



SAINTS ALIVE!

THE GOSPEL WITNESSED



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MARIE PAUL CURLEY, FSP, and MARY LEA HILL, FSP



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By Marie Paul Curley, FSP, and Mary Lea Hill, FSP

With a foreword by Celia Sirois



Pauline
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Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys

Woman of Compassion

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. . . . And [Elizabeth asked] why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? (Lk 1:39-40, 43).

The attractive, simply dressed young woman stared at the governor of Ville-Marie, New France. Her usual calm reserve deserted her.

“You want me to go with you to New France to start a school? As an associate of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Troyes, I told the sisters that if they went to New France, I would consider going *with* them. But not as a laywoman, alone!” Marguerite Bourgeoys looked around the parlor in an effort to gather herself, then turned back to the governor sitting quietly across the room. “I am not sure how to answer you,” she finally got out. “I will pray over it.”

Mary set out and went in haste ...

The governor, Paul de Chomedey, sieur de Maisonneuve, nodded at her. “I do not know what the Lord’s will is for you. Life in New France is full of dangers and challenges. But I can tell you that we have great need for a teacher, and the colony cannot yet support a convent. I will wait to hear from you.” As the governor rose to his feet, he added, “My sister speaks very highly of you. We need women like you to shape the future.”

“Your sister has told me much about the mission of Ville-Marie, and I desire to serve wherever the Lord calls me,” Marguerite said. “I really will pray over it.”

The governor nodded and left.

Marguerite went distractedly through the day’s duties. She had heard all about the colony Ville-Marie, founded in 1642—just ten years ago—by Paul de Maisonneuve and the nurse Jeanne Mance with the intention of evangelizing the Native Americans. Marguerite knew the governor to be well-respected for his integrity, piety, and leadership. She also knew that to go to the missions required a deep spirit of service—and wasn’t that her desire, to serve?

But she had been hoping for years to join or form a new kind of religious community of women who lived in imitation of Mary, the Blessed Mother. She wanted to commit herself to the same vows as other sisters, but her way of life would be different—not barred from serving the world by cloistered doors. Her community would live side by side with the people whom they served. If she left France to go to Canada as a lay missionary, she might never become a sister!

Not that I’ve always wanted to be a sister, she mused. Twelve years ago, Marguerite had been a frivolous, chic young woman who loved stylish dresses and thought mostly of making herself attractive. During a procession on Rosary

Sunday in her home of Troyes, Marguerite had looked up at a stone statue of the Blessed Mother that was placed over the door of the convent. And in a moment, everything had changed.

Even now, Marguerite felt her tears rise at the memory of the interior light she had received as she gazed at the statue, and of her startled realization of the beauty of Mary's life of love. From that day, Marguerite's life had been inspired by that new understanding of the Blessed Mother's self-giving love, strength, and closeness to Jesus. She understood her own call to be one of loving service like Mary's, a call so compelling that Marguerite had immediately given up her fancy clothes and sought a life of prayer and service. Her family and friends quickly noticed the change in her.

God made his desire and presence unmistakable at that moment. Since the gift of her "great conversion," Marguerite had dedicated herself to prayer and service. She had applied to enter the Carmelites, but was refused. She had become an associate of the Congregation of Notre Dame of Troyes, assisting the cloistered sisters in their mission of helping poor young women. She had also taken private vows of chastity and poverty. With the guidance of her spiritual director, Father Gendret, Marguerite had even tried to form a new community, but it had failed quickly: one member died and the other left, leaving Marguerite alone.

What if this mission to New France was another failure? The governor had been clear that it faced many risks: only fifty settlers were left, and the Iroquois continued to attack the settlement. Would Marguerite even be able to teach when she arrived?

That evening as she knelt to end her day in the presence of her beloved Lord, Marguerite prayed from her heart. *My*

Good God, help me to know how you are calling me. If I go to New France, would I have to give up my dream of becoming a religious sister? What is your dream for me? Something stirred in my heart when the governor spoke about the needs of the colonists, their purpose in settling there to bring the Gospel to the new world. The governor said that they desperately needed women who faithfully live the Gospel, even in poverty and danger of death.

