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**Title:** The Virgin Mary as a Source of Strength, Comfort, and Hope for Asian Women: Our Lady of La Vang (Vietnam) and Our Lady of Health (Vailankanni, India)

## Abstract

Asian women are often vulnerable to gender discrimination and abuse that leaves them persecuted or dispossessed. The Virgin Mary can be a source of sisterly or motherly strength and hope for women who face hardships and challenges. This paper examines two instances of Marian apparitions in Asia, La Vang in Vietnam and Vailankanni in India, where widespread veneration of the Blessed Mother provides hope for persecuted and vulnerable women. Mary provides a model of feminine authority against systemic patriarchy and a source of solidarity across religious and national boundaries for oppressed and marginalized women. A comparison of these two Marian images and shrines may offer insight into the role of Mary as a source of strength for women in other parts of Asia and the world.

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## The Virgin Mary as a source of strength

Asian feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung argues that “Asian women are oppressed economically, socially, politically, religiously, and culturally in specific ways just because they are women.”<sup>1</sup> Patriarchal society in Vietnam and India can leave women marginalized and facing discrimination in all aspects of life. Women in Vietnam are treated as inferior, especially in family life, society, and education. Likewise, women in India are often victimized by economic, sexual, and social practices that leave them searching for a source of hope. Although Christianity is a minority in both Vietnam and India, the Virgin Mary is recognized by women who pray at her shrines and by some Asian feminist theologians<sup>2</sup> as a source of strength and comfort. According to oral tradition, Christianity reached India with St. Thomas the Apostle in the first century. The arrival of European missionaries in the fifteenth century helped spark the growth of Catholicism, and Our Lady appeared in Vailankanni at the end of the sixteenth century. European missionaries first appeared in Vietnam in the sixteenth century with Our Lady of La Vang appearing in 1798. Catholics recognize Mary’s advocacy for the marginalized in the words of the Magnificat when she says, “He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly” (Lk 1:52), while non-Catholics acknowledge her motherly care and power on behalf of those who are suffering. Asian feminist and liberation theologians have sought to recast Mary from a traditional emphasis on her virginity and submissiveness, to her strength and power on behalf of justice for the marginalized.

The Virgin Mary can be a source of sisterly or motherly strength and hope for women who face hardships and challenges. A comparison of the shrines and images at two instances of Marian apparitions in Asia, La Vang in Vietnam and Vailankanni in India, where widespread veneration of the Blessed Mother provides hope for persecuted and vulnerable women, may offer insight into the role of Mary as a source of strength for women. While first considering the historical context of the two apparitions and challenges for women in India and Vietnam, this essay will examine Marian veneration and Mary as a source of comfort and strength to

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<sup>1</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 24.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Asian feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung in *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, Indian feminist theologian Pauline Chakkalakkal, “Mary of Nazareth: An Indian Feminist Theological Perspective,” in *Breaking Silence: Theology from Asian Women’s Perspective*, ed. Meehyun Chung, 23-40 (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), and Vietnamese feminist theologian Thien-Huong Ninh (2018), “Holy Mothers in the Vietnamese Diaspora: Refugees, Community, and Nation” *Religions* 9, no. 8: 233.



provide hope for marginalized and dispossessed women in Vietnam and India. A significant observation is that Marian apparitions and shrines provide an example of feminine authority that challenges patriarchal society. The conclusion will consider an application to Marian images in other parts of Asia and the world.

## Context and History

For Asian women, both Catholic and non-Catholic, Mary is a relatable figure and a model of inspiration. Women in Asian countries with political turmoil and armed conflict, identify Mary as a mother who has similarly suffered as her child was killed or taken political prisoner for actions on behalf of justice and love. Her example gives grieving mothers, wives, and daughters strength in their struggle against state repression and personal despair.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Marian theology could be more relevant to Asian women if more attention is given to socio-political realities, such as Mary's flight into Egypt, her exile, and the challenge by her Son to the religious establishment and foreign rulers. Chung Hyun Kyung approvingly describes the Virgin Mary as a "self-defining woman," a symbol of strength who is free to serve God, she is a woman "in solidarity with other women and the oppressed."<sup>4</sup> Mary's example and model are an inspiration for Asian women, one with whom they can identify.

Marian devotion has played an important role in the life of the Vietnamese Church since the arrival of Western missionaries in the sixteenth century. The special devotion to Mary by Vietnamese Catholics was heavily influenced by Iberian missionaries, especially those from the Jesuit, Franciscan, and Dominican orders. According to Vietnamese theologian Peter Phan, one result from the inspiration of Iberian Catholicism was that "devotion to Mary assumed a prominent place."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, these seeds of Marian piety in the hearts of Vietnamese Catholics, sewn by the European missionaries, proved instrumental in fostering a spirituality that could withstand the persecution and struggles of the next two centuries.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2003), 296.

<sup>4</sup> Chung. *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, 76-80.

