

Inculturation of Catholic Virtue Ethics through Vietnamese Women’s Reclaimed Confucian Virtues

Ngoc Nguyen

Abstract: Vietnamese women have historically been obligated to practice four womanly virtues because of the influence of Confucian values. Confucian concepts and practices correlate to Christian virtue ethics by stressing the practice of good acts and the avoidance of evil through the practice of special virtues strictly observed and reflected in a moral life, leading to the perfection of oneself. There is a connection between the Catholic virtues of justice, charity, solidarity, and wisdom and the four Vietnamese womanly virtues because modern Vietnamese women are expected to utilize these virtues to promote the common good in society and the family. Despite the negative influence of Confucian values that results in the societal oppression of women, both the practice of virtue ethics and Vietnamese womanly virtues allow one to become a more perfect person. The Virgin Mary is considered a virtuous and perfect woman because she lived and practiced the virtues in her life. This paper considers how Vietnamese womanly virtues are linked with Marian virtues through the context of virtue ethics to illustrate a linkage between Confucian and Catholic virtues. This can help to enhance the relevance of Catholic teaching in the Vietnamese church.

MOST VIETNAMESE PEOPLE ARE ADHERENTS OF Confucianism, Buddhism, or Taoism. Although a colonialist import, which gained ascendance in the third century CE, Confucianism is now a genuine part of Vietnamese culture used by many people to structure and give meaning to their lives. Under the influence of Confucianism, Vietnamese society changed the previous matriarchal family structure into a patriarchal system, emphasizing the family, with women responsible for the domestic life and the education of children.¹ For this reason, Vietnamese women are required to fulfill their familial

¹ Huy Ngoc Nguy n, “The Confucian Incursion into Vietnam,” in *Confucianism and the Family* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 92.

duties at the cost of being excluded from receiving an education, seeking higher positions in society, or participating in politics.² Thus, women have remained voiceless and suffer discrimination because of the cultural prioritization of males.³ Likewise, women have historically been dependent on males and forced to be submissive. In the twenty-first century, the role of Vietnamese women in the family has changed, yet women continue to face discrimination.

Catholics are a small minority in Vietnam, forming only seven percent of the population. The growth of Catholicism in Vietnam began in the seventeenth century due to the Jesuit missionaries, especially Father Đắc Lộ (Alexandre de Rhodes), who reinforced, established, and nurtured the Vietnamese Church.⁴ The purpose of this article is to illustrate connections between the Confucian and Catholic virtue frameworks in order to suggest that the Catholic tradition provides an important resource for helping Vietnamese women overcome the patriarchal structures of their culture. Confucianism and Catholicism share common ground in emphasizing virtues as a means to help persons become perfect individuals and contribute to the greater community. Both traditions prioritize the cultivation and practice of virtuous qualities that elevate the moral character of the individual. For Confucianism, benevolence, filial piety, sincerity, and righteousness are virtues which help to guide ethical conduct, fostering a society where persons have empathy, respect, and social responsibility. These virtues are considered important for social harmony, promoting the individual's duty toward others and maintaining a just society and stable community. Likewise, Catholicism emphasizes virtues such as love, compassion, solidarity, wisdom, humility, and justice as means helping Christians grow spiritually to have a deeper relationship with God and neighbors. These Catholic virtues are viewed as a foundation for Christian life in accordance with divine teaching, reflecting God's love, embodying moral integrity within society, and promoting the common good. Confucianism and Catholicism are linked by a shared concern with virtues underlying the belief that practicing personal virtues is connected to the flourishing and harmony of society. Thus, to live virtuously is not only an

² Quynh Thi Nhu Nguyen, "The Vietnamese Values System: A Blend of Oriental, Western, and Socialist Values," *International Education Studies* 9, no. 12 (2016): 34–35.

³ Recognizing that most scholarly interpretations of Confucian ethics are from a Chinese perspective, the Vietnamese context offers a similar set of social conditions. There are some exceptions; for instance, foot binding is not a social practice in Vietnam, but the general trend of patriarchal misogyny is common in both Asian countries.

⁴ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 66–68.

individual but also a communal responsibility, contributing to the thriving of society through living an ethical life in harmonious coexistence.

This article will focus specifically on Confucian-derived Vietnamese womanly virtues and explore how they are linked with Catholic Marian virtues.⁵ Although there are patriarchal aspects to both traditions, Vietnamese women have been re-envisioning or reappropriating womanly virtues as a way of promoting justice for women. I will approach this by first outlining the historical background for Confucianism and the Vietnamese culture. Then, I will describe how contemporary Vietnamese women are interpreting Vietnamese womanly virtues to serve their needs for liberation. In the third section, I will examine how Mary is understood in the Catholic tradition as an exemplar of virtue and liberation. Finally, I will articulate how inculturated liberative virtues, in conversation with Marian virtues, can facilitate the pursuit of justice for women in Vietnam.

CONFUCIAN COLONIALISM AND VIETNAMESE CULTURE

For approximately two thousand years, Vietnamese women have been obligated to practice the four womanly virtues (*tứ đức*): namely, *công* (diligent work), *dung* (pleasing appearance), *ngôn* (appropriate speech), and *hạnh* (moral conduct). This practice arose from Confucian influence during the feudal regime established by the Chinese in the second century BCE. As the standard used to evaluate the conduct of every woman, with no distinction based on class or background, the four womanly virtues have resulted in societal oppression and marginalization of women in contemporary Vietnam. In this section, I provide a brief overview of this history and discuss the role these virtues play in Vietnamese culture.

Vietnam was founded as a country in the seventh century BCE.⁶ The Chinese government conquered Vietnam in the second century BCE and ruled over it for more than ten centuries.⁷ This period of Chinese domination included the enforcement of an assimilation policy to Confucian culture and customs on the Vietnamese. Confucianism began to take root as Chinese literature, arts, culture, and science were “disseminated” in Vietnam.⁸ The moral concepts and

⁵ Derived from Confucian teaching, the Vietnamese womanly virtues are described by the term “womanly” rather than feminine because they are expected of all humans biologically determined as women.

⁶ Nguyễn, “The Confucian Incursion into Vietnam,” 91.

⁷ Peter C. Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2005), 11.

⁸ Nguyễn, “The Confucian Incursion into Vietnam,” 92.

practices of Confucianism stressed good acts and the avoidance of evil through the practice of special virtues to be strictly observed and reflected in moral life, leading to the perfecting of the self.⁹ The linchpin of the Confucian system is the virtue of *jen*, which means humaneness; it is the basic virtue everyone must cultivate to become a good person and promote flourishing family and society.

