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Queen of Vietnam, Port Arthur: The Curious Origin of the First Vietnamese Catholic Parish in the United States

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Among 281 Vietnamese American Catholic communities active today are about 70 Vietnamese parishes. Their creation ran counter to U.S. bishops' reluctance to establish national parishes in the postwar era. It was therefore unusual that, on March 3, 1977, the bishop of a small Texas diocese announced the establishment of the Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs Parish (later Queen of Vietnam). This event reflected the postcolonial experience of the Church's expansion in South Vietnam and the institutional expectations that refugees carried with them upon resettlement in the U.S. It was also influenced by a conflict between Trần Văn Khoát, a refugee priest, and Warren Boudreaux, the bishop of Beaumont. This article traces the parish's historic establishment to this conflict; highlights the roles of Vietnamese laypeople and the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix; and contextualizes the creation of the first Vietnamese parish into the broader histories of national churches among European immigrants, Cold War refugees, and Asian immigrants.

Keywords: Asian Americans; Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix; Diocese of Beaumont, Texas; national parishes; Queen of Vietnam Parish; Vietnamese refugees

Following the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, tens of thousands of Vietnamese arrived in the United States as refugees. Catholics made up a disproportionately higher percentage among them, with estimates as high as 40 percent.[1] Many Catholic refugees, possibly the majority,

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1. Gail P. Kelly, "Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487 (September 1986): 141.



On March 3, 1977, Warren Boudreaux, bishop of Beaumont, signed the decree establishing Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs Parish in Port Arthur, Texas. Deacon Đỗ Thái Hòa and Father Thái Sơn, both members of the Congregation of Mother Co-Redemptrix, joined him for the signing (Courtesy of the Catholic Archives of Texas, Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops).

were resettled in large metropolitan areas. However, the first three Vietnamese American Catholic parishes were not established in archdioceses with large Vietnamese refugee populations such as Galveston-Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Philadelphia. Rather, they were founded in small dioceses. In southeastern Texas, the Diocese of Beaumont reached a historical milestone when Bishop Warren Boudreaux issued a decree on March 3, 1977, establishing Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs Parish.[2] Two additional establishments followed in 1979: Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in the Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska, in March; and the Blessed Vietnamese Martyrs Parish in the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, in August. By contrast, the Archdiocese of New Orleans, which received many more refugees in 1975, did not create a Vietnamese parish until 1983. Likewise, the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston did not establish one until 1985. Many dioceses with large Vietnamese populations, including the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, have never established a Vietnamese parish. What contributed to these differences? And what led the Diocese of Beaumont to establish a parish for the refugees? In this article, I seek to demonstrate that the creation of Vietnamese parishes depended less

2. In 1983 the name of the parish was changed to Queen of Vietnam (*Nữ Vương Việt Nam*).

on the size of a local refugee population and more on factors such as the local bishop and the action and organization among the refugees, as shaped by the experience of the postcolonial church in South Vietnam.

American and Vietnamese Churches in 1975

Vietnamese refugees entered the U.S. at a time when national parishes were transitioning, and American bishops faced the necessity of closing or merging parishes. This trend was most pronounced in the Northeast and the Midwest. Between 1970 and 2020, the Archdiocese of Chicago closed and merged 187 parishes; the Archdiocese of Detroit, 146; the Archdiocese of New York, 111; and the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 104.[3] At the same time, other dioceses, notably in the West and the South, established new parishes to accommodate growing numbers of Catholics in cities and, especially, in the suburbs. Between 1971 and 2018, for instance, there was a net gain of 293 new parishes in Texas, 165 in Florida, and 121 in Arizona. The total number of U.S. parishes reached a peak of 18,988 in 1991 before a gradual decline to 16,346 parishes in 2018.[4]

Overall growth notwithstanding, the closures and mergers of parishes were a serious concern for some bishops in the 1970s. During that decade, the Archdiocese of Chicago closed and merged sixteen parishes; Philadelphia, eleven; New York, eight; and Detroit, six.[5] Parish feasibility studies and large-scale restructuring were necessary in some dioceses due to, as Thomas Rzeznik observed, the "legacy of an earlier era when densely-populated Catholic working-class neighborhoods and ethnic exclusivity necessitated a dense clustering of churches."[6] Many national parishes were established in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to serve the needs of Poles, Italians, Czechs, and other European immigrants. Over time, however, new developments affected the survivability of those parishes. While many national parishes survived, others were closed or merged.[7] The deepest impact of clo-

3. Michal J. Kramarek, Thomas P. Gaunt, SJ, and Mark M. Gray, *Parish, Ecclesial and Socioeconomic Statistics for Eleven Dioceses between 1970 and 2020: A Report for the Future Church* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2023), 3.

4. "Where the Parish Doors Have Closed . . . and Opened," *Nineteen Sixty-four Blog*, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University (February 22, 2019), https://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2019/02/where-parish-doors-have-closed-and.html.

5. Kramarek, et al., *Parish, Ecclesial and Socioeconomic Statistics,* 189, 307, 599, and 658.

6. Thomas Rzeznik, "The Church in the Changing City: Parochial Restructuring in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in Historical Perspective," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 80.

7. As Roger Stump has argued, assimilation into American society played only a minor role in determining the closure, merger, or survival of a European national parish. Rather, the

sures and mergers occurred in the Northeast and the Midwest, but bishops elsewhere also carefully considered creating any new national parishes.

Immigrants arriving after 1965 came primarily from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and did not possess substantial financial resources. It was especially true of Vietnamese refugees, who had lost virtually all financial resources as they fled communist rule beginning in 1975 and had to build their economic lives from scratch, adding to the hesitancy among American bishops to permit new national parishes. The bishops preferred a "shared parish" model that integrated different ethnic and racial groups into an existing territorial parish. Many created an apostolate or a center to serve the Vietnamese or other immigrant groups, though without the establishment of a parish.

In addition, the arrival of Vietnamese Catholics occurred amid a massive transformation of postconciliar American Catholicism. Beginning in the 1960s, a growing number of American priests chose laicization while many women and men religious left consecrated life. Those who remained, especially women religious, began to shift their work from teaching and nursing to social work, higher education, and other fields. Many Catholic institutions, including seminaries and religious houses, were closed by 1975, indicating a weakening of the U.S. Church's institutional structures.

In contrast to the American experience, the postcolonial Church in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) experienced significant consolidation and expansion between 1955 and 1975.[8] Catholics made up less than 10 percent of the overall population in South Vietnam, but their expansion was enormously aided by the migration of northern Catholics in 1954, the year before Ngô Đình Diệm established the anticommunist RVN. This migration

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outcome depended on the number of parishioners and the level of ethnic consciousness among them: factors that affected Mass attendance, financial stewardship, parish institutions (such as schools), and the clergy in charge. See Roger W. Stump, "Patterns in the Survival of Catholic National Parishes, 1940–1980," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 7, no. 1 (1986): 77–97.