As her confusion didn't abate over the next few days, Marguerite went to see her spiritual director. Father Gendret listened as Marguerite poured out her heart, her doubts, and the fruit of her prayer. A long silence followed. Finally, Father Gendret spoke. "Perhaps your efforts here in Troyes were not meant to succeed, but to teach you something. Perhaps in New France, you will have the freedom to begin the new kind of congregation that will truly imitate the life of the Blessed Mother."

"But I will be going alone, Father! I am not a community," Marguerite protested.

"With your guardian angel and mine, you will be three," Father Gendret smiled.

"And what about an unmarried woman traveling alone, with the governor? It's . . . unusual," Marguerite raised her last objection.

"De Maisonneuve is an upright man," Father Gendret said. "Anyone who knows you and him will realize that you are bound together for a higher purpose—for the sake of bringing the Gospel to this new land and its people. I encourage you to keep praying and consulting others. This could very well be God's will for you."

As the days passed and Marguerite consulted with the rector of the cathedral and others whom she respected, they encouraged her. Despite the hardships, the danger, and the

sadness of leaving her family behind, she decided to go. As she traveled to meet de Maisonneuve in Nantes, she continued to look for confirmation that this was God's will. Stopping in Paris, she received an unexpected and longed-for invitation. The Carmelite superior in Paris, with whose sister she was staying, sent her word that if she still wished it, she could now enter Carmel.

Was *this* the call from God that she had been looking for? Marguerite delayed the next stage of her journey to Nantes, losing her deposit on the carriage reservation. Torn with doubts, she next visited the Jesuits. The Jesuit priest who spoke to her had been to New France and shared his own experiences there. Reassured, Marguerite decided to go on. But she struggled with her last big doubt: what if, by going to New France, she never became a religious? Why would the Carmelites accept her now, of all times?

While waiting in Nantes for de Maisonneuve, Marguerite consulted with one more person, a Carmelite, who reproached her for not entering Carmel. The conversation brought all of Marguerite's doubts to a crisis. Overwhelmed, she sought a nearby chapel where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed for adoration. Praying before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, Marguerite received not just comfort and strength, but the inner clarity she sought. She left the chapel, fully convinced that God was calling her to serve in Canada. Shortly afterward, Marguerite had a vision of a tall woman, dressed in white serge, who told her, "Go! I will never forsake you." This vision of Mary, along with the conviction she received at the foot of the Blessed Sacrament, convinced Marguerite that she should go forward through all the dangers that lay ahead.

The perilous ocean voyage to New France was so frightening that most of the passengers wanted to abandon ship

and return home. Then a serious sickness swept through the ship. Before the vessel arrived at Quebec, eight people had died. Marguerite was deeply disturbed at the spiritual state of many of the men who had come so close to the point of death, and sought to do whatever she could for them. She tirelessly nursed the sick and spiritually prepared the dying to enter eternity. By the end of the three-month voyage, the men who had been so vulgar and eager to disparage her relationship with de Maisonneuve had come to respect and cherish the goodness of this lone thirty-three-year-old woman who, in the midst of peril and danger, offered a courageous and gentle charity.

Marguerite arrived in Ville-Marie in mid-November 1653. Besides the men, only fourteen women and fifteen children lived there. It would be five years before she started a formal school. But she began by caring for an orphan immediately entrusted to her care, teaching others one by one, and serving anyone in need. As she got to know all the inhabitants well, Marguerite became someone they confided in and turned to for help. During her first winter, Marguerite gave away her bed, mattress, and two blankets to the men who came to her about the cold. (Marguerite and her roommate were left with only a pillow and their aprons to sleep with!) A new bride came to her in distress after one day of marriage, and Marguerite helped to reconcile the bride and bridegroom. Marguerite's tact, her gifts for organizing and involving others, and her kind efficiency meant that she was soon considered the "compassionate mother" of Ville-Marie.