<sup>5</sup> Peter C Phan, "Mary in Vietnamese Piety and Theology," *Theology Digest* 49, no. 3 (2002): 244–52.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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Our Lady of La Vang  
<https://www.cdmedongcong.net>

Vietnamese Catholics were persecuted in the late eighteenth century because of the attempts of Emperor Cảnh Thịnh to limit the practice of Catholicism. As a result, many sought refuge in the forest of La Vang where they gathered every evening under a banyan tree<sup>7</sup> to recite the Rosary. While gathering one night in August 1798, the assembled crowd saw a beautiful lady, dressed in white, surrounded in light, holding an infant boy in her arms, with two angels standing beside her and holding a torch. Her feet were touching the ground and she walked back and forth several times in front of them.<sup>8</sup> Then she stopped and told them in a sweet voice: “My children, what you have asked of me, I have granted you, and henceforth, whoever will come here to pray to me, I will listen to them.”<sup>9</sup> The Catholics who were present interpreted this apparition to be the Virgin Mary and her infant child Jesus. A small chapel was built on this sacred site in 1901 and followed by growing numbers of Vietnamese faithful coming to La Vang to pray to Mary.<sup>10</sup> The first national pilgrimage at the shrine was in 1928 with the Vietnamese Church celebrating the La Vang festival every three years. When many people of the North migrated to the South in 1954, some Christians chose La Vang to build a community.<sup>11</sup> The shrine was destroyed by bombing during the Vietnam War in 1975 but was rebuilt and established as a National Marian Shrine.

The Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health in Vailankanni, Tamil Nadu, is at the site of the only Marian apparition recognized for public veneration by the Catholic Church in South Asia. The village of Vailankanni, due to its proximity to the tomb of Thomas in Mylapore, was placed under the care of the Franciscan missionaries from the sixteenth until the twentieth century. Despite a loss of political control from the Portuguese to the anti-Catholic Dutch colonialists

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<sup>7</sup> Mary appeared under a banyan tree in both La Vang and Vailankanni. The banyan tree is religiously and culturally significant in both India and Vietnam. It is mentioned in both Hindu and Buddhist texts and known for its miraculous healing powers. In Vietnam it is connected to life in the community or village, often linked to the well.

<sup>8</sup> Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 100.

<sup>9</sup> Chu Q. Tran, “Tổng Giáo Phận Huế (The Diocese of Hue),” *Sự Tích Đức Mẹ La Vang (The Story of Our Lady of La Vang)*, 2009, [http://tonggiaophanhue.net/home/dulieu/lavang/lavang\\_phan1.htm](http://tonggiaophanhue.net/home/dulieu/lavang/lavang_phan1.htm).

<sup>10</sup> Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 101.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond J. De Jaeger, “Our Lady of the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel,” *The Catholic Herald*, 8.

in the seventeenth century, the Franciscans oversaw the shrine until it became part of the Thanjavur Diocese. The main basilica includes an upper and lower church and three full chapels. There are also churches built at the sites of the original apparitions, the ten-thousand-person capacity Morning Star Church, a separate chapel for confessions, a museum, a Marian studies institute, and a nearly one-half mile long penitential holy path for pilgrims to walk or crawl from the basilica to the site of the first apparition.

One somewhat unique aspect of this apparition is that her first encounters are with Hindus, rather than a Catholic. Mary first appeared to a Hindu boy as a Tamil mother, carrying



Our Lady of Health  
Shrine Basilica of Vailankanni

the Christ child, in local dress. Our Lady of Health is portrayed at the shrine in a golden sari, adorned with gold jewelry, and standing over a crescent moon, which resonates with Hindu imagery. Her second appearance was to the crippled son of a poor widow who was selling buttermilk in a place near the first apparition. Her silent request to the boy was milk for her child and that he inform a rich Catholic in the town to have a chapel built in her honor. He found that he was healed after granting her request. A third apparition occurred in the early seventeenth century, when sailors on a

Portuguese ship prayed to Mary during a storm in the Bay of Bengal and were safely delivered to the shore near the village. The Portuguese then became the builders and benefactors of the modern Shrine of Vailankanni.<sup>12</sup>

## Challenges for Women

Although Asian women share neither a common language nor unifying culture, there are common challenges that women face across the continent. Asian women greatly suffer from multiple oppressions that result from sexism, classism, and neocolonialism, which are then exhibited in both society and family.<sup>13</sup> For example, discrimination persists in access to

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<sup>12</sup> *The History of The Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health, Vailankanni: The Lourdes of the East* (Tiruchirappalli, India: Sixth Computers Printing, 2019), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 25.

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education and equal compensation of pay for educated women in professional jobs. The patriarchal societies and misogynistic worldviews in parts of Asia continue to place men above women of equal or greater abilities. Discrimination in Asian culture prevents women from developing their full potential of skills and talents. In addition, for Asian women, study in the field of science and technology is underrepresented because many people consider women to not have the cognitive ability to study in this area; likewise, it remains difficult for them to find jobs if they have studied in this field.<sup>14</sup> This culture bounds women to household work or birthing, nursing, and raising children. Furthermore, Asian women frequently have no voice in family decisions, meaning that their lives depend on male figures. Their limited voice also extends to limitations in society and politics.

