

## THE MARIAN APPARITION AND CHRISTIAN ARDUOUS HOPE AMID POLITICAL REPRESSION: THE CASE OF OUR LADY OF LA VANG IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIETNAM

Duong Van Bien

Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam  
*biendv.iars@vass.gov.vn*

### Abstrak

Artikel ini berupaya untuk menyoroti dimensi harapan yang beraneka ragam dari orang-orang Kristen Vietnam yang diyakini telah menyaksikan penampakan Maria di situs La Vang dalam konteks konflik politik di Vietnam abad kedelapan belas. Mengenai tanda-tanda harapan melalui kasus dugaan penampakan Maria di situs La Vang, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memperkuat gagasan tentang harapan, seperti yang dikatakan Thomas Aquinas, yaitu perjalanan yang sulit, tetapi mungkin untuk dicapai, dalam mengatasi trauma orang-orang Kristen karena penindasan politik. Bagian pertama dari penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan penelitian, yang menggabungkan perspektif historis-politik dan filosofis. Bagian kedua mengkontekstualisasikan penampakan Maria yang diduga di situs La Vang di Vietnam dalam kerangka sejarah, menyoroti konteks sosial-politik pada saat itu. Bagian ketiga mengeksplorasi pesan-pesan harapan yang disampaikan melalui peristiwa dugaan penampakan Perawan Maria yang Terberkati di La Vang. Akhirnya, melalui kasus Our Lady of La Vang, artikel ini diakhiri dengan menegaskan peran penting agama dalam menghibur umat beriman di tengah bencana politik.

**kata kunci:** *Penampakan Maria, Bunda Maria dari La Vang, Penindasan Politik.*

### Abstract

This article sheds new light on the multifaceted dimensions of hope experienced by Vietnamese Christians who reportedly witnessed a Marian apparition at the La Vang site in the context of eighteenth-century Vietnam's political turmoil. Through examining the signs of hope in the case of the alleged Marian apparition at La Vang, the study reinforces Thomas Aquinas's idea of hope as an arduous journey—difficult but possible to attain—in helping Christians cope with trauma under political repression. The first section outlines the research approach, combining historical-political and philosophical perspectives. The second section situates the presumed Marian apparition at La Vang within its historical framework, highlighting the socio-political context of the time. The third section explores the messages of hope conveyed through the alleged apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary at La Vang. Finally, using the case of Our Lady of La Vang, the article concludes by affirming the significant role of religious faith in comforting believers amid political catastrophe.

**Keywords:** *Marian Apparition, Our Lady of La Vang, Arduous Hope, Political Repression.*

**Article History:** Received 21 October 2025, Revised 25 October 2025, Accepted 29 October 2025, Available online 30 October 2025

## Introduction

For Catholic Christians, the Blessed Virgin Mary is revered as a model of faith, hope, and charity. She is described as “a sign of sure hope and solace for the pilgrim People of God” (John Paul II 1987), and her role in offering hope is manifest in many situations—especially amid experiences of loss, pain, and fear among the faithful. Mary’s example inspires hope by providing comfort and encouragement in times of trial, embodying the theological virtue of hope that sustains believers through hardships. In the past, numerous Vietnamese Christians sought refuge under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, particularly during periods of political upheaval and trauma. This enduring devotion continues in the present day: in recent years, large numbers of pilgrims have journeyed to Marian shrines across Vietnam. They come seeking the Mother of God’s help in various aspects of their lives, hoping that Mary’s intercession before God will bring grace and relief. This contemporary pilgrimage tradition underscores the ongoing belief that Mary’s motherly care can mediate divine aid, reflecting a living hope among the faithful.

One of the most famous pilgrimage destinations in Vietnam is the La Vang site. At the annual pilgrimage festival in La Vang in 2024, which drew over sixty thousand attendees for the Feast of the Assumption, Rev. Joseph Đặng Đức Ngân (Vice Archbishop of Huế Diocese) commemorated the Blessed Virgin Mary’s apparition at La Vang. Speaking to the gathered faithful at this central Vietnamese shrine in Quảng Trị Province, he underscored the apparition’s enduring promise of hope and protection for Christians. He reminded everyone that:

Mother appeared here [in La Vang] to shelter her children in a challenging context. Today, each person brings here desires for faith, love, hope, and longing, and wishes to overcome challenges, illness, and difficulties in various ways. Pray for the Mother’s intercession with God, to turn everything into grace, and help us bravely become witnesses of God’s mercy<sup>1</sup>

Through this address, the Archbishop highlighted Our Lady of La Vang as a lasting symbol of hope and solace, linking the historical apparition to the

