

**St Thérèse and the Martin Family**  
**What they teach us about our homes**  
**(the temporal, spiritual, and eternal)**  
*(by Joanne Brydson)*

The whole world seems to love the Little Flower St Thérèse. But a good number of people do find her speech and simplicity a little too sweet, “*How can I relate to her? What can her story possibly teach me? She grew so saintly at such a young age. What can her parents possibly teach me? They were wealthy, had servants, had a perfect marriage... How could the parents of five perfect daughters who all became nuns possibly relate to me, maybe with marital problems or adult children who’ve left the faith?*” Well that would obviously be a very superficial approach to any saint. Thankfully, St Thérèse is one saint who put the spotlight on her family, in a sense. She painted for us a picture of the Martin family home, and in the years following her death and canonization, we had the benefit of her sisters providing even more details about their family. It wasn’t long before the world looked into Thérèse’s claim that her parents were “more deserving of heaven than of earth.”

Pope Francis refers to marriage as “*a true and living icon*” of the life and love of the Divine Trinity. In *Familiaris Consortio* St John Paul II explains the same – that marriage is the reflection of the Trinity. Each Person in the Trinity (the Person of God the Father, the Person of God the Son, the Person of God the Holy Spirit), each Person makes room in and around His person in loving communion, a term called *Perichoresis*. In other words, there is no “us” and “them.” There also was no “us” and “them” to the Martin family. Selfish individualism has no place in a home that aims to reflect God’s kingdom. Just as we must bear the likeness of Jesus, just as a marriage should bear the likeness of the Trinity, our homes must function with the anticipation and hope of our eternal home. Sts Louis and Zélie Martin created such a home with God’s help, and their lives and the lives of their daughters teach us much about our homes: our temporal home (earth), our spiritual home (the Church), and our eternal home (Heaven).



Louis-Joseph-Aloys-Stanislas Martin was born August 22, 1823, the 3<sup>rd</sup> child to army Captain Pierre-Francois Martin and his wife Marie-Anne-Fanny Boureau. The couple had five children; all but Louis died before reaching the age of 30. Mme Martin was conscientious about raising her young son to be virtuous, and would write him such things as, “I pray with all the fervor of my love that God may pour out upon my children the happiness and peace which we need in this stormy world... Be ever humble, my dear son.” His father would write with the same tone and advice: “May God be ever glorified and loved above all things!” From his father, Louis learned the characteristics of a good soldier: great obedience, and the willingness to lay down one’s life. He would learn to yield himself to God without reserve. God was providing the foundation for Thérèse’s confidence in God as Father by giving her a saintly father like Louis Martin.

Louis’ parents had been sure to provide for his education, although not for post-secondary, but despite this, on his own initiative, Louis pursued the study of classical literature. He was studious and technical, artistic, and attracted to delicate, meticulous work. He travelled to Germany as a young single man, where he was first introduced to the art of clock and watch-making, and these travels also equipped him with a good knowledge of the German language. Being a product of the Romantic era, with his sensitive nature and his love for God’s creation, and a serious approach to prayer and recollection, he came to see in the hermitage of the Great St Bernard in the Swiss Alps the ideal life – where the religious brothers lived heroic lives for God. Can you imagine? Hours spent in prayer followed by hours of utterly heroic charity: following dogs through snowy mountains rescuing lost or stranded mountain travelers. What could be more glorious to a young man?

So in the fall of 1845, at the age of 22, Louis headed straight to the Swiss frontier to seek acceptance to the religious life. The biographer of the Martin family, Fr Stephane-Joseph Piat, OFM, says Louis would carry to the end of his life a regret that he was turned away – he didn't have a sufficient knowledge of Latin. He did go home to continue his studies, and there is a note in his belongings that seems to hint that he appealed to the Order a year and a half later. He was determined! But God had another route to sainthood for Louis.

After being turned away by the monastery a second time, Louis would spend the next three years in Paris, from 1847 until 1850, living with his grandmother and uncle, apprenticing as a watch and clock maker. Upon completion of his training, he bought a house – No. 15 Rue du Pont Neuf, in Alencon, and there he established himself as a master clock and watch-maker, later even adding a jewellery shop. He lived a very orderly, hard-working life, and one could imagine how he must have carried himself like a monk – this intense, focused work which allowed him to retreat into himself, raising his thoughts to God all hours of the day. He even went to lengths to avoid women who thought him an eligible bachelor, instead saving himself for God. In time, his parents would move into his home and be supported by him.