Traditional Vietnamese family structure was matriarchal in authority and lineage.¹⁰ With the beginning of the Chinese conquest, societal roles of women transitioned from women exercising leadership and agency to women staying at home to take care of the family while men fought against the Chinese invasion. Confucianism further prompted a change of gender roles, shifting authority to men. In Confucian ideology, family is the center of every relationship in the village and state.¹¹ As head of the family, men hold the right to make decisions about all important family matters. Women form the cornerstone of the family, supporting the home and educating children in how to live out the social virtues of harmony, solidarity, tolerance, and unity. The logic is that if each member of the family is good, the village and society will be good. For this reason, it became expected that Vietnamese women would observe the four womanly virtues in order to enable them to behave well with others, properly manage the household, and educate children.

It is not surprising that this normative framework would be imposed on Vietnamese culture through Chinese colonialist activity. Over subsequent centuries, continued warfare and the influence of Chinese ideologies further reinforced this framework. Confucianism was the dominant ideology in Vietnam from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, mainly supported by the ruling class.¹² The only

⁹ Prior to the introduction of Confucianism, Vietnamese society emphasized gender equality and mutual support. This is indicated in ancient Vietnamese proverbs such as *Cha sinh không tày mẹ dưỡng* (The father's giving life is not equal to the mother's nurturing), or *Cha chết ăn cơm với cá, má chết liếm lá đầu chợ* (If your father dies, you can still eat rice and fish; if your mother dies, you will have to lick leaves at the market). See Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 33.

¹⁰ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 32.

¹¹ Nguyễn, "The Confucian Incursion into Vietnam," 93. Confucianism produced some changes in the structure of the Vietnamese family. Vietnamese family structure was matriarchal with descent and authority handed down through the female line. However, under Chinese domination this structure was clearly converted to patriarchy with revolts against the Chinese led by men (the father) instead of women (as in the case of the Trung sisters). The Vietnamese family was led by men who as head of the family had the right to make decisions about all important family matters. The men were allowed to have multiple wives but women only one husband (Nguyễn, "The Confucian Incursion into Vietnam," 93).

¹² Anh Q. Tran, "When Christian Devotion Meets Confucian Piety: The Teaching of the 'Three Fatherhoods' in Premodern Vietnam," in *Confucianism and Catholicism*:

Confucian values that reached most of the population, however, were the bonds and relations for men, the four womanly virtues, and three submissions for women.¹³ The cultural norm of three submissions (*Tam Tông*) are: *Tại gia tông phụ* (a girl must obey her father), *xuất giá tông phu* (when married, she will submit to her husband), and *phu tử tông tử* (when a widow, she must depend on her eldest son). These factors resulted in women being prevented from obtaining education in Confucian society because people thought that girls did not need academic study but should only learn and practice the three submissions and four virtues. Women living under feudal society were expected to know how to cook, sew, and embroider, but writing and reading were not deemed necessary.¹⁴ This mode of thinking pushed women deeper into the depths of marginalization and powerlessness.

As a result, contemporary Vietnamese culture, influenced by Confucianism and other social factors, remains extremely patriarchal. A philosophical look at feminist interpretation of Confucian womanly virtues reveals a deep connection between Confucian virtue ethics and the social reality of ingrained sexism. One of the most frightening examples is the historical practice of female infanticide. The birth of a boy was met with congratulations, while female children were killed

Reinvigorating the Dialogue (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 36.

¹³ In Confucian society, while women practice the Three Submissions (*Tam Tông*) and Four Virtues (*Tứ Đức*), men are expected to observe the Three Bonds (*Tam Cương*). These include the relationship between king and ministers, father and son, and husband and wife, where the king holds authority over the minister, the father over the son, and the husband over his wife. If such order is maintained, the state will be at peace; if not, it will plunge into chaos. Likewise, there are the Five Virtues (*Ngũ Thường*), including: *nhân* (compassion, benevolence, love for one's fellow human beings), *lễ* (propriety, social appropriateness), *nhĩ* (kindness), *trí* (knowledge, wisdom), and *tín* (sincerity, truthfulness), which apply to all persons. Society will become more beautiful if every person practices and lives out both *Tam Cương* and *Ngũ Thường*. See Tran, "When Christian Devotion Meets Confucian Piety," 34; A. T. Nuyen, "Filial Piety as Respect for Tradition," in *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History*, ed. Alan K. L. Chan and Sor-hoon Tan (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 204, and Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 31. In Confucian society, men also need to possess moral self-cultivation to become a *quân tử*—a gentleman or superior man—who does things just because of his rightness, not for individual profit. See Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 40. According to Confucian teaching, men are the head of the family and encouraged to participate in social duties. They are required to practice more virtues to adapt with requirements of the family and society. If a man would like to have a good family or a stable society, he must first be good. In Confucianism, the process to such growth involves *tu thân* (cultivating the self), *tề gia* (regulating the family), *trị quốc* (ruling the country), and *binh thiên hạ* (pacifying the world). See Confucius, *The Great Learning*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1893), 5).

¹⁴ Thao Nguyen, *Asian Catholic Women: Movements, Mission, and Vision* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019), 60–61.

because of the perceived benefits of having a male child.¹⁵ Although Confucianism stresses the value of *jen*, women remain marginalized through their expected submissiveness. For example, in contrast to Confucian emphasis on the importance of education for boys, the proper education for girls only comprises practical household management to prepare them for a life of servitude.¹⁶ Likewise, feminist Confucian ethicists associate aspects of widow chastity and restrictions on filial piety to the implied influence of inherent sexism in culture on how Confucian values are interpreted.

THE FOUR WOMANLY VIRTUES AND CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE FEMINIST REINTERPRETATIONS

As noted earlier, the four womanly virtues Vietnamese women were required to observe are diligent work, pleasing appearance, appropriate speech, and moral conduct. They first appeared in *The Lessons for Women*, authored by the earliest Chinese woman historian, Ban Zhao, during the first century.¹⁷ Ban lived during the first century of the Han dynasty and was born into a family of noted scholars and officials. Exceptionally gifted and knowledgeable in numerous disciplines, Ban wrote the treatise to provide her daughters with marriage advice.¹⁸

While many interpretations find the “four womanly virtues” in *The Lessons for Women* a form of patriarchal oppression, other scholars have argued that this text stands as a foundational source of Confucian feminism. For example, Sandra A. Wawrytko emphasizes the Confucian scholar Kongzi’s advocacy of universal education, seeing that this implies an effort for equality and means to eliminate social ignorance.¹⁹ Ban advocates for equality of education, seeing women’s

¹⁵ Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 122.