---

<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese excerpt: “Mẹ đã hiện diện nơi đây để bao bọc đàn con trong cơn thử thách. Ngày nay, mỗi người chúng ta đều mang đến đây những tâm nguyện của Đức tin, của tình mến, của hy vọng, của thao thức, thử thách, bệnh tật và kể cả những khó khăn về mọi phương diện. Nhưng xin Mẹ cầu bầu cùng Chúa để biến đổi tất cả trở thành hồng ân, và giúp chúng ta can đảm trở thành chứng tử của Chúa thương xót [...]” (Ban Truyền thông TGP Huế 2024).

contemporary spiritual longings of the people. Alleged apparitions or visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary are considered a form of supernatural occurrence that can offer believers “many valuable gifts” and foster “spiritual growth in fidelity to the Gospel” (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024). According to tradition, the first Marian apparition took place as early as the year 40 A.D., when the Mother of Jesus reportedly appeared to encourage the Apostle James during his missionary journey. Throughout Catholic history, claimed apparitions of Mary have occurred in many places and eras, often following a notable pattern: such visions tend to be reported during periods when Christian communities are experiencing dire political or social crises. This pattern holds true in Vietnam as well. To date, the country has at least three prominent cases of reported Marian apparitions—Our Lady of La Vang, Our Lady of Trà Kiệu, and Our Lady of La Mã—each of which is said to have occurred amid intense political turmoil. These instances suggest that Marian apparitions became most salient as signs of hope during the darkest chapters of Vietnamese Christian history.

Of these events, the Marian apparition reputed to have occurred at La Vang in 1798 became especially renowned, both within Vietnam and internationally. In the aftermath, a Marian shrine and pilgrimage center were established at the site. In August 1961, Pope John XXIII—through the decree *Magno Nos*—elevated the Shrine of Our Lady of La Vang to the status of a Minor Basilica. Later, in 1988, Pope John Paul II, during an Angelus address, cited the La Vang shrine as one of the world’s most significant Marian pilgrimage sites, ranking it alongside Lourdes (France), Banneux (Belgium), and Poponguine (Senegal). Today, the Minor Basilica of Our Lady of La Vang stands in Hải Phú commune, Hải Lăng district, Quảng Trị province, in central Vietnam. The site is a famous pilgrimage destination, often referred to by Vietnamese Catholics as a *sacred land* (*thánh địa*) for its holy significance.

In the case of Our Lady of La Vang, this study examines how the Marian apparition phenomenon became intertwined with the multifaceted hope of Vietnamese Christians, emphasizing how the apparition delivered a message of hope that helped neutralize the trauma of political persecution. This aspect of the La Vang apparition—the function of religious experience in sustaining hope amid political catastrophe—has often been overlooked in previous research. By addressing this gap, the article offers a new perspective on the complex relationship between religion and politics. It demonstrates the significant role that a religious phenomenon like a Marian apparition can play in comforting and

strengthening believers during times of political crisis, thereby applying the Thomistic framework of hope as a lens to understand this historical event.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative interdisciplinary methodology that combines a historical-political perspective on religion with a philosophical-theological perspective on hope. From the historical-political side, the research uses contextual analysis to situate religious phenomena within their specific historical and political milieu. Historical contextualization aims to reconstruct “the chronological, geographical, and social characteristics of the source, person, event, or phenomenon under study,” and by doing so, to “help make sense of actions by those in the past that may appear counter-intuitive to our modern understanding, but were rational to those in the past” (Sendur et al. 2021, 799). In other words, this approach requires identifying the location, timing, and socio-political conditions in which an event occurred. Applying such a historical lens to Our Lady of La Vang involves reconstructing the late eighteenth-century Vietnamese context in which the alleged Marian apparition took place, thereby clarifying how the event was experienced and understood by Christians of that era.

In practical terms, this contextual approach entails identifying where and when the events occurred and thoroughly examining the socio-political conditions of that period. Accordingly, this study gathers historical documents pertinent to the La Vang apparition. Because no contemporaneous archival records of the 1798 apparition have survived, the research relies on sources from subsequent years—especially accounts by French missionaries of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (*Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris*, MEP) and narratives by Vietnamese Catholic authors—that describe the historical context and recount the oral history of the apparition. Secondary sources, including scholarly studies by Vietnamese and international researchers, are also utilized to construct a detailed historical backdrop for the period of the alleged Marian apparition at La Vang. In some cases, the historical review extends to events prior to 1798 in order to trace a sequence of relevant developments leading up to the apparition. This historical inquiry provides the necessary background for understanding the “worldly,” context-specific dimension of the hope held by the Vietnamese Christians who were said to have witnessed the Blessed Virgin Mary at La Vang.

