

The Story of a Soul: Reflections on Chapters 1 and 2

Marie-Françoise-Thérèse Martin was born on January 2, 1873 to Louis and Zelie Martin in Alençon, France. She was the youngest of nine children - four living sisters; two sisters and two brothers died in the early months/years of life. In fact, it was not expected that Thérèse would survive infancy. Her mother sent her to be in the care of a nurse living in the countryside in the hopes that the family would not mourn the loss of another child. Thérèse thrived and she was the joy and consolation of the family's members in life and countless others once her sojourn on earth ended. Thérèse was not known for her sanctity of life by many during her life, not like St. Rose of Lima and St. Martin de Porres. She was virtually unknown when she died of tuberculosis on 30 September 1897. How do we know her today, more than 100 years after her death? Seemingly simple or unremarkable in life, except to those closest to her, she was canonized and she has been given the title of Doctor of the Church for her profound teaching called her "little way".

Thérèse's, *Story of a Soul*, was not originally intended to be a published work, at least not on Thérèse's part, when she first penned it. It was written in three parts and each was written at the command of her superior. The first manuscript was written as a "family souvenir" and addressed to Mother Agnes, prioress of the convent, who was her elder sister Pauline. The style of the text is familiar and is filled (at least to the end of the second chapter) with remembrances and ponderings of Thérèse about her up-bringing and some meditations she put on paper. Thérèse wrote this manuscript out of obedience to her superior but it was a task that she was not pleased to undertake because she was concerned that writing her childhood story would cause her to concentrate too much on herself. But she was consoled by our Lord: obeying simply, was pleasing to the Lord. This manuscript was not edited and there were no errors in it.

The second manuscript was addressed to Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart, her eldest sister Marie, who commanded her to record her "little doctrine" after a retreat in September 1896. It was suspected that Thérèse would not live much longer because her first coughing up of blood caused by tuberculosis occurred Good Friday, 3 April 1896. She called this "Christ's first call." The final manuscript was requested and dedicated to Mother Marie de Gonzague, the new prioress, at the urging of Mother Agnes. In this part, Thérèse recorded her religious life.

Some months before her death Thérèse had a premonition that her future mission - in heaven - was linked to her manuscripts and she charged Mother Agnes with editing them and publishing them. She charged her Superior and sister to tell no one about it lest the devil hear of it and stop publication and circulation. We should be glad that the Martin girls learned and practiced

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obedience, otherwise we may never have known St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face and her little way to perfection.

The Prologue tells us about Therese's parentage and the first two chapters record Therese's recollections of her early childhood and raising to the age of eight years of age. She does not tell of her "little way" in this first manuscript but only hints at it. She tells us that "Perfection consists in doing his will, in being what He wills us to be." (p.14) When writing this souvenir, Thérèse did so with the help of letters written by her mother to her eldest sister Pauline who was away at the Visitation convent for school. Thérèse tells of the growth of her soul and how the love of her family helped her grow and eventually become a spouse of Christ. Thérèse's story is not so much about her life but about the graces God deigned to give her.

This first section is about family life and this is important to delve into because much of St. Thérèse's story is rooted in her experiences from early childhood and the lessons she learned as a member of a family, the domestic church. The writer of the prologue firmly sets St. Thérèse in her familial context and tells of the benefits she derived from family life. Thérèse does this as well but she does not tell the modern reader her parents story which affected definitively the rhythm of family life and left an indelible mark on the Martin sisters. They were born into a loving family that had Christ firmly in the center of familial life. Looking at the family life of the Martin family, like looking at the Holy Family of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, we can see true family life in this exemplar. Gazing at this family and learning about them is especially important in these times as the primacy of the family is undermined violently by same-sex marriage demands and legalization, abortion, divorce, contraception, and reproductive technologies. Those desiring to live holy lives, those of us living in the vocation of matrimony, desiring to raise holy children in this mixed up culture can look to the Martin's for strength and practice.

