

During this month of May, we continue our look into different Marian devotions around the world, and the unique stories and miracles associated with them. Last week we looked at Poland and Ukraine. This week we travel to Asia, exploring some of the special devotions that are personal to Vietnam, China and the Philippines.

Our Lady of La Vang

In 1792, when he was only nine years old, Nguyễn Quang Toản ascended his father's place and became Emperor Cảnh Thịnh of Vietnam, the third and last emperor of the Tây Sơn dynasty.

Sadly, a major element of his reign involved the persecution of Catholics. In 1798, he issued an edict against Catholicism in the country, resulting in the fierce and violent hunting of Catholics throughout the country. Many of them, fleeing for their lives, sought shelter in the rainforest of La Vang in the Quảng Trị Province. It was here they witnessed one of Vietnam's famous Marian apparitions.

By some accounts, Mary appeared on the branches of a nearby tree while they were praying the Rosary. In others, she appeared in a glow of light. She was wearing the traditional Vietnamese áo dài dress and holding a child in her arms. Although the exact words she spoke are lost to history, it is said that she offered the people great comfort, and by some reports, she instructed them to boil a certain kind of leaf to help with the illnesses that were claiming them in the forest.

She also invited them to make a shrine in that spot, where their prayers would be answered, which they did. The story of Mary's appearance spread throughout Vietnam, and even the large Buddhist population was affected by the news, resulting in many conversions.

After the persecution eased, they were able to build a chapel there in 1820, although Vietnamese Christians continued to go through bouts of intense persecution, and the shrine was frequently damaged or destroyed and rebuilt again.

Although the apparitions of La Vang are not officially recognised by the Church (there are very few that are), the Church does recognise the importance and significance of this event for the Vietnamese faithful. In 1961, under Pope John XXIII, the Church of Our Lady of La Vang became a minor basilica, and it is now the National Shrine in honour of the Immaculate Conception.



Our Lady of La Vang (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Our Lady of Sheshan

One of the bloodiest wars in human history occurred in the nineteenth century in China. It is known as the Taiping Rebellion and lasted for fourteen years (1850-64 AD).

It began with Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864), a man who professed to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. He established the “Taiping Heavenly Kingdom” in defiance of the Qing Dynasty. His movement gained remarkable traction: by the time the rebellion began, he had nearly thirty thousand followers.

One of the cities the army of Taiping attacked was Shanghai. In 1863, the Superior of the Jesuits in Shanghai was a man named Fr Gu Zhen Sheng. He had recently purchased the south side of the mountain of Sheshan, where a retreat centre had been built for the Jesuit Fathers.

During the attack, Fr Gu Zhen Sheng went up the mountain to pray for the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, promising that if their diocese was preserved from destruction, he would build a basilica there in her name in thanksgiving.

Miraculously, the diocese of Shanghai was spared the full force of the attack, and in 1878 the bishop of Shanghai consecrated the new basilica.

Although during Mao’s Cultural Revolution the statue of Our Lady of Sheshan was destroyed, it was rebuilt in 2000, with the Blessed Virgin standing atop a Chinese dragon.



Our Lady of Sheshan (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage

The Filipino Jesuit, Fr Catalino Arevalo, once said: 'To understand Filipino Catholics, one must understand their love for Mary.'

The Philippines, perhaps more than any other country, has too many Marian devotions and shrines to talk about. Colloquially, it is common to hear Filipinos refer to Mary as "Mama Mary," an affectionate title that speaks to their familiarity with the Blessed Virgin.

Across the country, two of the most popular devotions are to Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Our Lady of Fatima. However, there are many popular home-grown devotions. In a book released in conjunction with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, there is a history and visual presentation of eighteen different shrines.

One of the most popular indigenous devotions is to Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage. The wooden statue of Our Lady, a Black Madonna, dates back to the 17th century and is enshrined at the Antipolo Cathedral in the Sierre Madre mountains. In 1925, Pope Pius XI granted her a canonical coronation, a special act of crowning for a member of the Holy Family that is widely venerated in a diocese.

The Black Madonna arrived in Manila in 1626, having left Mexico four months earlier in the hands of Governor-General of the Spanish East Indies, Don Juan Niño de Tabora. He dubbed the statue Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage, attributing his safe journey to her.

In the 1630s, construction of a church in Antipolo began. However, it is said that during construction, the Madonna would vanish several times mysteriously, reappearing by a nearby tipolo plant. This was taken to be a heavenly sign about the location of the church, so it was built there instead.



Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

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