

Honoring the Ancestors of Faith: The Martyrs of Vietnam

Last summer, through an interview with the young people of a California Bay Area parish, Rufino Zaragoza introduced the readers of *Rite to Vietnamese Catholicism* (“Asian Culture and Catholicism, Voices of Vietnamese American Youth,” *Rite*, July/August 2003). Here he builds on that introduction, explaining the role that the veneration of martyrs plays in the liturgical life of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American Catholics.

Few tourists to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) wander into the shrine of Le Van Gam. Across from Zen Plaza, one of those elegant new malls, is a small building hidden between various clothes shops on Nguyen Trai Street in District One. Every Tuesday night about fifteen to twenty Vietnamese devotees gather in this chapel to chant prayers, sing hymns, and venerate the memory of Matthew Le Van Gam, who was martyred on this spot on March 11, 1847.

The men and women sit on simple plastic stools and sing a capella songs from their homemade photocopied prayer book. Their shoes are left outside by the front door because in Vietnamese culture, one removes sandals or shoes before entering a home or a sacred place. Before them is a marble altar and above this is a statue of the Vietnamese retail merchant who gave his life for harboring Catholic clergy. Below the altar, in a glass case, is a long wooden yoke. Matthew was shackled to this bar when he was walked from prison to the open field where he was publicly beheaded.

After about forty minutes, the hymns and prayers end. Some of the devotees leave; others stay for silent prayer and petitions. A few come forward and light incense sticks. Standing before the statue they bow three times from the waist in proper Confucian style. Then they place the incense in the ceramic bowl resting in front of the wooden yoke. One woman, on her knees, reaches over into the glass case, carefully touching the yoke and closes her eyes in intense prayer.

■ The 117 Martyrs of Vietnam

Le Van Gam was merely one of the thousands of Catholics martyred during the reign of King Tu Duc (1847–1883). He numbers among the official 117 Vietnamese Martyrs canonized by Pope John Paul II on June 19, 1988. That group is intended to represent over 130,000 faithful who were martyred in Vietnam over a period of four centuries and under various dynasties.¹

The commonly used title, “117 Vietnamese Martyrs,” is actually a misnomer. A more fitting title would be “The Martyrs of Vietnam,” since ten of the 117 were missionaries from France (two

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Cathedral of Bui Chu. Twenty-eight of the 117 Martyrs listed on the framed tablets come from this northern diocese in the Nam Dinh province.

bishops and eight priests) and 11 were missionaries from Spain (six bishops and five priests). Of the Vietnamese nationals, the 96 consist of 37 priests, 14 catechists, one seminarian, and 44 laypeople. The circumstances of their executions varied² as has their progress toward sainthood.³

■ Ancestor Veneration and the Honoring of Martyrs

Before the formal canonization in 1988, and before the four processes of beatification, veneration of the martyrs was widely practiced at the local level. This custom follows the Vietnamese practice of Ancestor Veneration. Peter C. Phan writes: “There is not a single important event in the life of the Vietnamese family to which the ancestors are not invited as witnesses, from the celebrations of the New Year to the birth of a child, the death of a member of the family, the celebration of longevity (when a person reaches 70), the earning of an academic degree, engagement, and wedding.”⁴

Ancestor Veneration was the indigenous Vietnamese belief before the arrival of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. When Christianity arrived with the first missionary in 1533, already the culture had a developed cult for remembering and honoring the dead.⁵ Naturally the Vietnamese Christians drew from their cult of the ancestors in venerating those who died for the faith.

■ The Annual Feast of the Martyrs in Phuc Nhac

In northern Vietnam, south east of Hanoi about a four-hour bus ride, is the small town of Phuc Nhac. It lies within



Town of Phuc Nhac. Robed in traditional dress, devotees process with the relics of the local martyrs for the annual November celebration in the Phat Diem diocese, Ninh Binh province.

the Phat Diem diocese, renown for its famous stone cathedral built in the architectural style of a Buddhist pagoda. Phuc Nhac yearly hosts a major celebration for the feast of the Vietnamese Martyrs, November 24.⁶ Parish groups come from all over the region, each location bringing a small red wooden box (*thanh tich*) that holds the relics of a martyr from their church.

At the celebration I witnessed a beautiful and lively procession. It included various musical ensembles—traditional drumming groups, brass bands, and indigenous musicians. Vietnamese women in traditional flowing silk dresses (*áo dài*) were followed by women religious, by a music group, by the relic of one saint, by another church group, by more religious, by another saint's relics, and so forth. There were colorful flags, streams of boy altar servers, and men and women in traditional Vietnamese dress. The procession took about an hour to circle the small lake in front of the church, after which everyone assembled in the outdoor seating for the solemn liturgy.