¹⁶ Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 142.

¹⁷ Ann A. Pang-White, ed., *The Confucian Four Books for Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 31.

¹⁸ Ban Zhao wrote from her personal experiences, and for this reason, the subject matter of the work is limited to a woman’s domestic roles. In Ban’s view, a woman’s happiness was ultimately determined by whether she could meet the demands of her matrimonial family. See Pang-White, *Confucian Four Books for Women*, 31–34.

¹⁹ Sandra Ann Wawrytko, “Kongzi as Feminist: Confucian Self-Cultivation in a Contemporary Context,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (2000): 176. Other Asian feminist scholars who argue for this reinterpretation of Ban include: Ann A. Pang-White, “Confucius and the *Four Books for Women*,” in *Feminist Encounters with Confucius*, ed. Mathew A. Foust and Sor-hoon Tan (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 17–39; Liling Huang, “Research on *Four Books for Women*,” MA thesis, Taiwan Nahua University, 2023; Yanli Huang, *Four Books for Women, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2008); Lisa Raphals,

education as something that should not be restricted because of being confined to the house.²⁰ As with later feminist movements, she takes a strong stand against spousal abuse and other social problems.²¹ This indicates that Confucianism, like any meaningful tradition, contains elements that give cover to patriarchy and others that can be reclaimed for liberation. Thus, prompted by global feminist movements of the late twentieth century, Vietnamese women are reclaiming those virtues for themselves, updating how they are understood and practiced to fit with their modern contexts. In the following, I describe this re-interpretation.

Công (Diligent Work)

According to Confucianism, *công* (diligent work) requires that a woman be good at sewing, cooking, and carefully taking care of her husband and family by keeping the house clean and orderly.²² The word *công* here also relates to the woman's ability to give birth to and nurture children, and have the strength to serve her parents-in-law. In Vietnam, women play an important role in family life and are considered to be an "interior general," with the right to make decisions for what happens in the house.²³ Men are blessed if their wives possess the *công* virtue; for then they will have good meals after working hard all day, the children will be educated, and the house will always be organized. If women do not have this virtue, it is a disadvantage for their daughters; for they will not be taught how to properly conduct a household and behave appropriately.²⁴

The word "*công*" is also often interpreted to mean that the woman must have the ability to give birth to children, especially a baby boy, and nurture them. The Confucian tradition sees children as a significant part of women's flourishing and virtue. For example, the Confucian tradition emphasizes having children—especially male offspring—as contributing to women's thriving. The reasoning is that

"Gendered Virtue Reconsidered," in *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*, ed. Chenyang Li (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2000), 223–248; Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*; Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1932), reprinted in *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture*, ed. Robin R. Wang (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003), 177–188.

²⁰ Pang-White, *Confucian Four Books for Women*, 17.

²¹ Pang-White, *Confucian Four Books for Women*, 18.

²² Pang-White, *Confucian Four Books for Women*, 151.

²³ Louise Chipley Slavicek, "Vietnam's Confucian Heritage," *Cricket Media*, 2012.

²⁴ Hằng M. Lã, "Bản về Công Dung Ngôn Hạnh Trong Các Sách Gia Huân Nôm," *Viện Nghiên Cứu Hán Nôm*, August 2007.

it helps women prevent their husbands from pursuing a concubine or divorce.

In the past, people thought that women were born with only the obligation to be wives and mothers. Their jobs were to stay home, give birth, educate their children, take care of their family, and serve as peacemakers in the home. Vietnamese women today, however, pursue an understanding of diligent work that they have consciously updated to include their contribution to society. The virtue of diligent work has changed to express the contribution of women, not only in the home, but also in their professional and social activities.²⁵ Modern Vietnamese women are encouraged to excel at both office work and managing the home. There are both advantages and disadvantages to this situation, as women in modern society are burdened with additional responsibilities, but have the opportunity to use their talents, capacities, and knowledge to contribute to the development of the nation. This results in a feeling of accomplishment and pride when their efforts are recognized. The additional role in society has improved women's sense of dignity.²⁶

Dung (Pleasing Appearance)

Dung is understood as beauty, pleasing appearance, and charm in the Vietnamese language.²⁷ However, in wider Confucian belief *dung* also has an ethical meaning. It indicates one's interior, the beauty of the soul or spirit. *Dung* is the Confucian concept that encourages women to lead a moral life of humility, sacrifice, charity, brilliance, wit, caring for others, generosity, and altruism. This does not mean that exterior appearance is unimportant, but that Confucianism sets interior beauty on a higher level.²⁸ Perfect women are those who have both a good-looking appearance and beautiful interior characteristics.²⁹ Nonetheless, if one does not have a beautiful outward appearance, she may still reflect the virtue of *dung* by living a moral life. Therefore,

²⁵ Mạnh Hùng, “Đạo ‘Tứ Đức’ Với Phụ Nữ Xưa và Nay/Way ‘Four Virtues’ with Women in the Past and Today,” EVNNPT, March 2015.

²⁶ Mạnh Hùng, “Đạo ‘Tứ Đức’ Với Phụ Nữ Xưa và Nay/Way ‘Four Virtues’ with Women in the Past and Today.”

²⁷ Lieu T. Q. Nguyen, “Phát Huy Phẩm Chất ‘Công, Dung, Ngôn, Hạnh’ Của Người Phụ Nữ Trong Giai Đoạn Hiện Nay” (Promoting the Traits of ‘Diligent Work, Pleasing Appearance, Appropriate Speech, Moral Conduct’ for Woman in Contemporary Society), *Báo Phú Thọ*, March 3, 2011.

²⁸ Mạnh Hùng, “Đạo ‘Tứ Đức’ Với Phụ Nữ Xưa và Nay/Way ‘Four Virtues’ with Women in the Past and Today.”

²⁹ Nong V. Tran, “Công, Dung, Ngôn, Hạnh Của Người Phụ Nữ Việt Nam,” *Báo Phụ Nữ*, May 3, 2011.

the Confucian concept of *dung* attends more to one's interior, good actions and habits.

The liberative task is not to update this virtue but to appreciate that the authentic tradition refers not so much to appearance as to a woman's full personhood. In contemporary society, the virtue of *dung* can be reinterpreted as referring to women who are in good health, dynamic, creative, and benevolent. In practice, this is manifested through Vietnamese women who are actively improving their education and knowledge and encourage the practice of gender equality in family and society.³⁰ This depiction indicates a correlation, and often blending, between the virtues of *dung* and *hạnh* (moral conduct).