Because Ville-Marie was still in danger from Iroquois attacks, most of the villagers remained inside the fort. But de Maisonneuve assigned thirty men to go on pilgrimage with Marguerite to a famous cross that he had erected after their

village had been saved from a flood. The cross had been knocked down, and the group spent three days putting up a new cross and reinforcing it so it would remain upright. Marguerite found the remnants of a banner given to de Maisonneuve by the Congregation of Notre Dame of Troyes, with the message: “Holy Mother of God, pure Virgin with a royal heart, save a place for us in your Montreal.” Marguerite had already realized that her great conversion and the foundation of Montreal, including the original fort at Ville-Marie, had happened during the same year. Now, finding the prayer on the banner, Marguerite felt confirmed that the will of God had led her here: the “place” reserved for the Blessed Mother in Montreal was for her and the new congregation that she would begin. Great joy filled Marguerite’s heart at this sign of God’s special and loving call.

With that same joy, Marguerite Bourgeoys served the people of Montreal for forty-seven years. She energized the entire village to help build Our Lady of Bon Secours Chapel. In 1658, she opened Montreal’s first school, in a stone stable. That same year, Marguerite returned to France and brought back the first young women who would help her form her new congregation, the Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal. She would serve as superior for most of her life, guiding the sisters in initiatives, in spirituality, and in fidelity to their apostolic spirit of service. She founded multiple schools throughout Quebec, thus establishing the future school system. Finally, in 1698, when Marguerite was seventy-eight years old, her congregation—with its new apostolic way of life—received formal approval from the Church. With this official recognition, Marguerite and her sisters, who had only been permitted to make private vows up to this point, were finally able to make public vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

Marguerite died on January 12, 1700. The inhabitants of Montreal immediately recognized her—their mother, a woman of great compassion—as a saint.



Prayer

Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys,
inspired by the example of the Blessed Mother,
you dedicated yourself to the service of God's people,
regardless of class or status.
You found the strength to give so fully of yourself
in Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.
Help me to be open
to God's invitation to serve,
no matter where it leads me.
You nurtured the young families of Montreal,
offering them motherly advice and help
so that they could grow in their vocations to love.
Guide and protect my family;
help us to grow in love for one another,
and to reach out to those in need,
as Mary did when she visited Elizabeth. Amen.

About Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys

Born: April 17, 1620, in Troyes, France

Died: January 12, 1700, in Montreal

Feast Day: January 12

Canonized: October 31, 1982, by Pope John Paul II

Patron: people who are poor, orphans, those refused
entrance into religious life

Notes on Her Life

- ✿ The seventh of thirteen children, Marguerite grew up in France's Champagne province, famous for its merchants and poets.
- ✿ Marguerite experienced her great "conversion," which she also considered her great gift, when she was twenty years old.
- ✿ She tried to found an active, noncloistered community of women religious in France, but failed; one companion died and the other left.
- ✿ Marguerite prayerfully discerned a call to serve as a teacher in New France after she was invited by the governor of Montreal when she was thirty-two.
- ✿ She started the first schools in Quebec, thus establishing the province's first school system.
- ✿ She founded the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Montreal, one of the first noncloistered communities of women religious—although it took almost her entire lifetime for it to receive full approval in the Church.
- ✿ Marguerite had to constantly insist that the sisters' way of life remain noncloistered to better serve the needs of the people.
- ✿ She wanted always to be "with the people," by their side, and she rejected offers for herself or her sisters that would give them special treatment or remove them from the people they served.
- ✿ She was called "Mother of the colony" and is considered by many to be one of the founders of Montreal.

Lesser-Known Facts

- ✿ Marguerite's devotion to the Blessed Mother as a woman of service, focusing on Mary of the Visitation, was unusual for her time.
- ✿ Marguerite considered the Blessed Mother the true founder of the congregation.
- ✿ When she was seventy-nine, Marguerite offered her life for another sister who had fallen ill. The sister immediately recovered; Marguerite died a few days later.
- ✿ Marguerite was so reserved about her interior life that we know little about her prayer, with the exception of the advice she left for her sisters and her letters.
- ✿ She used the most advanced pedagogy of her time for teaching. At a time when corporal punishment was used routinely in schools, Marguerite believed it should be used very sparingly. Her goal was always to help to build *understanding*.
- ✿ Marguerite taught not just reading and writing, but also working skills for those who would need to earn their living.
- ✿ When her congregation was approved and Marguerite and her sisters able to make their solemn vows, Marguerite chose the name Sister Marguerite of the Blessed Sacrament.