In his free time Louis would fish and hunt, sharing his catch with the Poor Clares of Alencon. He even purchased a little recreational property, a little “retreat,” where he could store his fishing tackle, and spend time in reading, prayer and recreation. It was named “The Pavilion.” This tiny building was austere, barely furnished except for a couple of wooden chairs, a small table or two, some inspirational words framed on the walls, and in the corner of a well-kept garden a three-foot statue of the Blessed Virgin – the statue which would become known as the Virgin of the Smile. Louis lived like this for about eight years.

Zélie Guérin was born Marie-Azélie Guérin, on December 23, 1831, the second child of Isidore and Louise-Jeanne Guérin. She had a delicate constitution and was nearly always ill between 7-12 years of age. She was a friend to suffering for the majority of her life. In *The Story of a Family*, Fr Piat tells us that although Monsieur Guérin was a tough, domineering military father (who nevertheless loved his two daughters and was loved by them) the real suffering Zélie endured was due to her *mother*, a woman who completely lacked motherly affection and what he calls, “the sense of psychology essential to raising young people,” and as a result, the woman seriously mishandled her exceptionally sensitive and often-ill daughter. Zélie herself would later write to her brother, Isidore, that her childhood and youth were shrouded in sadness, that her mother spoiled him but with her was too severe, and that it had caused her deep suffering.

One might wonder at how a wounded young woman with no model of motherly tenderness would herself one day become such a tender mother to nine children. Providentially, when Zélie was 13 years old, Monsieur Guérin prepared for his retirement and moved his family to Alencon, where his children would have good schools. The eldest daughter, Elise, was 15 and the Guérins' son Isidore was 3 years old. There in Alencon, Isidore Sr could entrust the education of his teen daughters to the religious sisters. Zélie would grow in her knowledge of the Faith, with her sister would be enrolled in the Confraternity of the Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and in time both would even conceive of consecrating themselves to God in religious life. At 22, Zélie would open her lace-making business on the ground floor of the family home, assisted by Elise. They would work for the famous Parisian house of lace, Maison Pigache, and for several years together the single young business-women produced the unique Point D'Alencon lace. But life would change for her when she was 27. Her dear older sister, Elise, would enter the Visitation monastery and one of her lace-making classmates would have her eyes on introducing Zélie to her bachelor son.

Louis' mother met Zélie in a lace-making class in Alencon, and as the mother of an aging bachelor, she immediately saw in Zélie a suitable, morally strong wife for her son. She played “matchmaker,” but it is noteworthy that Zélie also recognized God's hand in their meeting, for she would write of a very peculiar incident: One day, while walking on a bridge, she passed Louis Martin. She heard the Lord tell her distinctly that Louis was “him whom I have prepared for you.” What more could a girl want?

It wasn't long before they were secretly betrothed, and then publicly betrothed, and three months later, on July 12, they were married. It was a civil ceremony in the Town Hall at 10:00 pm, and two hours later – at midnight – they were quietly married in the Church, July 13, 1858 before God and their priest as their witness. Zélie moved into the house on Rue du Pont Neuf, moving her lace-making business there with her.

The marriage of these two souls – or rather, as Venerable Fulton Sheen would say, the “three” who are married – can be held up as a model for us that marriage has the potential to bring us into union with God. Louis and Zélie were going to discover that their marriage was indeed to be their vocation, as much as they wished that they had vocations to religious life. The Catechism tells us that the sacraments are “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” (CCC 1131). It says, “In them Christ himself is at work” (ibid.). The sacraments DO bring us into an encounter with Jesus Christ. Sin and selfishness can mar the original divine plan for marriage, but when marriage exemplifies what God meant for it to be, when it is aligned to His divine plan, it becomes a means of great grace, for as Jesus promised, whoever keeps His word, He and the Father will come to him and make their home with him.

So here we have a newly-wed couple, maybe married a little later in life than average... It is well-known that Louis at least, even in marriage, remained attracted to the celibate life, and he sincerely studied and admired the theological value of a purely fraternal union. Some say that Zélie held the same views as her husband. It was not exactly so; rather Zélie was, understandably for that era, *completely and utterly ignorant* of the “mysteries of life.” Upon learning it all, *then* she was immediately inclined to agree with her husband on all of this! She admits that even on her wedding day, she would still have wished to join her sister and the Visitation nuns! But she wrote years later to her daughter Pauline, “You will think perhaps that I was making him unhappy, and that I had spoilt our wedding day for him. But no, he understood me and consoled me as well as he could, for he had similar inclinations. I think that our mutual affection was increased.”