In addition to the historical analysis, the study employs a philosophical-theological perspective on hope. In particular, it draws on Catholic teachings and

scholarly reflections about the virtue of hope, with a special emphasis on the Thomistic understanding of hope. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) provided one of the most systematic expositions of the virtue of hope in Western theological thought (Michael Lamb 2016, 303). Aquinas defines hope as a theological virtue and carefully distinguishes it from related passions and virtues. According to Aquinas, “*the object of hope is a future good, arduous but possible to obtain,*” and “*hope makes us tend to God, as to a good to be obtained finally, and as to a helper strong to assist*” (Thomas Aquinas 1947, 1246). In Aquinas’s formulation, the term “arduous” (difficult) is significant and has been the subject of debate. As Nicholas H. Smith (2010, 14) observes, describing the hoped-for good as *arduous* implies that those who hope must exert effort and perseverance in order to attain the desired good. Thus, hope for Aquinas is oriented toward a good that is not easily achieved but is attainable with God’s assistance.

Aquinas further distinguishes between the passion of hope (hope as an emotion) and the virtue of hope. As a virtue, hope is a “stable habit” that functions as a guiding principle, “prompting and regulating internal passions or external acts” (Michael Lamb 2016, 305). Hope, unlike passions such as fear or desire, is directed exclusively toward a good that is not yet present but lies in the future (Dominic Doyle 2011, 75). Moreover, the Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper emphasizes that hope truly qualifies as a virtue only when it directs a person toward a righteous good and when its source is God’s grace, orienting the person toward supernatural happiness in God (Josef Pieper 2012, 100). In line with this understanding, the Catechism of the Catholic Church defines hope as follows:

Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promise and relying not on our strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” “The Holy Spirit ... he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.” (United States Catholic Conference 1997, 447).

This theological virtue of hope “keeps man from discouragement,” “sustains him during times of abandonment,” and “opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude” (United States Catholic Conference 1997, 448). The Beatitudes proclaimed by Jesus “raise the hope of Christians toward heaven as

the new Promised Land” (ibid., 448). In aspiring to practice hope as a theological virtue, Aquinas teaches that the human will must rely on God’s help and also on the assistance of others (such as the intercession of saints) as instruments of God’s grace (Dominic Doyle 2011, 87).

With these methodological foundations in place, the following sections will apply this interdisciplinary approach to examine a sign of arduous hope in the historical case of the alleged apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary at La Vang, which occurred amid intense political and religious conflicts in Vietnam. The analysis will integrate the historical context with the Thomistic theological framework of hope to provide a comprehensive understanding of the event’s significance.

### **Political Persecution by the Literati Mandarins and the Hardships of Christian Refugees in the La Vang Jungle**

Christianity was first introduced to Vietnam in 1533, but its integration into Vietnamese society and culture unfolded very gradually. This slow adoption resulted from multiple factors: conflicts arose between Catholic missionaries and the local feudal authorities, and tensions developed between Catholic converts and adherents of traditional religions and folk beliefs. Over the centuries, several Vietnamese emperors issued edicts forbidding missionaries to propagate Catholicism among the populace. Furthermore, Vietnamese Christians endured periodic waves of harsh persecution under various dynasties. Many believers were martyred for refusing to renounce their faith, indicating the extreme lengths to which they clung to their hope and belief despite repression.

In 1625, during the rule of Lord Sãi (Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên), the first royal edict banning Catholicism was issued, ordering that all foreign missionaries be expelled. In the decades that followed, successive Nguyễn Lords in Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) and Trịnh Lords in Tonkin (northern Vietnam) promulgated numerous anti-Catholic decrees through the 17th and 18th centuries. A similar pattern of persecution re-emerged under the Tây Sơn regime in the late 18th century, particularly during the reign of Emperor Cảnh Thịnh (who ruled 1792–1802). The Tây Sơn dynasty, founded by the rebel leader Nguyễn Huệ, had overthrown both the northern Trịnh Lords (who governed on behalf of the Lê Dynasty) and the southern Nguyễn Lord[2]. Initially, according to French missionary-historian Adrien Launay, the Tây Sơn rulers were not overtly hostile to Christianity. However, by around 1796 their attitude shifted dramatically,

largely because some Catholic missionaries had allied themselves with Lord Nguyễn Ánh (the pretender who would later become Emperor Gia Long)[3][4]. This perceived collusion between missionaries and Nguyễn Ánh aroused deep suspicion within the Tây Sơn court.