In Her Own Words

“All that I have ever desired most deeply and what I still most ardently wish is that the great precept of the love of God above all things and of the neighbor as oneself be written in every heart.”

Servant of God Satoko Kitahara

Mary of Ant Town

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (Lk 2:7).

Here is the man I must contact, Satoko thought as she stared at the front-page picture of Brother Zeno. The accompanying story praised the Polish Franciscan as the mysterious man of charity who appeared throughout Japan begging money for the poor and generously filling the hands of anyone who approached him. He sounds like Koya, the Buddhist pilgrim to the poor, she thought, and then proclaimed aloud, "If the brother is still in Tokyo, I will find him."

The next afternoon Satoko spotted the black robes of Brother Zeno as he hurried through the streets toward the Sumida River. *Where can he be*

She gave birth to her firstborn son ...

going? Satoko thought. *Certainly nothing is down there but garbage. He was moving quickly, his steps firm and sure. Satoko strained not to lose sight of him. And as she struggled along, she brushed against dirty walls and tripped over discarded junk. Mother wouldn't be pleased to see me in this soiled kimono. Neither she nor Father will. . . .* She stopped short. What was this place? Satoko was stunned as she stood staring at what looked like shacks among heaps of refuse. Shaking off her dismay, Satoko hurried past a makeshift gate and nearly collided with Brother Zeno.

“Pardon me, Mother,” he said to the woman with whom he had been speaking. Turning to Satoko, he asked, “And who might this be? Are you lost, or have you followed me here to Ant Town?” He was a big man. Satoko looked up at him in wonder, but his smile was disarming.

“Oh, yes . . . I am Satoko Kitahara from Asakusa and I did follow you here.”

“Well then, follow me a little farther. I must talk to the Boss and the Professor,” he said. In a moment they were face to face with a tall thin man with a natural air of elegance and a short, fierce-looking man who appeared to be in charge. Satoko was introduced, and then ignored, as the three men engaged in an animated discussion. Then suddenly, Brother Zeno took Satoko by the elbow and turned with her to leave.

“But, Brother,” she said with some irritation, “I just got here. There must be something I can do.”

“No, no, miss. Come with me. I will accompany you to your door. It is getting dark.” Once they were outside the gate, Brother Zeno told her the two men were unimpressed and pegged her as a mere do-gooder. “They are proud people, Satoko. They are used to taking care of one another without any outside help. ‘No help, no hindrance!’ That is

their motto. They are even leery of me. But, come with me and I will show you the Tokyo I know.”

With this they set out in the direction of Satoko’s apartment. Along the way, Brother Zeno pointed out an endless crowd of people: the homeless, prostitutes, orphans, the mentally ill, casualties of war, the destitute. These poor souls huddled in doorways, under bridges, in parks, at bus or train stops—it seemed to Satoko that they were everywhere, but she had never seen them before. Where had they been, she wondered? At last, she and the friar arrived at her door.

“Here, Brother Zeno. Please come in for some tea. I have much more to say.” As she served the hot tea and sandwiches, Satoko began sharing her story with the good Franciscan. She related how she had followed two nuns into a Catholic church one day purely out of curiosity, but once inside became mesmerized by a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. “It was a statue, but I felt a real presence. I went for instruction and received Baptism. That was some months ago. Now I want to do something to show my commitment. That is why I followed you. The newspaper story inspired me, and now there is Ant Town. I can surely help with the children, Brother Zeno.”

“Ah, yes, the newspaper!” Zeno sighed. “You know, I don’t care for all the fanfare, but the publicity is good for my poor people. People read the stories and money comes in.” He abruptly rose and announced, “I must be off now. Perhaps I will see you again in Ant Town.” Out he went into the misty darkness to serve the city’s invisible poor.

