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# Japanese sisters recount the road of conversion

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 28, 2011

Good Samaritan Sr. Yoshi Suzukawa sits in her community's library in Nara, Japan, in August. (NCR photos/Joshua J. McElwee)

NARA, JAPAN -- Sr. Yoshi Suzukawa slowly scans the titles of the musty books.

Standing in her community?s small library here, just left of the section on ecology, she picks up a small book with many dog-eared pages. Flipping through it quickly, she gently places the book on a table.

?Can you believe it?? she asks in fast, Japanese-accented English. ?This one book is the cause of so many troubles!?

Suzukawa, a member of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, is one of eight sisters living in their small community house here, tucked in a small neighborhood just north of the central area of Nara, which is known for its collection of ancient Buddhist temples. From the window outside the community?s chapel you can see a number of the buildings, with their stark wooden architecture, rising above the rooftops of houses and apartment complexes.

The juxtaposition of religions isn?t new to Suzukawa, who was raised in a Buddhist family but has spent the bulk of her life Catholic. A sister for 44 years, she taught at a Catholic high school for more than 20 years and then spent a decade in the Philippines as a missionary, teaching English and hosting Bible study classes.

Sitting in front of the book, the aging sister explains about those troubles. The book by Dr. Takashi Nagai, she says, was the first by a Catholic author she read. A survivor of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Nagai was a convert to Catholicism who passed away from leukemia a few years after the attack. One of Japan?s most well-known Catholics, Nagai is respected for his numerous books and writings on peace, and for organizing medical response teams to tend to the wounded in the first days after the atomic blast.

Given to her by a friend in middle school, one of Nagai?s books interested Suzukawa in Catholicism, and would eventually lead to her baptism and joining the Australian-based order of the Good Samaritan Sisters.

The Good Samaritan community in Nara, founded in 1952, was the second opened in Japan by a group of

missionary sisters from Australia who had been summoned to the Nagasaki archdiocese in 1948 to help rebuild that city after the atomic bombing. At first the home of six Australian sisters, the Nara community soon became the base for a slow trickle of Japanese who joined the order.

In a country where Christians make up less than 1 percent of the population, it seems many of those Japanese might share a story of conversion similar to Suzukawa?s. Flipping a small silver ring between her index finger and thumb, Suzukawa recalls the story.

**Opening rifts**

Forty-eight years ago, she said, she told her parents she wanted to be a Catholic sister. It wasn?t an easy thing for them to hear.

After reading some works by Catholic authors during her college studies away from home, Suzukawa decided to receive baptism, and shortly thereafter, that she wanted to become a religious sister.

Her mother immediately understood. On a visit home the two spoke briefly, and her mother told her, ?People should be able to do what they want to do. If you are truly wanting to be a sister, you should do it.?

Her father, however, wasn?t so accepting. Four decades later, her voice still trembled a little as she recounted how he had told her she should remain Buddhist, and try to find a man to marry.

The rift between her and her father, she said, was a ?very heavy burden? that weighed on her as she struck out on her own and entered the Good Samaritan community.

?He just couldn?t understand,? she said. ?It was very hard.?

Slowly, though, things began to change. Eventually, she was able to convince one of her two sisters to visit her at the community house. After spending some time there, her sister came to understand a little of Suzukawa?s decision.

With a slight smile crossing her wrinkled face, Suzukawa recalled her sister?s first words about the visit: ?My sister said to me, ?Those Australian sisters are so nice! You should become that kind of sister!? ?

While it didn?t completely reconcile her with her family, Suzukawa said, that visit was a good start.

Such small beginnings are familiar to one of Suzukawa?s community members, who faced a similar struggle with her family.

Estuko Hatori, a Good Samaritan sister for 39 years, moved to Nara in 2008. Before then, she had spent a decade as principal of the order?s high school in Sasebo, a city near Nagasaki, and had spent eight years in Tokyo as the head of a university student hospital. In a separate interview in the library, she too recalled her own conversion story.

The youngest of three daughters and three brothers in a Buddhist family, Hatori had watched as both of her sisters attended Catholic high school, and then decided to become Catholic and enter religious life. Within two years? time, Hatori?s siblings had both made first vows with an order of Franciscan sisters who had come from Spain as missionaries.

When Hatori, who is five years younger than her next eldest sister, told her parents she also wanted to attend the Catholic high school, they refused. Afraid their youngest would also want to enter the order, they enrolled her in a private academy instead.

?My parents didn?t want me to become a nun because three daughters becoming nuns is hard to understand,? she remembered.

Yet, still wanting to attend the Catholic school, Hatori took its entrance exam without her parents? permission. With a near-perfect score in her hand, her parents acquiesced.

A few years later, Hatori was in the middle of college studies when she received some unwelcome news. Her mother was very ill, and needed someone to come home to take care of her.

So, Hatori said, she went home to look after her mother. ?I promised my father that for three years I would look after my mother and then I could choose for my life for the future,? she recalled.

Good to her word, three years later Hatori entered the novitiate. At about the same time, her eldest sister was sent to Rome by her order.

Placing a hand over her face, Hatori remembered the confluence of events.

?Just as I entered the novitiate, my eldest sister went to Rome,? she said. ?On the same day, my mother entered a coma. And when my sister arrived in Italy, there was a telegram waiting for her to say our mother had died.?

?It seemed to all happen at once. And my father was very angry at us. He felt like we had left the family all alone.?

Yet, Hatori said, eventually her father came to understand.

?Before his death, he was baptized too,? she said. ?Sometimes we just don?t know how things will happen.?

**Healing wounds**

Such stories of the ebb and flow between future sisters and their families pepper the history of the Good Samaritans in Japan, said one of the sisters most familiar with the order?s presence in the country.

Speaking in a phone interview from her home in Sydney, Good Samaritan Sr. Clement Baseden, who spent two decades in Japan before returning to Australia, said Suzukawa?s and Hatori?s stories were common among the native Japanese who eventually took vows with the community.

Many, she said, also came from families that hadn?t had much contact with Christianity and didn?t understand how to react when their daughters expressed interest in converting, let alone joining an order and remaining celibate.

Baseden, who was principal of the school in Sasebo for 16 years and wrote a 1998 book on the history of her order in Japan, said the Australian missionaries tried to be sensitive to the cultural differences their new

religious sisters were facing. She recalled instances where superiors met with postulants? parents, and, sometimes over a period of years, helped families understand the choices their daughters were making.

?We did everything we could to be sensitive to our postulants? unique struggles,? Baseden said. ?We wanted to make sure that, eventually, the community could become wholly theirs.?

Back in Nara, Hatori recalled how that effort made a substantial difference in her struggle to explain her desire to join the order. A member of the order made a special trip to her family home in Nagano, about a five-hour train journey east of Nagasaki, to try to give her parents an understanding of the order and why their daughter would want to join.

While that trip didn?t settle everything for her parents, eventually, Hatori said, they came to understand.

With a little laugh, she added, ?At least, I hope they did! It?s a little late now for misgivings.?

For Suzukawa, those misgivings were set aside years ago. Reaching for a glass of water, she recalls being summoned to her father?s side years ago, as the lifelong Buddhist lay dying.

?When my father and I were alone in the room, I asked him, ?Father, do you want to experience peace and go to heaven?? ? she said softly.

?And he nodded slowly and asked for baptism. So I baptized him by myself. He looked so peaceful. And, when he died one week later, I had some solace knowing that our wounds had been healed, and he had come to know God.?

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