

Catholic Digest

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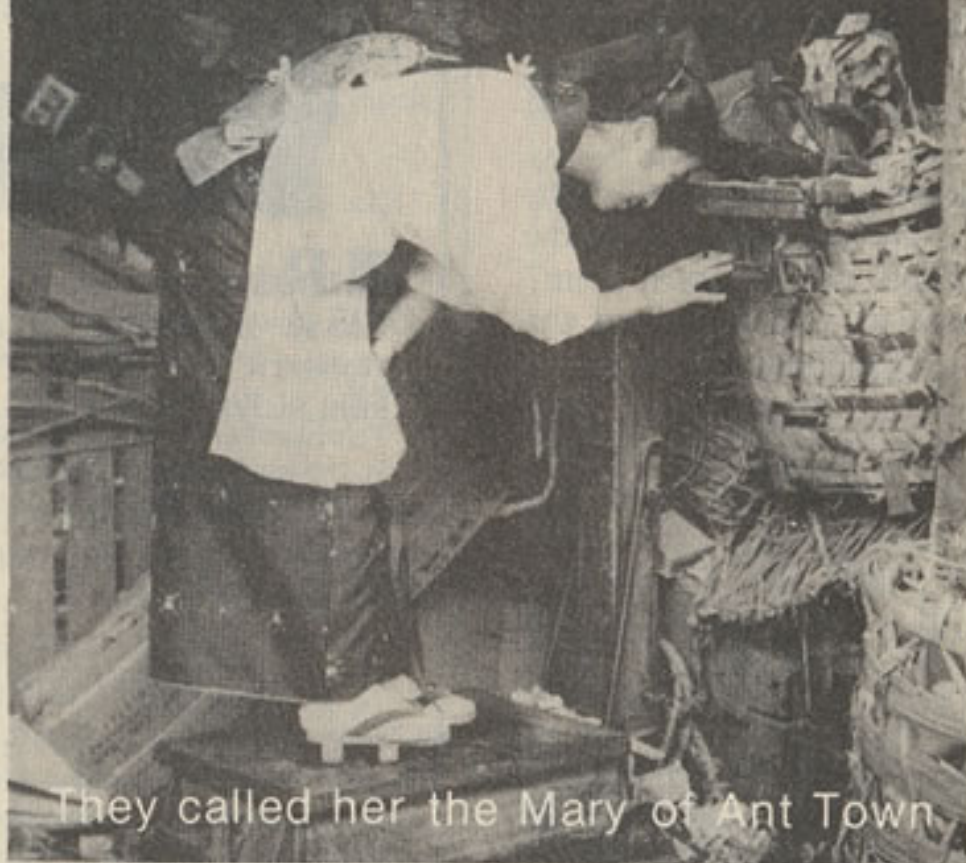
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A Saint for Tokyo?

By BONIFACE HANLEY, O.F.M.

Condensed from "The Anthonian"



They called her the Mary of Ant Town

Satoko Kitahara served the poor in a shantytown of Tokyo. She credited the intercession of the Blessed Mother for the gift of her Baptism.

Satoko Kitahara was born in a wealthy Tokyo suburb on Aug. 22, 1929. Her father, a descendant of generations of Shinto chief priests, had earned a doctoral degree in agriculture. He also earned a generous

income from the family's shoe business. The Kitaharas maintained a comfortable home and provided a fine education for their three daughters and only son.

The girls gave unquestioning loy-

alty to their Emperor, respect and obedience to their father, love and deference to their mother. They presumed their parents would arrange their marriages and, once wedded, they would walk behind their husbands, with toes pointed inward to appear awkward. As good wives, they would never offer an opinion. If someone insisted, they would say, "I have no idea," or, "I entirely agree with my husband."

When Japanese authorities established schools for the higher education of women, they loaded curricula with instruction in etiquette and body movement. One president of a girls' school arranged for his students to learn European languages so "they would be able to put their husbands' books in the bookcase right side up after they had dusted them."

Professor Kitahara, deeply committed to the tenets of Japanese custom, did not dream that his charming and highly intelligent little Satoko would not fit the traditional mold.

When war broke out between Japan and the U.S. in December, 1941, Professor Kitahara and his son were drafted. The father entered the armed forces, the son enlisted for factory work. In 1944, 15-year-old Satoko joined the war workers at a Tokyo aircraft factory.