Unable to sleep that night, Satoko Kitahara reviewed her life. *I am twenty-one years old*, she thought. *My parents are respected members of the community. I am well-educated with my degree in pharmacology. In fact, I should be seriously preparing to settle down, as my parents hope, with a nice young*

man. Ah, yes, she smiled to herself, my parents don't realize that my heart is set on something else. So far the only thing that has kept me from entering the convent has been my health. As soon as my lungs are strong I will try again. . . . I will try again, yes . . . , but tomorrow I will try Ant Town again.

“Gentlemen, I am Satoko Kitahara and I place myself at your service. How can I help?” The two men, Ozawa San and Matsui Sensei—the Boss and the Professor—looked at each other and then at Satoko.

“All right,” Osawa said. “You can help us decorate for Christmas.”

“You celebrate Christmas here?” she asked.

“Is that so surprising?” a voice boomed from behind her. It was Brother Zeno, who immediately took over the situation. “Yes, Satoko, and I am very pleased to see you because we need someone to organize the children to do a Christmas pageant.”

“Oh, come now, Brother Zeno,” the Professor sneered. “These children know nothing about Christ. All they know is Santa Claus and decorations.”

“Dear Professor, remember the television crew will be here,” Brother Zeno said, “and we want to show how we celebrate Christmas in Ant Town. It has to be good, really good!”

And it was. Satoko taught the children the story of the first Christmas and in place of carols practiced some traditional songs with them. The high point was the grand finale with everyone kneeling before the crèche saying the Rosary. When the television crew left, the Boss, knowing how much the good publicity would help his people, thanked Brother Zeno for such a great celebration.

“Oh, but thanks belong to Satoko. She is the one who organized the children and got the costumes and music ready.”

“Will we see you again without the lights and cameras, Satoko?” the Professor asked tersely.

“You will,” she replied with a smile. “I’ll be here as often as I can.”

True to her word, Satoko came almost every day to help the children with schoolwork, to make sure they were clean and fed. She played games with them and even took them out of Ant Town on excursions. One day she proposed that the children come with her for a few days to a friend’s house in the mountains. The fresh air would be a blessing for them. The Boss was suspicious. He demanded to know where the money for this would come from.

“Actually,” she replied, “I’m not sure yet. But I know God will provide.”

That evening as she was praying, her mother came with a message from her father. “He has a friend who wants to dispose of many large milk cans. Could they be recycled for Ant Town?” her mother asked.

“Oh, yes, Mother,” Satoko said as she jumped to her feet. “I will go round up some of the men to haul them away.”

The money brought in from the sale of the cans covered the exact expense of the children’s vacation. Now Satoko was an established part of Ant Town. For some time she had been begging the Boss for permission to go out with the group of ragpickers.

“I’m sure I can do it. Let me try, please.” Finally, he handed her a large wicker basket and sent her out. She came back with her basket full of twine and hay, which was sold for a good sum. The Boss was so pleased that he presented her with an “official” ragpickers cart. With this she went about the city collecting anything that could be sold. She even obtained a ragpickers’ license, which gave her a bit of legitimacy in her new “profession.”

The news media began referring to her as “the Mary of Ant Town.” However, people whispered about the poor young woman, obviously well-bred, who must be one of the tragedies of the war. For her part, Satoko went about smiling and content. She was a ragpicker by day and a big sister to the children of Ant Town by night. This bustle of activity, however, was wearing on her fragile health. Her wartime work in an aircraft factory had seriously damaged her lungs. Satoko had to admit that her goodwill was not enough. She had to relax her efforts. When she brought this news to the Boss and the Professor, they told her to take a year off, go to the mountains and get well. Satoko did go away for a year.

When she returned, however, a couple had been put in charge of the children. She was no longer needed. Satoko took this as a sign that she should apply again to the Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. They were pleased and set a date for her entrance. However, her illness returned and those plans had to be canceled.

In the hospital her condition worsened. Her parents met their daughter’s friends from Ant Town and agreed with them that she would only recover if she was brought to the town. With the doctor’s permission, Satoko was settled in a small room off the central building. Brother Zeno arrived with a large statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, which was set in the room where Satoko could see it.