After Emperor Nguyễn Huệ's death, his eldest son Nguyễn Quang Toản assumed the throne in 1792, adopting the reign title Cảnh Thịnh. Under Emperor Cảnh Thịnh's rule, the Tây Sơn dynasty promoted Confucian orthodoxy and grew increasingly distrustful of French Catholic missionaries, whom they suspected of political meddling (Mary Kim Anh Thi Trần 2024, 9). As the conflict between the Tây Sơn and Nguyễn Ánh intensified, the Tây Sơn mandarins became convinced that certain French missionaries were conspiring with Nguyễn Ánh to help him overthrow their regime and reclaim power as the future Emperor Gia Long (1802–1820). This suspicion reached a breaking point when Emperor Cảnh Thịnh intercepted a letter from Lord Nguyễn Ánh to Bishop Jean Labartelle of the MEP (1746–1823). In response, Cảnh Thịnh issued a drastic order in May 1798 to execute all Christian missionaries (Phan Phát Huần 1965, 247). By August 1798, the Tây Sơn court promulgated an edict vehemently condemning Catholicism:

“People in the realm must uphold the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues [of Confucianism]: subjects must be loyal to their lord; sons must obey their father; wives must submit to their husband; and all must practice benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. By contrast, Catholicism (originating from Portugal) propagates heretical teachings and must be strictly forbidden. Therefore, for the benefit of the nation and its people, the Emperor has ordered the destruction of this religion, which is deemed loathsome. We must destroy every church and parish, and capture every missionary and Vietnamese priest.”<sup>2</sup>

The Tây Sơn persecution struck Catholic communities particularly hard in Annam (central Vietnam, including present-day Quảng Trị province). In August 1798, Emperor Cảnh Thịnh dispatched four military detachments—amounting

---

<sup>2</sup> The Vietnamese excerpt: “Nhân dân trong nước phải giữ đạo Tam Càng Ngũ Thường: quân thần, phụ tử, phu phụ, nhân, nghĩa, lễ, trí, tín. Đạo Da-Tô (Bồ Đào Nha) có nhiều tà thuyết phải được cấm triệt để. Do đó, muốn ích quốc lợi dân, Hoàng Đế truyền tiêu diệt Đạo ấy vì là đạo đáng ghét. Phải phá tất cả các nhà thờ, nhà xứ và bắt tất cả thừa sai và các Linh mục Việt Nam.” (Stanislas Nguyễn Văn Ngọc & Giuse Nguyễn Văn Hội 1993, 161; Hồng Phúc 1998, 25).

to roughly two hundred soldiers—to subdue several Catholic villages near the capital Phú Xuân (the Imperial Citadel in Huế), with orders to seize Bishop Jean Labartelle (Louvet 1885, I:466). One contingent of these troops marched to the parish of Cổ Vưu in Quảng Trị province in search of the Bishop (Nguyễn Văn Ngọc 1970, 28). Fortunately for the Catholics, Bishop Labartelle was tipped off about the raid and managed to escape capture, finding safety through a covert warning network.

However, many Christians were not so fortunate and fell into the hands of the authorities during this dark episode. Emperor Cảnh Thịnh’s mandarins devised a cruel test of faith for the captives: they were herded into a building outfitted with two opposite doors. Above one doorway, large characters proclaimed it the “door of life” (sinh môn, 生門), while the other bore the label “door of death” (tử môn, 死門). To walk through the “door of life,” a prisoner was required to trample on a crucifix laid on the threshold—an act of public apostasy renouncing Christianity. Those who instead chose the “door of death” could see executioners waiting outside with drawn sabers, ready to carry out immediate sentences (Louvet 1885, 470–471; Phan Phát Huồn 1965, 248). Remarkably, almost all the Christian captives elected martyrdom rather than betray their faith. Among the many who perished in this ordeal was Father Emmanuel Nguyễn Văn Triệu, along with some thirty other unnamed faithful, their blood indelibly marking this tragic chapter of history (Stanislas Nguyễn Văn Ngọc & Giuse Nguyễn Văn Hội 1993, 162–163). These martyrs exemplified the ultimate witness of hope and fidelity, choosing eternal life over temporal survival. In the face of Emperor Cảnh Thịnh’s relentless persecution, some Christians from the hard-hit parishes (such as Cổ Vưu and Thạch Hãn) chose flight as their only hope for survival. Terrified and desperate, they scattered into more remote areas to evade the imperial forces (Hồng Phúc 1998, 26–27).