On Aug. 14, 1945, one day before the Emperor formally surrendered, Satoko collapsed at her factory bench, a victim of tuberculosis. Her brother had already died of exhaustion.

During the American occupation, soft drinks, jukeboxes, short skirts, lipstick, and American singing and dancing fascinated Japanese youth. They found it difficult to decide whether they were Japanese or American. The inner turmoil of her contemporaries deeply affected Satoko. By her own admission, she was as confused as her peers.

After her health improved in autumn, 1946, Satoko enrolled in Tokyo's Showa Women's Pharmaceutical College. One day during her student years, while walking with a friend, Satoko spotted two nuns entering a tiny church. Although neither she nor her companion was Catholic, they followed the nuns into church. Satoko stood before a statue of the Blessed Mother. The statue's beauty pierced her heart. For months afterward, she reflected on this. She determined to discover more about the person whom the statue represented and about the nuns who had led her into that mysterious, wondrous place.

The nuns, she learned, belonged to a Religious Order known as Mercedarians. The Community had been interned during the war, but in spite of harsh treatment they felt nothing but love and respect for the Japanese. Satoko persuaded her father to enroll her younger sister in Tokyo's Mercedarian College; later, when she visited her sister, Satoko met the assistant principal, Mother Angela.

Mother Angela asked Satoko if she had been baptized. "No," responded the bewildered young woman, who

hardly knew the meaning of the word. "Why don't you prepare yourself for Baptism and become a Christian?" asked the nun. Four months after Mother Angela's invitation, Oct. 30, 1949, Satoko was baptized and given the Christian name Elizabeth. A few days later, she was confirmed and chose Maria as her middle name.

Brother Zeno Zebrowski, O.F.M. Conv., became the next person to significantly influence Satoko's life. He had arrived in Japan in May, 1930, with some Polish Franciscans and their leader, Maximilian Kolbe. Each day barrel-chested Zeno, in his black Franciscan habit, walked down from the friary in the hills above Nagasaki to the city. Standing in the town square, he begged for Nagasaki's poor. In fractured Japanese he greeted each person who passed him, and handed each a holy card of the Blessed Mother. When his begging was finished, he distributed all he had received in the poor quarters of the city.

When war hysteria gripped Japan, only Zeno — of all the foreign priests, Sisters, and Brothers — was not interned. The government allowed him to travel throughout the nation, doing works of mercy.

Satoko met Zeno shortly after her conversion. The Franciscan, who had come to search out Tokyo's poor and needy, wanted to assist one community in particular: Ant Town.

During the American occupation, beggars, criminals, black marketeers,

prostitutes, drug pushers, and drifters swarmed into Tokyo. Some squatted illegally in a shanty town in the Tokyo marshes, and this place came to be called Ant Town. Tokyo's city officials viewed Ant Town as an eyesore, a constant reminder of military defeat. They made frequent efforts to wipe it out.

Ant Towners themselves rejected crime and welfare assistance as means for escaping poverty. Headed by a convicted criminal known as The Boss, and another villain, The Professor, Ant Town's people survived by collecting junk and selling it on the market. Each morning, ragpickers swarmed through Tokyo streets, alleys, and bombed-out buildings, scouring refuse heaps, picking through trash cans and garbage pails, looking for saleable materials. They refused charity from others, finding it patronizing and demeaning. Their determination to maintain Ant Town was as strong as city officials' determination to destroy it.

As the ongoing battle between the Ant Towners and city authorities reached a climax, Brother Zeno appeared on the scene.

The Professor and The Boss did not welcome Zeno's offer to help, but they listened to what he had to say. In mangled Japanese, he assured them that he could rescue Ant Town. "I'll get you some favorable publicity," the friar announced.

The Professor, a wily strategist, devised a bold plan. Capitalizing on postwar interest in Western religion, he phoned some newspaper editors.

"Brother Zeno is in Ant Town," he announced. "We are planning to build a church here." To insure an immediate response, the Professor added, "Brother Zeno will be here for only a few moments. I will hold him here only if you wish." The ruse worked. A team of reporters showed up immediately.

Just before the team arrived, the Professor told Zeno of his rash promise. "Never mind," said the irrepressible Franciscan. "Ant Town will have a church." Brother Zeno left the Professor, walked out to a broken concrete plaza, knelt down, and began to say the Rosary. The reporters filmed the Franciscan Brother at prayer.

