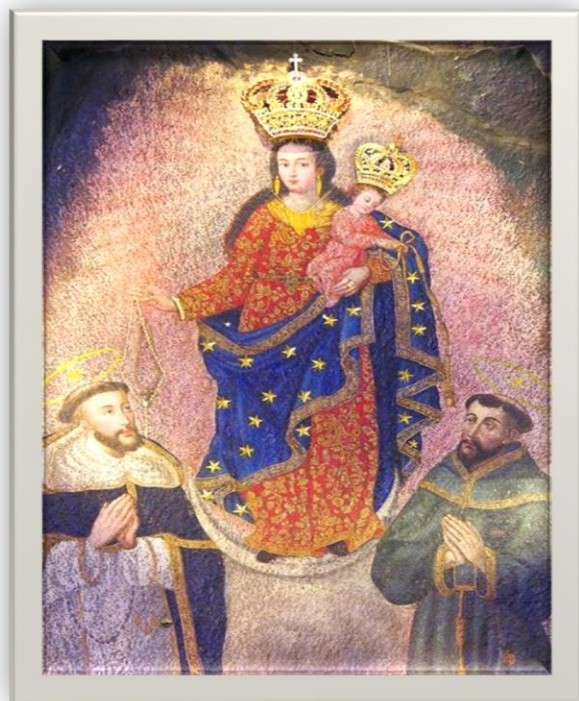


OUR LADY OF LAS LAJAS Guaitara Canyon, Colombia 1754

THE portrait of Our Lady of Las Lajas is somewhat like the miraculous tilma of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City in that the formation of the portraits of Our Lady cannot be explained. Yet both have not lost their brilliance throughout the centuries. Although the tilma of Juan Diego has various kinds of paint, but no brush strokes, that of Las Lajas is different in that no paint or dye was used in its creation. Like the tilma, no brush strokes are visible despite meticulous inspections. Since the portrait at Las Lajas is attached to a slab of rock, geologists were permitted to bore small holes into the rock in order to find a scientific explanation for its formation. Their conclusion rendered the portrait even more mysterious since they found that the image evenly penetrates into the rock to which it is attached. It would seem that only a heavenly painter performed this beautiful work of art. Historians and scientists cannot explain this mysterious image that may forever remain a mystery. The history of the portrait involves an Indian woman named Maria Mueses de Quinones who was walking from her village of Potosi to the village of Ipiales. One day in 1754, she was making the journey with her small daughter, Rosa, when she approached the area called Las Lajas (the Rock) where the trail passes through a deep gorge of the Guaitara River. Maria did not like this area since rumor told that the place was haunted.



Unexpectedly, a rainstorm started, and spying a cave ahead, she anxiously entered it. While invoking the protection of the Virgin of the Rosary she suddenly felt someone touching her shoulder as though to gain her attention. Without looking back to see who it was, Maria fled back into the storm; Rosa protectively sheltered by her mother's tight embrace.

THE FIRST VISION

Days later, finding it necessary to travel the same route, Maria and Rosa, who was a deaf-mute from birth, paused to rest on a stone near the cave. The first miracle of Our Lady of Las Lajas then took place when the child suddenly spoke. "Mommy, look at the lady with a little boy in her arms." With these words, the child slid off her mother's lap and began to move toward the cave. Struck with terror, Maria grabbed her daughter and rushed from the mysterious place. On returning home, Maria told friends and neighbors what happened, and all looked in amazement at Rosa who could now speak and hear.

THE SECOND APPARITION

The next day Maria looked for Rosa but could not find her. Remembering what had taken place at the cave, she returned there and found the child kneeling before a beautiful, radiant woman and playing happily with a small child. Realizing at once that she was in the presence of the Blessed Mother and the Child Jesus, Maria knelt in

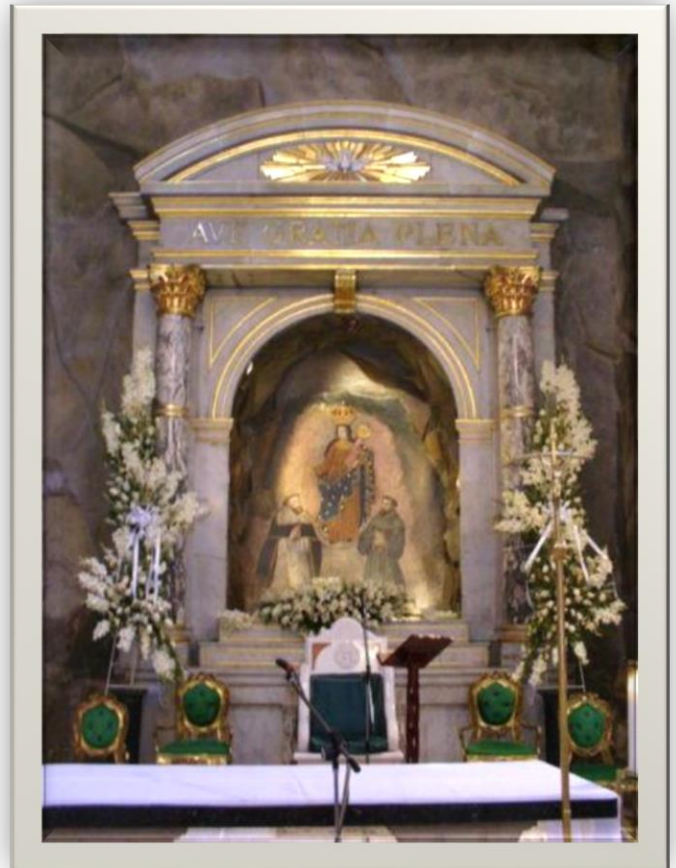
admiration and reverence. The Mother and Child, it seems, had detached themselves temporarily from the miraculous portrait. Yet another miracle took place when Rosa became very ill and died. Remembering the beautiful Lady and the miracle she had worked in healing the child of her earlier affliction, Maria carried Rosa to the cave and implored the Lady to restore her child to life. Our Lady answered her prayers when the child awoke in perfect health. Friends and neighbors who had seen the child without life were now overwhelmed with awe at this latest miracle and later followed Maria to the apparition site.