Ngôn (*Appropriate Speech*)

Ngôn (appropriate speech) is expressed by a gentle-clear voice, with the use of polite and suitable words. The words human beings use in daily life play an important role in human conversation as a means to exchange information and communicate. One's relationships become closer or break down, depending on the use and choice of words. Words used in anger or malice can harm others or a community just as much as physical violence.

In contemporary Vietnamese society, women have reclaimed the virtue of appropriate speech to describe how to use one's voice to build healthy relationships between colleagues, speak against injustice, and oppose domestic violence and patriarchal structures.³¹ The virtue of *ngôn* is also indicated through skillful communication and behavioral intelligence. A woman exhibiting the virtue of *ngôn* is one who illustrates her understanding of cultural nuances with those she engages or encounters. The expression of *ngôn* in contemporary Vietnamese society is characterized by frankness in criticism and self-criticism. For example, the virtue of *ngôn* can be demonstrated by speaking up to protect the legal rights of women and others.³²

³⁰ Nguyen, "Phát Huy Phẩm Chất 'Công, Dung, Ngôn, Hạnh' Của Người Phụ Nữ Trong Giai Đoạn Hiện Nay" (Promoting the Traits of 'Diligent Work, Pleasing Appearance, Appropriate Speech, Moral Conduct' for Woman in Contemporary Society).

³¹ Thanh Đào, "Luận Bàn về "'Công-Dung-Ngôn-Hạnh'" Trong Xã Hội Hiện Đại" (Discussing 'Diligent-Pleasing Appearance-Appropriate Speech-Moral Conduct' in Modern Society), *Thư Viện Tinh Đông Nai*, October 2015.

³² Nguyen, "Phát Huy Phẩm Chất 'Công, Dung, Ngôn, Hạnh' Của Người Phụ Nữ Trong Giai Đoạn Hiện Nay" (Promoting the Traits of 'Diligent Work, Pleasing Appearance, Appropriate Speech, Moral Conduct' for Woman in Contemporary Society).

Hạnh (Moral Conduct)

In Confucianism, a virtuous woman exhibits the quality of *hạnh* (moral conduct) by expressing her love to her husband and children through kindness, sacrifice, and faithfulness.³³ She must also express filial piety to her parents and ancestors. Moral conduct is not only a duty for women within the home but must extend to their role in society.³⁴ While in the past, moral conduct for women was judged solely on how they fulfilled their duty within the domestic sphere, women in contemporary Vietnam are now expected to display moral conduct in a societal role. In this case, the standards of moral conduct in society for both men and women are now the same.

In modern society, Vietnamese womanly moral conduct has been restructured to include trust and credibility with clients, while also promoting social justice and the common good.³⁵ Moral conduct is indicated through compassion, kindness, and understanding others, especially those suffering in difficult situations. To live out virtuous moral conduct is to participate in creating a more equitable society. Moreover, moral conduct in modern society includes recognizing and respecting human dignity, promoting mutual understanding and cooperation, and having faith and hope in God. Therefore, moral conduct for modern Vietnamese women is a commitment to creating a better world for all people.

Thus, in spite of their historical role in reinforcing patriarchy, Vietnamese feminist scholars are working to reclaim and update the four womanly virtues to enable Vietnamese women to contribute to building up not only a happy family but also a just and equal society where women can flourish in more autonomous roles. The practice of the four womanly virtues can enable Vietnamese women to become good and perfect through self-cultivation. In “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” Catholic moral theologian James Keenan argues that “people can only become morally excellent persons by being themselves.”³⁶ “Being themselves” can be a lens for being true to who we are—a human good or *telos* which God or the Creator infused in us from the

³³ Huong T. T. Tran, *Tứ Đức Công–Dung–Ngôn–Hạnh Theo Linh Đạo Đức Cha Pierre Lambert de la Motte* (Cà Mau: Phương Đông, 2009), 93.

³⁴ Minh Uyên, “Nghĩ về ‘Công–Dung–Ngôn–Hạnh’” (Thinking about ‘Diligent–Pleasing Appearance–Appropriate Speech–Moral Conduct’), *Báo Ninh Thuận Online*, March 2015.

³⁵ Nguyen, “Phát Huy Phẩm Chất ‘Công, Dung, Ngôn, Hạnh’ Của Người Phụ Nữ Trong Giai Đoạn Hiện Nay” (Promoting the Traits of ‘Diligent Work, Pleasing Appearance, Appropriate Speech, Moral Conduct’ for Woman in Contemporary Society).

³⁶ James Keenan, “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” *Theological Studies* 56, no. 4 (1995): 713.

beginning. Likewise, the four Vietnamese womanly virtues emphasize the self-cultivation of virtues. For instance, Chinese philosopher Tu Wei-ming notes that for one's moral formation, "Confucius advocated the need of self-cultivation that emphasizes learning which, in turn, prompts actions and the development of character."³⁷

This view links to the Confucian idea of the virtue of *jen* (humaneness), where a person who has *jen* is a perfect person. In the practice of Vietnamese womanly virtues, being oneself means to practice the virtue of *jen* and self-cultivation through the four virtues.³⁸ The virtue of *jen* is one of the most important concepts in Confucian thought. The concept predates Confucianism and is also a component of Taoist and Buddhist thought; however, Confucius made an important contribution in the evolution of the concept by bringing *jen* from its association with aristocrats and rulers to a moral quality that belongs to all humans.³⁹ The Confucian understanding of the term has been interpreted in a variety of ways, often dealing with love and being human. It was not until the eleventh century, however, that philosopher Chang Tsai identified *jen* with human nature, making the Western translations of *jen* as humaneness an appropriate interpretation.⁴⁰ In Confucianism, *jen* is set as the foremost virtue. In effect, if a human being has the virtue of *jen*, they may have the other virtues; if they do not, then they are without virtue.

This article illustrates how women, by following these virtues, contribute in significant ways through their work, charity, and positive influence on society. Therefore, the virtue of *jen* can benefit women and society, as through the practice of *jen* in modern society, women can fulfill both familial and societal duties. If one interprets the virtues of *jen* and self-cultivation through the practice of the four virtues, it can lead to a liberative view.

