

Blessed Among Women

This text on the baptism of a young Chinese woman in Quebec is taken from the Revue Sainte Anne, October 2004.

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She is blessed among women. And yet her name is not Mary and she does not come from Nazareth. Sze Wan Sit was born in Asia, in Hong Kong, on July 12, 1981, and she has lived in Montreal since her fifth birthday. She is blessed because an angel from God visited her and

touched her heart. Called to Christian life at the age of 22, she said yes by receiving baptism in the Catholic church of Saint Ambroise on rue Beaubien in Montreal on February 15, 2004.

Her conversion to Catholicism and her baptism came at the end of a long search. It started in her third year of high school when she met Rosalia Suarez, who was directing a theatre group. Both of them were participating in a variety show organized by Ville Saint-Pierre, in Montreal, for the June 24th celebrations of the Feast of Saint John the Baptist. The various performances in the show were not only entertainment but also a competition among local talent. That day Sze Wan gave a piano recital and won first prize.

Reached by phone at her work, Mrs. Suarez was delighted to talk about

Sze Wan, who became her friend during the preparations for that show. “Providence allowed me to meet her. I didn’t know her at all. She was looking for a place to sit down in the audience. There was only one chair left next to me. We began talking right away. She is a most attractive and very simple young woman. It is not hard to talk to her at all”.

Two years later, while trying to organize a project for elderly people, Ms. Suarez introduced Sze Wan to some young women in Fonteneige student residence, on Woodbury Street not far from the University of Montreal. This is a non-profit centre where Opus Dei priests often meet the young residents to give talks on the faith and to provide spiritual direction. It was probably this experience that brought about Sze Wan’s vocation to medicine, says Rosalia Suarez, who now is head

cook at the Manoir de Beaujeu, a superb retreat centre in Coteau du Lac, Quebec, a sort of spiritual Spa for beauty care on the inside.

In those years Sze Wan Sit, an atheist like her parents, was becoming interested in philosophy and different religions. At Marianapolis College she was taking philosophy courses to find some response to her existential questions. “The courses did not really satisfy my curiosity,” she said. “They helped me to ask questions but didn’t provide real answers.” With a friend at the student residence she had long conversations about the existence of God, the meaning of life, the authenticity of the Bible and the truth about Jesus, and all this eventually led her to discover Catholicism.

Starting University

After getting her Diploma of College Studies (DEC) she thought of studying music full time before making the jump into medicine. She asked a number of people for advice, among others her piano teacher, an Argentinian. “He was the one who advised me to apply to medical school,” she recalled in an interview. “He said that working as a pianist would be very difficult because career opportunities are few and far between. Besides, the pay is not very good! To become known, you must unquestionably be the best.”

Sze Wan was accepted for the preparatory year in medicine at McGill University. But she decided not to give up her studies in music, which she had begun when she was five years old. “I wanted to prove to myself that I was able to take two different full-time university programs simultaneously and get good results.” That meant working to

complete her courses in medical school and at the same time her master's at the Montreal Conservatory of Music.

From Mind to Heart

She obviously had no time to waste, and yet she managed to set aside a few hours a week to go to the student residence to pursue her examination of religion and philosophy. She felt that they listened to her there, that her point of view was respected by the others, especially her friend.

As Sze Wan related: "I was intrigued by her religious approach. We didn't always understand one another, but this was not serious for me. I asked her lots of questions she found hard to answer. So she asked Father Eric Nicolai to give little talks on the subjects I was asking about, and he agreed."

“She had heard about my own conversion to Catholicism,” Father Nicolai recalled. “That intrigued her and so she wanted to chat about it. She asked very intelligent questions. She was not satisfied with ready-made answers. Faith in Jesus is, in fact, primarily a matter of the heart. We prayed a lot for Sze Wan.” To answer a number of her doubts, the priest advised her to read Peter Kreeft’s Handbook of Christian Apologetics, because it contains answers to many fundamental questions about the faith.

These were weeks when she was preparing for her piano examination for the first year of the master’s. “My paternal grandmother came to stay with us for about a month. She lives in Calgary and is Protestant. She goes to her church every week. She prays before eating and before going to bed. I found that very nice. I followed her example and began to

pray. I wanted to see if prayer really works! Also, it was the end of term and I had a lot of exams coming up. The piano exams were what caused me the most stress. I started to pray, telling myself I had nothing to lose. I would just give it a try. At this time I was reading the Gospel of John, loaned to me by a Protestant friend who was in medicine courses with me. One passage said, 'If you ask, God will provide'.