Chinese invasions into Vietnam introduced Confucian ideology, which considers females to be inferior. This ideology became deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture and created a gender inequality where women suffer greatly from discrimination. One frightening example of this inequality is illustrated in the popular Vietnamese proverb *Nhất nam viết hữu, thập nữ viết vô* / if a couple gives birth to a boy, they are considered to have a treasure; whereas, if they have ten girls but no boy, they are seen to have nothing. If the wife after a few years of marriage cannot give birth to a boy but only girls, the husband can divorce the wife, or he can find another woman to live with. This concept leads to many social evils, such as abortion, divorce, or extra-marriage to have male offspring. In this male-dominated Confucian culture, women face discrimination in all aspects of life, especially in education, family, and society. Women in Vietnamese society are expected to be submissive to men and have no voice in family decisions. Moreover, Vietnamese women must practice the four virtues (*tứ đức*): *Công* (diligent work), *dung* (pleasing appearance), *ngôn* (appropriate speech), and *hạnh* (moral conduct).<sup>15</sup> According to Confucian ideas, *Công* (diligent work) requires that a woman must have the ability to give birth to children, especially a baby boy, nurture them, and be healthy and full of energy to serve her parents-in-law. Women in feudal society suffer in silence and become “without emotion” because they have no voice when

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<sup>14</sup> The Asian Foundation, “Accelerating Women's Advancement in STEM: Emerging Lessons on Network Strategies and Approaches in Asia,” June 2021, 11. [https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Accelerating-Womens-Advancement-in-STEM\\_Report\\_update7.26.21.pdf](https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Accelerating-Womens-Advancement-in-STEM_Report_update7.26.21.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 52–53.



faced with their husband's mistress, drinking, gambling, or even his concubine.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, women were historically denied education and encouraged only to learn and practice the three submissions and four virtues.

Culturally, the patriarchal social order of India limits the power and decision-making ability of women. Metti Amirtham argues that "the social systems of India control women in such a way that she has no other choice except to submit herself to patriarchal values."<sup>17</sup> Women are unequal partners in life, dependent on their fathers, husbands, or sons, becoming servants of the family who are subject to physical and psychological domestic violence. The social reality of India includes millions of poor who are exploited and socially marginalized - especially women and children, religious and ethnic discrimination, ongoing violent conflicts and violations of human rights that result in refugees from war or oppressive economic conditions, ecological destruction, and small pockets of rich who control the destinies of the poor while enjoying power and status.<sup>18</sup> Development, which is controlled by the rich and elite, has overexploited natural resources, resulting in further impoverishment of tribal societies, particularly of women. The process of development that is enforced in India leads to the subjugation of women, which is exacerbated by the trauma and cost of war, and which destroys the family structure and causes many women to become refugees in their own country.<sup>19</sup> Women are also much more vulnerable than men to abuse and trafficking when forced into migration or displacement. Furthermore, armed conflict in South Asia illustrates the subjugation and oppression of women through the humiliation and forced submission that occurs from violations committed by combatants and militants.<sup>20</sup>

Although the Catholic Church has never deliberately attempted to degrade women and its position has evolved over the past century, its teaching has rarely reflected the concerns

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<sup>16</sup> Wei-Ming Tu, "Probing the 'Three Bonds' and 'Five Relationships' in Confucian Humanism," in *Confucianism and the Family*, ed. Walter H. Slote and George A. De Vos (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 155.

<sup>17</sup> Metti Amirtham. *Women in India: Negotiating Body, Reclaiming Agency* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2011), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (Eugene: Orbis Books, 1997), 135.

<sup>19</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*. Ed. Helen Stanton (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 180.

<sup>20</sup> Dinesh Kumar Singh, "Women, Security, Peace, and Conflict in South Asia," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 71, no. 2 (April-June 2010): 656.

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of feminist theologians. When women throughout the world fight for equality with men, the Church continues to recognize the role and duties of women as interpreted by scripture. Throughout the twentieth century, the church was consistent in supporting some women's rights, but rejected the possibility of full equality because, in accordance with natural law, women's role bestows on them a crucial position in family and social life.<sup>21</sup> One example has been the Church's rejection of the possibility of women's ordination, which many feminist theologians see as a clear example of denying the opportunity and participation in decision-making to women.

Notably, magisterial teaching failed to acknowledge the crucial roles or responsibilities of men in families. A shift began with *The Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, which claims that women have been discriminated against in every aspect of life, such as education, pay for work, and position in society.<sup>22</sup> Most recently, Pope Francis has called for radical equality between a husband and wife in marriage and opposes discrimination where women are paid lower than men.<sup>23</sup> Although the Church advocates equality between male and female, it sees no perfect equality as there is a difference in the nature of female and male. Nevertheless, a male-dominated ideology persists in many Asian churches.

