khmer woman. In light of the fact that not even the United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia was able to manage the Khmer–Vietnamese ethnic violence, the French missionaries feared that the largely Vietnamese Catholic population would endanger the church’s new beginning. Moreover, because the church’s foundation was centrally located in Phnom Penh, the threats of anti-Vietnamese hostilities were much more eminent than in rural areas (Tarr 1992). As a result, MEP was determined to carry out its Khmer

inculturation program in order to assuage anti-Vietnamese assumptions that the Catholic Church was catered to the Vietnamese.

Consequently, under Bishop Yves-Georges-René Ramousse, who also led the Khmerization transformations during the 1960s in Cambodia, the Virgin Mary was redesigned in the form of a Khmer woman. She was imagined as a woman dressed in Khmer traditional clothes: a sarong (a long skirt), a simple long-sleeve top, and a kroma (a hand-made, multi-functional scarf) wraps around her neck (Fig. 2.7). Her two hands hold a small figurine of baby Jesus. Moreover, because her image is often carved out of the banyan tree, her skin tone is distinctively dark and makes her stand in great contrasts to “white” European



**Fig. 2.7** The Virgin Mary represented as a Khmer woman (Phnom Penh, Cambodia)

statues of the Virgin Mary. Through this form of localization, the Catholic Church hoped that the Khmer Virgin Mary could be approachable and effectively convey teachings of Catholicism to Khmers.

All of my Vietnamese Catholic interviewees informed me that they were shocked when they first saw the Khmer statue of the Virgin Mary. Marian piety has deep historical roots and is relatively strong among them because they “believe” and do not have to learn to have faith in the Virgin Mary, according to Father Thai.<sup>24</sup> A member of a pastoral committee said, “we are used to seeing Mary a certain way since we were young. It (the Khmer-looking Virgin Mary) hurts our eyes.” Most ethnic Vietnamese Catholics informed me that they know “Our Lady of Peace” (*Nữ Vương Hoàng Bình*). This title refers to the grand statue of Our Lady of Lourdes that was placed in front of the Phnom Penh Cathedral during the 1880s and had an engraving of “Our Lady of Peace, Love, and Justice.” Coincidentally, it also refers to other important sites in Vietnam—such as the Our Lady of Peace in Saigon and Our Lady of Lavang in Vietnam, as I have discussed in previous sections—but most ethnic Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia do not know this. A smaller number of them also shared that they worship “the Praying Blessed Virgin Mary” (*Đức Mẹ Cầu Nguyện*). This title probably refers to other lesser popular but more “generic” portrayals of the Virgin Mary with her clasped hands in prayer position. This form of the Virgin Mary was probably introduced to ethnic Vietnamese Catholics by various sister religious orders who arrived during the early years of the MEP-led Catholic Church. I have seen several copies of this Marian statue at several Catholic centers and churches. It represents the Virgin Mary as a European woman with her head slightly tilted down while her hands are clasped in a prayer position. She is dressed in a long dress that is white topped by a sky blue outer layer.

Even Father Thai, the only widely known Vietnamese priest in Cambodia who takes care of the largest group of ethnic Vietnamese, could not convince his followers to worship the Khmer statue of the Virgin Mary and had to replace it with a “white” one.<sup>25</sup> Many Vietnamese Catholics shared with me that they believe the Virgin Mary was “white” and beautiful, suggesting that the dark-skinned Khmer version of the Virgin Mary was not beautiful. As one villager suggested with this complaint, “She (the Khmerized Virgin Mary) is painted dark. I can’t see all of her facial features.” Several said that they could not possibly stand reciting prayers in front of the Khmer Virgin Mary, while others believed that the Virgin Mary in heaven would not receive their prayers if they prayed to her.

