



# RESTORING THE SACRED

By James Monti

## How A Plaster Statue Of Our Lady Changed One Young Woman's Life

### Part 1

We have all had at some time or another the unfortunate experience of walking into a church that we have not visited before, only to be dismayed by a stark, visually lifeless interior devoid of any statue, painting, or stained-glass window that could transport our soul. In some cases what images there are portray the human form in such an ugly or distorted manner that they leave the heart frigid and unmoved.

But however spiritually starved we may feel in churches like this, there is an even greater reason to regret what has been done here. For an opportunity has been lost, the opportunity to communicate the treasures of our faith to a curious visitor of a different faith who might happen to stop by. How do we know this? Because there are true stories of real people whose curiosity drew them into Catholic churches, and it was precisely when they saw the beautiful images inside that they began to set their feet on a path that would ultimately lead to their

conversion. I want to share with you one such story.

On a March day in 1948, 18-year-old Satoko Kitahara, a Japanese pharmaceutical student of the Institute of Medicine at Showa Women's University near Tokyo, was taking a leisurely stroll with a classmate on a visit to the city of Yokohama.

The young woman had a lot on her mind. In the wake of World War II, she and her university friends were asking themselves fundamental questions about the very meaning of life. Satoko herself had narrowly escaped death twice, having been nearly run over by a bus when she was about six and then surviving a round of gunfire during a U.S. air raid on the plane factory where she worked as a teenager during the war.

After seeing two of her siblings die from illness, she decided to give up her dream of becoming a concert pianist and instead turn to the study of medicine. In her restlessness she became an obsessive cinema fan, going to the movies as often as six times in a week.

Although Satoko had been raised in the Shinto religion, she had recently grown curious about Christianity, attending a Bible discussion group at the university and taking an interest in the faith-motivated charitable work of a famous contemporary of hers, the Lutheran physician and musical scholar Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Whenever Satoko happened to pass a Catholic church, she felt a desire to stop in to have a look, but time and again a seemingly insurmountable shyness held her back.

There was one aspect of Satoko's Shinto upbringing that did tug at her heart. As a child she had been taken by her parents to see a Shinto ceremony carried out by "miko," shrine maidens. The very modest full-skirted red and white dresses of these maidens evoked in the little girl a nascent longing for purity and beauty that remained with her through her teenage years, when as a worker at the airplane factory she was appalled by the unchaste behavior of so many of her colleagues. Yet she did not find in the Shinto religion the answer to her desire for purity.

As Satoko was walking with her friend on that day in March, they noticed a Japanese man going into a Catholic church they were passing, Yokohama's Church of the Sacred Heart. Satoko was surprised to see the door of the church open. The sight of a fellow Japanese going into the edifice was just enough of an enticement to make her overcome her shyness, and she and her classmate decided to go in and see what was inside.

It was when Satoko reached the left side of the church that she suddenly found herself spellbound. Her eyes had settled upon a simple plaster statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. It was just like so many other statues of this nature found in churches around the world, a work not of any great artistic achievement but fashioned with the sole intention of moving the heart to the love of God and His Immaculate Mother. Writing about this moment almost two years later, Satoko related that she was overwhelmed with an "indefinable emotion" by the image, feeling herself irresistibly drawn by it and sensing that it was somehow related to her longing for purity.

She did not know what had made her go into the church that day, nor did she as yet understand who the mysterious woman on the pedestal was, but the experience was to change her life.

Over the months that followed, Satoko made more visits to Catholic churches. Not long before her graduation as a pharmaceutical student in March of 1949, she encountered a fellow student who seemed uncommonly happy. When Satoko asked her the reason for her joy, the girl replied that she had begun frequenting the very church in Yokohama that Satoko had visited a year earlier.

In the same month that Satoko graduated, a new beginning for another member of her family was to open a way for her to seek out the source of the joy her friend had found. Satoko's father did not share her interest in Christianity, but he did want a good education for his granddaughter Choko and so decided to enroll the child as a pupil in a school run by the Mercedarian Sisters, a religious congregation from Spain.

As Providence would have it, Satoko was given the duty of taking Choko to school. One day Satoko noticed a Japanese nun in the Mercedarian habit, a sight that like her encounter with the image of Our Lady of Lourdes evoked her memories of the *miko* ceremony and stirred the embers of her yearning for purity.

When little Choko began attending the convent school's Sunday Mass, Satoko was afforded her first glimpse of the Catholic liturgy. On a sultry July day she de-

cidated to take her questions about the ultimate meaning of life to these nuns whose very lives seemed to testify that they knew the answer. Sensing intuitively Satoko's desire, the mother superior warmly invited her, saying, "Come, come, young lady! May you be welcome among us."

Before Mr. and Mrs. Kitahara knew what was happening, Satoko had begun taking catechetical lessons from the nuns and was attending the daily 6:00 a.m. Mass in their convent chapel. Now the Kitaharas were a tightly knit family, and Satoko's father had resolved never to oppose his children's aspirations. But he did believe that his highly intelligent daughter could be brought back to her senses by a lively exchange of ideas at the dinner table.