Moved at the news of a dead child being restored to life, word spread quickly and far with many visiting the cave, now regarded as a grotto, to ask for answers to their

prayers. All were amazed upon entering the grotto to see the delicate and regal image of the Blessed Virgin holding her Infant Son. Pictured with the Mother and Child are St. Dominic on one side who was receiving a rosary from the Virgin, and on the other side is St. Francis of Assisi who is receiving from the Child Jesus the Franciscan cord, which is a symbol of the Franciscan Order. These two Orders, the Dominicans and the Franciscans, are the founders of the two Orders that first evangelized Colombia.

A magnificent church was constructed in such a way as to protect the image, which remains in its original location but can now be found behind the main altar. The location of the church is interesting in that one end was built flat against the hillside of the apparitions while the body of the church spans most of the gorge and is supported by decorative pilings. A bridge from the church touches the adjacent hillside which makes it easier for the approach of pilgrims. Custodians of the church boast that it has more turrets and spires than Notre-Dame in Paris.

Pope Pius XII in 1952 granted a canonical crowning of Our Lady of Las Lajas and in the presence of the entire Colombian episcopate, the Gothic church was elevated to

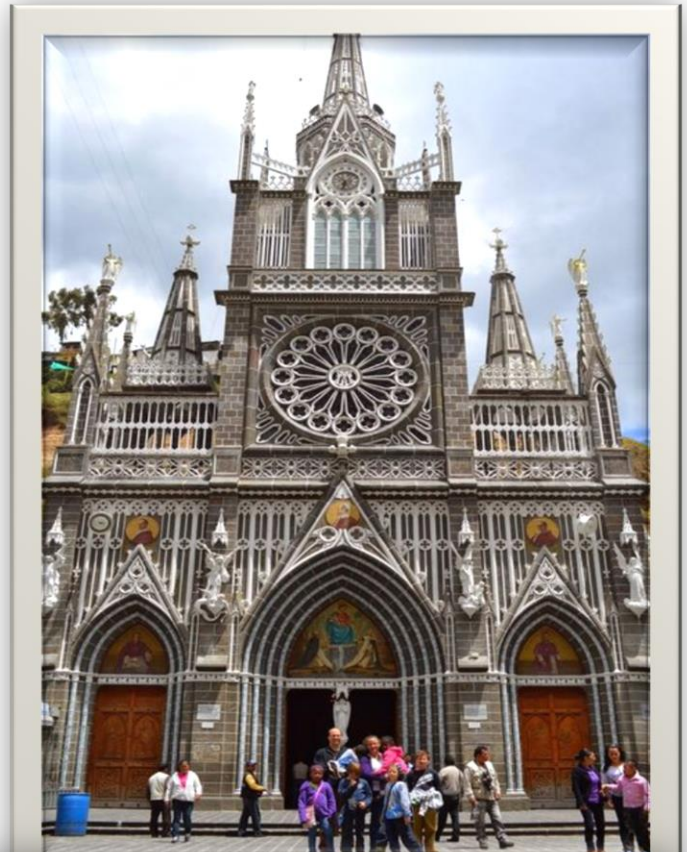


the dignity of a minor basilica journeyed to the place, despite its isolated location in the high mountains.

BISHOP GASPAR ORDERS THE BUILDING OF A CHURCH

After the persecution the bishop of La Vang, Bishop Gaspar, ordered that a church be built in the place of the apparition in honor of the Lady of La Vang. Because of its location on a high mountain, it took many years to complete. Finally, when the church was dedicated by the bishop, he proclaimed during the solemn ceremony that the Lady of La Vang was the Protector of the Catholic communities.

An even larger church was built in 1928, that was unfortunately destroyed in the summer of 1972, during the Vietnam War. With the validation of many cures and favors, another more beautiful church was built. This was elevated by Pope John XXIII to a minor basilica while on June 19, 1988, Pope John Paul II, in canonizing 117 Vietnamese martyrs, recognized the importance and significance of Our Lady to the Vietnamese people. The following year, for the 200th anniversary of the apparition, Pope John Paul II, in writing to Cardinal Paul Joseph Pham Dinh Tun, Archbishop of Vietnam, wrote: "I warmly join in the joy and



thanksgiving of the Bishops of Vietnam and the members of the dioceses.”

The sanctuary is an important site of pilgrimage for Catholics in Vietnam, as well as for the Catholic Overseas Vietnamese Community. To accommodate the pilgrims the La Vang Boarding House was recently constructed. The Vietnamese people have dedicated many churches in the United States to Our Lady of La Vang where she remains their beautiful champion to whom they freely give their love and reverence

