

Bishop Thomas Celebrates Opening Mass for Marian Conference



Bishop George Leo Thomas celebrated the Opening Mass for Our Lady of La Vang Marian Conference on October 19, held at the Vietnamese parish. The conference is a celebration of our Lady of La Vang which provides opportunities for prayer, spiritual growth, community building and festivities.

In his homily, Bishop Thomas drew a beautiful delineation of devotion for Our Lady between the persecuted and martyred Catholics who witnessed an apparition of the Blessed Mother in the forest of La Vang and the late Cardinal Francis Nguyen Van Thuan, the former Cardinal of Saigon who was imprisoned by the Communist for 13 years, 9 of those were spent in solitary confinement.

The origin of La Vang is believed to be named for the deep forest in the central region of Vietnam where there was an abundance of Banyan trees. It's also believed the name La Vang came from the Vietnamese meaning of the word "Crying Out" to denote the cries for help of people being persecuted.

The first apparition of the Lady of La Vang was noted in 1798, when the persecution of Vietnamese Catholics began. Many Catholics from the nearby town of Quang Tri sought refuge in the deep forest of La Vang. A great number of these people suffered from the extreme cold weather, wild animals, sickness and starvation. In the evenings, they often gathered in small groups to say the rosary and to pray. Then one night, they were visited by an apparition of a beautiful Lady in a long cape, holding a child in her arms, with two angels at her sides. The people recognized the Lady as Our Blessed Mother.

Our Blessed Mother comforted them and told them to boil the leaves from the surrounding trees to use as medicine. She also told them that from that day on, all those who came to this place to pray, would get their prayers heard and answered.

The history of the Lady of La Vang continues to gain greater significance as more claims from people whose prayers were answered were validated. In April of 1961, the Council of Vietnamese Bishops selected the holy church of La Vang as the National Sacred Marian Center. In August of 1962, Pope John XXIII elevated the church of La Vang to The



Basilica of La Vang. On June 19, 1988, Pope John Paul II in the canonizing ceremony of the 117 Vietnamese martyrs, publicly and repeatedly recognized the importance and significance of the Lady of Lavang and expressed a desire for the rebuilding of the La Vang Basilica to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the first apparition of the Lady of La Vang in August of 1998.

Bishop Thomas' unabridged Homily from the Opening Mass:

October 19, 2018

Marian Conference Opening Mass

Our Lady of La Vang Catholic Church

Bishop George Leo Thomas

For many years, I served as a priest and bishop in the Archdiocese of Seattle. Seattle is also home to a strong and vibrant community of Vietnamese Catholics, not unlike our own here in the Diocese of Las Vegas.

During my time in Seattle, I spent an evening with one of the greatest religious figures of modern times, a man well on his way to sainthood--the late Cardinal Francis Nguyen Van Thuan, the former Cardinal of Saigon.

Cardinal Van Thuan was in Seattle to visit his niece and family, and to minister to the thousands of Vietnamese Catholics residing in the Northwest.

It was very clear that the Cardinal's life story was still very painfully fresh and tender.



Eight years following his ordination as archbishop, then Archbishop Van Thuan was arrested by the Communist government and charged as a conspirator against the Communist regime.

He was held for 13 years in prison without a trial, nine of those years in solitary confinement.

The Cardinal was humble and small in stature, but clearly a giant of the Church.

He was willing to pay the ultimate price, even death itself, for the sake of the Gospel. I could see in his eyes that he still suffered greatly, both in body and in mind, from the burdens he had borne during his confinement.

At age 48, while still in the prime of his life, the young Archbishop was taken away from his people and placed in the hold of a ship along with 1,500 other prisoners. Under the cover of darkness, he was taken to an unknown location in North Vietnam.

During that frightening ordeal, he made his commitment to God and to his people, saying in prayer, *“I will trust you Lord, knowing you will send someone else to do the work in my diocese... Perhaps another even more capable than I. The prison will become my cathedral. These are now the people you have given me to care for, and this will be my mission, to ensure your presence among them, my despairing and miserable brothers. It is your will that I am here. And I accept your will.”*

From that moment on, a deep sense of peace filled the Archbishop’s heart, and remained with him for the next 13 years.

That night I asked him, “Archbishop, were you able to celebrate Mass while you are in prison?” “Yes” he said, “but not without considerable danger.”

During those early months in prison, his family began to send small quantities of wine, supposedly to ease their brother’s stomach pain from which he regularly suffered. But the “medicine” was in fact sacramental wine, which he held in the palm of his hand as he celebrated holy Mass with small fragments of bread.

In the course of those years, miracles began to take place.

Fellow prisoners, some of whom were already Catholic, took turns at night to adore the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Buddhists and non-Christians were converted by the example of the Bishop and his fellow prisoners. The darkness of the prison was bathed in light, and the fragile seeds of faith quietly germinated in the darkness of a prison cell.

Many of the prison guards who held him captive were also converted to the Catholic faith, because, in the words of the Cardinal, the love of Jesus is simply irresistible.

He told us that night, I cannot tell you how moving it is to see the prison guard, a consummate communist, arrive at work in the morning singing the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritu*,--Come, Holy Spirit.

“Deprived of freedom and living in extreme poverty, I was at peace,” said the Cardinal. “I learned from personal experience and from interactions with ordinary people, that it is precisely there, in the face of darkness and desolation that the mystery of Jesus takes on its fullest meaning.”



Over 50 years ago, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote a powerful passage that reflects the spirit of the Cardinal, when they wrote, “Through Christ, and in Him, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from his gospel, they simply overwhelm us.”

The Gospel proclaimed on this holy night sums up so powerfully what we learned from the life of the Cardinal. “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love... This is my commandment: that you love one another.”

Cardinal Van Thuan is given the Church many powerful lessons.

First, he has underscored the power and grace that comes to us from the precious gift of the Eucharist. Eucharist is the life blood of the Church. It is the heartbeat of the Catholic faith, and in the words of St. John Paul II, *Inestimabile Donum*, that is, the Church’s most priceless treasure.

It is my hope that you, as the Vietnamese Catholic community, will always treasure the blessing of the Eucharist, and that as individuals and families, you will ensure that you and your children and your grandchildren will make certain that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the life of your families and communities.

Second, Cardinal Van Thuan taught us not only to love one another, but to love our enemies, and to pray for those who have harmed and persecuted us. There is an old proverb that states, “Those who seek revenge should dig not one grave but two.”

The late Pope St. John Paul II admonished all of us to be practitioners of mercy. Pope Benedict counseled that the Church should always be the home of mercy and the domicile of forgiveness. To paraphrase William Shakespeare, “The quality of mercy falls like gentle rain from heaven, twice blessed, blessing the one who gives and the one who receives.”

The third lesson comes to life in a very special way tonight, as we gather to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary. Cardinal Van Thuan had a deep devotion to Our Lady. She is the Mother of the Church, she is the Mother of Mercy, she is your mother and mine, always ready and willing to assist us in our hour of need.

The words of the great prayer the *Memorare* say it succinctly and well—“Never was it known that anyone who fled to her protection, implored her help, or sought her intercession was left unaided.”

Let her, our dear and Blessed Mother, always have a place of honor in your heart and in your homes. For your soul magnifies the Lord, and draws you and me closer and closer to the heart of her son.

Thank you for inviting me to be with you this night. Please know that you always have my friendship, advocacy and prayerful support.

I count the Vietnamese Catholic Community as one of the greatest treasures in the Diocese of Las Vegas. Thank you and God bless you on this holy happy night.

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