This partly explains why ethnic Vietnamese Catholics made concerted efforts to maintain the original European depiction of the Virgin Mary. During the late 1990s, when Cambodia–Vietnam borders opened up and became more porous, they invited a sculptor from Vietnam to come to Phnom Penh to sculpt a statue of her. However, they did not keep it. As a pastoral leader said, “We didn’t like her face and so we got rid of it.” Afterward, they decided to purchase an “authentic” statue in Vietnam and ship it over by boat to Cambodia. In 1998, they pooled in more than \$800 to purchase a \$250 statue, hire a deliveryman, and pay for the transportation. However, the Cambodian government seized the statue before it arrived. Two years later, they attempted to purchase the statue again with success. Not longer afterward, they purchased another one from Vietnam.

These statues of the Virgin Mary have been enclosed separately in two cement shrines located at opposite ends of Buddha’s Village, the central meeting point for ethnic Vietnamese Catholics throughout Cambodia. Each is approximately 24 inches or 60 cm tall. One is of Our Lady of Lourdes, representing the Virgin Mary with her hands clasped in a praying position. There is also a similar-sized statue of a Carmelite nun placed inside her shrine, which was influenced by the presence of the religious order in Phnom Penh between 1919 and 1975. The other Marian statue is of Our Lady of Grace, depicting the Virgin Mary with arms spread at her sides similar to the illustration in the Miraculous Medal.

These statues of the Virgin Mary have been a focal point of faith for ethnic Vietnamese. As a pastoral committee member illustrated, “With these (European) statues, many people believe in the Virgin Mary. They get whatever they pray for. For example, if someone was sick or we had other problems in our religious community, we would pray together in front of the Virgin Mary and our wish would be granted. If there was anything wrong in our religious community, we would immediately have a procession for the Virgin Mary right away and the problem would be resolved right away.” Whereas the church is only opened during prayer services and on Sundays during mass hours, the Virgin Mary is always available to the villagers because her shrines never close. As a man illustrated this point, “Whenever I am tired, I can just go to visit the Virgin Mary and ask her to give me health and strength so that I could be a good servant until my last breathe. I have come to know her power very well.”



On a daily basis, Vietnamese Catholics may stop by the Marian shrines to recite a prayer, light incense sticks, or meet close friends. The Virgin Mary's central place in community life is further attested by the fact that villagers often decorate it with elaborate ornamentations, changing them according to the cycle of the liturgical seasons. On important religious holidays, especially the Feast of the Assumption and Christmas, there is usually a 30-minute procession to the shrines and around the village before mass service.

As Marianism becomes revived and thrives once again in Cambodia, ethnic Vietnamese Catholics have continued to be disengaged from Our Lady of Lavang, which became the patroness of Vietnam and a unifying symbol for Vietnamese Catholics throughout the world by 1998. Several of them have heard of Our Lady of Lavang from words of mouth, tourists from Vietnam, and informal networks. They have also seen a photograph of her and a DVD on the Lavang Convention. Nevertheless, the majority of ethnic Vietnamese Catholics does not know about this Vietnamized Virgin Mary. Instead of Our Lady of Lavang, these ethnic Vietnamese Catholics have to choose between the Virgin Mary as "white" (European representation) or "dark" (Khmer representation). These are the only two options that they have within the context of anti-Vietnamese hostilities in Cambodian society, which in turn has been internalized by the Catholic Church's anti-Vietnamese Khmerization programs.

The experiences of ethnic marginalization have forced ethnic Vietnamese to prove their authentic belonging within the contemporary church's French-led Khmerization programs. Consequentially, they have entailed embracing *only* European forms of the Virgin Mary. They have asserted that these are the "true" representations that have been passed down through many generations by their ancestors. In doing so, the European statue lays evidence to their *đạo dòng* (kin religion, in reference to the filial transmission of Catholicism) and claim of *quê hương* (homeland) toward Cambodia.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the European Virgin Mary is a reminder of their belonging to a universal Catholic community that is beyond Cambodia. This is a source of inspiration that gives them hope and a sense of religious legitimacy despite decades of isolation from Catholics outside of the country.