One small band of Catholics from Cổ Vưu and Thạch Hãn found refuge in a remote area known as La Vang—a wild, forested mountain about six kilometers from Cổ Vưu. There, in a clearing by a large banyan tree, these refugees set up a makeshift settlement. They built a modest thatched cottage and established an altar inside it, dedicating this shelter as a place to pray to the Mother of God (Trần Văn Trang 1930, 7–9; Dương Văn Biên 2024, 107). In the relative isolation of La Vang, this little community of faithful hoped to practice their religion in peace, even as they remained in hiding from the authorities. Life in the La Vang jungle was fraught with peril and hardship. Even as they constantly feared discovery by the imperial soldiers, these Christian refugees also had to endure

the formidable challenges of the wilderness—an environment so inhospitable it was proverbially known as “a sacred forest with poisonous water” (rừng thiêng nước độc). The forest teemed with dangers: wild animals (especially tigers) prowled and threatened their lives, and the climate was unforgiving, with extreme tropical heat, humidity, and monsoon rains. Moreover, the displaced Christians suffered from severe shortages of food and clean water. Malnutrition and exposure soon took a toll: many fell ill with fevers and other maladies. Their condition at La Vang was later remembered as “hundreds of hardships” (Hồng Phúc 1955, 10), a phrase that barely captures the multitude of sufferings they faced. Yet even in this state of powerlessness and misery, the Christian refugees tenaciously clung to the hope of divine intervention from God through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. By all accounts, it was in answer to this persevering hope that the Blessed Mother is believed to have manifested herself at La Vang. In other words, the Marian apparition tradition holds that Mary appeared precisely as a response to the ardent and arduous hope of her beleaguered children, offering them comfort and reassurance in their darkest hour.

### **The Arduous Hope of Christians amid Political Repression**

Despite the extreme hardships they faced, the small community of exiled Christians at La Vang remained steadfast in their faith. They continued to place their trust in Christ’s promise of salvation and constantly sought the grace of the Holy Spirit. These Christians developed deeply pious routines in thought and practice. By day, they labored to survive in the forest and on the nearby plateau; by night, they returned to their humble cottage for communal prayer. Each evening, they lit oil lamps in their little chapel, sang hymns, and knelt before a simple image of Mary holding the Baby Jesus. They fervently prayed the rosary, imploring the Mother of God to protect them from all dangers and to intercede with God on their behalf (Trần Văn Trang 1930, 7; J.-B. Roux 1933, 113). Their prayers to the Blessed Virgin Mary asked not only for deliverance from immediate misfortunes but also for the restoration of peace to their persecuted Christian community (Trần Văn Trang 1930, 8). In these nightly devotions, we see that their hope was oriented toward the good—something not yet realized in the present, but fervently awaited in the future. In Thomistic terms, this was truly hope in the proper sense: a confident desire for a difficult but possible good to be attained with God’s help.

The resilience of the La Vang Catholics in these trials highlights the vital role of hope as a conduit leading the faithful toward redemption. As Saint Paul

reminded the Romans, the Christian journey to God's salvation is inextricably linked with hope: "Spe salvi facti sumus"—"in hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:24). Reflecting on the power of hope in the work of salvation, Pope Benedict XVI (1927–2022) similarly articulated:

"Redemption—salvation—is not simply a given. Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, a trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey." (Benedict XVI 2007, *Spe Salvi*)

In this light, the Christian refugees at La Vang did not yield to their overwhelming circumstances of want and danger. Instead, they lived with unwavering hope, continually looking toward God and entrusting themselves to the Mother of Jesus. Exercising the virtue of hope enabled them to resist and overcome the two extreme vices that Aquinas warns against—presumption (overconfidence in one's own power) and despair (the abandonment of hope)[5][6]. Hope, according to the Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper, is "one of the very simple, primordial dispositions of the living person" (Josef Pieper 2012, 100). Indeed, when an individual is on the brink of despair, hope becomes essential—a fundamental condition for human survival and spiritual perseverance. The refugees at La Vang, confronting the temptation to despair, were no exception: they actively sought hope to carry them through their trials. Crucially, they understood that this hope could not rest on their own strength, but only on divine assistance, for they were keenly aware of their limitations as created beings. As Josef Pieper observes, "In the virtue of hope more than in any other, man understands and affirms that he is a creature, that he has been created by God" (Pieper 2012, 98). The kind of hope these Christians pursued amid adversity was precisely what Aquinas defines: difficult to attain, yet possible by means of Divine assistance (ST II-II, Q.17, Art.2). Their steadfast hope, difficult though it was, proved to be the virtuous means that kept them from falling into presumption on one hand or despair on the other.