In this age we know, or at least understand better, through the works of St John Paul II on the Theology of the Body, that periodic continence in marriage will help the husband and wife to grow in mutual respect for each other, to grow in respect for that *potential* that exists to cooperate with God in the creation of life, and at an individual level, also teaching one to put aside appetites, willing first the good of the other. Now Louis and Zélie were not practicing what we would call “periodic continence” as a couple – they were actually practicing *celibacy*, but, according to Fr Piat, by this experience, in a unique way, God prepared these two to raise saintly children, he made them “capable of understanding the grandeur of virginal life because they had practiced it.” Thanks to the intervention of a confessor, ten months into their marriage, Louis and Zélie widened their view of married life. Ultimately, what aided them in transitioning to a new type of union was the desire to offer sons and daughters to the Lord. And God would allow Louis and Zélie the gift of sons and daughters, and they would be asked to give them back – in the deaths of four of the nine children that they were given. So we see, it was not *in spite* of marriage, but it was *in* and *by* marriage that they were to be sanctified.

A year into her marriage, Zélie was to lose her mother. Zélie was 28 years old, and her older sister had been in the Visitation monastery for one year. Their younger brother Isidore was just 18, just about to go out into the world and pursue a career. Having ten years between them, Zélie took on a motherly role for her brother. At 21 he embarked on post-secondary studies, and in a few years he was a pharmacist. He moved to Lisieux, bought a pharmacy and soon after married the daughter of the pharmacy's previous owners. Her name was Céline. The happy couple had three children (one of whom was stillborn). Isidore was a strong man, a militant Catholic, involved in many good works, and lived up to the ideals that his sisters and family had for him – he would eventually become a surrogate guardian of his nieces after the death of Zélie, and in time would also support his widowed brother-in-law, Louis, as his health deteriorated. Isidore would also play an instrumental role in the publication of the Story of a Soul. The influence that Zélie had on him must have been tremendous – after all, he was the recipient of many good counsels from his saintly sister, and a witness to the exemplary life she led with her husband and daughters. The loving advice from Zélie extended to Isidore's wife Céline, too. Much of what we know of the Martin household comes from the letters which Zélie wrote. She spoke to Céline not as a sister-in-law but as a sister. She wrote on one occasion, quite bluntly: “Mme. Y. appears to be much happier

than you; she lives only for luxury and pleasure” (and Zélie goes on to describe examples)... “yet I would rather see you with your troubles than think of you, like her, forgetting the things of Heaven for the short-lived delights of earth.” Zélie’s eyes were always on eternity.

When Louis and Zélie had opened their hearts to a new marital union and the possibility of bringing forth children, they became parents. Their nine children were Marie-Louise (called Marie, became Sr Marie of the Sacred Heart), Marie-Pauline (called Pauline, became Mother Agnes of Jesus), Marie-Léonie (called Léonie, became Sr Françoise-Thérèse, a Visitandine nun), Marie-Hélène (called Hélène), who lived to age of 5, cause of death unknown, Marie-Joseph-Louis (called Joseph), who died of infectious disease at 5 months old, Marie-Joseph-Jean-Baptiste (also called Joseph), who died of infectious disease at 8 months old, Marie-Céline (called Céline, became Sr Genevieve of the Holy Face), Marie-Melanie-Thérèse (called Thérèse) who died of neglect and starvation by a wet nurse at 7 weeks old, and Marie-Françoise-Thérèse (called Thérèse, who became Sr Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face) 1873-1897, canonized 1925, proclaimed Doctor of the Church 1997.

