

Blessed Zélie Guerin and Louis Martin: Companions on our Journey

by Maureen O’Riordan

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On July 13, 1858, Zélie Guérin, 27, a maker of *Point d’Alençon* lace, and Louis Martin, 35, a watchmaker, were married at midnight in the Church of Notre-Dame at Alençon in northern France.

This marriage nearly didn’t happen, for Louis had applied to be a monk at the Abbey of the Great St. Bernard in Switzerland, and Zélie had requested admittance to the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul at Alençon. The prior refused Louis because he knew no Latin, and the superior told Zélie that she had no vocation to the religious life.

The couple had seen each other for the first time only three months before. Zélie was crossing St. Leonard’s Bridge when she saw Louis, and heard an interior voice say to her: “This is the one I have prepared for you.” Louis’s mother, who had noticed Zélie at the lacemaking class both women attended, probably introduced them. They fell in love and married very soon. For ten months they lived as sister and brother; then their confessor, perhaps urged by Zélie, intervened, and they began to live as husband and wife. They had nine children, of whom five survived to adulthood: Marie, who became Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart in the Carmelite monastery at Lisieux; Pauline, who became Mother Agnès of Jesus in the same monastery; Leonie, who became Sister Françoise-Thérèse at the Visitation Convent in Caen; Céline, who became Sister Geneviève of the Holy Face at Lisieux Carmel; and the youngest, little Thérèse, who in 1888 joined her sisters at the Carmel. She died there in 1897, and, in 1925, was named Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus of the Holy Face, one of the most popular saints the Church has canonized.

Now, 150 years later, Louis and Zélie are joining their daughter on the path to canonizable sainthood. This summer Cardinal Saraiva Martins, former prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, presided at the celebrations in Alençon and Lisieux (where the family moved after her mother’s death) of the 150th anniversary of their marriage. On July 12, 2008 he announced that Zélie and Louis will be beatified at Lisieux on Mission Sunday, October 19, 2008, eleven years to the day after Pope John Paul II declared their youngest daughter a Doctor of the Church.,

The world knows Thérèse through the pictures and statues of a young Carmelite nun in a brown habit and white mantle, carrying a crucifix heaped with roses. But Therese did not fall out of heaven as a completed saint. Like all saints, she came from a

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real family. Even though her family was a devout Catholic family, it had, like our own, families, its challenges, failures, and struggles.

Louis and Zélie are only the second spouses in history to be declared “blessed” as a couple. Why has God inspired the Church to hold them up as a model for the families of today? What can we learn from them? How can they accompany us on our own pilgrimage?

Fully Engaged in Life on Earth, yet Oriented to Heaven

Both Zélie and Louis worked very hard. She was a maker of *point d’Alençon* lace, he a watchmaker. Zélie’s business was so successful that Louis eventually sold his watch-shop so that he could handle the business end of her lacemaking venture, but this success exacted a price. Of how hard she worked, Zélie wrote: “My poor Marie feels the whole situation very much, also. She has not a good word for the *point d’Alençon*. She repeats that she would rather live in an attic than earn her living at what it costs me. I admit that she is not wrong. If I were free and alone, and if I had to go through all I have suffered for the past twenty-four years, I would rather die of hunger; just thinking of it makes me shudder!

I often tell myself that if I had endured half of all that to win heaven I would be a canonizable saint! I think also of my brother [a pharmacist], and if he's undergoing the same troubles as I am, I pity him with all my heart, for I know about it from the school of hard knocks.”¹

The couple had nine children and raised five of them to adulthood. They were fully engaged in business, social, family, and ecclesial life. At the same time they were constantly oriented to eternity. Louis often repeated “Oh! the Homeland! the Homeland! It is beautiful, the Homeland!” Zélie’s daughters remembered how often she said “Oh! the Homeland! the Homeland! Heaven . . . !”²

Even in the conflicts of everyday life they turned toward heaven. When a neighbor sued them over a boundary dispute in which even the judge found the Martins blameless, Zélie wrote to her daughter Pauline: “We can but accept contradictions patiently, since we must suffer in this world. If only it enables us to avoid a little Purgatory, we shall bless M. M. in the next world for having made us undergo some of it in this life. But I prefer that it should be he who should do us this wrong, rather than that we should have to reproach ourselves with having caused him a quarter of the trouble.”³

¹ See *The Mother of the Little Flower*, by Céline Martin. (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 2005), pp. 31-32.

² *Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux, Vol. I*, tr. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1982), p. 515, footnote 3 to LT 79.

³ Quoted in *Louis and Zélie Martin: The Seed and the Root of the Little Flower*, by Rev. Paulinus Redmond (London, Quiller Press, 1995), p. 139.