8. For an overview of the Church in the Republic of Vietnam, see Tuan Hoang, "Postcolonial Catholicism in South Vietnam, 1954–1975," in *A History of Vietnamese Christianity*, ed. by Anh Tran and Tuan Hoang (Leiden: Brill, 2026), 372–394. See also Thien Bui, "The Complexities of Political Identity: Catholics and Politics in South Vietnam, 1954–1975," in *A History of Vietnamese Christianity*, 395–420; Tuan Hoang, "Pray the Rosary and Do Apostolic Work: The Catholic Associational Culture in South Vietnam and the Diaspora," in *Republican Vietnam, 1963–1975: War, Society, Diaspora*, ed. by Trinh Luu and Tuong Vu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), 189–202; and Tuan Hoang, "'Our Lady's Immaculate Heart Will Prevail': Vietnamese Marianism and Anticommunism, 1940–1975," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 17, nos. 2–3 (2022): 126–157. On colonial developments leading to the postcolonial Church, see Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

increased the Catholic population in South Vietnam from 520,000 to 1.17 million; by 1973, it had grown to over 1.8 million, accounting for 9.5 percent of the overall population of 19.3 million. The migration led to the creation of many new parishes and missions in southern cities, towns, and villages. In the same period, the number of diocesan priests rose from 1,302 to 1,605 and religious priests from 383 to 425, leading to a ratio of 10.8 priests for every 10,000 Catholics. Among professed religious, there were 4,714 women and 973 men in 1963, growing to 6,571 women and 1,309 men in 1973. In education, the South Vietnamese Church in 1973 operated 1,130 primary schools enrolling nearly 427,000 students and 270 secondary schools with over 205,000 students. Building upon an infrastructure of ultramontane sodalities begun under the late colonial period, South Vietnam saw a large expansion of membership among its associational culture, including organizations such as the Legion of Mary, the Eucharistic Youth, and Cursillo.[9]

Against this background of postcolonial Catholicism, unsurprisingly, Vietnamese Catholic refugees strongly desired their own parishes despite their limited financial resources. Moreover, the shocking and absolute communist victory in April 1975 led them to adopt an exilic identity, believing they could never return to Vietnam.[10] Between this ecclesial background and the shock of RVN's unconditional surrender to the communists, they fervently desired worship in their language and a devotional and associational culture similar to the structure of their former parishes. At the same time, they worked mostly in low-paying jobs and could not readily support the creation and maintenance of parishes. Indeed, U.S. dioceses had to subsidize Vietnamese Catholic worship, religious instruction, and other activities.

The refugees, however, had an important resource at their disposal: a sizable number of priests who left Vietnam with them. Following the fall of Saigon, the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) became heavily involved in the resettlement of Indochinese refugees. Upon the request of the Vatican's apostolic representative to the U.S., the USCC prioritized the resettlement of refugee priests and women and men religious.[11] Their reset-

9. On these and other statistics, see Hoang, "Postcolonial Catholicism in South Vietnam," 373–375.

10. See Tuan Hoang, "Ultramontanism, Nationalism, and the Fall of Saigon: Historicizing the Vietnamese American Catholic Experience," *American Catholic Studies* 130, no. 1 (2019), especially 21–35.

11. Tuan Hoang, "The Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugee Religious, Priests, and Seminarians in the United States, 1975–1977," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 99–122.

tlement, in turn, was pivotal for the formation of Vietnamese Catholic communities throughout the U.S. In the case of Queen of Vietnam and the Diocese of Beaumont, the story leads to the refugee priest Trần Văn Khoát.

From Fort Chaffee to the Diocese of Beaumont, 1975

Father Peter Trần Văn Khoát—Peter was his baptismal name and it sometimes appeared in archival documents—was born in northern Vietnam in 1939 and entered a minor seminary in 1951. After migrating south in 1954, he continued his studies until priestly ordination in 1967 in the Diocese of Đà Lạt. Little is known about his life as a priest before 1975, although he stated to the USCC that he studied law at Saigon University from 1972 to 1974 and that he was "affiliated" with the Archdiocese of Saigon until the fall of Saigon.[12] He arrived in the U.S. with approximately 150 priests and 250 women and men religious alongside some 125,000 Indochinese refugees.[13]

At Fort Chaffee, one of four refugee processing centers on the mainland, Father Khoát quickly became the leader of several hundred refugees, mostly from Catholic fishing villages in South Vietnam. He attracted a following, in part, because of his basic fluency in English, since most refugees did not know the language. Khoát approached representatives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans at Fort Chaffee and asked for the sponsorship of ninety families, totaling about 650 people. Contrary to the stereotype of the meek and helpless refugee, his approach was aggressive, and he "demanded" that all his followers be taken to New Orleans.[14] The U.S. government had hired several Vietnamese priests who had previously come to the U.S. to work as "contract chaplains," assisting with pastoral needs at the processing centers. They, too, were approached by Khoát, who shared his vision of leading refugees to build a prosperous Catholic community in a new land.

But not all agreed with his plan. One contract chaplain criticized Khoát for "trying to form a ghetto as the Jews did" and suggested that "his plan was foolish because [he] did not understand U.S. civilization and the way of living here." For his part, Khoát felt that the Vietnamese contract chaplains

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12. "Biodata on Rev. Tran Van Khoat," "Ad Hoc Committee: Migration and Tourism: Vietnamese Priest Tran Van Khoat" folder, box 46, National Conference of Catholic Bishops Records, American Catholic History Research Center, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. Unless indicated otherwise, files from this collection are hereafter cited as "Folder on Tran Van Khoat."

13. Hoang, "The Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugee Religious, Priests, and Seminarians," 105.

14. Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975–1982* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 86.

looked down on him and the other refugee priests.[15] Khoát leveled several complaints against the USCC, including the concern that this office's director was not Catholic, and that the office had a section for Buddhist refugees and employed Buddhist workers but had none for Catholic refugees. He implored the USCC to allow the Vietnamese to take charge and considered himself a USCC member by virtue of his priesthood.

On July 16, Father Khoát led a demonstration involving several hundred Catholic refugees in front of the USCC office. He offered a "unanimous motion" on behalf of Vietnamese Catholic Refugees at Fort Chaffee, demanding respect for their rights. Though there were many other Catholic refugees at the camp, including some refugee priests, Khoát was the most visible, and his followers were the most vocal in their demands. In this motion, he accused the USCC director and staff of being "discourteous, arrogant, and working without responsibility and honesty," and alleged that the contract chaplains sought "to cover up the corruption inside the USCC at Ft. Chaffee." The motion called for the director and staff to be fired.[16] Three days later, however, Khoát admitted in an interview with a visiting American priest representing the USCC that he now understood he could not change the director and staff, and that he might seek assistance from another resettlement agency rather than the USCC.[17] All the same, his agitation made him a troubling figure to the camp authorities. When President Gerald Ford made a well-publicized visit to Fort Chaffee, the camp authorities wanted to prevent the refugees from appearing demanding, ungrateful, or undeserving of American largesse. That morning, they took Khoát into "comfortable custody" until Ford and the press corps had departed.[18]

In the end, the refugee priest neither went to another agency nor moved to New Orleans. Instead, he and most of his followers were among the approximately 1,000 refugees who were resettled in Texas's Golden Triangle, formed by the region's three largest cities: Beaumont, Orange, and Port Arthur. Responding to a federal appeal for local assistance in accelerating the resettlement of Indochinese refugees, the resettlement of refugees in the Golden Triangle largely resulted from the work of two local Catholics: William Manger, a priest of the Diocese of Beaumont, who served as the

15. "Father Murray's first interview with Father Tran Van Khoat on July 18, 1975," Folder on Tran Van Khoat.