St. Thérèse's parents are saints. This holy couple was canonized on 18 October 2015 by Pope Francis and their Feast day is July 12. In the canonization homily Pope Francis stated:

The holy spouses Louis Martin and Marie-Azélie Guérin practiced Christian service in the family, creating day by day an environment of faith and love which nurtured the vocations of their daughters, among whom was Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus.

It is well known that both parents sought service to the Lord in religious vocation but were refused. Louis because he could not master Latin and Zélie was "categorically refused" entrance to the Hotel Dieu in Alençon. (Not sure that means.) Neither parent had the ideal home life that they

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endeavored to provide their own children. Both came from military families. Zélie lamented her mother's emotional distance telling her brother that she had a dismal childhood and youth while her brother was doted on. Her mother was good but did not know how to "take" Zélie, and she suffered for it.

While both were refused the life both thought God desired for them, they maintained their faith and separately "got on with life". Louis lived a semi-monastic life with his parents while pursuing his profession as a watchmaker which was perfectly to his "orderly, methodical, solitary, and meditative nature", eventually owning a jewelry shop in the town. Zélie took of the trade that Alençon was known for at the time: lace making – Point d'Alençon. She was one of the best lace makers in the town, a good worker, and apparently a gifted business woman as she seems to have thrived in this. Louis eventually sold his own shop and helped his wife with the business. They may not have known it at the time but God had another plan for them. Their vocation was not to live separated from society in the monastery and convent but in the matrimony. Vocations come in different forms, although most of us may think that it means religious or priestly life it actually refers Love. How we act that out depends on our call and our answer to it. The Martins lived out their vocational call in the married state as laity. The *CCC* 898 - quoting *Lumen Gentium* 31.2 states:

"By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. ...It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are closely associated that these may always be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer."

Obedient to the will of God both Louis and Zélie embraced their vocations outside of the cloister.

This pair met and married on 13 July 1858 but lived as brother and sister in a Josephite marriage for the first 10 months of their marriage. A confessor intervened. He likely explained that the ends of marriage are the procreation and education of children and the mutual aid of spouses. St. Thomas taught this centuries before in his *Summa contra gentiles*. This was later stated in the 1917 Code of Canon Law, but this was well understood prior. The Martins had nine children born to them between 1860 and 1873. Although not all of the children survived, Louis and Zélie ensured that family life held a privileged place for the surviving children. They were not unfamiliar with loss of dear ones and perhaps this helped them embrace one another in love more fervently. The

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devoted mother herself died on 28 August 1877 at the age of 46 from Breast Cancer that had plagued her for many years.

The education of the family was given in lessons, by example, and in time spent with one another. The duty to educate religion and inculcate reverence for our Creator appears to have been of primary concern to the family. They often took walks, trips, train journeys and visited family together. It was their routine to pray together, attend morning Mass as a family, frequently receive Holy Communion, and go retreats. Their lives revolved around the liturgical year, pilgrimages, fasts, and abstinences. Sundays, Holy Days, and procession were well prepared for and celebrated. Thérèse recalled with much affection these days and activities. The parents led by example in prayers, devotions, Mass attendance, and care of the sick, poor, disinherited, epileptic, and dying. The faith in the Martin home was talked about often and practiced intentionally. The religious obligation of parenthood was clearly understood the parents.

The Pope stated the following at their canonization:

Louis and Zélie did not do anything extraordinary during their lifetimes, but rather lived their faith in a very simple, humble way, teaching by example, knowing what it was like to mourn the loss of loved ones, nurturing the vocation of their children, and putting their faith into action by reaching out to others in need. Louis and Zélie are excellent models for all Christian spouses.

The Martins did what was required of them to a superlative degree, although we may take offense to the Pope's comment that they did not do anything extraordinary. In our times we cannot imagine the difficulties they faced and how they could possibly go on after losing four children – one of them Hélène at the age of five. The mother told her sister how difficult it was to lose this one, especially.