Overwhelmed with Responsibilities, yet Faithful to Prayer

Although Zélie and Louis were constantly pressed for time, each was faithful to the contemplative life, the life of family prayer, and the liturgical life of the Church, and they created a family similarly faithful. Husband and wife maintained a demanding schedule. Yet every morning they attended the 5:30 Mass, saying it was the only one the poor and working persons could attend. When the neighbors heard their door shut as they left for church, they would say “Oh, it’s only that holy Martin couple going to church; we can turn over and sleep a while longer.” Every morning and evening they prayed as a family; they observed Sundays and the feasts of the Church with care. Louis was a leader in the nocturnal adoration of the Eucharist. Zélie, always the last to go to bed, was often up till nearly midnight. There were many demands on their time, but they gave it generously to serve God and their neighbor.

Loving Each Other and Our Children, yet Honoring the Life of the Soul Above All

Louis and Zélie loved each other very much. In October 1863, away on business, Louis wrote to Zélie: “My dearest, I cannot get back to Alençon before Monday; the time seems long to me, for I want so much to be with you I embrace you all with my whole heart, while awaiting the joy of being with you again Your husband and true friend who loves you forever.”⁴ In August 1873, when Zélie took the little girls to Lisieux to see their relatives, she wrote to him: “I am with you all day in spirit, and say to myself: ‘Now he is doing such and such a thing.’ I long to be with you, Louis dear. I love you with all my heart, and I feel my affection doubled by being deprived of your company. I could not live apart from you.”

They also loved their children deeply. A few weeks before Thérèse’s birth, Zélie wrote to her sister-in-law: “I love children to the point of folly; I was born to have them. . . . But it will soon be time for all this to end . . . I’m at an age when I should be a grandmother!”⁵ On March 4, 1877, Zélie wrote to her daughter Pauline: “When we had our children, our ideas changed somewhat. From then on we lived only for them. They made all our happiness, and we would not have found it except in them. Nothing any longer cost us anything; the world was no longer a burden to us. As for me, my children were my great compensation, so that I wished to have many in order to bring them up for Heaven.”⁶ Zélie’s letters are filled with descriptions of good times at home, with chestnuts, cakes, and fritters for feasts; visits to relatives; and the girls’ pleasure over their New Year’s gifts.

In the midst of this family life, however, the parents formed each daughter carefully from childhood in the spiritual life. They studied each child as an individual, nurtured her confidence in them, and encouraged her to give God a free hand in her life. About their decision to allow Marie to go on a retreat at the Visitation Convent where she had been educated, Zélie wrote, “I did have a good reason for wanting Marie to make the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵ *Letters, Vol. I, op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁶ Quoted in Redmond, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

retreat. It's true that it is an expense, but money is nothing when it comes to the sanctification of a soul; and, last year, Marie came back completely changed.”⁷ Louis had a profound respect for the spiritual lives of his daughters and reverently supported each in fulfilling her vocation.

Loving Their Extended Family

Devoted to each other and to their children, Zélie and Louis reached out lovingly to support their extended families. For years they shared a house with Louis's parents. When Zélie's father could not find a good housekeeper, she welcomed him gladly into her own home, and she wrote to her brother “You would not find one in a hundred as good as my husband is to a father-in-law.”⁸ When her father died, Zélie wrote to her sister-in-law: “If you only knew, my dear sister, how much I loved my father! He was always with me; I never left him; he gave me all the help he could.”⁹ The couple was very close to Zélie's sister Marie-Louise, a nun of the Visitation at Caen, and sent their three oldest girls to school at her convent. They often wrote and visited Zélie's brother, Isidore Guérin, and his wife, Céline, who lived at Lisieux. After Zélie's death, Louis moved to Lisieux with his five daughters to give them the advantage of the influence of their aunt, uncle, and cousins.

Trusting in God in the Face of Sorrows

Suffering acute grief in many trials, Louis and Zélie continued to trust in God's personal love for them and for their children. In six years they lost four children, three infants and one little girl, Marie-Hélène, at the age of five. To her sister-in-law, whose baby had just died, Zélie wrote: “Your dear little child is with God; he is looking down on you and loving you, and one day you will possess him again. This is a great consolation that I have experienced myself, and which I still feel. When I had to close the eyes of my dear children and bury them, I felt deep sorrow, but I was always resigned to it. I did not regret the pains and the sorrows I had endured for them. Many persons said to me: ‘It would have been better for you if you had never had them.’ I could not bear that kind of talk. I do not think that the sorrows and the troubles I endured could possibly be compared with the eternal happiness of my children with God. Besides, they are not lost forever; life is short and filled with crosses, and we shall find them again in Heaven.”¹⁰

⁷ Cited in “Louis and Zélie Martin,” a spiritual newsletter published by the Abbey of Saint Joseph of Clairval and visible online at <http://www.clairval.com/lettres/en/2000/03/19/2220300.htm>

⁸ Quoted in Redmond, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁹ Quoted in *Therese of Lisieux: God's Gentle Warrior*, by Thomas R. Nevin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 89, September 7, 1868.

¹⁰ Quoted in Redmond, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99.