16. "Motion of the Vietnamese Catholic Refugees at Ft. Chafee," Folder on Tran Van Khoat.

17. "Father Murray's second interview with Father Tran Van Khoat July 19, 1975," Folder on Tran Van Khoat.

18. Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus*, 87.

diocesan resettlement director; and Dow Wynn, a layman and director of the Port of Port Arthur, who was the resettlement office's chairman.[19]

Created by Pope Paul VI in 1966 from the Archdiocese of Galveston–Houston, the Diocese of Beaumont had a rather small Catholic population in the Protestant-majority Golden Triangle. In 1979, Catholics numbered 82,000—or 14 percent—out of a total population of 586,000.[20] Like most small dioceses, it had little experience in resettling refugees. The closest precedent occurred in the early twentieth century, when Italian immigrants moved to the Golden Triangle and the bishop allowed a classroom at a parochial school to be used for a Mass for Italians. The immigrants desired a parish of their own, and in 1905 they successfully obtained permission for one.[21] The scope, however, paled in comparison to the sudden arrival of Vietnamese refugees seventy years later.[22]

Father Manger and Father Khoát likely established contact in July 1975. On August 17, just one month after the demonstration at Fort Chaffee, the refugee priest sent Manger a proposal for resettlement in the Diocese of Beaumont. Addressed also to the USCC executive director and the Fort Chaffee camp director, the six-page proposal requested that the USCC and the diocese create a "Vietnamese fishermen center" to be headed by Khoát himself, which would work in conjunction with the diocesan resettlement office. The resettlement office, led by Manger, would manage housing, transportation, meals, and English instruction for the refugees, and the fishermen's center would handle job placement, vocational training, and interpretation services. The USCC would provide funding to help fishermen purchase boats and to establish fish-processing factories.[23] There are no records of how Manger or the USCC responded, but a report in the *New York Times* stated that by the end of 1975, fifty-two families in the Diocese of Beaumont were under Khoát's leadership.[24] Shortly after resettling in the Golden Tri-

19. "Father Murray's second interview."

20. "Diocese of Beaumont, Directory 1979," 65, Folder "Diocese of Beaumont," box 8: "Parish list and directories, 1964–1968," Texas Dioceses Collection, Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, Texas.

21. "St. Joseph's Parish," *The Texas Catholic Herald*, December 16, 1977, 15.

22. The diocese also experienced the influx of 15,000 Black Catholics, who began arriving in the 1910s. Their parishes were administered by the Josephine Fathers, who were dedicated to African-American ministry. See Warren Louis Boudreaux, *Memoirs of a Cajun Bishop* (Houma, LA: H-T Publishing, 1995), 146–147.

23. "Planning of resettlement for Vietnamese refugee fishermen in Beaumont," Folder on Tran Van Khoat.

24. Frances Fitzgerald, "Punch in! Punch Out! Eat Quick!," *New York Times*, December 28, 1975, https://www.nytimes.com/1975/12/28/archives/punch-in-punch-out-eat-quick-from-maine-to-texas-the-vietnam.html.

angle, he drafted another proposal calling for the purchase of two tracts of land, on which the refugees would raise crops and livestock under the leadership of a director, presumably himself.[25] This proposal, too, apparently went unanswered, but it reflected the priest's determination to pursue an economic path according to his vision.

In the Golden Triangle, Khoát was drawn into further conflict with the USCC, which had hired Dr. Nguyễn Văn Châu to head the resettlement office. During the 1960s, Châu studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he met his future wife. After earning a doctorate in language and literature, he returned to Vietnam to teach at a university. His wife and children had gone to Europe for a family funeral, and Châu left Vietnam just before the fall of Saigon. The family was reunited in the U.S., and Châu was employed at Fort Chaffee to assist American officials with refugee resettlement. Châu and his family were resettled in the Golden Triangle, and he was hired to replace Manger as director of the resettlement office. As the primary dispenser of funds for refugees, the resettlement office did not align well with Father Khoát's vision. As indicated by his proposals, Father Khoát strongly and consistently advocated for rapid economic self-sufficiency: a vision contrary to the gradual assimilationist strategy common among resettlement offices, which prioritized English-language learning and occupational training. Khoát became critical of Châu and other Vietnamese and Americans whom he perceived to obstruct his work, even persuading his followers to file complaints against the local resettlement office to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the federal agency responsible for refugee resettlement.[26]

Father Khoát, Bishop Boudreaux, and the Resurrection Community, 1976

The resettlement office was not the only target of Father Khoát's grievance; another was the office of Warren Boudreaux, bishop of Beaumont. The tension between priest and bishop exploded into a full conflict in late 1976 and early 1977. A native of Louisiana who had served as a priest for the

25. "Proposal for a Vietnamese Resettlement Program in Southeast Texas," Folder 38–76, 000-89-0006, AR 92-043, Lloyd Bentsen, Jr. Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas–Austin.

26. Liz Hanna to Bishop Boudreaux, August 20, 1976, Folder on Tran Van Khoat. For further analysis of the conflict between Khoát and Châu, see Tuan Hoang, "Shrimpers and Refugees: Vietnamese Catholics in the Golden Triangle, Texas, 1975–1987," in *Vietnamese Refugees and the Making of the Gulf Coast*, ed. by Allison J. Truitt and Jana K. Lipman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, forthcoming). The chapter, as distinct from this article, focuses on the role of labor and divergent economic visions between the men who pitted the Resurrection Community in Port Arthur against the Beaumont resettlement office.

Diocese of Lafayette, Boudreaux was installed as the leader of Beaumont in 1971.[27] Since Father Khoát was the only Vietnamese-speaking priest in the diocese, Boudreaux relied on him for pastoral care of the Vietnamese. For at least a time, the refugee priest was seen—and he certainly saw himself—as the spokesman for *all* Catholic refugees in the diocese. The diocese's monthly, for example, published a photograph in February 1976 showing Khoát and two American priests concelebrating Mass with Boudreaux during a Lunar New Year celebration.

The concelebration, however, might have masked tensions that gradually grew over the next eleven months and unraveled any prospect for a lasting collaboration. Although he was not openly critical of the diocese as he was of the resettlement office, he pushed hard for an economically self-sufficient community of Catholic refugees under his leadership. Exhibiting an acutely entrepreneurial ability, he shifted from farming to shrimping, which played well with his followers, many of whom had been fishermen. He explored the possibility of forming a civil corporation to obtain funds and purchase shrimping boats. In April 1976, he established a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization called Resurrection Community, Inc., for those purposes.[28]

At this time, the refugee priest was living at St. James Church in Port Arthur, where he said Mass in Vietnamese for the Catholic refugees.[29] Bishop Boudreaux arranged this living situation, but it is unclear how much he knew about Khoát's plans until the community's founding. By late 1976, Boudreaux became wary of Khoát and shared his grave concerns with Archbishop Jean Jadot, the apostolic delegate in Washington, D.C. In a letter to Jadot, Boudreaux stated that he "basically . . . approved [Khoát's] operation" to help fishermen but also found Khoát to have "caused much concern among the people of Port Arthur, some of his own people and our clergy regarding his financial transactions." According to the bishop, Khoát "used all sorts of pressures upon people to get them to contribute money to his operations" and showed "more concern about being a political and business

27. On his life and ecclesial experience before Beaumont, see Boudreaux, *Memoirs of a Cajun Bishop*, especially 61–133.

28. Lilla Ross, "Diocese cautions Vietnamese priest on disobedience," *Beaumont Enterprise*, May 11, 1977, Folder on Tran Van Khoat.

