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Review article

Mary Kim Anh Thi Tran, *Our Lady of La Vang: History and Theology of a Vietnamese Devotion*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2024. xix + 237 pages. \$34.00.

Mariological studies have for too long focused on Europe and the western hemisphere, neglecting the vast history of Marian apparitions and devotion in Asia and other parts of the world. Therefore, Sr. Mary Kim Anh Thi Tran's comprehensive study of Our Lady of La Vang is a refreshing addition to the field of Mariological studies. Mary appeared to a group of Vietnamese Catholics who had fled to the remote forest of La Vang in 1799 to pray the rosary each night during a period of intense government persecution. Her encouraging message has prompted trust in her care and accompaniment through two centuries of war and continued persecution. Throughout *Our Lady of La Vang: History and Theology of a Vietnamese Devotion*, Sr. Kim Anh weaves this fascinating account to create a compelling narrative of inculturation, love, and devotion. The author crafts a rich theological framework through the story of the apparition and the history of Vietnamese devotion to Our Lady of La Vang (OLLV).

This book seeks to demonstrate that OLLV is the ecclesial Mother of the Church in Vietnam and, at the same time, the ecclesial Mother of the universal church (3). The author begins with the challenging task of recounting the story of the apparition by integrating both oral and written histories. She accounts for the tension between indigenous belief and Christian faith, as well as the socio-political factors that sparked persecution. The next two chapters explore devotion to OLLV as a fundamental aspect of Vietnamese Catholicism and its growth over the last two centuries. The second half of the text develops a theological foundation for OLLV as an ecclesial mother through the history of the title Mother of the Church and how earlier Marian titles found a unique home in the story and devotion to OLLV (147). Sr. Kim Anh analyzes the Vietnamese tradition of Marian devotion and examines the recent contributions of twenty-first century theologians.

While this book offers a wealth of information about Vietnamese Catholicism and devotion to OLLV, the most significant contribution to Mariological studies is that it fills a significant lacuna in the understanding of Marian devotion within a global socio-political context beyond Europe and North America. The author's skillful analysis of the early and recent literature related to the apparition is integrated with careful analysis of Vietnamese history, both domestically and internationally, especially related to the political conflicts and globalization in the twentieth century. The descriptions of how the sanctuary of OLLV became a significant site of refuge during stages of political chaos reflect Mariology in the Vietnamese context by accounting for the social, cultural, and political circumstances that have shaped Vietnamese Marian devotion (98). The vivid picture that Sr. Kim Anh paints of the pilgrimages and shrines, in which she describes the songs, rituals, and music, helps the reader understand why trust in OLLV has spread beyond the Christian faithful to others—locally, nationally, and internationally.

One of the more intriguing aspects of this book is how the author explores the adaptation of the way Church teachings are presented to non-Christian cultures and, in turn, the influence of those cultures on the evolution of these teachings. Sr. Kim Anh describes the story of OLLV as the story of the inculturation of the Catholic faith in Vietnam (1). Her



meticulous research shows that inculturation, though often wrongly regarded as simply a post-Vatican II concern, has in fact been occurring for centuries in Vietnam through the cult of OLLV. Each chapter progressively shows how devotion to OLLV became inculturated at the local and universal levels. The author notes examples from the introduction of Marian devotion by early French missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through more than two centuries of devotion to OLLV that both adapted to indigenous Vietnamese culture and shaped universal devotion to Mary. This aspect of the text can serve as a practical case study for those seeking to conceptualize the theoretical descriptions of inculturation in Catholic Church history presented by other authors.

It is impossible to discuss every aspect in a groundbreaking research project for a given subject. In this case, Sr. Kim Anh adeptly creates a historical and theological treatise of OLLV in this first full-length English language text. Nevertheless, her frequent allusions to the interreligious implications of OLLV can leave the reader with more questions than answers. She first acknowledges the importance of connecting with other religious traditions, especially in the Vietnamese context where Marian devotion is related to the Buddhist veneration of Bodhisattvas. Later, she notes that even the earliest scholars who write about OLLV emphasized the graces that Mary offered to both Christian and non-Christians (21), a trend that has continued among the pilgrims of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as “La Vang is the house of all Vietnamese people, both Christians and non-Christians” (104). These examples, although certainly not a weakness of the text, offer a starting point for further research to fully appreciate the implications of the author’s claim that OLLV is the mother of all Vietnamese people.

The meticulous and comprehensive approach of *Our Lady of La Vang* by Sr. Mary Kim Anh Thi Tran offers a necessary empirical contribution to the fields of Mariological studies and World Christianity. The author magnificently describes Mariology in the wider context of the universal church, primarily from a magisterial perspective, and then effectively integrates the local specificity. The text, although decidedly focused on the Vietnamese context, should be read by anyone with an interest in Marian devotion or the inculturated growth of Catholicism in Asia. To be sure, Sr. Kim Anh is not content simply to tell the story of Vietnamese Marian devotion. Rather, she effectively integrates the social, cultural, and political factors that have shaped the mutual love and fidelity between Mary and the Vietnamese people.