Loving Christ in the poor, and causing charity and justice

While supporting a large family, Zélie and Louis gave generously of their energy and money to the poor, to the Church, and to causing charity and justice in their society. Louis was a member of the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul, and he also interested himself in the poor persons around them. When he went out, he always carried loose change to give alms to those who begged of him. If he met a drunken man in the street, he helped him get home. At the train station, meeting a poor epileptic man who had no money for his fare, he gave him some money, collected the rest from others, and settled him in his seat. When Louis and Zélie found a homeless man by the side of the road, they brought him home, gave him a good meal, and found better clothes and boots for him. Louis then went to a lot of trouble to get him into the home run by the Little Sisters of the Poor.

Zélie took good care of her maids, nursing them herself when they were ill. She did not want to send them to the hospital or to burden their families. For three weeks she nursed her maid, Louise Marais, day and night. She was kind to the fifteen women who worked as her lacemakers, visiting them on Sundays after Vespers and making sure they lacked nothing. When she found that two women who pretended to be nuns were abusing a poor girl they had taken in, she took them to court. Thérèse's sister Céline testified that she often saw poor people coming into her home to receive food and clothes from Zélie, who often cried when she heard their tales of distress.¹¹ Both had great reverence for the poor, in whom Jesus still suffers poverty today. After Louis had brought one poor man home from church and given him a meal, he asked Céline and Thérèse to kneel to receive the poor man's blessing.

Surrendering Ourselves Completely to God

After leading heroic lives, Louis and Zélie surrendered themselves to long and painful illnesses and, in Zélie's case, to a premature death. She died of breast cancer at age forty-six, when Thérèse, her youngest, was only four years old. After she was diagnosed, she wrote "So let us leave it in God's hands. He knows what is for our good much better than we do. It is He who wounds and He who heals. I will go to Lourdes on the first pilgrimage, and I hope that the Blessed Virgin will cure me if that is necessary."¹² When she was not cured at Lourdes, she still kept the faith. About her return to Louis, who had been waiting at Lisieux for news of a cure, she wrote: "He was not a little surprised to see me returning cheerfully, as if I had obtained the hoped-for miracle. It gave him renewed courage, and all the house was filled with cheerfulness."¹³ Not long before her death Zélie wrote asking prayers "if not for a cure, then for perfect resignation to the will of God."¹⁴ The miracle she had hoped for on the feast of the

¹¹ *The Mother of the Little Flower, op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹² Quoted in Redmond, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

¹³ Quoted in *Zélie Martin, Mother of St. Therese*, by Barbara Foley (Boston, Daughters of St Paul, 1960), pp. 44-45.

¹⁴ *Correspondance familiale 1863-1885, Zélie et Louis Martin*, (Paris : Editions du Cerf, 2004), CF 214 bis, p. 367.

Assumption did not happen. The next day, twelve days before her death, she ended her last letter, to her brother, with the words: “Obviously, the Blessed Virgin does not want to cure me.¹⁵ What would you have? If the Blessed Virgin has not cured me, it is because my time has come, and God wills me to rest elsewhere than on earth.”¹⁶

Later Louis became ill with dementia, and he was confined in a mental asylum, the *Bon Sauveur* at Caen, for three years. The “holy patriarch” became inmate no. 14449.¹⁷ He accepted this trial generously and brought many other patients back to God. On February 27, 1889, Céline wrote: “The Sister said to him that he was rendering them a great service by bringing back the fallen-away patients to God. ‘You are an apostle,’ she told him. ‘That’s true,’ answered dear little Father, ‘but I would prefer to be an apostle elsewhere; however, since it is God’s will! I believe it is to break down my pride.’”¹⁸ Sister Costard, who looked after Louis, wrote: “He is really admirable; not only does he not complain, but he finds that everything we give him is perfect.”¹⁹ When his family and friends made a novena that he might be well enough to return to Lisieux, he said “No, you must not ask for that, but only that God’s will be done.”²⁰ In 1892 he was well enough to return to Lisieux, where Céline and the Guérins looked after him devotedly. He said “In heaven, I’ll repay you for all this!”²¹ On learning of his death, Father Almire Pichon, a Jesuit then working in Canada and a close friend of the Martin family, wrote prophetically to Louis’s daughters: “Jesus . . . is taking him from you only to beatify him.”²²

God has called the Church to declare these courageous spouses “blessed” not for their glory but to stimulate us, in our circumstances, to imitate their fidelity in loving and serving their Lord and their neighbors, their love for the poor, their commitment to prayer, and their incomparable abandonment. May we not only admire them but also receive the grace that in us, as in them, the desire for Jesus Christ becomes greater and more intense than any other desire.

¹⁵ Nevin, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁶ Redmond, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁷ “Louis et Zélie Martin: Un mariage d’amour,” by Guy Gaucher, O.C.D., in *Feu et Lumière*, no. 230, July/August 2004.

¹⁸ *Letters, Vol. I, op. cit.*, pp. 535-36.

¹⁹ *Letters, Vol. I, op. cit.*, pp. 575-76, note 4.

²⁰ Redmond, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

²¹ *Letters of St. Therese, Vol. II*, tr. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1988), pp. 750-51, LD, May 10, 1892, note 2.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 876-77.