Why is the family so significant? The human family is how we image the Trinity. As God is a communion of persons, so is the family. Our vocation is to love, this is the vocation of each and every person, and our communion in matrimony is an image of God, who is love. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* states that the husband and wife constitute the first form of the communion of persons and this communion is possible because of the complementarity of the sexes – male and female. The spouses complement one another in sex and in temperament and Thérèse shared the few reminiscences she had of her mother, who died when she was four and a half. She remembered the prayers her mother taught her and used those prayers. She also recalled the

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discipline that she sometimes needed and deserved and thanked her mother for these. Permissive parenting was not practiced in the Martin home.

Parenting is not sole responsibility of one spouse. Thérèse had a good relationship with both parents, but was closer to her father, in part because he was the surviving parent. Although he was austere and unbending, he doted on his daughters and especially, his “little Queen.” After the death of Zélie and the family’s relocation to *les buissonnettes* in Lisieux, we see more of the paternal care offered by Louis. The “King” and Thérèse were able to enjoy many things together such as fishing (Louis’ favorite pastime), singing, poetry, and games. Many of these activities were enjoyed in the winter months. We also see that Thérèse adopts Pauline as her “mother” because she understood that it was normal for a child to have a father and a mother. (Thérèse’s sister Celine, her constant companion, adopted Marie as her “mother.”) Thérèse often tells Pauline in the first manuscript that she is “doubly my mother.”

We cannot underestimate the value, primacy of the human family and the relationships of the spouses with one another and each with the children. We must understand, for those of us who are parents or aspire to be, our relationship with our children is formative. It is noted in the *Catechetical Framework for Lifelong Faith Formation* from our Archdiocese that a child’s image of God is set by the age of three. The image that he/she forms of God is based on how he/she views his/her parents. If the parents are demanding, so is God. If the parents are loving but firm, so is God. This was terrifying to me as a parent with children well beyond the age of three when I learned this. I had to reflect on the image of God we have given our children. While we are all saints in the making I am fairly certain that I have not given our children the fertile garden Thérèse’s well formed and intentional parents were able to offer to her and her sisters. But God is not finished with us yet. We also know that difficult parents do nurture saints – St. Rose, St. Thomas Aquinas for example. Thankfully the HS takes over at one point.

The Church teaching about the family states that it is the first natural society and it exists without derived rights. It is a privileged society that is charged with the procreation and education of the offspring. This of course exists properly in the state of marriage, through the sacrament of matrimony wedding body and soul to one another. The Church states that essence of Marriage includes: Totality in total self-giving (Theology of the Body); Unity in coming together in the marital embrace; Indissolubility of the marriage covenant for the benefit of spouses, children, and society; Fidelity of the spouses; and Fruitful in serving life if/when blessed by God.

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The family is called to form a communion of persons for the benefit of any children resulting from the mutual love of the parents for one another, not simply on the biological level but also the spiritual. We are composite beings. Originally, the Martins did not understand this but corrected their way of life and give themselves to one another and welcomed children. Zélie later wrote that she was born to have children and loved them to distraction. If only all parents wrote this way of their children.

Questions

Much of what Thérèse recorded about her early life came from letters her elder sister received and kept from their mother. Letter writing is becoming a lost art in the digital age of pictures, text messaging, e-mails and other social media. Hand writing, without the innovations of spell-check and editing ad nauseum, requires the writer to be deliberate and succinct in his/her communication. How do you think your observations about your children would be altered if you shared about them in a hand-written letter?

Thérèse pondered the “favoritism” of God in His granting extraordinary favors to those great offenders like St. Paul or St. Augustine and why would he care for some from the cradle, while savages die never knowing God. (p14) How do we explain this because we are taught that salvation comes only through Christ. (Affirmed by the CDF document *Placuit Deo*: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20180222_placuit-deo_en.html)