Although Marian issues were rejected as a separate schema for the Second Vatican Council, they appeared in the final chapter of *Lumen Gentium* and featured prominently in many key speeches of the Council. The final chapter of *Lumen Gentium* only reiterated major tenets of the Church's teaching on Mary from a scriptural perspective, providing no new theological concepts. However, Pope Paul VI's encyclical before the final session, *Mense Maio* (April 29, 1965), made some steps toward effectively connecting Marian veneration with liberation. The document relates Mary's experience of "the cares and hardships of earthly life, weariness of toil, trials of poverty, and sorrows" as a means for solidarity with the poor

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<sup>21</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Octogesima Adveniens," May 14, 1971, no. 13, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_apl\\_19710514\\_octogesima-adveniens.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html).

<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, "Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women," June 29, 1995, no. 3, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_29061995\\_women.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html).

<sup>23</sup> Independent Catholic News, "Pope Francis: Christianity Calls for Radical Equality between Men and Women," April 29, 2015, <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/27320>.



and suffering.<sup>24</sup> This is one of the rare instances of Church teaching relating Mary's experience as relevant to the need for protecting the vulnerable while engaging with the powerful. The distorted portrayal of Mary and other biblical women has led Christian women in general to submit themselves to clerical domination in God's name. Thus, Pauline Chakkalakkal argues that "the task of a new Mariology" is to "let the Virgin of the Annunciation and the radical woman of the Magnificat to stand up."<sup>25</sup> As Church teaching has failed to reflect the concerns of feminist theologians, it has likewise historically portrayed an image of Mary that fails to resonate with Asian women.

### **Marian Veneration**

Mary's role as Mother, who is always ready to listen with affection and assistance, leads people to turn with confidence to her to find comfort in tribulation, relief in sickness, and refuge from the trials of life. Comfort is an essential component of any bereavement process that is necessary to facilitate reconciliation and the empowerment of women for the pursuit of justice, to challenge systems of oppression.<sup>26</sup> In patriarchal societies where women face discrimination or worse, true liberation can only occur when the wisdom, love, and purity of Mary is present.<sup>27</sup> Veneration, for both Catholics and Muslims, is an act of honoring a person who has a high degree of sanctity or holiness. This is a lower level of devotion from worship, which is reserved for the one true God. Hindus and Buddhists, alternatively, often worship Mary as a Mother goddess. These theological differences must be acknowledged but should not be an impediment for Mary providing strength, comfort, and hope to those who seek her intercession.

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<sup>24</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Mense Maio: On Prayers During May for Preservation of Peace," Vatican, April 29, 1965.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_29041965\\_mense-maio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_29041965_mense-maio.html).

<sup>25</sup> Chakkalakkal, "Mary of Nazareth: An Indian Feminist Theological Perspective," 35.

<sup>26</sup> Comfort of trauma helps to reduce the chance of further violence and oppression, as those with unmitigated suffering often feel justified in imposing pain or violence on others. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 24.

<sup>27</sup> Vandana Mataji, *And the Mother of Jesus Was There: Mary in the Light of Indian Spirituality* (Mumbai: Saint Paul Press, 2011), 15.

## The Virgin Mary as a source of strength

There are numerous reasons for why Mary appeals to women as a protector. For many Asian women of any religious tradition, there is a strong belief in the tremendous intercessory power and compassionate love of Mary's heart. For women oppressed by husbands, society, or other male authority, Marian apparitions provide an agent of the miraculous or an inspirational support.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Mary is a relatable figure as a mother, sister, or as a woman who faced challenges and suffering in her own life. At Marian shrines in South Asia, most intercessory prayers are related to fertility, motherhood, and healing. Thus, the image of the mother and child, as Mary is portrayed in both La Vang and Vailankanni, helps make her recognizable as an ideal maternal figure.

Marian veneration is deeply rooted in the heart of many Vietnamese Catholics. Mary is revered as a Mother who is merciful, powerful, consoling, and who accompanies the faithful in their lives. Veneration for Our Lady of La Vang has remained a significant manifestation of this devotion for more than two centuries. Her appearance in 1798 to console the group of persecuted Catholics moved them to dedicate themselves to Mary and trust in her more deeply. La Vang is known as a sacred place where people come to dialogue with Mary about the difficulties in their lives. Mary is a mediator between people and God, one who will intercede for them in prayer. Therefore, La Vang's "Sacred Space" became an important part in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people. This remains true even for those Vietnamese people who were forced to leave the country and settle elsewhere after the war in 1975. Wherever they resided, they created for themselves "their own" La Vang, a "Sacred Space" to help them feel the real presence of Our Lady of La Vang beside them.<sup>29</sup> In the mind and heart of Vietnamese persons there is always a private "sacred space" for Our Lady by taking her statue with them to remind them of Mary's presence.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Simon Coleman, "Mary in a Mobile World: The Anthropology of a Moving Symbol," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 610.

<sup>29</sup> Eleonore Villarrubia, "Our Lady of La Vang: The Catholic Side of Vietnam," *Catholicism.Org*, January 24, 2013, <https://catholicism.org/our-lady-of-la-vang-the-catholic-side-of-vietnam.html>.

