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Around 15,000 pilgrims attended the inaugural Marian Days celebration July 1-2, 2022, at Our Lady of La Vang Shrine, Christ Cathedral, in Garden Grove, Orange County, California. (Courtesy of Orange Diocese)



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July 19, 2025

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Five Vietnamese ladies garbed in ao dai are gracefully making their way toward the northeast corner of the sprawling church grounds to pray. Pausing reverently, they break into a gentle hymn. The object of their veneration is a 12-foot white marble statue of the Virgin Mary as a Vietnamese woman bearing in her arms the infant Jesus.

Mirroring her devotees, the Virgin too is dressed in ao dai, but she is also crowned with a *khan dong*, a moon-shaped headpiece worn for weddings and festivals. Despite being elevated on a cloud-shaped pedestal, she does not exude imposing grandeur but motherly steadfastness.

The image is set under a swirling umbrella-like metal canopy supported by three poles that symbolize banyan trees, a representation of a rainforest in La Vang in the central Vietnamese province of Quang Tri, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to Catholic refugees in the 18th century at a time of persecution.

This tranquil moment of Catholic devotional life is situated at the shrine of Duc Me La Vang, or Our Lady of La Vang, located on the campus of Christ Cathedral in Garden Grove, Orange County, California.

My research interest in the devotion to Our Lady of La Vang brought me here, serendipitously leading me to a new documentary, "Our Lady at the Center" (directed by Bradley Zint), which tells the story behind the creation of the statue and the shrine.

'She is known as the mother of Vietnam. She is not just the mother of La Vang to the Catholics in Vietnam but the mother of Vietnam in general.'

—Elysabeth Nguyen

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Vietnamese American youth drummers perform on the dedication day for the Our Lady of La Vang Shrine in Garden Grove, Orange County, California, on July 17, 2021. (Courtesy of Orange Diocese)

The documentary attributes the vision for the shrine to Bishop Dominic Dinh Mai Luong, auxiliary bishop of the Orange Diocese from 2003 until his death in 2017. The patient accumulation of information throughout the film reminds me of the tile work involved in the process of creating a mosaic, each tile forming a piece of the story.

"It took an entire community, one supported by countless acts of hard work, generosity and dedication to make such a holy place a reality," attests the pleasantly lilting voiceover.

Who is Our Lady of La Vang? The film takes us to the 18th-century apparition story as delivered in an earnest homily by the sage-like Bishop Pierre Nguyen Van Kham of the Vietnamese Diocese of My Tho. The accompanying cinematic sequences, with panoramic drone shots of the environs of the shrine in Vietnam interspersed with a visual retelling of the apparition, re-roots the film to the soul and story of Our Lady of La Vang.

Under the ominous specter of an anti-Catholic edict, a group of oppressed refugees had gathered under the sprawling branches of a banyan tree to pray the rosary. Suddenly, a luminous presence shone through the dark night. A young Vietnamese woman, sublime in beauty, clothed in a traditional robe in the blue and white of the Immaculate Conception, appeared before them.

"Spiritual and physical healing from our mother," the bishop's words narrate, as the apparition lays her hand on a devotee.

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The scene could easily go the heavy-handed, hagiographic route of a number of films of the "apparition genre," but it chooses instead to retain the mystery of the story with impressionistic shots and a Marian representation that is quietly restrained, like a votive candle reverently lit.



A woman poses in front of a statue of Our Lady of La Vang near Christ Cathedral in Orange County, California. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

A similar restraint can also be seen in the testimonies of divine intervention and healing from devotees of Our Lady of La Vang, both in Vietnam and in the diasporic community. Sans contrived dramatizations and musical crescendos, the stories come

across as heartfelt personal narratives of real people who experienced the healing compassion of a loving mother. Whether the recollection of a woman whose father was the only survivor of a vehicle that plunged into a river or the witness of a 76-year-old who had inexplicably stood up unharmed after a potentially crippling fall from a ladder, the stories shine with authentic humanity.

"Our Lady at the Center" does its Mariological assignment, widening the aperture to include illuminating conversations about the place of Mary in Catholic faith life, and even a historical piece that underlines Martin Luther's devotion to Mary despite the strictures of the Reformation.

"She is known as the mother of Vietnam. She is not just the mother of La Vang to the Catholics in Vietnam but the mother of Vietnam in general," notes Elysabeth Nguyen, a respected community organizer in the Orange Diocese, not to mention a consummate multitasker: Nguyen was directly [involved in the conceptualization of the shrine](#) and spearheaded the task of raising some \$12 million for its construction.



A woman shaded by an umbrella walks by Our Lady of La Vang Shrine in June 2024. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

The statue of Our Lady of La Vang at the Orange County shrine was carved out of fine Italian marble from Carrara — famously known to have been Michelangelo's marble source — by fifth-generation Carraresi sculptors, based on the inputs of the project's advisory board.

As the film shows, the resulting image is Our Lady of La Vang with a Eurasian face, inclusively mirroring not just Vietnamese devotees, but the culturally diverse communities of Orange County. Like Our Lady of Guadalupe, she is at once culture-specific and culture-transcendent.

The image was [unveiled at Christ Cathedral](#) on July 17, 2021, to a gathering of 8,000 people.

[Related:](#) [Pham, first Vietnamese American bishop to head US diocese, installed in San Diego](#)

The film's multi-angled cinematography showcases the graceful curvilinear design and maternal image. Christ Cathedral, with its reflective steel belltower and hyper-modern geometric lines, is offered a counterbalance; Our Lady of La Vang grounds it, humanizes it.

Miracles abound in "Our Lady at the Center." There is the miracle of the original apparition story in Vietnam, where the Virgin Mary appears as a loving mother, bringing God's compassion and healing to her suffering children. Then there is the Orange County "miracle of multiplication," the unanticipated burgeoning of support and volunteerism that paved the way for the completion of the shrine against all odds.

Finally, there is the growing number of pilgrims from near and far gathering at the shrine. Whether in mustard seed faith or ardent devotion, everyday miracles happen where they truly count — at the center, in the secret place of the devotees' heart.

For updates on theater screenings of "Our Lady at the Center" visit www.ourladyatthecenter.com/media.