29. As alluded to in the official parish publication marking its thirtieth anniversary, Father Khoát at times offered the preconciliar Latin Mass. *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm thành lập Giáo Xứ Nữ Vương Việt Nam* [Special Yearbook Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of the Founding of the Queen of Vietnam Parish] (Port Arthur: 2007), 26. Unless it is indicated otherwise, all translations of Vietnamese sources, including quotations from this history, are mine.

leader than serving as pastor."[30] Khoát's vision of economic self-sufficiency was putting him at odds with ecclesial authority.

Father Khoát and his followers requested that Bishop Boudreaux establish a parish for the refugees. Other Catholics, who were not adherents of Khoát, were hoping for the same. Different parties articulated this desire to Boudreaux so strongly that the bishop announced on August 15, 1976, that he would work to establish an ethnic Vietnamese parish in the future. According to the local newspaper, he even "directed Khoat to begin searching for a suitable location for the parish."[31] A parish history written over thirty years later describes the same announcement without mentioning Khoát.[32] This source states that the bishop made a "declaration at the Cathedral [that] a parish will be established specifically for the Vietnamese."[33]

Father Khoát took the announcement as permission for action in the ensuing months. He actively sought a church building and, in December 1976, after securing a $65,000 loan from Allied Merchants Bank, successfully purchased a former Baptist church in Port Arthur for $115,000.[34] Tensions between the bishop and the priest were worsened by Father Khoát's purchase of the Baptist property without the bishop's knowledge and approval. Only after the fact did Khoát notify Boudreaux of the purchase, adding that he intended to convert the property into a parish called Resurrection.

Responding to the priest, Bishop Boudreaux wrote that his "first reaction . . . was one of almost disbelief." "I do wish to inform you," he continued, "that I strongly object to this action." His astonishment indicated that the refugee priest had kept him more or less in the dark about the search for and purchase of the property. Because only the bishop of a diocese had the authority to establish a new parish, Khoát's plan to have the building dedicated as Resurrection Church was contrary to canon law. Furthermore, Boudreaux stated,

> [The] unauthorized action on your part is consistent with the frequent complaints that I have received about you. It now raises serious questions as to whether you can satisfactorily fill the spiritual needs of your own people and it presents the question of a possible "conflict of

30. Boudreaux to Jadot, November 22, 1976, Folder on Tran Van Khoat.

31. Ross, "Diocese cautions Vietnamese priest on disobedience." It is not clear, however, if this information came from Boudreaux, Khoát, or another source.

32. *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 27.

33. I could not find Bishop Boudreaux's statement in the original, but it might have been a conditional statement rather than a declarative one.

34. Ross, "Diocese cautions Vietnamese priest on disobedience."



In 1987, the Resurrection Church was sold by Father Trần Văn Khoát to Vietnamese Buddhist refugees, who converted it into the Bửu Môn Temple (Photo by the author, December 2021).

> interest" because of your involvement with both the Resurrection Community and the proposed parish of the Resurrection.[35]

In other words, Father Khoát's independent action had turned an uneasy collaboration into a full-fledged conflict. In Khoát's mind, he might have envisioned his leadership as parallel to that of pioneering Vietnamese priests who moved to southern Vietnam in 1954 and took it upon themselves to initiate a mission or parish while the laity began building their livelihoods. In regard to canon law, however, he clearly overstepped and violated ecclesial authority. Several days after his letter to Khoát, Boudreaux went to inspect the property at the invitation of the priest. He found it "a very fine building and a very practical and useful place in which we can establish the Catholic Parish for the Vietnamese."[36] However, he informed Khoát after the inspection that he would not be appointed to be pastor of the Vietnamese parish.[37]

Boudreaux's decision not to name Khoát as pastor angered the priest and his followers at the Resurrection Community. In an open letter to the bishop, they argued that, while they did "not understand procedure" due to linguistic issues, it was the bishop who had "permitted our Catholic population to establish a parish named Resurrection Parish" and had "suggested us to buy the

35. Boudreaux to Khoat, December 30, 1976, Folder on Tran Van Khoat.
36. Boudreaux to Khoat, January 6, 1977, Folder on Tran Van Khoat.
37. Boudreaux, *Memoirs of a Cajun Bishop*, 197.

Baptist Church on Proctor Street." They noted, too, that Boudreaux considered the purchase "a bargain" but now "forced us to sell it to the Diocese." Most of all, they protested against the replacement of Khoát by another Vietnamese priest: "As Father Khoat has led us since the days of Fort Chaffee, Arkansas and has succeeded in helping us to be in a free profession (fishing) we can not abandon him to follow another priest who does not know anything about us and whom we do not know." Lastly, the letter referenced the friction between the Resurrection Community and the resettlement office, accusing the bishop of having "listened too much to Mr. Nguyen Van Chau."[38]

For Khoát and the Resurrection Community, the overlap between the community and the church was total and necessary. For many northern Vietnamese Catholics who migrated south in 1954, parish life was closely intertwined with economic organization in new resettlements. It was perhaps most true of fishing villages, where a new chapel or church would be erected not long after resettlement. This experience helps explain why Khoát and his followers did not view the Resurrection Community's economic activities and ownership of a church building as separate enterprises. The acquisition of the Baptist property, which Khoát soon turned into Resurrection Church, complete with a lay church council, was the result of his determination to run his own course. Simultaneously, the strong support among his followers was partly rooted in their experiences with new Catholic villages in South Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s.

It took less than two years for the tension between Father Khoát and the USCC authorities at Fort Chaffee to reach a point of no return between the Resurrection Community and the Diocese of Beaumont. The bishop and the dissident priest, however, were not the only players in this drama. The establishment of a Vietnamese parish could not have happened without another coalition of refugees: clergy, religious, and, especially, laypeople who aspired to a national parish within the canonical structure of the Roman Catholic Church. It was their cooperation with the Diocese of Beaumont that led to the eventual creation of Queen of Vietnam.

Lay Refugees, the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix, and the Founding of Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs Parish

Ironically, the prospect of a Vietnamese parish barely registered in the correspondence among Bishop Boudreaux, Archbishop Jadot, and USCC

38. "Open letter to the Bishop of Beaumont," April 17, 1977, Folder on Tran Van Khoat. Boudreaux himself acknowledged a high regard for Châu; see Boudreaux, *Memoirs of a Cajun Bishop*, 196–197.

officials. The conflict between the dissident priest and the local ordinary disrupted plans but did not alter them. As Boudreaux wrote to the apostolic delegate in February 1977: "I still plan to establish a Vietnamese parish."[39]

As he was growing more familiar with the situation of Vietnamese Catholic refugees, he came into contact with the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix (CMC) in Carthage, Missouri. At the time, the CMC was the largest religious order, men or women, among all Vietnamese communities in the diaspora. The congregation was formed in northern Vietnam during the 1940s and officially approved as congregation in 1953. In the following year, the founders and the entire community moved south ahead of the communist takeover of the north. The CMC centered its mission on devotions to Our Lady of Fatima and the reparation movement to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. In April 1975, dozens of members, including eight priests, fled as the communists approached Saigon. Most stayed in Fort Chaffee before resettlement in Carthage, Missouri, with the sponsorship of Bernard Law, Bishop of Springfield–Cape Girardeau.[40] Bishop Law ordained twelve members to the diaconate in 1976 then to the priesthood a year later. These developments allowed the CMC to assign its priests to several dioceses with Vietnamese Catholic communities.