Scanning a newspaper the follow-

ing day, Satoko saw Zeno's picture and read that he had pledged to help build a church in Ant Town. On a cold, damp winter night in early December, 1950, Satoko arrived in Ant Town and re-introduced herself to Zeno. The Professor and The Boss, regarding her as just another patronizing do-gooder, were not impressed. Brother Zeno, however, received her kindly and offered to walk her home. As they strolled through Tokyo, he pointed out the ex-soldiers, vagrants, prostitutes, and war orphans who were sleeping on sidewalks, clustered around campfires, and huddled in public toilets.

Satoko did not sleep that night. She compared her life to Zeno's. She was 21, wealthy, a respected univer-



Praying the Rosary at the Christmas Eve festival are (left to right): Ozawa San (called "The Boss" by the Ant Town people), Brother Zeno Zebrowski, O.F.M. Conv., and Satoko.

sity professor's daughter. She could speak a few foreign languages, play the piano, watch motion pictures, and enjoy musical concerts.

By morning, she had resolved to serve the poor.

A few days later Zeno asked her to organize a Christmas celebration in Ant Town. Satoko quickly mobilized the children. She discovered they knew nothing about Christ, except that He was a Western hero and had been born poor. They created decorations of tinsel and set up a 10-foot-tall Santa Claus to imitate Western customs.

When Satoko discovered that the ragged children could not, in a few days, learn Western Christmas carols, she taught them a couple of Japanese children's songs. In thin, piping voices the little ones, who had never seen anything but Tokyo streets, sang *Cedar Saplings Growing on the Mountain Top*.

Following the song rehearsal, the children sat in a circle around Satoko. Starved for affection, they opened their hearts to the young woman who had taught them to sing. From innocent children came stories of drunken parents, broken homes, and bitterness about rejection they experienced from other children. "They shout at us and insult us," one tot said, weeping. "It's as if we have no feelings."

"I'll be your big sister," Satoko told them. "I'll be on your side and I'll fight for you."

On Christmas Eve, 1950, in the glare of camera lights, a celebration

began in Ant Town. Twenty or thirty ragpickers portrayed shepherds; The Boss's goat debuted as a sheep, and The Boss himself played chief shepherd. Little children dressed like shining stars, and the entire cast moved in colorful procession toward a small straw hut where a real baby slept on a bed of straw. The Boss's wife, wearing a white veil, played Mary. Satoko had managed to teach the children one Latin hymn, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. As the ceremony concluded, Zeno dropped to his knees before the straw hut and began praying the Rosary. As cameras swept across Ant Town, its residents, one by one, fell to their knees.

The Professor knelt beside Zeno. As the Brother finished praying, he murmured, "Thank you, thank you" to The Professor.

"Don't thank me," the crusty leader responded. "Satoko made all this preparation."

The Professor, while admiring Satoko's dedication to the children, still distrusted her. "You do not live for us, Satoko, but only for your Christ. You love Jesus, not us," he charged. He chided her that she did not understand Ant Town's citizens. "We are poor, but we are not beggars. We are proud of our ability to live off junk."

Satoko's simplicity and cheerfulness, as well as her obvious love for Ant Town's children, finally convinced him that she was sincere. It would take awhile, though, for The Professor to change his mind.

One particular effort of Satoko's did impress The Professor. From

someone in Ant Town she had obtained a ragpicker's large wicker basket. Within an hour of her first day of ragpicking, she collected a basketful of goods, which she sold for a hundred yen. The Professor, to show his pleasure, presented her with an Ant Town junk cart.

The next morning, pulling her cart through the streets of Tokyo, Satoko felt like a real Ant Towner. Ordinary Japanese who encountered the beautiful young woman of obvious breeding assumed she had gone mad, probably as a casualty of the war.

Each day, after finishing her ragpicking and junk-sorting, she instructed the children in basic grammar, singing, music, and dancing. After classes, she supervised the children's afternoon baths.

In spite of her service, though, Satoko continued to live with her parents and returned to her posh suburban home each night after working in Ant Town. Her mother would strip Satoko of her kimono, take it outside, shake gnats from it, and then hurl her underclothes into a tub of boiling water. Although Satoko was breaking every rule for young women of her class and station, her mother and father never interfered or resented what others of their status termed eccentric behavior.