For Zélie, who never spared herself sacrificing for her loved ones, motherhood was not a burden to be endured. In contrast, as a couple, they adopted the conviction (probably one instilled in their days of youth) that they should labour unceasingly. Louis and Zélie were both extremely hard-working individuals, however, as wealthy as they became, their labours were never with the aim of acquiring abundance. They enjoyed fine things and treated their guests to the best, but they were not materialistic people. Their daughters would later say of their parents that they ensured that their children grew up knowing that “all is vanity” and only heaven matters. Louis was staunch in his opposition to business transactions on the Lord’s Day. Zélie, on the other hand, labored at her business all days of the week in the home because the couple viewed it as a domestic industry, not at all in conflict with a mother’s role. The couple never allowed her work to take her from family duties though, despite the fact that she would write that when she had many orders, she was “a slave, and it is the worst kind of slavery.” She really felt the weight of financial responsibility toward so many workers – the business was quite big now – and found herself at times worried to the point of nightmares... but she expressed her resignation, saying, “What is one to do? I must make up my mind to do it and do my part as well as possible” (Letter, November 1865). Louis would insist on hiring more workers to ease the burden on his wife, and even suggested closing the business totally, but she ignored him. It is speculated that Zélie’s compulsion to work to this extreme might have been her own insecurity which resulted after her parents had not been able to provide for her dowry or her sister’s – the girls had to work for it themselves. As a business owner and a mother now, she never wanted others to feel that she might not fulfill her obligations toward them. The same attitude of generosity even extended to the family’s servants. She told her sister-in-law that she never treated her servants less well than she did her children. She even nursed her sick assistants back to health, most notably their maid Louise Marais, whom she later learned had been emotionally and physically abusing Leonie for several years since early childhood, even using emotional blackmail to turn the child against her mother. In practicing this kind of charity she was at every moment able to tend only to following the will of God. Even with their minds and labours constantly applied to their work, Zélie’s and Louis’ hearts and wills remained oriented to God. This, according to St John of the Cross, is the thing necessary for true “*interior solitude*,” complete detachment. This early discipline and disposition of heart would serve the Martin saints in their future sorrows, which would be many.

The revolutions in France attempted a separation of Church and state, which resulted in severe persecution of the Church, and one of the political and social results was the Church’s loss of power and influence. Vocations dropped off, the growth of religious orders was controlled, and thousands of schools operated by religious orders were shut down. However, historians can’t deny that a phenomenon took place in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as often does, when God steps into history and allows His Blessed Mother to appear.

- July & November 1830 – Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal to Catherine Laboure (Paris)
- December 1836 – locution at Our Lady of Victories (Paris) about devotion to the I.H.M.
- September 1846 – Our Lady of La Salette

- February to July 1858 – Our Lady of Lourdes
- January 1871 – Our Lady of Pontmain

*And ALL of these were just the ones in France!*

The Church in France did not stand silent amidst these occurrences, but worked hard to foster devotions and growth in faith. Public processions became commonplace and churches sponsored mass national pilgrimages. Pilgrims made good use of the newly-built trains. Even on a local level, parishes and dioceses supported pastoral works such as the annual Corpus Christi processions the Martins participated in. Dozens of lay organizations sprang up to support parishes and priests, organizations to which a number of Guérins and Martins belonged, such as:

- Conference of St Vincent de Paul (Louis)
- “The Children of Mary” (Marie, Pauline, Thérèse)
- Confraternities – of the Rosary (Zélie), of the Scapular (Zélie), of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus (Zélie), of Christian Mothers (Zélie), of the Holy Face (Louis and Thérèse)
- And more, not to mention the Third Orders (Zélie belonged to the Franciscans and Isidore to the Third Order Carmelites).

The Martin children clearly knew what it meant to belong to a greater family – the Lord’s inheritance and our second home, the Church. The Martins were not very involved in *social* events outside of Church, but despite that, with the charity witnessed in the home and to surrounding neighbours, for example a father who ensured that all of the dying were receiving the last sacraments, the Martin girls learned that the borders of our domestic churches must extend beyond our immediate families. The homes we create are of no use if they do not foster love of neighbor, and if we do not see our place in the Body of Christ.

So how did the Martin couple foster a connection to their wider family, the Church? The corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and living the liturgical year in the Church were at the forefront of Louis’ and Zélie’s priorities. The family not only observed the fasts, penances and works of the Church but the feasts as well. Actively living the Church calendar, they made reading the lives of the saints with their children a daily source of inspiration. The girls and their mother would make it a practice to decorate the statue of Our Lady in the older girls’ room – Pauline bragged that the wreaths and flowers became a shrine to rival that in the local cathedral. She said Mother wanted flowering branches to reach as high as the ceiling! Mother and Father would begin their day with weekday Mass at 5:30 am, several times a week and every First Friday. As we have said, they both had a strong work ethic, a great respect for the traditions of the Church, and a desire to lead souls to heaven. We know the importance Zélie placed on working as hard as she could, doing what was within her power, but we should not think of her as self-reliant at all. She knew God’s providence in every aspect of her life. When her brother experienced some financial troubles and was stressing about them, she reprimanded him:

“My sister has spoken to me a great deal about your business... I told her not to wrack her brains over all this, that there was only one thing to do: pray to God, because neither she nor I can help you in any other way. But He, who is not at a loss, will get us out of this when He finds that we’ve suffered enough. And then you will recognize that it’s neither your abilities nor your intelligence which you owe your success to, but to God alone, like me, with my Alençon lace. This conviction is very helpful, I’ve tested it myself. You know that we’re all given to pride, and I often notice that those who have made their fortune are, for the most part, unbearably arrogant. I am not saying that I’ve reached that point, or you either, but we have been more or less marred by this pride. It’s certain then that constant prosperity takes us away from God. Never has He led His chosen ones down that road. They have passed through the crucible of suffering to be purified.” (Letter 81)

And she was blunt with his wife too:

“Life is not a bed of roses. God wills this to detach us from the world and raise our thoughts towards Heaven.” (Letter 90)

Zélie was not considered a “strong” woman, but as far as Church laws were concerned, she was uncompromising. She was never pretentious about it though. She wrote to her daughter one day, ‘I must go to Vespers to pray for the intention of our dear deceased relatives. The day will come when you will do this for me, but I must make sure that I do not have so great a need of your prayers. I would like to become a saint but this will not be easy; there is a lot of wood to burn but it is as hard as stone. It would have been better if I had begun earlier, when it was less difficult, but anyhow “it is better late than never.” ’ She admits to her sister-in-law that she was quite uncomfortable fasting, and that she considered herself quite cowardly. She says she wouldn’t have observed Lenten fasts at all if she listened to nature! (Letter 130, Mar. 14, 1875) She even admits that she and her husband would attend the upcoming parish Lenten mission only out of a sense of duty, despite the fact that the visiting missionary priests were poor preachers – she called it an extra penance for herself!

All joking aside, Zélie, by the time she wrote these things about herself, had already endured some of the greatest sufferings a mother could endure. Ten years earlier, in 1865, she had to send their fourth child, Hélène, to a wet nurse. Zélie could not feed her own child. Their third, Léonie, just 2 years old, became gravely ill, so Louis made a pilgrimage on foot to beseech Our Lady’s help in curing his infant daughter. Léonie’s health was restored soon after. That same year, Zélie confides in her brother that she had been experiencing pain and numbness in her breast. They discussed the possibility of surgery, but fear of leaving her family and also an awareness of the risks associated surgery in those days, kept her from pursuing treatment (she would live with this for eleven more years, without saying anything to anyone.) Their first son, Joseph, is born a year and a half after Hélène, but he dies at 5 months old due to double infections. The next son, another Joseph, is born and cared for by a wet nurse for a time. Zélie would write about walking 8 km twice a day – at 5:00 am and 8:00 pm – every day, before and after work, to check on him (Letter 32). That’s 32 km a day! In the dark! Rain or shine! With or without her husband! In time, little Joseph comes home to the Martins, and the girls would enjoy entertaining him and making him laugh. Zélie is convinced God will allow her this son, that he will become a priest, but he dies at 8 months old from intestinal infection too. She writes about being reluctant to bury him, crowning him with a wreath of white flowers. Within days of the death of her sweet boy, Zélie is caring for her dying father, who passes away in their home just ten days later. These tragedies leave her feeling numb, and to the world she appears indifferent, but she had truly accepted these sufferings. At this time, Zélie is newly pregnant with another child (she might not have even *known* she was pregnant!); this child would be Céline. As with the others, likely due to progression of breast cancer, Zélie must send this baby away to a wet-nurse, and Céline would almost die of starvation in the care of this alcoholic wet-nurse. In the winter following, Louis and Zélie’s fourth daughter, 5 year old Hélène, would die slowly, in her mother’s arms, of an unknown illness. Zélie blames herself. Seven months later, she would deliver another baby girl, named Thérèse, who would die at 7 weeks old due to neglect and starvation by *another* alcoholic wet nurse. A year and a half later, God would give them another daughter, whom they also named Thérèse. She too would have to be surrendered into the care of a wet-nurse. And all this time Zélie is also unaware that the child she thinks has emotional and psychological problems, Léonie, is being abused and brainwashed by a trusted maid. Could any of us put ourselves in these shoes, of this mother in anguish and children traumatized, and still wait – just wait – for the will of God to be known? Make no mistake – Zélie and Louis did not perceive that the deaths, or the anguish, or traumas were the *will of God* – no, they knew very well that these are a result of our first parents’ fall from grace. Rather, they understood that what was asked of them was *surrender*. ‘God never gives us more than we can bear,’ Zélie would say. ‘Many times I’ve seen my husband worry about my health, when I couldn’t be any calmer. I would say to him, “Don’t be afraid. God is with us.” I had the firm confidence of being supported from on high’ (Letter 65). She told God, “I don’t have time to be sick,” and she felt His answer was, “Since you don’t have time to be sick, perhaps you’ll have time to suffer a lot of pain?” She passed this message on to her sister-in-law: ‘You see, in this world, that’s what it’s like. We have to carry our cross in one way or another. We say to God, “I don’t want that one.” Often our prayer is answered, but often also to our misfortune. It’s better to patiently accept what happens to us. There’s always joy alongside the pain’ (Letter 70).