Each relic box was placed on its own special wooden platform (*ruoc kieu*). One platform was carried by females, the others by young adult males. They were dressed in the formal apparel of Nguyen dynasty soldiers. During the period of the Hue kings, mandarins and officials were often carried in highly decorated carriages, like the ones used for the relics. Often an official went before the platform with a special drum (*trống*) and gong (*chiêng*). These elements, drawn from Vietnamese culture, are retained in honoring the martyr as an ancestor in faith, as a venerated elder.

Some of the richest traditions of Vietnamese Catholicism come from this northern region.⁷ Before 1954, the Phat Diem diocese was 95 percent Catholic and had developed a rich tradition of indigenous liturgical chanting and devotional practices. The celebration at Phuc Nhat is just one expression of Vietnamese Catholicism from the area.⁸

Numerous martyrs come from the wider “Catholic crescent” of the north; in fact 93 of the canonized 117 died for the faith in this part of the country.⁹ In addition, other ‘unlisted’ martyrs have been and continue to be honored in this region, even though they are not included in the official list of 117. In Vietnam, often veneration is centered on one particular martyr by devotees of that region, whereas in the United States, Vietnamese Americans seem to have a more general devotion to all 117 as a group.¹⁰

■ Devotional Practices in Other Regions

In the Hue Cathedral (in central Vietnam), the statue of martyr Paul Tong Viet Buong graces the shrine on the right side of the sanctuary. He was one of the mandarins of the Nguyen King, whose imperial court was in Hue. At Notre Dame Cathedral in Ho Chi Minh City you will see the statues of four martyrs added in one of the alcoves in 1989. On the far left is Matthew Le Van Gam, who was martyred about one mile east, in the open field used by the town as a public market.

Many of the observances for venerating these martyrs developed before the formal canonization. But since then some new shrines have sprung up. Recently, the Cathedral of Bui Chu (in northern Vietnam) renovated the right side altar and added two tablets listing all 117 Martyrs. As new churches are built in Vietnam, often some contemporary sculpture or artwork is added to honor those who gave their blood during the times of persecution. At a popular shrine,



At the July 2003 National Vietnamese Youth/Young Adult Conference in Irvine, California, the LaSalian Youth Troupe of San Jose performs the story of the trial of the martyrs before their execution.

Den Cong Chinh, in Ho Chi Minh City, the outdoor area offers separate devotional areas to Mary, Saint Joseph, and the Martyrs of Vietnam. Throughout the day, visitors come to offer incense, recite prayers, and sit before the Blessed Sacrament reserved in a small chapel.

■ Veneration of the Martyrs in the United States

In the United States, several national Vietnamese parishes have taken the name “Vietnamese Martyrs”: Sacramento, California; Arlington, Virginia; Richmond, Virginia; and Arlington, Texas, among others. This name is the second most popular name, the first being some designation of Mary, or Our Lady of La Vang.¹¹ The Vietnamese American community of Denver, Colorado, brought together these two important elements of Vietnamese spirituality in naming their national parish “Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs.”

In the rich cultural mix of California, non-Vietnamese are slowly being introduced to these Asian ancestors of faith. Sacred Heart Church in San Diego is a trilingual community (Spanish, Vietnamese, and English). In the back of the church, on one side is a full shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Exactly opposite on the other side of the church is a comparable shrine to the 117 Vietnamese Martyrs. In Orange County, the parishioners of Saint Barbara Parish have a shrine to the Martyrs to the left of the vestibule area. The story of the martyrs is engraved on three plaques on the right wall, in English, Vietnamese, and Spanish.



Saint Barbara Church, Orange diocese, California. The traditional portrait of the 117 Martyrs is part of a large shrine in this multicultural community. Orange County has the highest number of “overseas Vietnamese” in the United States.

Often some relics are obtained from Vietnam (or France) and placed in these parish shrines. The most avid collector in the United States is probably Mr. Bai Tran of San Jose. For a small chapel of the Vietnamese Martyrs he has collected the relics of 87 of the 117 martyrs from Rome, France, and Vietnam. After the young catechist André Phu Yen (1625–1644) was beatified, Mr. Bai was able to procure a piece of his hair. The story of this 19 year old is especially dear to the Vietnamese, since he was baptized and trained by Father Alexandre de Rhodes, SJ, the premier missionary of Vietnam.¹²

For Vietnamese American communities that have relics, Mass is often preceded by a procession—a Vietnamese Catholic custom. These may include colorful round umbrellas (*long*) from the Vietnamese tradition or the wooden platforms common from northern Vietnam. In some locations

the spiritual preparation of a three-day novena is observed. Sometimes an eloquent speaker is invited to give a parish mission before the major celebration.