Using their wits, The Professor and The Boss were able to build an Ant Town center, a two-story building with a meeting room, school, and bathhouse. Their last feat of con-

struction was to place a six-foot wooden cross on top of the building. This convinced city officials that the center was also a church—and they were reluctant to bulldoze a church. Ant Town had won a reprieve.

Satoko set up study rooms in the new building. Her days, beginning with early morning ragpicking and ending with classes and other chores at night, consumed her limited energies. The pervading dampness of Ant Town, plus her exhausting pace, wore down Satoko's frail health. The Professor watched with dismay as she vigorously ministered to the people of Ant Town.

Satoko's efforts attracted the attention of the media, and the press began referring to her as "The Mary of Ant Town." In Japanese, the words *The Mary* referred to the Blessed Mother. Satoko received fan mail from all over the country.

But eventually Satoko's health failed. She had to remain at home. One day while visiting her, The Professor found her depressed. "I cannot be sleeping here at home in these warm surroundings when so many believe I have given myself to the poor," she told him.

"Satoko," The Professor said, "I always believed you only serve us because Christ demanded it; I cannot believe that you truly love us. Would you," he challenged, "give your life for the people of Ant Town?"

"Yes, I would."

"Why?" The Professor asked.

"Because Christ gave up life for me. And, if Jesus wishes me to give

my life for Ant Town, I will do so."

"How do you plan to give your life for us, Satoko?" The Professor asked.

"I want to live in Ant Town. I want to leave my parents' home and share the life of the Ant Towners. I want to work and suffer with them, to rejoice with them."

"Satoko," The Professor responded, "for the first time, I believe you really love us. But, please do not come with us. You are weak, your health is poor, and you will die. You will be of no use to anyone dead." He convinced her to rest. "If you are willing to give your life for us, you'd better have a life to give," he counseled.

As she neared the end of a year of recuperation, Satoko heard rumors that city authorities planned a final offensive against Ant Town, so she returned there to live. She discovered that The Boss had hired a married couple to educate the children and supervise their baths. Many youngsters she had trained had left; the new children did not know her. The place, she judged, functioned very well without her. She had abandoned her wealth, her parents, and her health only to discover how quickly she could be replaced. The knowledge crushed her.

Of all people, The Boss helped her put her life in perspective. "You told The Professor once, Satoko, that you would be willing to die for Ant Town if your Christ wanted you to do that," he said. "Don't you see the role of 'The Mary of Ant Town' was

only loaned to you, and now your Christ wants it back? If Christ wants it back, why don't you give it?"

She acknowledged The Boss's truthful words. "The new couple you have hired can do all that I can, and perhaps do it better," she responded. "I will leave and won't return unless God calls me."

That night, The Boss called a meeting of the Ant Town Council. "We've got to let her go," he said. "The only thing I said that made sense to her was that her God, whom she claims is the most important being in her life, required this of her. If that God inspired Satoko to help us, I want to have that God for my God, too." His words ignited lengthy discussion. In the end, everyone agreed that The Boss should be baptized.

Then The Professor and the elders decided they would like to be baptized, too. The Boss took the name Zeno; The Professor, Joseph. The Professor explained his choice of a name in this way: "From what I know, Joseph assisted Mary. I plan to assist our Mary."

Satoko left Ant Town and returned to her home. With Mother Angela's approval, she decided to join the Mercedarian Sisters. The morning she was to depart for the convent, a high fever felled her. Her parents sent her to the hospital. Doctors placed her on the critical list and eventually summoned her parents as well as The Boss and The Professor.

"I can do nothing for Satoko," the doctor told them. "There's only



The simple cross above Ant Town center saved the squatters' village from the bulldozers of the Tokyo municipality.

one hospital that can possibly help her."

"Where is this hospital?" The Boss demanded.

"In Ant Town," the doctor said. "Take her there. She'll probably die here. If she dies in Ant Town, she'll die happy."

After obtaining her parents' consent, The Boss brought Satoko back.

The Boss and The Professor arranged a special room for Satoko in the Ant Town center. Brother Zeno came from Nagasaki with a 3-foot-tall statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. The Boss and The Professor placed the statue on a platform in front of Satoko's room.

Ant Towners gathered to celebrate a special Mass of dedication for the

statue, and for the first time Mass was celebrated in the junkyard ghetto. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and Chairperson of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce, who later became the nation's Foreign Minister, sent congratulatory messages.