Simultaneously, while they idolize the European-looking Virgin Mary and reject her Khmer depiction, ethnic Vietnamese Catholics have also disdained the depiction of their own ethnicity and culture by her. Father

Thai's comment has illustrated this: "They (ethnic Vietnamese Catholics) do not like the Virgin Mary wearing the traditional Vietnamese dress. We are educated so we appreciate her like that. However, for them, they only like her dressed in that (European dress) as she has always been depicted like that. If her nose were to be flatter, they would immediately not worship her....Our Lady of Lourdes is much superior (efficaciously). Why would they need Our Lady of Lavang dressed in a Vietnamese traditional costume?"<sup>27</sup>

Vietnamese in Cambodia have tried to demonstrate their close affiliation with the Church through their affinity for a non-Asian Mary. As I have discussed earlier, they have been the important foundation of the church since its arrival—in terms of number, lay participation, and religious devotion. However, Vietnamese have not been fully accepted by the ecclesiastical hierarchy since its return to Cambodia during the early 1990s. Instead, they have been rejected in many ways by the Church's policies of anti-Vietnamese Khmerization program. Unlike co-religionists in the USA who could freely organize and mobilize their concerns because of their rights as citizens, Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia are stateless and depend on the local church hierarchy for legal protection. Consequentially, they are much less able to contest their ethnic marginalization and have to constantly prove their belonging within the Church.

*Our Lady of the Mekong River: The Spiritual Mother of Vietnamese Catholics in Village Sa*<sup>28</sup> (2008–Present)

Since 2008, Vietnamese have been challenging the Catholic Church's Khmerization program and exposing its limits through a third form of the Virgin Mary. On April 11 of this year, a group of Cham-origin Muslim and Khmer fishermen from a village named Village Sa<sup>29</sup> in Phnom Penh lifted a 130-kg, 1.5-m tall statue of Our Lady of Lourdes from the Mekong River, which flows through both Cambodia and Vietnam and Khmer and Vietnamese alike have had a long history of sharing resources from this river (Jordens 1996). They immediately recognized the object as a Catholic figurine and gave it to Vietnamese Catholics in the village. This is the same statue that was placed in front of the Phnom Penh Cathedral before it disappeared during the Pol Pot era (1975–1978). Like many other religious objects, it was most likely dumped into the Mekong River by Khmer Rouge soldiers.

Within days after the statue was lifted from the river, hundreds of people flocked to Village Sa in order to venerate her. Vietnamese villagers informed me that large crowds kept on arriving for several weeks. The pilgrims prayed throughout the day and into the night. Although there were some cases of disapproval of the veneration, including a foreign Protestant priest, people in general were awed by the statue.<sup>30</sup> As a result of the generosity of benefactors and visitors throughout Cambodia and from other countries, Vietnamese Catholics were able to collect \$22,000 to build a shrine for the statue in around 2009.<sup>31</sup> The sacred site includes an artificial 8.1-meter-high mountain located next to the village's church.

The shrine's natural scenic surroundings (plants, trees, and stones) allude to the popular devotional sites of Our Lady of Lourdes and "magical" mother goddesses in Vietnam that Khmer worship, such as the Black Lady and Lady of the Realm (Taylor 2004, 2010). It is precisely at this juncture of multiplicities that Our Lady of the Mekong River has brought together ethnic Vietnamese Catholics and predominantly Buddhist Khmers, each with different motivations and interpretations of her with respect to their own faith. And, yet, at the same time, they have chosen to not hyper-visibilize these distinctions but to show their connections. They do not refer to her as "Our Lady of Lourdes" or a mother goddess that ethnic Vietnamese Catholics do not venerate. Instead, ethnic Vietnamese and Khmers have decided to call her "Mother of the Mekong River" or "Our Lady of the Mekong River" (Fig. 2.8).

In Khmer, "Mekong" literally means "mother water" or "mother of rivers" to reference the waterway's grand size" (Nguyen 1999), and this meaning can loosely translate "Our Lady of the Mekong River" as "Mother of the Great River." As a central and nutrient-rich waterway that gave birth to the rise of civilization life in areas surrounding it, the Mekong River constantly brought Vietnamese and Khmers into contact with each other (Taylor 2010). In 1866, when King Sihanouk moved the royal capital from Angkor (near Siem Reap) to Phnom Penh, he invited the Vietnamese to the city and gave them land,<sup>32</sup> thus further encouraging inter-ethnic exchanges.