Boudreaux was the first American bishop to successfully acquire the service of the CMC outside of Missouri.[41] He secured the appointment of Phạm Kim Long, commonly called Father Thái Sơn, as chaplain of the community in the Golden Triangle. As he informed Archbishop Jadot, this priest would be "in charge [of the community], assisted by two young men": a deacon and a seminarian, also members of the CMC.[42] Although the timeline is blurry, it appears that they arrived at the Golden Triangle in late 1976, albeit at different times.[43] Their presence must have given Boudreaux confidence to go forward with the new parish and confirmed the decision that Khoát would not be its pastor. An unpublished archival photograph shows the bishop concelebrating Mass in honor of the Lunar New Year Tết in 1977, but this time with Thái Sơn not Khoát. Another photograph shows him

39. Boudreaux to Jadot, February 8, 1977, Folder on Tran Van Khoat.

40. On the CMC, see Hoang, "The Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugee Religious, Priests, and Seminarians," 107–111; and Hoang, "'Our Lady's Immaculate Heart Will Prevail,'" 137–138, 145–147.

41. Another diocese with CMC leadership among the refugees was the Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska, which established the second Vietnamese parish in the U.S.

42. Boudreaux to Jadot, February 8, 1977, Folder on Tran Van Khoat.

43. According to a recollection of Father Đỗ Thái Hòa, he came as a deacon to Port Arthur sometime in 1976. See *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 8.

shaking hands with parishioners, and its caption (provided by the lay council) reads, "Celebration of Tet 1977, smiles and trust."[44] On March 2, 1977, it was announced that the Vatican had appointed Boudreaux as the next bishop of the Diocese of Houma–Thibodaux in Louisiana. On the next day, Boudreaux officially signed the decree for the canonical establishment of the Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs Parish.

The event was joyfully celebrated in the diasporic press. A New Orleans-based Catholic monthly, whose circulation was the largest among Catholic refugees, praised the decree "because for a long time now the American Church has decided not to establish [national] parishes," but now Boudreaux's decision meant that "the ministry for Vietnamese Catholics [in the diocese] will be diverse and ethnically valuable in the true spirit of the Second Vatican Council."[45] The conciliar context was not insignificant, but left unsaid was the fervency to replicate Vietnamese faith life because the refugees believed they would be unable to return to Vietnam in the future.[46] The announcement led the Community of Vietnamese Clergy and Religious in America, then the most important representative of Catholic refugees, to consider the Golden Triangle among four locations in the U.S. for a Vietnamese pilgrimage center.[47] Although New Orleans and Houston had more Vietnamese Catholics, the establishment of the first Vietnamese parish put the Golden Triangle on the aspirational map of the refugees, whose parish experience in South Vietnam led them to expect to replicate that experience in the U.S.

Besides Father Khoát, Bishop Boudreaux, and the CMC, other important actors, especially laypeople who did not support Father Khoát, pursued their goal of a Vietnamese parish through diocesan structures. By 1977, approximately 2,100 refugees had come to the Golden Triangle, a majority of them Catholics, including an estimated 300 to 600 members of the

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44. These photographs were found in an unnamed album which was put together by the parish council of Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs in 1980 and given to Bishop Ganter. The album was kept in box 27, Ganter, Bernard J., Episcopal Collection, Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin.

45. "Giáo xứ Việt Nam được thành lập" [The First Vietnamese Parish Has Been Established], *Dân Chúa* [People of God] 9 (October 1977): 35.

46. Like many diasporic publications in the 1970s, *Dân Chúa* frequently published on the fall of Saigon and the refugees' exilic identity. See Hoang, "Ultramontanism, Nationalism, and the Fall of Saigon," 23–35.

47. *Liên Lạc* [Communication] 41 (October 1, 1977): 26. A center in the Golden Triangle would serve Vietnamese refugees in Texas and Louisiana. Other locations offered were Washington, D.C., for people in the Northeast; Portland for Oregon and Washington states; and an unspecified location in California. Though the proposal never came to fruition, it exemplified the expectations of the refugees at the time.

Resurrection Community.[48] Members of the Resurrection Community continued to be an economic force within the refugee community, but they were fewer than those supporting Boudreaux. The establishment of a national parish would not have been possible without the commitment of the latter group.

The split among the refugees was discernible as early as the spring of 1976 and became apparent in the summer. After the bishop declared his intention to found a Vietnamese parish on August 15, 1976, a "provisional council" of lay refugees—who were not aligned with Father Khoát—was formed with Nguyễn Văn Nhị as president. Four months later, Nhị and other representatives offered a "hastily written" petition to Boudreaux, expressing their desire for "a stable life of the faith and necessary resources in pastoral activities." The timing suggests that the petitioners were motivated by Khoát's purchase of the Baptist property even though they did not approve of his leadership. The phrasing implies that they asked Boudreaux for a parish under a pastor *other* than Khoát. Besides Nhị, there were four other men who presented the petition to Boudreaux: Phạm Quang Ân, Trần Quang Văn, Phan Đình Diệm, and Lê Minh Quang. Ân and Văn were also fathers of priests: a stature carrying considerable respect among Vietnamese Catholics and its own title, *ông cố* (father of a priest).[49]

On February 10, 1977, three weeks before the official establishment, the provisional council was sworn in during Mass said by the new chaplain, Father Thái Sơn. It was led, again, by Nguyễn Văn Nhị as council president. They followed the Vietnamese Catholic tradition of dividing parishioners by geographic location into several "parish wards" (*giáo khu*), each with a leader. Since this council was formed before Bishop Boudreaux's establishment of Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs, it was not the first parish council. Nonetheless, it was crucial in helping the new priest serve the community. The council, for example, was responsible for organizing and staffing catechism classes among Vietnamese children. Since the refugees were heavily influenced by ultramontane devotions such as processions in honor of the Virgin Mary, they organized outdoors processions on various feast days.[50] On July 4, 1977, the parish

48. I have not seen a definitive number of members of the Resurrection Community. The estimate of 300 came from several parishioners of Queen of Vietnam that I spoke with during my visits in 2021 and 2024. The estimate of 600 is found in Thomas E. Summers, *Father Hector Bolduc: Defender of the Catholic Tradition* (n.p.: Wolverine Press, 2023), 177.

49. The information and quotations in this paragraph are from *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 26–27.

50. These activities are seen from photographs in the unnamed album, box 27 Ganter, Bernard J., Episcopal Collection, Catholic Archives of Texas.