<sup>30</sup> For example, in my case, before coming to study in the U.S.A., my first thought was to carry with me was a small statue of Our Lady of La Vang to place on an altar in my room to create a sacred space of my own where I could revere her. With this, I feel her real presence beside me where I can communicate with her every moment of the day about my difficulties; and through my prayers to her, I believe she will intercede to God for me.



Mary's appearance in La Vang continues to inspire thousands of faithful to engage in pilgrimage to the site. Her words "My children, have faith and be brave. I have heard your prayers. What you have asked of me I have granted you; and henceforth, whoever will come here to pray to me, I will listen to them," inspire confidence and trust in her intercession.<sup>31</sup> Most Vietnamese Catholics conduct a pilgrimage to Our Lady of La Vang at least one time during their lives. The focus of intercessory prayers include help with fertility, refuge from domestic violence or alcoholic husbands, and other challenges that women face. Moreover, Mary is perceived as the "morning star," who can guide them to their destination and show them how to act in the face of challenges. There are also numerous accounts of miracles attributed to veneration at the shrine in La Vang. The spreading of the stories about the miracles causes even more people to visit the Our Lady of La Vang to tell Mary about their difficulties. While tens of thousands of pilgrims attend the Marian festival in La Vang every three years, special events such as the two-hundredth anniversary of the apparition in 1998 and the one-hundredth anniversary of the annual pilgrimage have drawn hundreds of thousands to the shrine.<sup>32</sup> The pilgrimages to the La Vang Shrine illustrate the love and belief of Vietnamese Catholics, especially women, in Mary. They come to venerate her, express their gratitude, and share the sorrows, difficulties, and sufferings in their lives with the belief that Mary will give them strength, comfort, and hope.

Across South Asia, devotion to the Virgin Mary occurs in homes, churches, and grottoes located at schools and other shrines. India's largest shrine to the Virgin Mary is near the site of the apparitions to Our Lady of Health, in Vailankanni, dating to the sixteenth century. This is one of the most popular Christian shrines among Hindu and Muslim devotees and, although in a heavily Catholic populated area, draws more non-Christian than Christian

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<sup>31</sup> Chu Q. Tran, "Sự Tích Đức Mẹ La Vang (The Story of Our Lady of La Vang), 2009," *Tổng Giáo Phận Huế (The Diocese of Hue)*, 2009, [http://tonggiaophanhue.net/home/dulieu/lavang/lavang\\_phan1.htm](http://tonggiaophanhue.net/home/dulieu/lavang/lavang_phan1.htm).

<sup>32</sup> Lâm Tùng Nguyễn, trans., "Ngày Đức Gioan-Phaolô II Ra Lệnh Cho Những Người Cộng Sản Xây Lại Nhà Thờ La Vang (The Day Pope John Paul II Asks the Communists to Rebuild the Lavang's Church)," *Tin Công Giáo*, accessed August 16, 2022, [http://www.tincongghiao24h.com/2022/08/ngay-uc-gioan-phaolo-ii-ra-lenh-cho.html?fbclid=IwAR1EAoEaUOEEdsCvov7FCzF-Alg82avs6Q2x9v1d\\_2W70Hqz61kJuJf\\_TOR8&m=1](http://www.tincongghiao24h.com/2022/08/ngay-uc-gioan-phaolo-ii-ra-lenh-cho.html?fbclid=IwAR1EAoEaUOEEdsCvov7FCzF-Alg82avs6Q2x9v1d_2W70Hqz61kJuJf_TOR8&m=1); "200,000 Giáo Dân Về La Vang Hành Hương Kỷ Niệm 100 Năm," *Việt Báo*, August 16, 2001, <https://vietbao.com/a42946/200-000-giao-dan-ve-la-vang-hanh-huong-ky-niem-100-nam>; Truyền Thông Tổng Giáo Phận Huế, "Thánh Lễ Dịp Hành Hương La Vang 2022 (The Pilgrims' Mass Lavang 2022)," August 16, 2022, <https://gpbanmethuot.net/Tin-tuc/thanh-le-dip-hanh-huong-la-vang-2022-10147.html>.

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pilgrims.<sup>33</sup> The shrine is visited by over five million pilgrims, of all faiths, each year. The dominant themes for intercession at the shrine are healing or good health and fertility. The form of a healing mother is distinct and familiar to Hindus; thus, the most beloved representations of the divine in South India are as mother and as child, rather than Jesus on the Cross or the risen Christ.<sup>34</sup> There are increasing numbers of devotees from all religious groups for Marian festivals in Vailankanni, such as the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.<sup>35</sup> When Mary appears to her devotees in Vailankanni, she exhibits the dress and markings of a blessed Tamil mother. She takes the form of a goddess for her Hindu devotees, Muslims venerate her for being the mother of the prophet Jesus, and for Christians she is the Holy Mother of God.<sup>36</sup>

Given the social hierarchy of India, it is interesting that Our Lady of Health attracts devotees from diverse religious, caste, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Numerous facilities are provided at the shrine to facilitate the spiritual needs of pilgrims. In addition to low-cost accommodations, three congregations of religious sisters are present at the shrine to care for their pastoral needs. One nun noted that although it is possible to differentiate the religious affiliation of some pilgrims, especially Muslim women in hijab, it is very difficult to determine the faith tradition of most pilgrims, and often there is a blend of several – especially when they visit the shrine in Vailankanni.<sup>37</sup> Their religious identity is unimportant, however, for the sisters as they seek to promote veneration of the Virgin Mother. Many of the pilgrims, a majority of whom are women, seek Mary's intercession for healing or fertility. It is also common to see pilgrims (mainly women) who shave their heads in an act of penance or offering to increase the likelihood of Mary's intercession.