He urged her to recognize how the advance of science had made passionate religious convictions a thing of the past. Satoko rose to the challenge, countering with the testimony of physicians who had confirmed the scientifically inexplicable nature of miracles at Lourdes. In the end Mr. Kitahara's efforts to change his daughter's mind came to nothing, for Satoko had already become convinced of the truth of a faith so compelling that, as she observed, it had the power to induce women from other lands to sacrifice even family life to serve the people of a country so foreign to their own.

Satoko's passion for her newfound faith persuaded the local bishop to grant her a dispensation from the usual one-year "waiting period" for receiving Baptism as an adult. The priest who was to baptize her, Fr. Albert Bold of the Society of the Divine Word, reviewed with her the various saints' names she could choose to take in receiving the sacrament. When he came to the name of Elizabeth and told Satoko about St. Elizabeth of Hungary's service to the poor, immediately Satoko exclaimed, "I am taking that name, I am taking that name."

### A Wedding Dress

Satoko's love for Christ quickly grew to the point that she could not content herself with simply becoming one of His disciples; she longed to become His bride as well. After hearing Satoko comment that with her Baptism she was becoming "the bride of the Lord," her older sister Kazuko volunteered to sew a white wedding gown for her to wear at her Baptism, which took place on Sunday, October 30, 1949, the Feast of Christ the King.

The wedding dress was for Satoko a visual pledge to God that she intended to consecrate her heart entirely to Him as a nun, and she wore it again at her First Holy Communion and her Confirmation, on the latter occasion adding to her baptismal name of Elizabeth that of the Virgin of Virgins, Maria. It was at Satoko's Baptism (probably) that Fr. Bold gave her a rosary blessed by the Venerable Pope Pius XII; this rosary was to be constantly in her hands for the rest of her life.

Satoko, now Elizabeth Maria, was to wear her wedding gown one more time, for the occasion of her own funeral following her death on January 23, 1958. What happened during the eight and a quarter years between Satoko's Baptism and her death at the age of 28 would lead to her being declared venerable by His Holiness Pope Francis on January 22, 2015.

The fascinating story of those years we shall reserve for another essay in our *Restoring the Sacred* column. In our very next essay, we will take a pause from our account of Satoko Kitahara to contemplate the liturgical rites of Ash Wednesday.

## God's Foreknowledge And Our Freedom

### (Continued from 1B)

to love Him in turn. Belief in His bounty and Providence leads us to thanksgiving and trust. Belief in His creation and Fatherhood leads us to respect all things as works of His hands and to love all people as members of our family, children of the same heavenly Father.

Belief in His truthfulness and wisdom leads us to faith in His word, and obedience to His commands. Belief in His fatherly care and interest leads us to pray to Him and converse with Him.

This is the good side of reality, when we draw the natural consequences of our belief in God. The bad side of reality is when we, miserable sinners, believe and do not act according to our belief, meaning, when we sin.

When we pray the Hail Mary, we do not say to our Lady, "Pray for us saints." We say, "Pray for us sinners."

We do this because we are sinners, and her divine Son reminded us that even the just man sins seven times a day.

Yes, the reality is that all sins offend God, even those most secret, but some sins are more particularly directed against God Himself. For instance, a sin against the First Commandment is polytheism, or the belief in many gods, as pagans do; or atheism, the denial of God's existence, which is also an aberration of the

human mind; or agnosticism, the denial that God can be known by our minds, which is just a self-confessed ignorance.

Then there are also the sins contrary to worship of the one true God, such as idolatry, or the adoration of a false god or a mere creature, and there are veiled forms of idolatry like the virtual adoration of money, power, or prestige. Superstition is the aberrant belief that certain practices magically constrain God or our future in determined ways, like the use of a horoscope in our era.

Contrary to hope and trust in God are despair, presumption, divination, and putting God to the test. Contrary to love of God are irreligion, indifference, and ingratitude.

Against the Second Commandment are the sins contrary to service of the all-holy God, like the violation of just vows. The crises in the Church today caused by scandals among the clergy are a blatant and sad example of the violation of vows.

Contrary to God's veracity are sins like perjury, when a person lies under oath, taking God as his witness; also the teaching of false doctrine, very common today among liberal and progressivist theologians, as well as those who deny or willfully doubt God's Revelation.

Contrary to His holiness and majesty are blasphemy, or attacks

upon God or His saints, sacrilege or the violation of something sacred, and simony (buying or selling spiritual things).

Contrary to the Third Commandment is a refusal to rest and worship on Sunday in the manner prescribed by the Church. St. Augustine says, "The essence of religion is to imitate the one whom you adore."

### The Triune God

So far we have investigated God's attributes according to natural reason. We have not touched on the belief in the Holy Trinity because our minds are not able to consider it without the help of divine Revelation.

That is, we believe in the Triune God not because it makes sense through pure reasoning, but because Jesus revealed it to us.

Next article: The Most Holy Trinity.

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