MARY, THE REINTERPRETATION OF THE FOUR WOMANLY VIRTUES, AND CATHOLIC INCULTURATION

This reclaiming of Confucian virtues by Vietnamese women is an opportunity for inculturation of Catholic virtue ethics for the Vietnamese context. Most Vietnamese people understand Confucianism and Catholicism to be different with respect to their historical and cultural

³⁷ Cited in Yiu Sing Lúcas Chan, "Bridging Christian and Confucian Ethics: Is the Bridge Adequately Catholic and East Asian," *Asian Christian Review* 1, no. 5 (2011): 49–72. See Tu Wei-ming, "Confucianism," 142–143.

³⁸ Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1978), 94.

³⁹ Wing-Tsit Chan, "The Evolution of the Confucian Concept Jên," *Philosophy East and West* 4, no. 4 (January 1, 1955): 299.

⁴⁰ Chan, "The Evolution of the Confucian Concept Jên," 305.

contexts; however, they do share many common beliefs, and Confucian values have greatly influenced the practice of Vietnamese Catholic rituals and values. Despite the very real differences, the shared centrality of virtue in both traditions points to an avenue for inculturation.⁴¹ Just as the four Vietnamese womanly virtues emphasize self-cultivation of virtue,⁴² Catholic virtue ethics focuses on the behavior and habits a person practices to develop virtuous actions, become a good person, and form a moral life. These moral actions—particularly the cardinal and theological virtues—lead to authentic human flourishing.⁴³

A female exemplar of virtue in the Catholic tradition is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Like the Vietnamese tradition, the Catholic tradition has, at times, interpreted Mary as a passive or submissive woman with no agency.⁴⁴ Yet contemporary retrievals of Mary interpret her faith in God as liberating her from the oppressions of patriarchal society as she became the liberator of humanity.⁴⁵ This section will examine how the church understands Marian virtues through teachings, Scripture, and interpretations of modern women theologians. I will first discuss Marian virtues in light of the theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. Secondly, I will examine her practice of the cardinal virtues, namely justice, wisdom, fortitude, and temperance. Thirdly, I will illustrate the virtues of solidarity, compassion, charity, and mercy Mary observed during her life. Finally, I will connect Mary as a virtuous

⁴¹ James Bretzke notes that Confucianism has developed its understanding and cultural embodiment of human rights in terms that are “distinct . . . but not incommensurate” with contemporary Western ideas. See James Bretzke “Human Rights or Human Rites: A Cross-Cultural Ethical Perspective,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 41, no. 1 (2005): 45. Historian Philip Ivanhoe finds Confucian teachings to be “profoundly insightful” so that a modern understanding of the virtues could be augmented with traditional Confucian accounts and Catholic views. See Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Concluding Reflections: Confucian and Catholic Conceptions of the Virtues,” in *Confucianism and Catholicism: Reinvigorating the Dialogue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 221.

⁴² Pang-White, *The Confucian Four Books for Women*.

⁴³ Jean Porter, “Virtue Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 96; Joseph Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 24. See also Keenan, “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” 714.

⁴⁴ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 75.

⁴⁵ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 77–78. According to Chung Hyun Kyung, “For many Asian women, Mary’s virginity is an active symbol of resistance against patriarchal order. Mary as a virgin is a complete human being within herself. She defines her life. By defining herself by her experience and her faith in God (and not by patriarchal norms), she becomes a model of full womanhood and liberated humanity for many Asian women” (Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 77–78).

woman and liberator with Vietnamese womanly virtues in the struggle for women's equality, justice, and liberation.

Recognizing the frustration of women in Asia, the Consultation of Asian Women's Theology was held in Singapore in 1987 to help women rediscover Mary as liberated and liberator. The "Summary Statement on Mariology" from this meeting defined the task of feminist Mariology as:

1. We must name and liberate ourselves from the destructive efforts of two thousand years of male interpretation of Mary.
2. We must return to the Scriptures as women with our own cultural contexts, to rediscover the Mary who is liberated and liberator.⁴⁶

Portraying Mary as a "self-defining woman" allows her to become a "symbol for the autonomy of women."⁴⁷ This statement does not refer to a woman who refrains from engaging in sexual activity, but rather to a woman who does not live a life defined and controlled by her relationships with men, such as being a daughter, wife, or mother.⁴⁸ She is a woman who becomes a complete and independent individual, while also being open to forming meaningful relationships with others.⁴⁹ Through Mary's virginal conception and pregnancy, God sent a message that it is not acceptable for men to exert control and oppress women. To numerous Asian women, the virginity of Mary represents an active symbol of defiance against patriarchal societal norms.⁵⁰

Reinterpreting Mary as model of liberated woman and liberator provides Vietnamese women with a framework for further, theological reinterpretation of Confucian virtues in their struggle for peace, justice, equality, charity, and liberation from patriarchal oppression. Mary is a model of practicing the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Mary's strong faith in God is evident throughout her life. At the Annunciation, Mary relied on her faith to believe in God's word through Gabriel. By saying "yes," Mary entrusts her future to God. Mary's strong faith is praised in the church with the title of "woman whose faith never wavered."⁵¹ Faith and hope are not separated in Mary's life. The Litany of Loreto refers to Mary as a model and

⁴⁶ "Summary Statement on Mariology" (Consultation on Asian Women's Theology, 1987), 1.

⁴⁷ Marianne Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), 20.

⁴⁸ Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free*, 20.

⁴⁹ Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free*, 20.

⁵⁰ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 77–78.

⁵¹ CCC, no. 149.

“Mother of Hope.”⁵² Practicing faith and hope led Mary to actions of love. Mary’s love for God and people is unmistakable throughout her life. The love Mary gives Jesus as she cares, nurses, and educates him shows her love for God. Mary’s love for Elizabeth, the disciples, and others at the wedding in Cana are examples of how Mary expressed her love.

Mary carefully observed the cardinal virtues of justice, wisdom, and fortitude. The church calls Mary “Mirror of justice.”⁵³ In the *Magnificat*, Mary indicates her opposition to injustice and announces a fight for justice on behalf of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized (Luke 1:52). Mary’s life is an example for those seeking justice in terms of liberation. Asian feminist theologians describe Mary as a “self-defining woman” because her virginity affirms her as a liberated human being, free to serve God without being subject to anyone else.⁵⁴ Mary is a strong and liberated woman who can inspire those who struggle against oppression. Likewise, Mary reveals the virtue of wisdom through her conversation with Gabriel to ask for sure what God wanted her to do (Luke 1:26–38). Thus, the church praises her as “Seat of wisdom.”⁵⁵ Mary expressed this wisdom by choosing to faithfully walk with God, even at the difficult time of the cross.⁵⁶ Mary’s fortitude is demonstrated through her actions of coming to serve Elizabeth and standing up at the end of the cross (John 19:26). Mary’s bravery is also evident in her long and dangerous journey during the flight to Egypt (Matt 2:13–15). Although Mary stood at the foot of the cross to witness the death of her son and hear the curses of his enemies, she remained strong as a sword pierced her heart, she accepted it bravely, in accordance with God’s will. This image is a beautiful picture of Mary’s fortitude and resilience. These difficult situations indicate how the practice of cardinal virtues can help women in the struggle for equality. The burden of her suffering and misery under the cross strengthened her faith in God.