Likewise, the Christian refugees at La Vang clearly recognized their own limitations when confronted with such extreme adversity. They were few in number and utterly unable to mount any resistance against the imperial forces or to shield themselves from the perils of the jungle. In truth, they had no worldly means of deliverance—what, apart from divine assistance from God and the Mother of Jesus, could they be waiting for? Above all, these believers placed

steadfast trust in God's omnipotence and mercy. They persisted in the conviction that God would bring salvation, directing all their expectation toward divine aid. On a basic level, they certainly hoped to survive and meet their immediate physical needs in the wilderness. Yet beyond these natural desires, their deeper hope in divine assistance revealed the innermost disposition of their souls: they embraced their total dependence on God's help (mediated through the Mother of Jesus) and fixed their gaze on a future good that only God could ultimately provide. The experience of the La Vang community thus illustrates how ordinary, "secular" or psychological hopes (for safety, relief from suffering, and basic well-being) can be absorbed into and uplifted by eschatological hope (hope oriented toward ultimate salvation), rather than remaining merely spontaneous or apart from God. In other words, their natural hopes for an end to pain and peril were inseparably linked with supernatural hope grounded in faith. Their expectation of rescue and peace was not a simple optimism in fate or chance; it was intertwined with their faith in God's providence and the Blessed Mother's intercession. According to the Thomistic understanding, this integration meant that even their mundane desires for survival were elevated and directed toward the ultimate hope of eternal life with God, which gave their perseverance a profoundly spiritual character. In fact, the hope they exemplified aligns with Josef Pieper's Thomistic definition of hope:

"Hope is the confidently patient expectation of eternal beatitude in a contemplative and comprehensive sharing of the triune life of God; hope expects from God's hand the eternal life that is God Himself: sperat Deum a Deo." (Josef Pieper 2012, 103)

Filled with a patient expectation of deliverance and shelter from God (and trusting in the Mother of God's intercession), the desperate prayers of the La Vang refugees were, according to their testimonies, eventually answered. In this, we discern the truth of Saint Thomas Aquinas's assertion: "Hope is called the entrance to faith... because by hope we enter in to see what we believe" (ST II-II, Q.17, Art.8). In other words, by steadfastly hoping in God's aid, the La Vang Christians were effectively stepping into the reality of their faith, preparing their hearts to eventually see fulfilled what they had long believed and hoped for. And indeed, through God's grace, their hope was not in vain, as it is said to have culminated in a miraculous event. According to oral tradition, one night as the refugee community gathered to pray on the grass under the banyan tree, the Mother of God appeared to them. The apparition was enveloped in a radiant light. Mary was described as wearing a long mantle and holding the infant Jesus

in her arms, with two small angels beside her bearing lights. The Blessed Mother stood near the banyan tree where the faithful knelt in prayer, and she spoke to them in a gentle voice, saying:

“My children, please remain faithful and willingly bear hardship. I have heard your prayers. From this time onward, anyone who comes here to pray with me—I will receive their prayers and bless them accordingly.”<sup>3</sup>

Although conveyed in only a few sentences, the Virgin’s message to the refugees carried profound significance on multiple levels. First, her words conveyed maternal compassion and empathy. The Mother of God let the humble refugees know that she was attentively listening to them, fully aware of their sufferings and sorrows—thus demonstrating her deep sympathy for her “children.” Second, she affirmed that she had indeed heard and received their prayers. This assurance offered immediate comfort: it told the beleaguered Christians that their cries for help had reached heaven through Mary’s intercession. Finally, and most importantly, she made a promise. Mary pledged that she would continue to accompany these believers through her intercession, ensuring that their lives and pleas would be “turned over” to God through ongoing prayer and acts of penance. In the context of the catastrophic challenges the Church in Vietnam was facing—when each member of the faithful confronted imminent dangers, illness, and the threat of death—this promise from the Mother of God emerged as a tangible sign of hope to safeguard their lives. Armed with this hope, the Christians found the strength to persevere. Truly, in the spirit of the theological virtue of hope, they could “endure even the worst of circumstances” (Christopher Kaczor 2008, 83) because they trusted they were not abandoned by God or His Blessed Mother. In this way, renewed trust in God’s benevolence—bolstered by the Mother of Jesus’s reassurance—became a wellspring of hope for the Christians at La Vang. For them, hope now truly embodied what Josef Pieper describes as “the power to wait patiently for the ‘not yet’—a ‘not yet’ that becomes ever more immeasurably distant the closer we approach it” (Josef Pieper 2012, 110). Our Lady of La Vang’s message perfectly illustrates the arduous dimension of hope: these Christians were called to bear suffering and yet remain steadfast in believing in help that was “not yet”