■ Vietnamese and Vietnamese American Customs Compared

In general, the celebrations in Vietnam are more solemn and elaborate than the festivities in the United States. In Vietnam there is a wider range of resources and personnel to draw from than in some small Vietnamese American communities in the United States, which sometimes have limited access to parish facilities for preparation and coordination of events. Both national Vietnamese and “overseas Vietnamese” have a repertoire of devotional hymns and prayers specific for the martyrs. Some communities chant a litany with all 117 names.

Many Americans are inspired by the sacred dance tradition of the Vietnamese. Usually these dances are done in honor of Mary during May or October (traditionally observed as special times for venerating the Virgin Mary). Rarely is sacred dance done in honor of the martyrs; the primary gesture is incense veneration as appropriate for an honored ancestor. In Vietnam it is rare to see a skit about the martyrs

during a liturgy, although sometimes these take place outside the church on the day of the celebration or during a youth conference.

In the United States, some youth or young adult groups will dress in the traditional robes of the Vietnamese king, soldiers, and Catholic martyrs. They act out the call to denounce the faith and “step on the crucifix” as a sign of apostasy. Of course, the Christians in the play do not give in to the allurements of the mandarin or king, and remain faithful to the Gospel of Jesus, comforting their fellow prisoners before shedding their blood. Such skits are a way of catechizing the second-generation children about their heritage. It also affirms the involvement of the young adults who have the challenge of preserving Vietnamese faith and culture while living in a post-modern society that neither honors elders nor esteems ancient traditions.



Women of Phuc Nhac Parish. Saint Ine Le Thi Thanh was 60 years old with 17 grandchildren when she died for the faith. Today, her parish church is regularly filled with village women.

■ Continuing the Legacy

While the Feast of Vietnamese Martyrs is both a liturgical feast and a cultural heritage, private devotions also exist within Vietnamese Catholicism. A random visit to Vietnamese homes will find the usual home shrine with a depiction of a crucifix, Mary, Joseph, and deceased grandparents or relatives. Often, also hanging on the wall is a holy card or picture of Reverend Truong Bui Diep. He was a priest in the Ca Mau area of Vietnam (the southern tip) killed by the Communists in 1946. At Ca Mau there is a shrine at his grave behind Tai Say Church. Many miracles are reported because of his intercession; in fact, he is perhaps seen more as a miracle worker than a revered ancestor. Even the Buddhists go to this shrine with petitions and prayers.

Reverend Bao Q. Thai writes that Truong Bui Diep “for the South of Vietnam . . . is considered as one of the Vietnamese martyrs’ descendants.” Also in this arena would be Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan (1928–2002). Though not a martyr himself, he was imprisoned by the Communists for 13 years. He was a descendant of these ancestors of faith and “due to his great love and reverence

for the martyrs, Cardinal Thuan viewed the martyrs’ values and virtues as his spiritual guidance.” In his biography, he speaks continually of the courage of these martyrs and how they strengthened him during his trials.

■ On Pilgrimage to the Realm of Martyrs

In January of 2004 I accompanied a small group of American pilgrims to the Phat Diem area. After a full tour of the cathedral, we went to Phuc Nhac Church, where the relics of the only canonized woman martyr are displayed. Agnes Le Thi Thanh (1781–1841) was the wife of a farmer and grandmother. She was detected hiding priests, arrested, and suffered long interrogations and torture. She died in prison and her memory has been kept at her home parish in the area of Phuc Nhac.

Our time at Phat Diem had been delayed and we were severely behind schedule by the time we arrived at Phuc Nhac; nevertheless we decided to perform the prepared prayer service. One of the tour participants was leading

prayer in honor of all the Vietnamese women who have suffered from wars and oppression. As tour coordinator, I was anxious and distracted, hoping that we would finish and get back into Hanoi before the traffic became unbearable. Suddenly the side door of the church opened. My first thought (and worry) was that the local authorities were interested in finding out why a tour bus was parked outside this remote church. Instead, a group of elderly Vietnamese women slowly entered the church. It was late afternoon and they were gathering for their daily devotions. As our prayer leader told the story of Agnes Le Thi Thanh, that strong, faith-filled grandmother, we all realized that we were in the presence of other grandmothers, women who were the spiritual descendants of Saint Agnes Le Thi Thanh.