However, the inter-ethnic coexistence was ravaged by decades of war during the twentieth century. Vietnamese Catholics were among the primary victims of waves of Khmer nationalism that sought to search for a golden past after the French ended its rule in 1954. During the



**Fig. 2.8** The first statue of Our Lady of the Mekong River lifted from the bottom of the river in 2008 (Phnom Penh, Cambodia)

1970s, thousands of Vietnamese Catholics, especially men and boys, were killed in the middle of the night and then their bodies were thrown into the Mekong River, floating down from Phnom Penh and toward Vietnam (Williams 1970; Chicago Tribune 1971; Kamm 1970). Unlike Vietnamese of other religious groups, they were easy targets because they concentrated in Catholic enclaves. The Mekong River also harbored

Khmer people's traumatic past. From 1975 to 1978, the Pol Pot regime systematically annihilated all signs of civilization, and, from religious artifacts to books and artworks, the river was its dumping ground.

Today, the Mekong River continues to conjure this traumatic past as American explosives and munitions continue to be found at the bottom of the waterway and endanger the lives of Vietnamese and Khmer alike (Hrubry 2013). Within the atmosphere of anti-Vietnamese hostilities, which have been further internalized by the Catholic Church, ethnic Vietnamese Catholics have not been able to openly appease the spirits of their ancestors. As for Khmers, they have been drawn into an international tribunal that does not seek to heal and reconcile their past. Instead, it has become a playground for international powers to deploy their Judeo-Christian Western-centric conceptualizations of human rights, individual guilt, and justice (Fitzpatrick 2012). In a Theravada Buddhist majority nation such as Cambodia, these ideas contradict with beliefs in karma and reincarnation, which do not conceptualize the human person as isolated and finite but continuously connected to his/her surroundings and previous and next life. Among both ethnic Vietnamese and Khmers, their pain has been further exacerbated by the growing economic disparities. They have been displaced and forced to remain across the river, away from the wealth looming around the high rises, casino, and foreign brand name stores.

The "resurrection" of Our Lady of the Mekong River, lifted from the bottom of the river after decades of neglect, is a glim of hope amidst these merciless moments. She has brought them together and revealed their own strength in peaceful and loving coexistence as her children. As has been noted in a tourist pamphlet about Our Lady of the Mekong River made by ethnic Vietnamese Catholics, who have become the rightful protector of the statue: "We only know that the Holy Mother really loves her children. She wants to be by their sides to care, console, and bless each and everyone who has come to her. Her hands are always clasped in the form that Cambodians would make when praying. Her eyes are always looking up toward the sky whether she is praying or blessing her children. She never refuses to listen to anyone who has come to ask for her blessings." At the bottom of her feet, there is a large engraving of her name in Khmer and Vietnamese letters.

Such inter-ethnic coexistence is oppositional to and prohibited by the Catholic Church's anti-Vietnamese Khmerization policies. This

is evidently reflected in a publication written by one of its leaders, an MEP French priest who served in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge regime and returned to the country to continue his practice during the 1990s: “As soon as Khmer people feel that the Vietnamese are too numerous in their church, they desert it. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, assert themselves. Coexistence is thus a constant concern and there is always the danger of explosion into open conflict even within the tiny community that is the church. Everything must be done to prevent Khmer people from feeling estranged within the Church of their own country” (Ponchaud 2006: 30, emphasis added). He certainly expresses a sense of sympathy for the minority Khmer population within the church, but he also blames the Vietnamese majority for creating havoc for the church and, ultimately, causing its own decimation in the 1970s.

On the contrary, through Our Lady of the Mekong River, ethnic Vietnamese has illustrated that they are the essential key element for the Catholic Church to achieve its primary goal through Khmerization: the conversion of Khmers into the religion. By advocating and facilitating inter-ethnic coexistence through Our Lady of the Mekong River, ethnic Vietnamese Catholics have been more successful in bringing Khmers to the religion than the church’s Khmer-looking Virgin Mary. In fact, more Khmers have been venerating her than Catholics who “already believe in her,” as in the words of one ethnic Vietnamese Catholics. Because of this success, the MEP French bishop of the Vicariate Apostolic of Phnom Penh has not been able to carry out the Church’s anti-Vietnamese agenda and remove the Khmer/Vietnamese signs Our Lady of the Mekong River’s shrine. Not only Vietnamese but also Khmers have embraced her without questioning her association with “Vietnamese-ness.”