INCULTURATING LIBERATIVE VIRTUES IN PURSUIT OF JUSTICE FOR WOMEN

In *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberation Struggles*, Lisa Tessman describes the relationship between feminist theory and virtue

⁵² See Litany of Loreto.

⁵³ See Litany of Loreto.

⁵⁴ See Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 77 and Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Women’s Theology*, 21.

⁵⁵ See Litany of Loreto.

⁵⁶ Ed Broom, “Ten Virtues of Mary (Mười Nhân Đức Của Mẹ),” trans. Trần Thiên Thu, *Giáo Xứ Tân Việt*, giaoxutanviet.com/muoi-nhan-duc-cua-duc-me/.

ethics, arguing that a feminist virtue ethics can help promote women's empowerment and flourishing by recognizing the ways in which gender-based discrimination and inequality impact moral character.⁵⁷ Her argument emphasizes ways to empower women and promote flourishing in a way that is not focused on the self, but through solidarity in a struggle for justice and liberation that promotes the common good. For Tessman, "burdened virtues" are those traits which allow one to endure and resist oppression, yet "ultimately detract from the bearer's well-being."⁵⁸ An example of this is when one is encouraged to be sensitive and attentive to another's suffering. Tessman argues that this can help withstand oppression but with constant pressure to exercise this "intrinsically painful virtue."⁵⁹ The practice of this virtue can also leave one burdened with guilt because of one's sensitivity.

These virtues transform the person who becomes stronger in dealing with injustice and systemic oppression. In this process there is a risk that practicing virtues can increase a woman's endurance and ability to resist oppression but also detract her from her own wellbeing. Tessman thus asserts: "I hope to increase the breadth of the complaint about systems of oppression, to name moral limitations and burdens as belonging on a list of harms that oppression causes, and to express both anger and grief over these harms."⁶⁰ For her, oppression does not take away the opportunity to practice virtue; indeed, defending one's dignity may demand different virtues. Oppression and suffering do not drown women but offer them a new way of practicing virtues and making their lives flourish. Kate Ward's "Virtue and Human Fragility" identifies a question for theologians; whether flourishing can occur under oppression. The consensus among most theologians is "yes," because they consider flourishing under oppression to be an opportunity of hoping for a better situation.⁶¹

Redefining the four virtues as a practice of, first, being oneself and for oneself, is a way for Vietnamese women to resist oppression. Feminist virtue ethics encourages practicing justice to counter the experience of marginalization and injustice in the family, workplace, society, and church.⁶² Understanding the four womanly virtues

⁵⁷ Marilyn Friedman, "Feminist Virtue Ethics, Happiness, and Moral Luck," *Hypatia* 24, no. 1 (2009): 29–40.

⁵⁸ Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 95.

⁵⁹ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 95–96.

⁶⁰ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 5.

⁶¹ Kate Ward, "Virtue and Human Fragility," *Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (2020): 151.

⁶² Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 110–115.

through Tessman's concept of "burdened virtues" can help Vietnamese women, who suffer greatly from patriarchal tradition and culture, to struggle against inequality and injustice. These virtues can both reflect practices of oppression from patriarchy but also enable Vietnamese women to resist oppression while also creating harms. This has been recognized by Asian women theologians who encourage the practice of virtues to become resilient. For example, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) Women's Desk leaders, in *Women to Women: Asian Women in Solidarity: Mobilizing Women in Struggle for Food, Justice, and Freedom*, state:

We fight for women's positive participation in every aspect of life. We want women's perspectives to be considered in decision making. We support women doing things in their own unique way. However, women's struggles in Asia must not be seen in one dimension, as simply a struggle against men. It is vital to see the many aspects of the structural dimension (social, political, cultural, and economic) which everywhere keep "the weakest" and "the least" in society—women as well as men—disadvantaged and deprived . . . women need to participate in the struggles for *Food, Justice, and Freedom for ALL*. Struggle means awareness. Struggle means organization and unity. Struggle means courage, faith, and hope . . . and link up with one another.⁶³

This CCA statement calls Vietnamese women to be brave, courageous, faithful, and unified in their struggle. To examine this further, I will account for how the four womanly virtues can be reinterpreted first through feminist ethics and Mary to function as "burdened virtues." This can allow them to be potentially liberatory despite the harm they may cause.

Responding to the reality of patriarchal oppression requires Vietnamese women to both overcome and endure their suffering. Practicing the virtues of patience and fortitude allows for each of these approaches to succeed. For example, although women have historically been excluded from higher education, several Vietnamese religious sisters have successfully fought for opportunities to study abroad to strengthen their qualifications and position in the church. Many struggles remain, despite these successes, which require further practice of patience and fortitude.

Recent trends indicate that the number of Vietnamese women religious who obtain higher education is now higher than that of male priests and seminarians; yet they remain marginalized when they

⁶³ CCA Women's Concern Committee, *Women to Women: Asian Women in Solidarity: Mobilizing Women in Struggle for Food, Justice, and Freedom* (Singapore: CCA, 1986), 1.

return to their home dioceses because of some in the male hierarchy who refuse to grant them positions of influence.⁶⁴ This indicates the need for continued fortitude as the sisters struggle to gain a voice in the Vietnamese Church. Likewise, patience is required to remain resilient in response to this persistent misogyny. Such fortitude and patience instantiate burdened virtues, as the sisters have found an approach that can help them both endure and seek to overcome patriarchal discrimination, but the burden remains with potential harm that exists in the psychological and spiritual trauma of what seems to be a Sisyphean task.