The provisional council of laity for Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs, Port Arthur, Texas, with Father Thái Sơn, CMC, in 1977 (Courtesy of the Catholic Archives of Texas, Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops).

had Mass and a picnic at the Sabine Pass—which became an annual event.[51] In early 1978, a new group of laymen were formally sworn in as the first official parish council, this time with another representative of the petition, Phạm Quang Ân, as president. They continued the work of the previous council and furthered parish activities during their term.

Two other important developments occurred during this period. In spring 1977, Đỗ Thái Hòa, who had assisted Father Thái Sơn, was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Law. In October, the CMC provincial appointed him to succeed Thái Sơn as pastor. By then, Bishop Boudreaux had moved to the Diocese of Houma–Thibodaux. He was succeeded by Bernard Ganter, who was previously the inaugural Bishop of Tulsa. Ganter was installed as bishop of Beaumont in December 1977.[52] The Vietnamese Catholics had a canonically established parish but still lacked a permanent physical site of worship.

51. *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 39.
52. *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 27.

From Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs to Queen of Vietnam

Finding and purchasing a permanent church building was frustrated by the Vietnamese refugees' limited financial resources and the lack of support from Father Khoát and his allies. After Khoát learned that he would not be the pastor of the new parish, he explored other possibilities of affiliation and in 1978 joined the traditionalist movement led by French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who visited the Resurrection Church on August 12, 1979.[53] Since Lefebvre's movement was schismatic, Khoát's action was considered an act of schism and the Resurrection Church was not in communion with the Diocese of Beaumont. This led to an uneasy and even hostile relationship between the two groups of Catholic refugees. The hostility between the two groups occasionally became violent, with reports of people from one group driving past the other and throwing rocks at them.[54] It was not until the mid-1980s that the Resurrection Community ceased to be a substantial presence in the Golden Triangle. On August 15, 1987, the Resurrection Church was sold to a group of Vietnamese Buddhist refugees, who later turned it into the Bửu Môn Temple. Khoát himself eventually left Port Arthur, returned to Vietnam to pursue new business ventures, ceased priestly ministry, and married a Vietnamese woman.[55]

In the meantime, the liturgy and other pastoral activities of Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs Parish were held at St. Mary's Parish in Port Arthur, where both parishes shared the same church building on different schedules.[56] This arrangement reflected the ongoing limits of financial resources. Moreover, Bishop Ganter remained cautious about committing resources to securing a permanent site for the church, with Ganter even calling his predecessor's decision to establish the parish "a big mistake."[57] Once again, the Vietnamese laity proved crucial. The presence of Resurrection Church made them more determined to find a permanent home. In this they were assisted by their pastor Father Hòa as well as the provincial superior of the CMC in Missouri, Nguyễn Đức Thiệp. Building upon the growing relationship between the Diocese of Beaumont and the CMC, the parish council and their pastor persuaded Father Thiệp to travel from Missouri to Beaumont in the latter part of 1978. The CMC superior went with Hòa and

53. Summers, *Father Hector Boldu*, 177.

54. Conversations with parishioners on September 28 and 29, 2024.

55. Conversations with parishioners on September 28 and 29, 2024. His marriage was confirmed during my phone interview with Dan Nguyen, May 25, 2025. He is a relative of Khoát.

56. *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 58; *East Texas Catholic*, September 10, 2004, 20.

57. *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 8.

the parish council to meet Bishop Ganter, and they sought to persuade the bishop about the financial commitment among the parishioners. Ganter apparently changed his attitude after this meeting, and the search for a church building began in November 1978.

The pastor and council members looked at several properties and took Bishop Ganter to inspect at least one, but for reasons ranging from the potential for flooding to the prevalence of crime, Ganter did not approve of any. He eventually consented to the purchase of a Presbyterian church in Port Arthur, which was two and a half miles from St. Mary's Church and a little over a mile from the Resurrection Church. Located on Ninth Avenue between Eighth and Ninth Streets, the property was sold to Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs for $165,000. The parish received $30,000 each from the USCC and the Diocese of Beaumont, and parishioners financed the remainder.[58] Later, the Catholic Church Extension Society also gave "a generous grant" toward the purchase.[59] On Christmas Day 1979, Bishop Ganter offered the first Mass in the new church. After renovation, the church building was consecrated on May 18, 1980, by Archbishop John Cody of Chicago and a leader of the Catholic Church Extension Society.[60]

While the parish members were appreciative of the diocese for having permitted Vietnamese liturgy and activities at local parishes, the desire for their own worship space reflected a postcolonial Vietnamese Church that witnessed enormous growth in churches, schools, vocations, and lay organizations. Having acquired and renovated the church building, the parishioners expanded the parish's physical plant in the early 1980s under the pastorship of another CMC priest, Father Đoàn Quang Báu. The parish grew in the late 1970s and early 1980s as tens of thousands of refugees called the "boat people" illegally left Vietnam, often living at refugee camps in Asia before coming to the U.S. through family reunion or other forms of sponsorship. Some of these latter refugees resettled in the Diocese of Beaumont and joined the Vietnamese parish in Port Arthur. In addition, some followers of Father Khoát left the Resurrection Community and began attending Mass at Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs.

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58. *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 27–28.

59. "Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs to be dedicated, blessed Sunday," Folder "Port Arthur, Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs," Episcopal Collection: Ganter, Bernard J., Catholic Archives of Texas. Also, *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 9, which states that Bishop Ganter also sought funds from the archbishop of Kansas City.

60. Cody's participation was the first time that a church in the diocese was consecrated by a cardinal.

Responding to this growth, the parish for the first time welcomed an associate pastor, also a CMC priest, in spring 1982. This addition overlapped with the purchase of land across the street from the church building, leading to an expanded parking lot that accommodated the growing population. It also allowed for the construction of a shrine honoring the Virgin Mary and gardens for the Stations of the Cross and other devotions. On May 20, 1982, Bishop Ganter blessed the shrine and gardens. He returned a little over a year later on June 9, 1983, to bless and say Mass at the Shrine of the Queen of Peace. Two months later, the parish again expanded its campus with the purchase of a movie theater on the same street and next to the shrine. Although the property was initially listed for $150,000, the seller reduced the cost to $65,000. The theater was eventually renovated into a church hall and a place for catechism classes and Vietnamese lessons for children.

During this period the pastor and parishioners petitioned Bishop Ganter to shorten the parish name to Queen of Vietnam, which he approved on October 15, 1983. The refugees had proven that they were capable of keeping their parish financially solvent. The plant expansion led to an organizational expansion, including three choirs to sing at different weekend Masses, the Sodality of Catholic Mothers, the Legion of Mary, and the Eucharistic Youths aimed at pre-teens and teenagers. Close ties with the CMC led to the parish's participation in Marian Days held annually at the CMC headquarters. The CMC allowed Queen of Vietnam among other communities to cook and sell food at the nationwide pilgrimage, providing the parish with its largest annual fundraiser.[61]

The Queen of Vietnam Parish in American Catholic History

Among 281 Vietnamese Catholic communities in the U.S. today are approximately 70 national parishes.[62] The creation of these parishes began with Queen of Vietnam and, generally, countered the tendency *against* establishing new national parishes. To understand this development, it is

61. *Đặc san kỷ niệm 30 năm*, 38–51.