Furthermore, contrary to the Church’s assumption, Khmers have helped ethnic Vietnamese Catholics to become reconnected to co-religionists in other countries by elevating her popularity. Through informal networks and word of mouth, knowledge about Our Lady of the Mekong River has traveled across national borders. This has in turn developed into symbolic and material ties between ethnic Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia and co-religionists outside of the country. For example, members of the Pastoral Committee of Village Sa informed me that, because of Our Lady of Mekong River, they have received

monetary donations from Vietnamese Catholics in distant countries such as the USA, France, and Australia. A number of international non-profit organizations and humanitarian associations, including the San Francisco-based and Vietnamese-led Franciscan Charity and Maryknoll, have channeled their works through Village Sa partially because the Marian shrine has become a locus of community building. In return for the financial support, ethnic Vietnamese Catholics have prayed for their donors to Our Lady of the Mekong River. Without Our Lady of the Mekong River, ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia would not be able to connect so meaningfully with others around the globe. As an economically deprived community, they do not have access to modern forms of communication, such as the Internet and phones. However, the transnational connections opened up through the discovery and veneration of Our Lady of the Mekong River have heightened their sense of belonging to a borderless Vietnamese Catholic community while cultivating relations with local Khmers.

Our Lady of the Mekong River shrine has become a major pilgrim center in central Phnom Penh, attracting visitors from all over the world. According to the tourist pamphlet created by Vietnamese Catholics in the village: “The Holy Mother has blessed many pilgrims and their families, especially treating their illnesses, giving fortunes to them in their economic endeavors, and bringing peace and happiness into their family and personal life, and many more.” Each year on April 16, Vietnamese Catholics and people across religious affiliations and ethnicities have congregated at the shrine to commemorate the day when Our Lady of the Mekong River was lifted from the water. Among the regular visitors have included those from the Can Tho province in Vietnam, which has a large Cambodia-born ethnic Vietnamese population largely due to its historically close affiliation with the Catholic Church in Cambodia and role as a refugee camp during the 1970s (Diocese of Can Tho 2013). Vietnamese Catholic pilgrims have also come from the USA, Australia, and Canada. Just as the Our Lady of the Mekong River has been resurrected to life from the bottom of the river, ethnic Vietnamese Catholics too are rebuilding their local community and transnational ties to ethnic co-religionists. It precisely at this space of border crossings in which Our Lady of the Mekong River and Our Lady of Lavang, despite their tangential developments, have come to reconnect Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia and the USA.



## CONCLUSION

By employing different forms of the Virgin Mary (Our Lady of Vietnam, Our Lady of Lavang, and Our Lady of the Mekong River), ethnic Vietnamese Catholics in the USA and Cambodia have aimed to reconcile with their long history of religious persecution. An important part of this process has involved countering nation-state projects of “ethnic management,” which have been internalized within local church hierarchies. Whether it is through multiculturalism in the USA or anti-Vietnamese ethnic cleansing in Cambodia, these models have misconstrued and concealed their past and, consequentially, ruptured their relationships with each other across borders.

Marianism has been critical for ethnic Vietnamese to counter these forms of nation-state-sponsored historical erasure. It represents “acts of anamnesis against historical and an on-going erasure of Vietnamese ....distinct presence by forced forgetting” within nation-state paradigms of ethnic belonging (Nguyen-Vo 2005: 169). Within American multiculturalism, Vietnamese Catholics have depicted the Virgin Mary in their ethnic image in order to recreate ties with the homeland and co-religionists throughout the world. In contrast, in the context of the anti-Vietnamese antagonism in Cambodia, Vietnamese Catholics cannot worship a Vietnamese form of the Blessed Virgin. Instead, many worship an oxidized statue of a European-looking Virgin Mary that helps them to navigate complex and contentious inter-ethnic relations. As studies of Vietnamese female veneration have similarly found (Taylor 2004; Pham and Eipper 2009; Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006; Endres 2012), these “ethnic” forms of the Virgin Mary are not simply responses to the commands of traditions but the demands of day-to-day struggles.