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<sup>33</sup> Kristin Bloomer estimates that up to 70% of the pilgrims are non-Catholics, predominantly Hindus, although also Muslims, Protestant and Orthodox Christians, and other faiths, see Bloomer, "Religion and Hindu-Christian Relations," 231; Other estimates claim that about 35% of the Vailankanni pilgrims are non-Catholic, although most observers concede that they cannot differentiate by sight between Hindu or Christian pilgrims, see Locklin, *Vernacular Catholicism, Vernacular Saints*, 83.

<sup>34</sup> Narayanan Vasudha, "Response: Shared and Contested Spaces: Hindu-Christian Relations Through a Performing Arts Lens," in *The Routledge Handbook of Hindu-Christian Relations*, ed. Chad Bauman and Michelle Voss Roberts (New York: Routledge, 2021), 463.

<sup>35</sup> Johann Waghorne, "Chariots of the God/s: Riding the Line Between Hindu and Christian," in *Popular Christianity in India*, ed. Selva Raj and Corrine Dempsey (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>37</sup> Derived from author's conversation with Sr. Anisha, IHM, at the Basilica Shrine on 11 June 2022.



There are numerous similarities in the veneration of Our Lady in Vietnam and India. The two shrines are in countries where the majority of the populations are non-Christian, and Christianity is perceived as a foreign (Western) religion. Alternatively, Mary – specifically her manifestations as Our Lady of Health and Our Lady of La Vang – is seen as a local woman. In both instances, Mary appeared under a banyan tree, which has religious significance in Buddhist, Hindu, and Vietnamese culture. Furthermore, the connection to local indigenous religions is evident in the connection of Mary with cults of the mother goddess.<sup>38</sup> A commonality of the cultures in South and Southeast Asia, however, is the importance of the mother and child, indicated by Mary appearing with the infant Jesus in both Vailankanni and La Vang. This may contribute to the consistency in themes of women praying to Mary for help with fertility, protection, healing, and family struggles.

Although Mary is portrayed as a local woman and draws devotees from multiple religious traditions, there are some differences. Oral tradition describes Our Lady of Health as appearing as a Tamil mother, local to Vailankanni. Alternatively, while Our Lady of La Vang is depicted in traditional Vietnamese dress and holding the infant Jesus, she was also accompanied by two angels. Both Catholics and non-Catholics alike are drawn to the shrines, yet interfaith veneration is much more prevalent in Vailankanni. One reason for this may be that Mary appeared in Tamil Nadu nearly two hundred years before she appeared in Vietnam, and it takes time for the word to spread of her intercession to non-Christians. It is worth noting, however, that Our Lady of La Vang is referred to as “Our Lady of Christian Help,” while Mary appeared to Hindus during her first two apparitions in Vailankanni. Nevertheless, each shrine is a place where suffering women can come to Mary to ask for help amid suffering and oppression.

### **Mary as a Source of Comfort and Strength**

Mary can be a source of hope, strength, and comfort, especially to the marginalized and vulnerable. For women troubled by discrimination and social violence, this feminine vision of

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<sup>38</sup> The mother-goddess cult in Vietnam and India is popular due to agricultural society dependence on nature. It is often related to the Boddhisattva among Buddhists in Vietnam, while in Tamil Nadu, the most direct correlation is with the local Hindu deity Mariyamman (Mother Mary).

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unconditional love, peace, and forgiveness holds unique power and a palpable presence that is proximate and immediate.<sup>39</sup> From the Magnificat, we notice how Mary's view of God will not let her resign to a situation where the powerful oppress the lowly. She rejects the necessity of long-term suffering and sacrificing of the marginalized for a stable and secure society. Suffering women and grieving mothers can call on Mary for strength as they protect and provide for their young, their families, and their communities.<sup>40</sup> In the case of gender-based violence and social discrimination, Mary protects and defends her offspring, especially the most vulnerable against a cultural system of violence. Feminist theologians Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer describe how when the vulnerable are "near her, they are obviously safe, protected, free of the threats and dangers of everyday life."<sup>41</sup> This image expresses the frailty of the human condition amid a search for security, while also expressing symbolically Mary's strength.