"The day of the piano exam arrived. It was really important for me to do well. Before the exam, I prayed. I put my whole heart into my prayer. At the beginning I wanted mainly to test God. I said to him: 'If I have more than 90%, I'll believe in you!' I had never got above 90 before. But after a moment of thought I came to the conclusion that it was not very good to pray like this, placing conditions on God. This was bargaining! Finally

I asked him to help me give the best I was capable of giving.”

Her eyes opened wide as she talked about the exam. “It was incredible! I had never played like that before! It came out all by itself! Before, I had trouble with certain passages and I hadn’t managed to eliminate those snags. But during the exam everything came out exactly the way I wanted it to. It was a feeling that is hard to describe, but I really feel that God helped me. It was as if it wasn’t me who was playing, but Him playing through me. I did not feel all alone. I didn’t feel any stress. I was calm and peaceful in my head. I wasn’t thinking of anything at all. I played for an hour. At the end, my professor, who had known me for ten years, told me he had never heard me play like that. When I left the room, one of the judges came out to congratulate me. He said he had never heard anyone play like that.

That really got to me. I truly realized it was God playing for me. He had answered my prayer. My mark didn't really matter much after the test. The important thing in my eyes was that it was a proof that God exists."

She got 96, the highest mark given a master's student at the conservatory that year. In her beliefs Sze Wan Sit left atheism behind and set out to find a real religious meaning. The idea of a personal God who is concerned with each person attracted her. Her own experience had shown her that it was authentic. Christianity became obvious to her. She read books on the subject and talked with friends. She went to Catholic and Protestant churches. She was looking for her way and praying. For a whole year nothing happened. She was waiting for a sign from God.

A divine blessing

She attended a meditation at Fonteneige every week. One evening, she met another Chinese woman who had come there with her visiting sister. The sister lived and studied medicine in Hong Kong, where she frequented a centre of Opus Dei. This young woman wanted to be baptized, although her parents were not baptized.

“They impressed me,” Sze Wan said. “That came at a moment when I needed encouragement in my interior journey and in my life. They took me to the Catholic church in Chinatown. It was quite special. The Mass was celebrated in Cantonese. These people make a sort of a compromise between Chinese culture and Western culture.” Breaking into giggles, she added: “In the church, there is a painting representing Jesus with his apostles. They are all Chinese in the painting.”

For Labour Day weekend 2003 the two sisters invited her to a talk in a Chinese camp in Ontario. Without hesitation she agreed to go with them.. There she met a number of Catholics of her own age. They were pleasant and kind, and she had a lot of fun. They read the Bible together. There were also presentations of humanitarian projects. Priests chatted with them. Sze Wan found it all quite interesting, but nothing really struck home.

”Just before we left, there was an outdoor Mass on the lawn beside the lake. While the others were receiving communion I had to sit and wait, but a friend asked me if I wanted to receive a blessing from the priest. I accepted and went forward. Right after the blessing, I began to cry. I was the only one crying in the whole gathering. I finally dried my tears. After the Mass, the priest wanted to give a blessing to everyone. I went

forward towards him again. The moment he blessed me I stared crying again. For me this was God's invitation to enter into his house, with him, with his other sons and daughters." In the bus going back to Montreal, she announced to everyone her intention to become Catholic.

Baptism

Without waiting Sze Wan told Father Eric Nicolai of her decision. He started a series of catechism meetings with her. She confided her decision to her parents and they accepted it. In spite of their atheism, they were at her side the day of her baptism, which was celebrated in English. As often happens at the baptism of adults, she recited the profession of faith and also did her first communion and was confirmed during the ceremony. "Baptism is not the end of a spiritual journey, it is

only the beginning,” said Father Eric Nicolai. “With her and for her, the Church must provide the means of formation so that her faith will continue to grow. Moreover, Sze Wan must now be an instrument to help other persons approach the Lord.”.

In April 2003 Sze Wan Sit completed her master's in the piano and is at present in her fourth year of medicine at McGill.

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