Through Marianism, ethnic Vietnamese have been able to facilitate bonds of affinity and obligation between the USA and Cambodia. Although most of them do not know each nor have they met each other, they feel a sense of ethical responsibility to their co-ethnics’ well-being in other host countries. This is evidenced by their concerted efforts to circulate money, material, and spiritual support between Cambodia and the USA. Through these cross-border exchanges, Vietnamese Catholics have re-situated religion within their experiences of exile, disrupting national boundaries and ethnic order.

## NOTES

1. “La Vang” has two meanings. First, it is a colloquial term that refers to a yelling (“la”) that echoes (“vang”), which usually occurs in remotes areas. Second, it refers to a leaf (“lá”) that is a type of herb (“văng”). The archdiocese of Hue believes that the second meaning is more likely partly because local villagers have had the long tradition consuming a local herbal plant for treating illnesses. Local villagers had expressed that this practice was shown to them by the Lady of La Vang. Today, pilgrims and visitors could purchase these herbal leaves in La Vang.
2. A photograph in a 1961 publication about Our Lady of Lavang pilgrimage shows that the statue of Our Lady of Lavang was that of Our Lady of Victories. This has been confirmed by Phan (2005). There is also a photograph in color of Our Lady of Victories and printed words “Our Lady of Lavang, 1978–1998” on Dan Chua USA (<http://danchuausa.net/images/lavang.jpg>). I did not see this original statue during my two visits to the Our Lady of Lavang sanctuary in 2009 and 2010. The statue was most likely sculpted in Paris, the home of Our Lady of Victories Church and Bishop Casper’s missionary group, Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris/Foreign Missionary Paris (MEP).
3. The only exception is during the 1970s. The 17th La Vang Convention was held on May 29–31, 1970. However, the “Summer Red Battle” (*Chiến Thắng Mùa Hè Đỏ*) of 1972 killed many villagers and delayed the 18th La Vang Convention until 1978 (Tran 2009).
4. It was the fourth national shrine in Asia. The first one was in the Philippines (Basilica of San Sebastian, 1890), followed by national shrines in China (Basilica of Our Lady Help of Christians, 1942) and India (St. Thomas Cathedral Basilica, 1956) (Gcatholic.org 2013).
5. This statue survived the Vietnam War although the Notre Dame Cathedral behind it was damaged.
6. It was penned by Bishop Joseph Pham Van Thien, the first Vietnamese bishop.
7. Father Thanh Xuan Phan, interview, August 12, 2009, Hue, Vietnam.
8. Mr. Nhan Van, interview, December 28, 2012, private residence, Fountain Valley, CA.
9. This religious order was established in Vietnam in 1941. They moved their religious headquarters to Carthage after more than half of the group’s members (175 brothers) fled Vietnam since the fall of Saigon.
10. Mr. Dinh, interview, January 15, 2012, private residence, San Jose, CA.
11. This was the former home of Oblates sisters who temporarily stayed there to teach Eucharist courses at St. Polycarp.