Just as the doctor guessed, Satoko's health improved.

Tokyo authorities continued their relentless efforts to level Ant Town and develop a municipal park. Ant Towners successfully thwarted every bureaucratic maneuver and legal stratagem. In 1957, needing a large dumping ground for garbage, city officials began reclaiming a vast tract of land from Tokyo Bay. They offered a sizable portion of the new

land to Ant Towners for 25 million yen, cash.

City officials thought the squatters would jump at their offer. But, The Professor glumly told Satoko, "We do not have 25 million in cash. If they would allow us to pay in installments over ten years, we might make it."

"We must pray day and night to the Blessed Mother," Satoko told The Professor. To help herself pray, she tacked a large sign on her wall. "Twenty-five million yen," it stated.

The city officials summoned The Professor to negotiate the sale. Although he felt his efforts were doomed, the leader agreed to meet them.

Before he left for the meeting, Satoko gave him her rosary. "It is my most precious possession, Professor," she told him. "It has been blessed by the Pope. I will spend my day before the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, praying the Rosary. Remember, Professor, long ago I promised God that I would lay down my life for Ant Town. That moment has come."

During negotiations, The Professor told the city director that the Ant Town people only wanted a place to live and work. He handed the official a copy of a book Satoko had written, called *The Children of Ant Town*. Then he held out the rosary Satoko had given him. Pointing to the cross, he said that, because of the example of Satoko, he was willing to offer his life for others, particularly the Ant Town people. "Satoko, the

young woman who wrote that book," he continued, "has also offered her life for our people. At Ant Town, we are a community of love. That makes us different."

The city director visited The Professor at Ant Town a few days later. During their conversation, he heard an organ resounding from the Ant Town center. "That's Satoko," The Professor said. "She is the one who has offered her life for Ant Town."

"I think I understand," responded the official. "I may be an efficient official, but I also want to be a good person."

During the following weeks, Satoko's health steadily deteriorated, and she was once more confined to bed. When her mother asked if there was anything she wanted, she responded, "I am so happy to be among my friends, to eat their food, to share their life."

On Jan. 19, 1958, city authorities summoned The Professor. Before leaving for the meeting, he stopped at Satoko's room. Feeble though she was, she raised her thin hand, grasping her rosary, and waved. She took the rosary's crucifix and pressed it to her lips. Too weak to speak, she signaled The Professor that she was praying for him.

When The Professor arrived at the city office, he found a copy of *The Children of Ant Town* on the desk of the director.

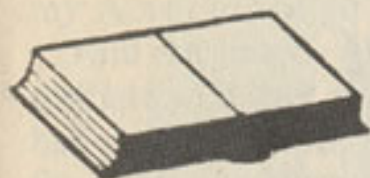
"After careful study," the director told him, "city officials have decided to provide land to Ant Town for 15 million yen, payable in five

years." Ant Town could easily afford that sum.

On Jan. 20, 1958, the new Ant Town was born. Three days later, at ten minutes before eight on the

morning of January 23, Satoko Kitahara, "The Mary of Ant Town," went to her eternal rest.

She never saw the new Ant Town for which she had offered her life.



NEW WORDS FOR YOU

By G. A. CEVASCO

The nouns listed below in Column A all end in *-ity*. This suffix, which derives from the Latin *itas*, means *state, condition*.

See if you can match these dozen useful words with their definitions in Column B.

Column A

1. *asperity*
2. *passivity*
3. *malignity*
4. *calamity*
5. *amenity*
6. *torpidity*
7. *duplicity*
8. *authenticity*
9. *verbosity*
10. *temerity*
11. *felicity*
12. *vitality*

Column B

- a) Condition or quality of being genuine, of undisputed origin.
- b) A wearisome use of unnecessary words; wordiness.
- c) Hypocritical deception; double-dealing.
- d) Foolish or rash boldness; recklessness.
- e) Complete or partial insensibility; stupor.
- f) Any extreme misfortune; disaster.
- g) Power to live or go on living; mental or physical vigor.
- h) Happiness, bliss; a quality of pleasing expressions in writing or speaking.
- i) Something evil; a harmful tendency; intense ill will.
- j) Pleasant quality; an attractive feature.
- k) Roughness or harshness; sharpness of temper.
- l) State or quality of being submissive, inactive.

(Answers on page 111)