---

<sup>3</sup> The Vietnamese excerpt: “Các con hãy tin tưởng, hãy cam lòng chịu khổ. Mẹ đã nhận lời các con kêu xin. Từ nay về sau hễ ai chạy đến cầu khẩn cùng Mẹ ở chốn này, Mẹ sẽ nhận lời ban ơn theo ý nguyện.” See Ban Truyền Thông TGP Huế. 2021. *Đi hành hương La Vang*. Accessed February 19, 2025. <https://tonggiaophanhue.org/tong-hop/suy-tu/di-hanh-huong-la-vang/>

visible or fulfilled. Such hope is not an instant remedy but a journey—a continual striving toward a future good that is difficult to attain but still possible. It is, as Aquinas would say (and as Dominic Doyle expounds), a path that is “difficult, yet possible, to obtain,” one that requires “a certain endeavor, a kind of elevation of the soul to attain the difficult good” (Doyle 2011, 75). The La Vang believers, by embracing this arduous hope, demonstrated a living example of Aquinas’s teaching: they engaged their souls in a labor of hope, enduring present trials for the sake of the promised divine relief that lay ahead.

It should be noted that Mary’s words at La Vang were not written down at the moment of the apparition. The quotations and accounts we have today were preserved through oral tradition among local Catholics. In the early twentieth century, both Vietnamese and French Catholic writers collected these oral stories and published them, ensuring that the message was passed down to later generations (Dương Văn Biên 2024, 105–110). According to these traditions, the Blessed Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared at La Vang on multiple occasions thereafter, each time strengthening the supernatural hope of the Christians. These reported Marian apparitions served to “rejuvenate and give new vigor” to the refugees’ natural hopes (Josef Pieper 2012, 110). As news of the Virgin’s aid spread, crowds of the faithful—and even non-Christians—began making pilgrimages to La Vang to pray for the Blessed Mother’s help. Numerous folk accounts emerged, testifying to Mary’s grace blessing those who visited the La Vang shrine and prayed earnestly. In 1901, in recognition of this legacy, the church at La Vang was formally dedicated under the title Our Lady of Help of Christians (Notre-Dame Auxiliatrice) (Tòa Tổng Giám mục Huế 1998, 11). This title encapsulates what Our Lady of La Vang had come to symbolize: the hope of a protective refuge for all Christians who seek her intercession.

## **Conclusion**

In Catholic understanding, a Marian apparition is a supernatural event that can serve as a channel of grace, bringing the encouragement of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers. In Vietnam, the phenomenon of Marian apparitions has demonstrated a profound significance in the life of the Church—especially as a sign of God’s saving presence during times of intense adversity. The case of Our Lady of La Vang, in particular, shows how such an event can reinforce the enduring virtue of hope among the faithful, no matter how miserable their circumstances. Vietnamese Catholics take the lesson of La Vang to heart: authentic hope does not belong to those who succumb to despair, but rather it is attained and sustained through steadfast faith and fervent prayer to God. In

Thomistic terms, the La Vang story confirms that hope, fortified by faith, enables believers to trust in divine aid for deliverance and salvation when no earthly hope remains.

The Blessed Virgin's apparition at La Vang became a wellspring of hope, one that imbued the persecuted Christians with renewed strength. Buoyed by this hope, they were able to "walk and not faint" despite confronting a political catastrophe that threatened to crush them. More broadly, the example of Our Lady of La Vang demonstrates how religious faith—and specifically the experience of a Marian apparition—can function as a spiritual strategy for believers coping with profound stress and persecution. In the throes of political conflict, the La Vang Christians transformed their faith into hope-fueled resilience. Their arduous hope, as articulated by Aquinas, was rooted in trust that God's grace would ultimately prevail. Thus, the La Vang narrative illustrates the dynamic interplay between history and theology: in a desperate historical moment, the Thomistic virtue of hope became a lived reality, empowering a community of the faithful to endure and find meaning amid suffering through the promise of divine intervention.

#### **Acknowledgment:**

This research was funded by the Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies (IARS) at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), under the basic research project entitled "Quan điểm của Công giáo ở Việt Nam về hiện tượng Đức Mẹ hiện hình và những vấn đề đặt ra" ("Vietnamese Catholic viewpoints on the phenomenon of Marian apparition and some issues raised").

