

Apostle of Limitless Charity

The 'Obscure' Zeno Turns Out To Be 'Zeno-San' in Japan

In March of this year, we ran an NC story about a then obscure Franciscan brother named Zeno, whom the Holy Father had embraced on his trip to Japan. At that time, though we scoured the news services and the press in general, we could find no great store of information on Brother Zeno.

Shortly afterwards, we heard from a priest from — of all places — Boston, who not only knew much about Brother Zeno, but had actually worked with him in Japan for 12 years.

Our informant is Father Luke M. Dyjak, OFM Conv., of Our Lady of Czestochowa Church, South Boston. Father Luke sent us a long memoir which, space being an urgent priority, we can only excerpt.

Zeno Zebrowski, says Father Luke, is "one of the greatest missionaries of charity, a counterpart of Mother Teresa, but never heralded in the western world."

Father and Brother met in Japan in 1952, when Fr. Luke volunteered to serve missions of the American St. Anthony Province of the Franciscan Minor Conventuals.

Says Fr. Luke: "I shall never forget that day when Fr. Jerome and myself entered the Monastery of the Frairs in Tokyo . . . Brother Zeno greeted us with a Franciscan embrace as he heard us greeting him in Polish."

Brother Zeno first went to Japan with the great martyr-priest, Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, and the two, says Fr. Luke, had "great plans to bring Christ to that nation under the banner of the Immaculate Mother of Jesus."



BROTHER ZENO ZEBROWSKI . . . Though little known in the U.S. before his dramatic meeting with Pope John Paul II in Japan last March, the charismatic Polish Franciscan is revered throughout Japan, where he has labored for more than 50 years. In the photo here, Brother Zeno (rear) waits to be greeted by Pope Paul VI — who knew Zeno's reputation well—during the beatification of Father Maximilian Kolbe (1894-1941) at the Vatican in 1971; Zeno and Fr. Kolbe had been fellow-missionaries in Japan. Actually greeting the Holy Father is Father Miecislau, OFM Conv., Superior of

"He would never take his religious habit off when visiting the poor," recalled Fr. Luke. "Once, when visiting poor derelicts beneath a bridge in Tokyo (called locally Ants Town), I asked Brother Zeno if he was not afraid of being attacked, the place being filled with rask-pickers, have-nothings, and all sorts of rejects of society."

"Brother Zeno smiled and said he feared not the people he loves for, the people know he loves them. In time, a chapel was dedicated to Our Lady there and, to add to the glory of it, a convert who took the name of Zeno at Baptism became the first Mayor of the village."

Fr. Luke refers to his missionary friend as "the Poverello of Tokyo." Zeno was not incarcerated during World War II, but permitted to minister to detainees, including priests, in camps throughout the Tokyo-Nagasaki district.

"Brother Zeno told me he was safe as long as he continued to wear his religious habit." One priest whom Zeno helped "remembered Fr. Kolbe very well, likening him to Zeno for outstanding love for the poor. The friars were working in the hills of Nagasaki and when the atom bomb fell on the city, the missionaries immediately put up a home for orphan children."

Fr. Luke recalls Zeno's first visit to "our island of Amami to Shima," a remote atoll subject to typhoons, earthquakes, and fire which ravages the match-box swellings.

"The saying goes that wherever there is a catastrophe, there you will find Bro. Zeno coming with some form of help." In one instance, Zeno arrived from the mainland. "He had with him tons of food, clothes, jewels, and necessities for the poor. The first people he asked for were Buddhist monks on the island, who gladly helped Zeno in the distribution."

"To set the good example, Zeno asked all to stand for one minute in silence as he began to finger his rosary and recite the Hail Mary in Japanese."

Zeno kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings, often showing it to others to impress them with the importance of his mission. Among photos most often shown were those

of Zeno with the Emperor of Japan or the Crown Prince. These rarely failed to persuade those about him.

Zeno went to Rome for the beatification of Fr. Kolbe, "the martyr of charity at Auschwitz." As Fr. Luke (who was also there) recalls it, mobs of Japanese in St. Peter's Square crowded around Zeno — knowing him better than Kolbe — and congratulating him for the recent translation into Italian of Zeno's book about the poor in Japan.

On the way back to Japan, Zeno visited his native Poland for the first time in 40 years.

Of late, Fr. Luke reports, Brother Zeno has been inactive, ailing and frequently hospitalized.

"My heart sank," he says, "when one of our returning missionaries paid a visit to Zeno and found that he was bed-ridden. I feel that one day our missionary paths will cross again, but in the meantime I am praying that the good Lord may raise up another Brother Zeno to keep on showing to the world that great people in love with God can be moved by the Holy Spirit and to great things even today."

Fr. Luke was in Japan from 1952 to 1964 and has, lately, served missions in the Middle East with the Chaldean Rite.

Among his souvenirs of Zeno are pictures taken with the Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, and numerous news clips from foreign and American papers.

One clipping is from the Vatican journal, *L'Osservatore Romano*, dated March 16, 1981. The story is headlined: "Zeno-San: Charity Without Limits," and tells the story of 89-year-old Zeno's remarkable life.

Among little known facts when the writer met Zeno, "the Franciscan habit was patched in several places (and) in his hands was the rosary."

Zeno-San could do everything: he was a printer, shoemaker, blacksmith, tailor, and farmer. He studied Japanese whenever he could. He constructed (the mission's) printing press, the chapel,

Father Kolbe's room, which served as a laboratory, and rooms for the religious.

Zeno-San was in Nagasaki when the bomb destroyed a large part of the city. Just after eleven in the morning of that 9 August 1945, he was repairing the millstone in "the basement near the stable."

"On 8 June 1976 the Polish government, through its ambassador in Tokyo, wished to decorate Zeno-San Zebrowski with a first-class gold medal — for the work he had tirelessly carried out for so many

years.

"Three years afterwards, on 18 November 1979, a monument at the Fuji Ryen Cemetery Park of Gotemba was also dedicated to Brother Zeno, the apostle of limitless charity, for his fifty years of charitable apostolate in Japan."

Japan has given Zeno its Order of the Sacred Treasure, one of its highest honors and given "for charity and esteem for the life of man."

— George E. Ryan

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