Mizuho Matsuda, a Japanese theologian and the first executive secretary of the CCA's Women's Desk, correctly states that nobody can help women in the process of liberation and fight for justice and equality more than women themselves.⁶⁵ Vietnamese women recognize their oppression under patriarchy but lack leadership to guide them towards liberation and justice. It is crucial to have strong leaders who can call for unity and solidarity among women to generate collective strength. The image of Mary in the upper room portrays her as a strong leader among male apostles, contradicting persistent social norms that view women as weak and inferior. Mary's wisdom and solidarity are examples for Vietnamese women to imitate. The wisdom Mary exhibits in her decisions and influence in navigating patriarchal society are essential for women leaders who might guide Vietnamese women in the fight for justice. Mary's visit to Elizabeth expresses solidarity for women who share the same struggles and journey together.⁶⁶ Chung argues that when women of faith overcome their own fear to support others, they can make even more of a difference.⁶⁷ Han Kuk Yum of Korea describes the solidarity of Mary and Elizabeth as a sisterhood of caring and support. In Mary's visit to Elizabeth, Yum senses that Mary displays solidarity with all women who face difficult situations in their lives, as only women know and feel the suffering and pain of women.⁶⁸ Thus, solidarity between Vietnamese women is an important factor for liberation.

Throughout history, Vietnamese women have shown resilience in fighting for justice and freedom. Examples include Nguyễn Thị Minh

⁶⁴ This assessment was offered by Vietnamese theologian Peter Phan during the dissertation defense of a Vietnamese student at Villanova University on March 20, 2023.

⁶⁵ CCA Women's Concern Committee, *Women to Women; Asian Women in Solidarity*, 1.

⁶⁶ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 80.

⁶⁷ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 80.

⁶⁸ Han Kuk Yum, "Mariology as a Base for Feminist Liberation Theology" (Consultation on Asian Women's Theology, 1987), 2.

Khai during the French colonization⁶⁹ and Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị against the Chinese invasion.⁷⁰ Vietnamese women continue to struggle against patriarchal society, exploitation by the church, and other forms of gender discrimination. The struggle for equality has not yet been won. Thus, women leaders can help raise awareness and develop strategies to overcome oppression through workshops, training, and outreach programs. In the *Magnificat*, Mary indicates her desire for liberation of the oppressed (Luke 1:52). This advocacy on behalf of the lowly illustrates her power and wisdom as a strong woman resisting oppression in a call for justice and equality. As Mary overcame societal constraints, Vietnamese women should seek solidarity and strength by uniting against the oppressive patriarchal system.

To liberate Vietnamese women from a patriarchal system, it is important to be creative in finding solutions. One option is to create private spaces for women to discuss their shared experiences and challenges. Unfortunately, these types of programs have not yet materialized in Vietnam. Vietnamese women should emulate the many Asian feminist theologians who have come together and created conferences, forums, and programs to encourage women to share their experiences. A second way to foster creativity in challenging patriarchal structures is to use art, social media, and storytelling to express disagreement with the patriarchal system and combat gender-based discrimination and oppression.

THE CORRELATION OF BURDENED VIRTUES WITH MARIAN VIRTUES

When considered as burdened virtues, Confucian womanly virtues clearly connect to Marian virtues. This section will describe the connection between Marian virtues, Vietnamese womanly virtues, and burdened virtues. I first emphasize how Marian virtues connect to Vietnamese womanly virtues of *công, dung, ngôn, and hạnh* through Mary's love, justice, humility, and solidarity.

Công (Diligent Work)

The Vietnamese womanly virtue of *công* and Marian virtue of love are interwoven. Since Mary says "Fiat" to God to become the mother

⁶⁹ William S. Turley, "Women in the Communist Revolution in Vietnam," *Asian Survey* 12, no. 9 (1972): 793–805.

⁷⁰ The Trưng sisters were national leaders in the first century, successfully leading the political and military resistance against China. See Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 12.

of Jesus, she accepts that hard situations will happen to her to fulfill God's plan. In marriage Vietnamese women need to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the family, their children, husband, and relatives. This section sets a stage to display how the Vietnamese virtue of *công* mirrors Mary's virtue, both sharing commitment to fulfilling responsibilities and obligations toward family and community.

Mary embodies the virtue of diligent work in her love for Jesus and those she meets, serves, and accompanies. Her love for God and people is unmistakable throughout her life. The love Mary gives Jesus as she cares, nurses, and educates him shows her love for God. Mary's love for Elizabeth is demonstrated when she comes to stay with and serve her. Mary exhibits the virtue of *công* at the wedding in Cana when she finds a way to help the wedding family who had run out of wine for their guests. Additionally, Mary's *công* is expressed by choosing to faithfully walk with God, even at the difficult time of the cross.⁷¹

Dung (*Pleasing Appearance*)

To understand the virtue of *dung*, one must consider the following Vietnamese proverb: *Cái nét đánh chết cái đẹp / Beauty dies and fades away but plainness holds its own / Beauty is only skin deep*. The true meaning of the virtue of *dung* relates to the interior beauty of women. Roman Catholic tradition considers Mary to be a beautiful and virtuous woman; thus indicating that she lived the virtue of *dung* through the practice of humility and purity. This section will discuss Mary's *dung* in light of humility to discern the virtue of *dung* in Mary's interior beauty.

Pope Francis spoke about humility as the beauty of Mary's soul from Saint Peter's Square on December 8, 2021. When Mary was greeted by Gabriel as one who is "full of grace," she did not become arrogant, but was astonished and humbled, referring to herself as a handmaid of the Lord (Luke 1:38). Mary saw herself as small before the grace God granted her, and recognizing her own smallness is an indication of humility.⁷² Mary's virtue of *dung* is clearly expressed through this example of humility. Mary's humility is seen through her prayer life, in which she is aware of her insignificance but is loved by God, so she lives a life of trusting in God and doing God's will. Mary's *dung* is also revealed in her silence when Joseph has doubts about her

⁷¹ Ed Broom, "Ten Virtues of Mary (Mười Nhân Đức Của Mẹ)."

⁷² Hồng Thủy, "ĐTC Phanxico: Nơi Đức Maria Chúng Ta Nhận Thấy Sự Khiêm Nhường Giúp Nên Thánh (Pope Francis: In Mary We Recognize That Humility Helps Us on the Way to Holiness)," *Vatican News*, December 8, 2021.

pregnancy. She would be praised if she told him about the mystery of what God has done to her; however, she chose to keep this story a secret and entrust her life and fate into God's hands. Mary's virtue of *dung*—humility as light illuminating her soul and leading her to a right and good way. In living out the virtue of *dung*—humility makes her become a beautiful woman in the eyes of God and the people.

Ngôn (*Appropriate Speech*)

The virtue of appropriate speech or *ngôn* for Vietnamese women has evolved to become a compulsion to speak out in the struggle for justice, making a call for solidarity with the poor and suffering. The Vietnamese womanly virtue of speech parallels Mary's compassionate words and fight for the oppressed. The virtue of *ngôn* reflects the power of speech women can have in building a just society and sustaining harmonious relationships. This section will describe how Mary consistently exhibited the virtue of appropriate speech in the aspects of justice, fortitude, and consolation.