62. These figures come from a compilation of churches, pastoral centers, shrines, and other settings regularly offering Mass in Vietnamese: "Các cộng đoàn giáo xứ Việt Nam tại Hoa Kỳ (Các nhà thờ có thánh lễ tiếng Việt) [Vietnamese Communities and Parishes in the U.S. (Churches Providing Vietnamese Mass)], Federation of Vietnamese Catholics in the USA, May 22, 2025: https://vietcatholic.net/Media/22ndMay2025ListCDGXVNinUSA.pdf. Another document from the Federation notes "70 parishes" and "approximately 225 [other] Vietnamese Catholic communities": Giuse Đặng Văn Kiếm, "Hành trình liên đới hiệp thông hai giáo hội Việt Nam & Hoa Kỳ [The Journey of the Relationship and Communication between the Vietnamese Church and the U.S. Church], Federation of Vietnamese Catholics in the USA, May 2025, 1: https://www.vietcatholic.net/Media/22ndMay2025JourneyVNCathsinUSA.pdf.



Dedication of Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs Church, Port Arthur, Texas, on May 18, 1980, with Archbishop John Cody of Chicago, representing the Catholic Extension Society, and Bernard Ganter, bishop of Beaumont (Courtesy of the Catholic Archives of Texas, Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops).

worth contextualizing Queen of Vietnam within the broader history of immigrants and parish formation in modern American Catholic history.

In particular, I wish to contextualize Queen of Vietnam within the histories of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European immigrants, Catholic refugees during the Cold War, and Asian Americans in the second half of the twentieth century. The history of European immigration and the development of the national parish provide a precedent against which the creation of Vietnamese parishes can be measured. Comparing Vietnamese refugees with other Cold War refugees helps explain why Hungarian and Cuban Catholics were generally incorporated into existing parishes, while many Vietnamese Catholics sought to establish new ones. Finally, comparison with other Asian American communities demonstrates that the proliferation of Vietnamese parishes was unusual among Asian American Catholics.

European Immigrants and the Era of National Parishes

In some respects, the establishment of Queen of Vietnam was aligned to conventional narratives about the creation of European national parishes. From its origins, U.S. Catholicism "was steadily becoming an urban

church," especially in East Coast cities such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, where German and Irish immigrants predominated.[63] This pattern grew further during the Second Industrial Revolution, when most immigrants resettled in major and mid-size cities, leading to many new national parishes staffed by immigrant priests and religious serving their co-ethnics, including Czech, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Slovak, and Ukrainian. The rapid creation of national parishes helped to lessen marginalization by other European groups and diminished conflicts over language and authority. The creation of new national parishes continued until the 1920s when the Great Depression put a pause on immigration.

The presence of many Vietnamese parishes today recalls the era of European national parishes, but the Vietnamese origins are distinct because they were created when the "shared parish" was normative. This was especially true of inner cities in major metropolitan areas, where many parishes already existed and where immigrants and refugees most often settled. Combined with the low income of Vietnamese refugees, these factors helped account for the complete lack of Vietnamese parishes in *all* archdioceses during the 1970s and in nearly all archdioceses during the 1980s. In this context, the creation of Queen of Vietnam was exceptional. Seen from the perspective of Catholicism in South Vietnam, however, it was unexceptional, even expected. While Vietnamese American Catholics were integrated into the shared parish model in many dioceses, the creation of dozens of Vietnamese parishes elsewhere indicates that many Vietnamese communities successfully integrated their experience of postcolonial Catholicism into the American Church. Although the refugees in the Diocese of Beaumont could not have purchased the church building without substantial financial assistance from others, they initiated action and drove the momentum toward the creation and expansion of their parish. Even Father Khoát and his Resurrection Community, who already owned a church property, played an indirect if unintentional role in motivating the Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs parishioners' commitment to the financial responsibility for the new parish.[64] Although these two groups of Vietnamese fiercely disagreed with each other over governance and authority, both insisted on having a parish for themselves. Their conflict should not obscure the ecclesial experience and institutional expectation for national parishes.

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63. See Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 158–194.

64. Neither Father Khoát nor the Resurrection Community appears in the chronology of the parish history in the thirtieth anniversary commemorative publication. His name, however, appears in two articles by parishioners who credit him as the first leader of the Catholic community in the diocese.

Catholic Refugees in the Cold War

The history of Cold War refugees provides another way to contextualize the founding of Queen of Vietnam. The unexpected arrival of 125,000 Indochinese refugees in 1975 was remarkable in scope, but it was not the only significant refugee wave of the Cold War. Following the Hungarian Revolution, some 38,000 Hungarian refugees were resettled in the U.S. For the most part, they settled in areas with established Hungarian American communities, many of which included national parishes. A plurality of refugees, for example, resettled in Ohio, which already had a long history of Hungarian immigration. In Toledo, particularly in the heavily Hungarian neighborhood of Birmingham, St. Stephen of Hungary Parish, established in 1898, readily welcomed approximately 300 refugees who settled in the city. Their arrival helped revitalize the parish's fading ethnic consciousness and traditions.[65] St. Stephen of Hungary illustrates how refugees could enter an established ethnic Catholic culture and institutional structure—an environment largely absent for Vietnamese refugees in 1975. This advantage extended beyond the parish itself to a broader institutional network of ethnic associations, newspapers, restaurants, businesses, and other organizations that welcomed and catered to refugees.

Cuban refugees in the late 1950s and early 1960s offer a different comparison. Cuban immigration to the United States dated to the nineteenth century, including more than 73,000 Cuban immigrants during the 1950s before the Cuban Revolution. In the four years following Fidel Castro's victory, however, nearly 250,000 refugees arrived in the United States. Several factors kept Cubans from pressing for national parishes. First, most Cubans settled in South Florida, particularly Miami, where the territorial parishes of the newly established Archdiocese of Miami quickly absorbed them by offering Spanish-language liturgies celebrated by Cuban and other Spanish-speaking priests. Second, within only a few years, Cubans became the predominant ethnic group in many parishes, which effectively became Cuban congregations. Furthermore, Cuban refugees considered themselves "exiles" and expected their stay in the United States to be temporary. Unlike the Vietnamese who generally believed that they could never return to Vietnam, Cuban expectation of eventual return reduced the incentive to establish their own national parishes. Although the Archdiocese of Miami established a Cuban parish, San Juan Bosco, in 1962, the significance of the parish lies less in its creation than in the fact that it was *the only new parish* established for Cuban refugees during the

65. "Introduction," *Hungarian American Toledo: Life and Times in Toledo's Birmingham Neighborhood*, ed. by Thomas E. Barden and John Ahern (Toledo: University of Toledo Affairs Center, 2002), 37–38.



The first church building of Queen of Vietnamese Martyrs, Port Arthur, Texas, on its dedication day, May 18, 1980 (Courtesy of the Catholic Archives of Texas, Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops).

early postrevolutionary period.[66] In contrast to Cubans of Miami, Vietnamese refugees were resettled all over the U.S. and did not become a preeminent presence in most local communities. This background helps explain the persistence of Vietnamese actors in the origin of Queen of Vietnam.