Mary was at the foot of the cross when Jesus gave her to us as our mother (John 19:26-27), and as our mother, she wants to comfort us. Mary's status as Comforter of the Afflicted in the *Salve Regina* is articulated by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where "as a true mother, she walks at our side, she shares our struggles and she constantly surrounds us with God's love."<sup>42</sup> For women oppressed by a patriarchal culture and gender discrimination, Mary can be a source of comfort. She is "the mother, the sweetness, the one to whom we can run, the one who understands all our afflictions and sufferings, the one who consoles and protects us."<sup>43</sup> What this protection and comfort provides, for those confronted with the devastation of warfare and injustice, is hope. As Pope Francis conveys, Mary is a source, "As mother of all, she is a sign of hope for peoples suffering the birth pangs of justice."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Linda Hall, *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ana Castillo, "Extraordinarily Woman," in *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, ed. Ana Castillo (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 78.

<sup>41</sup> Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 1989), 142.

<sup>42</sup> Pope Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium: The Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World," November 24, 2013, 286. [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

<sup>43</sup> Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 122.

<sup>44</sup> Pope Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium," 286.



Women in Vietnam have long struggled and faced inequalities in the patriarchal Confucian society. However, a complicating factor arrived in the seventeenth century when Western missionaries brought the image of Virgin Mary as something to contradict Confucian ideology. Remarkably, when Jesuit missionaries introduced Mary to Vietnamese Christians, Mary was accepted and venerated as a powerful and merciful woman. Mary's power is expressed most explicitly through her late eighteenth-century appearance in La Vang, with the promise of helping people suffering persecution from the government. By offering protection from suffering, Mary is considered as both merciful and powerful. The mercy of Mary is not "a mere sense of pity or a sentimental sympathy (suffering with). Rather, it moves the compassionate person to action. For example, women who are suffering from abuse find the strength to find peaceful solutions rather than exacerbate the violence. Importantly, pursuing peace does not preclude the necessity of challenging the oppression and persecution. Mercy without powerful action on behalf of the suffering is empty and demeaning."<sup>45</sup> There is a convergence of both power and mercy in Mary; thus, she is a perfect Mother. Therefore, Mary has a special position in the life of Vietnamese Christians. She is a mother with pure love, mercy, and compassion who accompanied her children in their suffering.

Despite the patriarchy that persists within the Catholic Church—and with traditional interpretations of Mary, Our Lady of La Vang has proven to be a considerable source for mitigating the gender inequality by deconstructing the Confucian myth of male superiority. The Church, if it can continue working to overcome its own patriarchal tendencies, could effectively use her to counter women's discrimination, as Vietnamese people view Mary as a powerful woman who can answer their prayers. She can help to dispel the fallacy of women as weak or incapable. She is not only a symbol of a strong woman, but someone who persecuted women can turn to in the face of gender discrimination.

The Marian shrine in Vailankanni attracts women from diverse religious, caste, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Many of the pilgrims, a majority of whom are Hindu or Muslim, seek Mary's intercession for healing or fertility. It is also common to see pilgrims (mainly

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<sup>45</sup> Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 105–6.

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women) who shave their heads in an act of penance or offering to increase the likelihood of Mary's intercession. There is a strong belief from devotees of all religions that Our Lady of Health, regardless of what form she takes in their religious conception, is very powerful.<sup>46</sup> The hope that devotees express in Mary's power is fulfilled in the many Miracles attributed to her intercession. The museum at the shrine bears witness to the dozens of miraculous healings and blessings, if not more, that resulted from praying at the shrine.<sup>47</sup> In a society where women struggle with discrimination and exploitation under patriarchal cultural norms, Mary is a motherly symbol of strength, comfort, and hope.

The image of a mother at the shrines in La Vang and Vailankanni are a source of comfort and hope for the women who visit. In each case, the devotees are living in patriarchal societies and offer similar intercessory prayers for protection, fertility, and healing. Recalling the Magnificat, however, Mary is not a model for passively accepting the adverse circumstances of personal and social life. Although she was a village woman and not a heroic superwoman, Chung Hyun Kyung describes Mary as a liberated woman with a mind and will of her own, capable of self-determination.<sup>48</sup> These shrines are not unique from Marian shrines around the world, which attract more women than men.<sup>49</sup> In countries where women face not only gender discrimination but also a struggle to overcome the legacy and persistent implications of European colonialism, Mary appears as a local woman with authority. This is significant for women living in patriarchal societies, where the shrines allow them to pray to a woman. It is the woman, Mary, who has the power. In Vietnamese and Indian culture, the women are expected to obey the men, but with Our Lady, it is the men who must obey the woman.

The postcolonial environment in Asia saw a return to traditional values and practices that reinforce patriarchal culture and systems. In South and Southeast Asia, the condition of women "is not simply an outcome of an ideology" but reflects how women "are subjugated and exploited through the power of traditions and socio-cultural and religious practices."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bloomer, "Religion and Hindu-Christian Relations," 236.

<sup>47</sup> *The History of the Shrine Basilica*, 89-113.

<sup>48</sup> Chung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, 77.

<sup>49</sup> Tine Von Osselaer, "Marian Piety and Gender: Marian Devotion and the 'Feminization' of Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Christ Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 583.

<sup>50</sup> Amirtham, *Women in India*, 121.