Mary's virtue of appropriate speech is highlighted in how she speaks on behalf of the poor and oppressed. The church calls Mary "Mirror of justice."⁷³ For Elizabeth Johnson, in the *Magnificat*, Mary aligns herself with the oppressed in the name of God. As a result, her worship explicitly affirms the dignity of every downtrodden individual and assembles strength for resistance against prevailing powers of oppression.⁷⁴ Additionally, Mary's embodiment of *ngôn* is expressed through her bravery with the apostles in the upper room after Jesus's death. Mary's appropriate speech is also evident at the Annunciation when she relied on her faith to believe in God's word through Gabriel. By saying "yes," Mary entrusts her future to God.

Hạnh (*Moral Conduct*)

In Vietnamese culture, moral women are those who not only live a virtuous life by practicing solidarity and doing charity to others but also have a close relationship with the divine.⁷⁵ In this view, the Marian virtues of solidarity, love, and close relationship with God are linked to the Vietnamese womanly virtue of moral conduct. This section will describe how Mary exhibits moral conduct through her solidarity with Elizabeth, love for the poor, and intimacy with God.

⁷³ See Litany of Loreto.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Mary and the Female Face of God," *Theological Studies* 50, no. 3 (September 1989): 514.

⁷⁵ I use the word "divine" instead of God here because of the religious plurality in Vietnam.

Mary's solidarity is indicated by how she could relate to Elizabeth's difficulties in her similar status of unconventional pregnant woman. Chung describes the solidarity of Mary and Elizabeth as of two women "who are walking on a new road, risking the safety of a conventional life."⁷⁶ Mary is praised as a mother of mercy and of the poor. Pope John Paul II, in *Dives in Misericordia*, states that "Mary . . . is the one who has the deepest knowledge of the mystery of God's mercy. . . . In this sense, we call her the Mother of mercy."⁷⁷ Again, in *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II describes Mary as a figure who always stands with and for the poor.⁷⁸ Many Christians have experienced Mary as a mother with pure love, mercy, and compassion, who accompanies her children in their suffering. In the context of Vietnamese society, where people continue to suffer persecution, Mary has played the role of Mother of mercy. Mary is attractive to the Vietnamese people because she is the embodiment of God's love, mercy, and compassion and is always ready to help them in their difficulties.⁷⁹ Mary also exhibits the virtue of moral conduct through her close relationship with God. No human could have more intimacy with God than the mother who carried God in her womb, accompanied Jesus through every situation, and always kept God's word in her heart.

This section has illustrated how the four Confucian womanly virtues, reinterpreted first through feminist ethics and then Marian virtues, function as "burdened virtues." These virtues are liberative despite the potential for continued harm to Vietnamese women. These "burdened virtues" enable Vietnamese women to have the endurance to resist oppression while seeking to overcome the entrenched social patriarchal mindset. The connection between Vietnamese womanly virtues and Marian virtues is made plain in these examples. It is appropriate to say that Mary perfectly lived the four Vietnamese womanly virtues of diligent work, beautiful appearance, appropriate speech, and moral conduct. Mary's diligent work is indicated by serving Elizabeth and her willingness to help at the wedding in Cana. Mary's beauty is illustrated by her inner faith through acts of charity, care for others, and sensitivity to the needs of others. Mary's appropriate speech is clear through her struggle for justice and encouraging people to remain strong and brave. Moral conduct is evident in Mary's faith and hope in God, fulfillment of her familial

⁷⁶ Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 80.

⁷⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 9.

⁷⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 37.

⁷⁹ In Vietnam, the image of Mary is similar to that of the traditional mother goddess. Therefore, Mary is venerated by both Christians and non-Christians with Marian statues in their homes and at shrines, often when facing difficulties in life.

and societal duties, and through her compassion, kindness, charity, and respect for human dignity. In other words, as Vietnamese women live and practice the womanly virtues, Mary's example provides a way to broaden that practice to include the virtues of justice, solidarity, charity, and the promotion of the common good.

CONCLUSION

This research shows how both Confucian and Catholic virtue ethics can be claimed by Vietnamese women for formation in human excellence and social liberation. Confucian virtue ethics emphasize moral self-cultivation to achieve personal and social harmony. Recognizing that the life of the individual affects society and others, Confucianism prioritizes humaneness (*jen*), righteousness, and fidelity. These attributes encourage harmony in relationships, building and developing an ordered society, and living out the virtues. Likewise, Catholic virtue ethics are rooted in the virtues of faith, hope, charity, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance to encourage the cultivation of moral virtues. Both Catholic and Confucian teaching assumes that individuals can become better persons by practicing virtues in their daily lives. There is a convergence in the pursuit of communal relationships, with Confucianism emphasizing family and friendship, while Catholic ethics requires love and compassion for others to promote the well-being of the community and caring for the vulnerable. In each case, the development of virtue is a lifelong process of practice, self-reflection, and growth.

The connections between Confucian and Catholic virtues, through an analysis of Vietnamese womanly virtues and Marian virtues, illustrate the relevance of Catholic teaching in Vietnamese context. This research can benefit both traditions to consider the similarities shared by their perspectives, promoting mutual respect and cooperation for the development of a good, just, and equal society through the teaching of moral behavior at the individual level. Mary's example in the Catholic tradition illustrates how virtues can enable work for liberation along with the flourishing of the self as person-in-relationship. Through this lens, the womanly virtues can remain true to the Vietnamese tradition while still encouraging the flourishing of contemporary Vietnamese women as they struggle for liberation. The patriarchal values imbued in Confucian and Catholic ethics are evident in the inequality women face in society and the church. Nevertheless, a genuinely liberating virtue ethics can be reclaimed from each tradition. Showing how Catholic virtues, exemplified through Mary, align with the updated Confucian virtues Vietnamese women have reclaimed is an important tool for Catholic inculturation and women's liberation. **M**

Ngoc Nguyen was born in Hanoi, Vietnam. She joined the Congregation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hanoi in 2005, taking her final vows in 2019. After receiving a Bachelors in English at Hanoi University in 2009, she came to the United States in 2014 for further education. She received an MA degree in theology from the Aquinas Institute of Theology in 2019 and a Master of Theological Studies from Villanova University in 2021. Ngoc is a doctoral candidate in theology at Marquette University. Her dissertation research focuses on the development of a Vietnamese womanist liberation theology.