Asian American Catholics

Still a third context is the place of Queen of Vietnam within the history of Asian American Catholics. Vietnamese were hardly the first major group of Asians to have come to the U.S., as migration from the Philippines began in the colonial era and was followed by mass migration of Filipino laborers and students in the first decades of the twentieth century. Chinese and Japanese immigrants likewise began arriving in the nineteenth century, although Catholic ministry to these communities remained limited until the early twentieth century. Another major Catholic group was Koreans, whose migration, similar to the Vietnamese, largely occurred in the post-1965 era.

66. See Gerald E. Poyo, *Cuban Catholics in the United States, 1960–1980* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), especially 81–107.

While the histories of these ethnic groups were distinct in many respects, they shared a relative paucity of national parishes. This pattern makes the multiplicity of Vietnamese parishes rather exceptional.

Before World War II, Chinese and Japanese Catholics mostly worshipped at urban missions run primarily by white members of religious orders. With rare exceptions, there were no Chinese and Japanese priests or religious among them. A prime example is the Old St. Mary's Catholic Chinese Mission, the first Chinese mission in the U.S., which was opened in 1903 by the Paulist Fathers.[67] Another example is the Maryknoll mission in Los Angeles, directed toward Japanese immigrants and their children, from 1915 until its closure during World War II when the Japanese were incarcerated.[68] As missions, their primary goals were evangelization and conversion, not building an ethnic or national community of immigrants.

In rare cases, however, a successful mission could lead to the establishment of a national parish. In Seattle, several Catholic immigrants from Japan met with the bishop as early as 1916 to discuss the founding of a Japanese mission, eventually resulting in the opening of a mission school in 1920 and, ten years later, the construction of the social hall and church building called Our Lady, Queen of Martyrs (OLQM). Because of the high costs of running two different ethnic ministries, the Diocese of Seattle administered OLQM as a dual-ethnic parish ministering to Filipino immigrants as well as Japanese. The parish survived after the incarceration of its Japanese members during World War II. But only one-third of them returned after the war, significantly reducing its postwar viability. Wartime conflicts between Japan and the Philippines also caused strong friction between the two ethnic groups, leading to the closure of the parish in 1953.[69] More enduring was the establishment of the Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Parish in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. In 1939, the visit of a Chinese archbishop to Philadelphia led to the opening of a catechism center for residents in Chinatown, which made several dozen converts. This growth and other factors, including goodwill among Americans toward China for its anti-Japanese action, led the

67. See Ricky Manalo, CSP, "A History of Chinese Catholics in San Francisco and the Bay Area," in *Asian American Christianity Reader*, ed. by Viji Nakka-Cammauf and Timothy Tseng (n.p., Pacific Asian American and Canadian Christian Education Project/Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity, 2007), 76–80.

68. Yuki Yamazaki, "St. Francis Xavier School: Acculturation and Enculturation of Japanese Americans in Los Angeles, 1921–1945," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 54–73.

69. See Madeline Duntley, "Japanese and Filipino Together: The Transethnic Vision of Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Parish," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 74–98.

archdiocese to establish a Chinese parish. It was the first of its kind and still functions to this day.[70]

The founding of OLQM and Holy Redeemer, however, were rare occurrences among Chinese and Japanese Americans. The same was true of Filipino immigrants, whose Catholic population was much larger than the Chinese and Japanese yet whose church membership was generally incorporated into territorial parishes. Filipino immigrants before World War II were less accustomed to the parish-based structure of American Catholicism. Their faith practice, much like that of Mexican Americans, was centered on "home devotions, fiestas, processions, pilgrimages, and novenas instead of the Eucharistic liturgy and sacraments."[71] Racism and neglect by the American Church, among other factors, contributed to the limited pastoral ministry available to the large Filipino population on the West Coast before World War II. In 1942, the burgeoning population of 9,000 Filipinos in Los Angeles prompted the archbishop of Los Angeles to establish St. Columban as a mission to Our Lady of Loretto Parish. St. Columban became its own ethnic parish in 1945.[72] The number of Filipino Catholic communities significantly expanded after the war, especially as more people migrated from the Philippines. But the pattern of ethnic incorporation into existing territorial parishes persisted, and St. Columban's remains the *only* parish canonically established specifically for Filipino Americans.

Korean Americans provide a different point of comparison. Although most Korean American Christians have been Protestant, the small number of Catholics at university campuses and other urban settings during the 1960s led to the creation of Korean ministries in San Francisco, New York City, and Los Angeles. Such ministries grew, but it took until 1989 for the first canonical establishment of a Korean parish: St. Bernard Parish in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The number of Korean parishes is no more than a handful, as incorporation of Korean communities into preexisting territorial parishes has remained the norm as it has been with Filipinos. This is the result of many factors, including insufficient numbers of Korean American clergy and the reliance on visiting priests from South Korea.[73]

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70. "Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church," Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, September 16, 2019, https://chrc-phila.org/holy-redeemer-chinese-catholic-church/. See also Kathryn E. Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown: Space, Place, and Struggle* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 40–61.

71. Kathleen Garces-Foley, "From the Melting Pot to the Multicultural Table: Filipino Catholics in Los Angeles," *American Catholic Studies* 120, no. 1 (2009): 36.

72. Garces-Foley, "From the Melting Pot to the Multicultural Table," 39.

73. On this point and the longer history of Korean American Catholics, see Simon C. Kim, "Korean Americans and the Changing Face of Twentieth-Century Catholic Immigration," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 77–98.



The current church building of Queen of Vietnam, Port Arthur, Texas, was dedicated on February 18, 2001 (Photo by the author, September 2024).

The large number of Vietnamese parishes shows a remarkable divergence from these and other Asian immigrant groups. Even after allowing for the diversity of Asian American Catholic experience, the establishment of Queen of Vietnam stands out strikingly for the speed of canonical establishment, the expansion of its physical plant, and the growth of its parish organizations. The divergence from other Asian Catholic communities suggests a different trajectory among Vietnamese refugees, especially their previous experience of growth and expansion in South Vietnam and the shock of the fall of Saigon that made them determined to recreate parish life in America.

Conclusion

Taken together, the contexts above suggest that the origin of Queen of Vietnam was not a latter-day continuation of the old European national parish. Nor did it follow a prescribed pattern from earlier waves of Hungarian and Cuban refugees. Comparisons to other Asian immigrant groups show further distinction. Moreover, the history of Queen of Vietnam raises larger questions about institutional continuity, change, and adaptation in American Catholicism. Why did the national parish, which prominently characterized the American Church in an earlier era, reemerge for Vietnamese Catholics when American bishops were moving away from that model? More broadly, how has postcolonial Catholicism in other parts of the world affected the U.S. Church?

The answers to the second question are suggestive rather than definitive in this article. Most importantly, the questions demand more than a simple

examination of how Catholic immigrants adapted to the American Church. Instead, scholars should study how the postconciliar American Church adapted its institutional structures to immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the case of the Vietnamese, it calls attention to the ecclesial experiences, institutional expectations, and associational traditions that refugees and immigrants brought with them. While the curious origin of the Queen of Vietnam parish centers on the Vietnamese Catholic experience in the U.S., it also illustrates the convergence of global postcolonial and post-conciliar forces that led to a new era of Catholic immigrants, who in turn affected the Church in the U.S. in new and even unexpected ways.