Zélie would write, “When it’s a real misfortune, I’m completely resigned to it, and await God’s help with confidence” (Letter 140). After suffering so many losses, she admits to being frustrated by people (*she sounds a little like St Teresa of Avila*):

‘When I closed the eyes of my dear little children and buried them, I really felt the pain. It is a pain to which I have always been resigned. I do not regret the pains and the anxieties I have had to endure on their account. Many people have said to me, “It would have been better if you have never had them,” I cannot tolerate these words. The pains and anxieties of this life cannot be compared to the eternal happiness of my children. After all, they have not been lost forever, life is short and full of suffering, we shall find them in heaven.’

In the spring of 1877, Zélie came to accept that she had an inoperable breast cancer which would likely take her life within months. She would write to her daughters asking for prayers for healing. She anxiously watched for an opportunity to go on a pilgrimage, and indeed did go to Lourdes seeking a miraculous healing, but only so that she could live long enough to raise her daughters. She did end up getting to Lourdes, but the trip was a complete disaster. Everything that could go wrong *did* go wrong. Still she would say “I hope the Blessed Mother will cure me, if not completely, at least so I’ll have time to raise my children...” “I need time to finish the work that God has put in my hands.” But we also read her words of resignation that a cure may not be His will for her. She approached death not with fear but only a concern for those whom she would leave behind. Nonetheless, we thank God that this “Little Thérèse” would survive, would grow up in this family, with these parents who were “more deserving of heaven than of earth,” as she says, and she herself would be a gift to the world and the Church. I would dare to say that the inspiration behind Thérèse’s famous confident confession that she would go to Jesus with empty hands was inspired by her own mother’s surrender and docility.

The death of Thérèse’s mother in 1877 was particularly traumatic for the 4-year-old, and she suffered so greatly psychologically that she withdrew into herself and clung to her family. Thérèse’s father moved the children to Lisieux to be closer to Zélie’s family. There he found a beautiful home to rent which was surrounded by trees and gardens; the children nicknamed it Les Bouissonets (“Little Bushes”), and life became serene and idyllic compared to the life they had lived before, with the busyness of work. Now the business had been closed and they were living off of the monies from it. Thérèse would be doted over by her sisters and father, and this would begin the phase of her life which would teach her who she was in God’s eyes.

Like her mother, Thérèse longed to see heaven. In her autobiography, she recounts fondly for her sisters that from earliest memory she was always thinking of heaven. Her mother would write that she was very intelligent and loved going to “Mette” – how Thérèse pronounced “Messe” (“Mass”). The first word she learned to read was “heaven.” She knew how to pray; her mother said that every Sunday she would go to some part of Vespers, and if for some reason someone forgot to take her, she would cry uncontrollably! After Zélie’s death, Thérèse would dwell for long periods on thoughts of heaven. “I know that this earth is the place of exile, we are voyagers who are travelling toward our homeland. What does it matter if the route we follow is not the same since the only goal will be heaven. There we shall be reunited never to leave each other, there we shall taste family joys eternally” (Thérèse, Letter 148). But in contrast to her mother, who was understandably distressed at the thought of leaving children behind, Thérèse, when she sensed that her own death was approaching, was relieved. She wrote to Léonie: “this thought of the brevity of life gives me courage, it helps me bear the weariness of the road... the hour of rest is approaching.” Not only rest, but she looked forward to being *very active* – interceding for us – in heaven.