12. Some of the Vietnamese catholic “personal parishes” that have been established are the following: “Resurrection of Our Lord Parish” in New Orleans in 1984 (Our Lady of Lavang Shring in New Orleans [2013](#)), “Our Lady of Laving Church” in Houston in 1985 (The Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston [2013](#)), “Vietnamese Martyrs Parish” in Sacramento in 1986 (Diocese of Sacramento [2013](#)), and “St. Philip Phan Van Minh Catholic Church” in Orlando in 2007 (Persaud [2007](#)). When I was in San Jose in 2012, I learned that the Vietnamese Catholic community is considering to rename one of their churches, St. Patrick’s Church, into “Our Lady of Lavang Parish” or “Vietnamese Martyrs Parish.”
13. Father Henry Noga, director of the John Paul II Polish Center, interview over the phone, October 3, 2012; Staff member at the Saint Thomas Korean Catholic Center, interview over the phone, October 3, 2012.
14. The high representation of Vietnamese in the religious vocations has remained today. In the USA, Vietnam is the most common foreign country of birth among the religious of the profession class of 2011 (CARA [2011](#)).
15. By 1978, four Vietnamese American priests had became pastor but none served the largest VietnameseAmerican Catholic community in Orange County (Tran [1994](#): 310). As pastors, they managed all functions and finances of an assigned parish. They also have authorities over other priests and staff assigned to their churches.
16. Father Duong Phan, interview, December 20, 2010, private residence, San Jose, CA.
17. The Center closed on December 16, 2012 due to financial restraints and the justification that Vietnamese Catholics around the world have successfully adapted into their host societies. Father Dinh Dao (the last director of Coordinating Office of the Apostolate for the Vietnamese in the Diaspora), email correspondence, April 25–May 29, 2012.
18. Monsignor Philippe Tran Van Hoai was the ideal candidate to direct the newly established organization. Since 1969, he had been studying and working in Rome. At the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Mosignore Tran was appointed as the Director of the Vietnamese Refugee Office of Caritas Italiana to rescue and resettle Vietnamese boat people who were fleeing from communism. In 1992, he founded the Movement of the Vietnamese Laity in Diaspora.
19. Mr. Nhan Van, interview, December 28, 2012, private residence, Fountain Valley, CA.
20. Ibid.
21. In January 2011, this original statue was replaced by a newer model sculpted by a local Vietnamese artist.
22. The earliest “Our Lady of Lavang Church” that I have was established in Houston in 1985 (The Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston [2013](#)),

- followed by New Orleans in 1988 (Our Lady of Lavang Shrine in New Orleans 2013).
23. It is sometime spelled as “Chroy Changvar.” In 1970 and 1971, this predominantly ethnic Vietnamese Catholic area was covered by several international English-language newspapers. It was dubbed as “Village without men” (Kamm 1970) because nearly all Vietnamese men and boys in this village and nearby ones were killed the Lon Nol government and its soldiers. For the massacre that occurred on April 12, 1970 alone, one account (Chicago Tribune 1971) estimated that there were 3000 thousand Vietnamese deaths, mostly men and boys. Their bodies were dumped into the Mekong River and floated down the waterway toward Vietnam. Before the massacre, Kamm (1970) estimated that there were 2700 Vietnamese Catholics and 40 Khmer Buddhist families who lived here. Williams (1970) suggests that these ethnic Vietnamese of Cambodia were popularly viewed as “Vietnamese nationals” who should be protected by the Vietnamese government. Kamm (1970) and Williams (1970) suggest that the killings were precipitated by ethnic hatred and the suspicion that these ethnic Vietnamese were collaborating with communist North Vietnamese.
  24. Father Thai, interview, October 20, 2010, Buddha’s Village, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
  25. Ibid.
  26. Tarr (1992) has similarly observed that many ethnic Vietnamese refer to Cambodia as their homeland.
  27. Father Thai, interview, October 20, 2010, Buddha’s Village, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
  28. This pseudonym does not have any meaning.
  29. It is very close to Chroy Changvar (also spelled as Chruichangwar), a peninsula in central Phnom Penh that used to be the home of one of the three early Vietnamese Catholic parishes (“Xom Bien”) established in the 1860s with land given to Vietnamese Catholics by King Sihanouk. The peninsula is across from St. Joseph seminary (which has been functioning as St. Joseph Parish since the church returned in the 1990s). During the 1970s, the massacres of nearly all Vietnamese men and boy on Chroy Changvar forced surviving Vietnamese to flee and move to nearby areas, including what later developed into “Village Sa” (a pseudonym).
  30. Father Tuan, interview, May 9, 2010, village church, near the border with Vietnam, Cambodia.
  31. Mr. Ro, interview, February 28, 2011, private residence, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
  32. Including an area that later developed into four original Vietnamese Catholic enclaves (Ponchaud 1990).

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