During this crisis the city laid another burden on Ant Town—officials wanted to relocate the whole settlement. A new site was designated for the refuse dump and a number of acres were to be made available to the new Ant Town. The catch was that the city supervisors were charging an enormous amount of money for the new site—twenty-five million yen, to be paid in cash.

“That’s outrageous!” the patrons of Ant Town agreed.

Satoko spoke up, “I promised you once that I would lay down my life for Ant Town. Now seems to be the time.”

The Professor was chosen to go to talk to the city officials. Satoko armed him with her most precious possession, a rosary blessed by the pope.

“This will give you courage and confidence,” she promised. “I will be praying for you here.”

The Professor arrived for the meeting, rosary in hand, carrying a copy of *The Children of Ant Town*, a book Satoko had written. The Professor explained the simple desire of the inhabitants of Ant Town: to have a place to live where they had some degree of safety and could be self-reliant. The official thanked him and said the council would send an answer soon. During the wait Satoko’s strength diminished. When the Professor was called back for the decision, Satoko could no longer speak, but she signaled that her prayers would accompany him. At the city office, the Professor noticed Satoko’s book on the desk of the man in charge. The official began by saying that the council had conferred and it was clear that Ant Town was an important part of the city of Tokyo. So, although the move was still necessary, the city would only ask for fifteen million yen, payable over five years.

Everyone was thrilled, but none more so than Satoko, whose sole response was a radiant smile. Ant Town was relocated on January 20, 1958. Three days later God called Satoko Kitahara, the Mary of Ant Town, to her eternal reward.



Prayer

Dear God, thank you for blessing the Church in Japan with the presence of Satoko Kitahara. This young Shinto Buddhist

was drawn to you by an attraction to your Virgin Mother.

Satoko became a motherly figure in Ant Town in Tokyo, imitating Mary by offering her love and attention to the poor, neglected children.

Like your Son, Satoko wanted to become one with the people with whom she lived.

In the end, with Christ she offered her life for the salvation of Ant Town.

Teach us by her attractive example to make ourselves totally available

for the needs of others, and above all to make ourselves humble imitators of your Son. Amen.

About the Servant of God Satoko Kitahara


Born: August 22, 1929, in Suginami (Tokyo), Japan

Died: January 23, 1958, in Arinomachi, “Ant Town” (Tokyo)

Declared Servant of God

Patron: those who work with the poor

Notes on Her Life

 Daughter of privilege.

 In 1944 she went to work in an aircraft factory.

 In 1945 she suffered a bout of tuberculosis.

- ✿ In 1946 she enrolled in pharmaceutical college.
- ✿ A visit to a Catholic church piqued her interest.
- ✿ In 1949 she was baptized as Elisabeth, and confirmed as Maria.
- ✿ She accepted and lived out the Mercedarian spirituality of self-offering.
- ✿ In 1950 Brother Zeno Zebrowski, OFM Conv., introduced her to Tokyo's poor.
- ✿ She began volunteer work in Ant Town.
- ✿ Around 1953 she faced another health crisis and took a year of rest.
- ✿ After recovering she decided to enter the Mercedarian Sisters, but illness intervened.
- ✿ In 1957 she offered her life for the security of Ant Town.
- ✿ Satoko died three days after Ant Town received a reprieve and a new location.
- ✿ She was buried at Tama Reien Cemetery in Fuchu City, Tokyo.

Lesser-Known Facts

- ✿ She wrote *The Children of Ant Town* in 1953.
- ✿ Due to her example Ozawa San and Matsui Sensei became Catholic.
- ✿ She was a licensed ragpicker.
- ✿ She was also an accomplished pianist.
- ✿ She nearly died in an Allied bombing of the aircraft factory where she worked.
- ✿ Ant Town is so named because the inhabitants resemble industrious ants.

In Her Own Words

“I suddenly realized what I had been doing. I was too proud and insensitive to understand what God was trying to show me. I was giving my free time to assist the Ant Town children with their studies. God, in order to save us, had sent his Son as one of us. He really became one of us! There it was: the only way I could really help these poor children was to become a ragpicker like them.”