I have said very little about Thérèse’s father, St Louis, because the truth is, he wrote far fewer letters than his wife did. His wife wrote about him a few times, especially recounting how he grieved with her, prayed with her, and was a constant support for her. We know more about him thanks to Thérèse’s autobiography and her sisters’ writings. Louis only wrote letters when he was away from home, and then they were filled with expressions of love for his family and how much he missed them. We know he devoted all of his time to the girls after their mother died. The Martins’ second daughter Pauline entered Carmel five years after Zélie died.

The eldest daughter, Marie, would take four more years to discern that she was called there too. Léonie tried to enter the Visitation monastery and ended up returning to her family, and a few months later Thérèse would receive special permission to enter the Lisieux Carmel at 15 years old. This was not easy for Louis, to stand behind his youngest daughter, his “Little Queen,” in her eagerness to enter Carmel. This gentle and loving father wasn’t aloof about his jewels of daughters leaving him on his own. “God alone could demand such a sacrifice, but He’s helping me so powerfully that through my tears, my heart abounds with joy!” (Letter 230 to the Nogrix family). Only a couple months after she entered Carmel, then Thérèse’s greatest trial began – that of hearing that her father was succumbing to dementia and would suffer strokes. She couldn’t bear to be away from him during his own trial. It took several months, but he was eventually admitted to a psychiatric hospital. He would spend the next three years there, and would say to his daughters who visited him, “I am very well here, and I am here by the will of God. I needed this experience.” How humble he was, thinking that being institutionalized was good for him... Eventually discharged from the hospital, Louis would be brought for his last visit to the Carmel, and he was in very poor shape. He could hardly speak except for a few phrases, like “My little Queen.” It is said that as he left in tears, he pointed up, and could only say “*Au ciel!*” (“In heaven!”) Fr Marc Foley points out in *Story of a Soul* that “heaven” was the first word Thérèse would read and the last word she would hear her father speak. He died on July 29, 1894, one day after a serious heart attack.

The Martin home was really the foundation for the Little Way of St Thérèse. The spirituality of the home was, according to Fr Piat: “governed by three principles: God’s supreme rights, faith in His providence, and a trustful, happy acquiescence in His will.” Are these not also the components of the Little Way? Parallels can be drawn between these principles and what Thérèse would call the Little Way of Spiritual Childhood. “God’s supreme rights” parallels with Love. Thérèse heard Jesus say from the cross, “I thirst;” she stresses that we must first *love*. “Faith in His providence,” well, Thérèse knew that suffering has the potential to be redemptive. And lastly, “a trustful, happy acquiescence to His will,” is exactly what the Little Way teaches: *surrender and confidence in His merciful love*. Jesus said “let the children come unto me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these...” Thérèse knew with confidence that in approaching Our Lord like little children (in the practice of faith, trust, and love), with the surrender and confidence of little children, heaven would be our eternal home. An ancient 2<sup>nd</sup> century script, quoted in the Catechism, says about Christians, “[Christians] are in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their lives on earth, but are citizens of heaven.” (“*Ad Diognetum 5: pg2*” quoted in CCC2796)

For most of us, home does NOT feel like heaven on earth. But home is the context in which we are called to holiness in love; we are called to service in simple obedience; we are sanctified and prepared for heaven, our *eternal* home. Jesus said to the apostles, “*In My Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.*” Thomas said to him, “*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” Jesus said to him, “*I am the Way, and the truth, and the life...*” (Jn 14:2-6)

God is already among us, dwelling in us. The experience of our eternal “home” can be lived here and now. We would do well to learn from Sts Louis and Zélie and their daughters, St Thérèse and Servant of God Léonie, how to live with our eyes on eternity. They knew that in their “yeses” to God, in their wholehearted docility to His will, they glorified God and provided a tangible witness to all of God’s love, providence, and mercy. A blessed result of their obedience was that their marriage and home were the means of sanctification and the same can be for you and me.

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*Photo of Zelig Martin*



An undated and unretouched photo of Zelig Martin, taken about 1875. Recently discovered through the kindness of Mme. F. Besnier, a member of the photographer's family. This photograph appeared first in the French edition of *Correspondance familiale*, the letters of Zelig and Louis (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2004). It was also published in *Thérèse of Lisieux: God's Gentle Warrior* by Thomas R. Nevin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). It appears here by the kindness of the Archives of the Carmel of Lisieux and Father Antonio Sangalli, O.C.D., the vice-postulator for the cause of Louis and Zelig Martin. In all likelihood we see Zelig's face here as Thérèse saw it.