The power and authority that Mary exhibits through the veneration at her shrines in Vailankanni and La Vang challenge this tradition of societal and cultural patriarchy, simultaneously empowering women. This is an example of what Chakkalakkal describes as women “fighting against the dictates of a patriarchal society” and “challenging all oppressive, discriminatory attitudes and structures.”<sup>51</sup> Chakkalakkal, echoing Chung, notes that “the traditional portrait of Mary as a pious, docile, maiden, symbol of passivity and humility, has become a powerful means of domesticating women.”<sup>52</sup> The attempt by these feminist theologians to reimagine Mary as a source of women’s empowerment that can shape the church’s view of women, reflects the symbol of Our Lady as a source of authority in La Vang and Vailankanni to counter patriarchal cultures.

The stark reality of patriarchal oppression of women in Asia is not confined to Catholics but applies across cultural and religious boundaries. Religious plurality, where Christianity is a small minority in Vietnam, India, and most of the Asian continent, requires dialogue across religious traditions. Chakkalakkal asserts that “interreligious dialogue is not a luxury, but a necessity,” that can lead to the promotion of solidarity.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Chung notes that Asian women theologians emphasize Mary’s sisterly solidarity with other women through examples of scandalous pregnancies, providing comfort when seeking shelter, and overcoming fear.<sup>54</sup> The interreligious veneration of Mary at the shrines in Vailankanni and La Vang are a manifestation of this solidarity, that when combined with Mary’s song of liberation in the Magnificat, express the integral liberation that can only be achieved through the mutual efforts of all women who are exploited, oppressed, and marginalized by patriarchal cultures.

Mary with the infant Jesus, as she appears at both shrines, is a symbol of strength in her selfless love. The knowledge that Mary’s child will be persecuted and that she will hold the body of her dead son in her arms is a relatable source of pain for many of the women in South and Southeast Asia. Mary’s strength, silence, and acceptance offer an example of hope and comfort for women in their life challenges. Prayer to Mary can be a compensation to the

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<sup>51</sup> Pauline Chakkalakkal, “Asian Women Reshaping Theology: Challenges and Hopes,” *Feminist Theology* 27 (2001): 23.

<sup>52</sup> Chakkalakkal, “Mary of Nazareth,” 30.

<sup>53</sup> Chakkalakkal, “Asian Women Reshaping Theology,” 30.

<sup>54</sup> Chung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, 80.

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spiritual needs of women oppressed in the religious and social life of a patriarchal society.<sup>55</sup> Efforts by male clergy and theologians to preserve traditional values and practices of Asian culture leave women confined to traditional gender roles and, often, in a situation that can appear hopeless. Mary's strength and authority at the shrines in La Vang and Vailankanni help to upend this power imbalance, providing hope and comfort to women devotees.

## Conclusion

In the late sixteenth century in Tamil Nadu, India, the Virgin Mary appeared twice to young Hindu boys in a poor fishing village on the coast of the Bay of Bengal. Two centuries later she appeared to a group of persecuted Catholics in the rainforest of central Vietnam. Mary's message of justice and liberation for the victims of injustice, both from her voice in the Magnificat and her appearances in La Vang and Vailankanni, remain relevant today for Asian women. Devotion to Mary can be an inspiration amid persecution, oppression, and other life struggles.<sup>56</sup> The challenges for Asian women, especially in Vietnam and India, are exacerbated by a patriarchal society and traditional cultural norms. The Marian apparitions and shrines in La Vang and Vailankanni can be a source of motherly strength, hope, and comfort in the face of these trials. Women devotees at these sites seek Mary's intercession for healing, fertility, and help with the struggles in their lives. The desire for Marian intervention is not limited to Catholics, as her appeal extends to non-Christians as well. This can help to build bridges across religious boundaries; thus, enhancing the possibility of solidarity for women seeking to overcome the struggles of a patriarchal society.

Mary, in both her appearance and example, provides hope, comfort, and strength for women suffering under patriarchal oppression across the Asian continent. Sr. Vasanta Mataji offers Mary as "truly a mother" who can strengthen and provide comfort in "hours of darkness, doubt, despondency, and despair."<sup>57</sup> Most importantly, for Asian women, Mary's

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<sup>55</sup> Dong Zhao, "The Christian Bodhisattva in China: Sinicization of the Virgin Mary in Chinese Literature," in *Representations of the Blessed Virgin Mary in World Literature and Art*, ed. Elena Shabliy (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 102.

<sup>56</sup> Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Mataji, *And the Mother of Jesus Was There*, 48.



symbol of female authority can be a source of strength and hope in confronting patriarchal culture. Mary, in Vailankanni and La Vang, is a model of the Asian woman who can be liberated from an inferior place in society. Her example applies to marginalized women across cultures, national boundaries, and to both Christians and non-Christians.

This article has articulated how Mary can be a source of strength, hope, and comfort to liberate women in Asia, as expressed in the theology of Chung, Chakkalakkal, and others. The authors have relied on their personal observations at La Vang and Vailankanni to craft this argument. Nevertheless, specific field research to explore the intentions and aspirations of female pilgrims at the shrines, as well as in literature dedicated specifically to the shrines, could help to affirm that the figure of Mary has the potential to act as a liberating catalyst for disadvantaged and oppressed Asian women.