At the conclusion of the service, as we individually venerated the small red box with the relics of the saint, we were watched intently by the elderly Vietnamese villagers—women who had endured years of war and persecution. Observing the weatherworn faces of these women as we exited, and greeting them briefly with simple nods and smiles, we could see courage and steadfastness in their eyes. We were in the presence of women who honor their ancestors, women who daily breathe in the communion of saints. These women were such a gift for us, as the Vietnamese Martyrs are an inspiration for the entire Church—this November 24 and throughout the liturgical year.

NOTES

1. Unfortunately the most complete work about the Vietnamese Martyrs, including a full biographical sketch for each person, a historical overview, and a summary reflection of their spirituality is only available in Vietnamese: *Thien Hung Su: 117 Hien Thanh Tu Dao Viet Nam*, edited by Tran An Bai. *The History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam* by Phan Phat Huon, CSSR gives a thorough narration of the waves of persecutions and various stories of martyrdom. The VietCatholic.net website has some English pages with useful summary information about the martyrs and Vietnamese Catholicism in general.
2. Most were beheaded, but many were strangled; some were burned alive, and some were cruelly tortured by slow amputation before death.
3. Leo XIII beatified a group of 64 in 1900. Pius X beatified the second group of eight in 1906 and beatified the third group of 20 in 1909. Pius XII beatified the fourth group of 25 in 1951. Pope John Paul II canonized these 117 in 1988. In 2000, he beatified a young Vietnamese catechist, Andre Phu Yen.
4. Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1998), p. 26.
5. A rich exploration of Veneration of Ancestors and liturgical inculturation in Vietnam can be found in Peter C. Phan's *In Our Own Tongues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2003) Chapter Seven: "Culture and Liturgy, Ancestor Veneration as a Test Case."
6. In 2003, I was able to attend this celebration, accompanied by a bilingual Vietnamese seminarian who was my guide and translator. The presence of this solo foreigner at such a religious celebration raised some suspicion from the local police authorities that monitor religious activities in this section of Vietnam. We were questioned but not hindered from photographing or videotaping the procession and outdoor mass.
7. Vietnamese people distinguish between three regions: south (Ho Chi Minh City), central (Hue), and north (Hanoi). Each region has its own

expressions of folk music, traditional dress, and food specialties. Even in language, three major accents can be designated: southern, central, and northern. Most Americans still view the country as two regions, a North/South split, following the 1954 Geneva Accords.

8. Such public processions and celebrations are recent developments in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese government. In the past decade there have been enormous improvements in permissions for religious gatherings and events.

9. "Catholic crescent" is my own designation for a geographical area in the north that curves down from Hai Phong to Bui Chu, Phat Diem, and ends in Vinh. While this area was heavily Catholic before 1954, over 600,000 Catholics fled south when the Communists gained control of North Vietnam. Today, the area of Phat Diem is only one third Catholic, the remaining population being Buddhist or practicing household rituals.

10. This observation is a simplification of a complex historical and political situation. Also this is the limited view of a cultural "outsider" who is continually learning new aspects of Vietnamese traditions and Catholicism.

11. A brief introduction to Our Lady of LaVang and Vietnamese American Catholicism in general can be found in my previous article, "Asian Culture and Catholicism: Voices of Vietnamese American Youth," *Rite*, July/August 2003, Volume 34, Number 4.

12. This missionary has been considered the Father of Vietnamese Catholicism. Rhodes developed a system of catechesis, helped form the national script of the Vietnamese language, and laid the foundation for future missionaries.

13. In an unpublished master's thesis, Reverend Thai gives a succinct overview of the history and explores the spirituality of the martyrs for today's Church: "The Spirituality of the Vietnamese Martyrs, 1745–1862," St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, California, 2003.

14. Thai, 84.

15. Highly recommended reading for appreciating Vietnamese Catholicism and spirituality is *The Miracle of Hope, Political Prisoner, Prophet of Peace, the Life of Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan* by Andre Van Chau (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2003).

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He frequently travels to Vietnam and coordinates Study Tour Pilgrimages for American liturgists and ministers (www.VNPilgrimage.com). Photos on pages 5–7 are by the author; those on page 8 are by Reverend Michael Fowler, OFM.

After eight years, the Study Tour Pilgrimages mentioned in the bio have been discontinued.

Vietnamese liturgical music resources and other cultural resources can be found at OCPVN.org