#### **References**

- Ban Truyền Thông TGP Huế (2021). *Đi hành hương La Vang*. Retrieved from <https://tonggiaophanhue.org/tong-hop/suy-tu/di-hanh-huong-la-vang/>
- Ban Truyền thông TGP Huế (2024). *Đức TGM Phó Giuse Đặng Đức Ngân chủ tế Thánh lễ vọng kính Đức Mẹ hồn xác lên trời*. Retrieved from <https://tonggiaophanhue.org/tin-tuc/tin-giao-phan/duc-tgm-pho-giuse-dang-duc-ngan-chu-te-thanh-le-vong-kinh-duc-me-hon-xac-len-troi/>
- Benedictus PP. XVI (2007). *Encyclical Letter Spe Salvi of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the Bishops Priests and Deacons Men and Women Religious and All the Lay Faithful on Christian Hope*. Retrieved from [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20071130\\_spe-salvi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html)

- Chris Maunder (2007). "Apparitions of Mary". In *Mary The Complete Resource*, edited by Sarah Jane Boss, 424-457. London: Continuum.
- Christopher Kaczor (2008). *Thomas Aquinas on Faith, Hope and Love: Edited and Explained for Everyone*. The Catholic University of America Press.
- Dominic Doyle (2010). Spe Salvion Eschatological and Secular Hope: A Thomistic Critique of Augustinian Encyclical. *Theological Studies*, 71 (2010): 350-379.
- Dominic Doyle (2011). *The Promise of Christian Humanism Thomas Aquinas on Hope*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Duong Van Bien (2024). Multiple agents involved in the process of localization of Our Lady of La Vang: From a Mythic Figure to the Mother of Vietnam. In Liam C. Kelley, Gerard Sasges (Eds). *Vietnam over the Long Twentieth Century*. Singapore: Springer, 101-125.
- Giuse Maria Phạm Cảnh Đáng & Matheo Lưu Văn Thiên (2018). *Linh Địa Trà Kiệu*. Lưu hành nội bộ.
- Hồng Phúc (ed) (1955). *Đức Mẹ La Vang [Our Lady of La Vang]*. Saigon: Đức Mẹ Hằng Cứu Giúp.
- [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_dcf doc 20240517\\_norme-fenomeni-soprannaturali\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dcf doc 20240517_norme-fenomeni-soprannaturali_en.html)
- Ioannis S. Christodoulou (2010). Hope and its Incongruence with Evil. In Janet Horrigan and Ed Wiltse. Eds. *Hope Against Hope Philosophies, Cultures and Politics of Possibility and Doubt*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 23-34.
- J.B. Roux (1933). "Le Pèlerinage de Notre-Dame de Lavang", *Annales de la Société des Missions – Étrangères*, XXXV Année. No 211, Mai-Juin, 112-122.
- John Paul II (1987). *Redemptoris Mater*. Retrieved from [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031987\\_redemptoris-mater.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html)
- Josef Pieper (2012). *Faith Hope Love*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- L.-e. Louvet (1885). *Missionnaire Apostolique De la Congrégation Des Missions Étrangères. Tome Premier*. Paris: Libraire De La Société Asiatique.
- Lamb, Michael (2016). "Aquinas and the Virtues of Hope: Theological and Democratic", *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2016), 300-332.

- Mary Kim Anh Thi Tran (2024). *Our Lady of La Vang: History and Theology of A Vietnamese Devotion*. Eugene, Oregon: PICKWICK Publications.
- Nicholas H. Smith (2010). From the Concept of Hope to the Principle of Hope. In Janet Horrigan and Ed Wiltse. Eds. *Hope Against Hope Philosophies, Cultures and Politics of Possibility and Doubt*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 3-22.
- Phan Phát Huồn (1965). *Việt Nam giáo sử, Quyển I (1533-1933) [History of Vietnamese Catholicism, Volume 1 (1533-1933)]*. In lần thứ hai. Saigon: Cứu thế tùng thư.
- Sendur, K.A.; van Drie, J.; van Boxtel, C. (2021). Historical contextualization in students' writing. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 30(4-5): 797-836.
- Stanislas Nguyễn Văn Ngọc & Giuse Nguyễn Văn Hội (1993). *Lịch sử Giáo phận Huế qua các triều đại vua chúa 1596-1945 [History of Huế Diocese during the periods of Emperors and Lords from 1596-1945]*. Huế: Lưu hành nội bộ.
- The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (2024). Norms Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena. Retrieved from
- Thomas Aquinas (1947). *Summa Theologica. Volume 2. First Complete American Edition in Three Volumes. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province*. New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc.
- Tòa Tổng Giám mục Huế (1998). *Thánh địa Đức Mẹ La Vang*. Lưu hành nội bộ.
- United States Catholic Conference (1997). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana