

Zélie (1831-1877) and Louis (1823-1894) Martin, Mother and Father of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus of the Holy Face

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[We will look first at the events of Zélie and Louis' youth, then their marriage, and finally Louis's relationship especially with Thérèse, as well as with his other daughters, after the death of Zélie.]

Zélie and Louis are the parents of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face, she who was enthusiastically defined as “the most loved young girl in the whole world” and “the greatest saint of modern times.” Thérèse died in 1897 and was canonized in 1925. In coming to know and love her, the whole Christian people has learned to know and love her family also, especially her father and mother.

This has come about not only because of their being related but even more because of the young Carmelite's message. Thérèse has spoken to the world of “ecclesial—church childhood.” It seems better to use this expression, rather than the more traditional one, “spiritual childhood.” Why? Because the former expression better expresses the childhood of the *whole* Church that is born-baptized by means of Christ—and which is destined for Him, as was the Blessed Virgin Mary, immaculately conceived—as well as the childhood of the individual Christian soul, formed by our Heavenly Father and eternally destined for His Divine Son, Who became human out of love for us.

Now the “little Thérèse” understood and experienced this doctrine (“ecclesial childhood”) within her family and her childhood, a childhood lived out and enjoyed within a deep sacramental life.

Her *Story of a Soul* (the title of her autobiography which made her known to the whole world) is, for the most part, a collection of her childhood memories.

And it is amazing how, with regard to these memories, even today—with varying degrees of sensitivity—theologians, spiritual authors, novelists, directors, and psychoanalysts all inquire in the attempt to coax out a secret that continues to fascinate them. And so, because of this fascination for their daughter Thérèse, Louis and Zélie Martin have also been studied thousands and thousands of times, often in destructive,

irreverent ways. The Church, on the other hand, has decided to recognize the sanctity not only of the daughter but also of the parents as well.

The canonical process surrounding their sanctity has not yet concluded, but the essential has already been recognized: they have been judged to have lived out their faith heroically, that is, with a deep and total generosity, a faith that can be proposed to faithful Christians for imitation.

Every possible judgment about Louis and Zélie Martin is in some way always authoritatively anticipated by that which their saintly daughter wrote about them: “The Lord gave me a father and mother more worthy of heaven than earth. I have had the happiness of belonging to parents who have no equal. God brought it about that I be born in a holy land.”

We will return to Thérèse’s evaluation of her parents; for now let us be content to underline just this one apparent paradox: Thérèse never felt that she was a saint. Instead she felt that she was the daughter of saints. Her doctrine of “ecclesial childhood” is rooted also in this awareness.

On the other hand this judgment was also shared by her relatives, in spite of the fact that relatives—as we have noted—are often the most critical. The sister-in-law of Zélie and Louis Martin will write to her niece a few years later, after she has already entered Carmel: “The truth is, my little Thérèse, that your parents are of that group that one calls saints and who merit begetting saints.” (Letter of Nov. 16, 1891)¹

The events this couple lived out are in many ways strange or odd. Or, to put it better, they are so normal in the Christian life as to appear strange to all who think of the Christian faith as something secondary in their life. Persons, events, and choices all appear strange to anyone who is not accustomed to the daily use of faith-enlightened reason.

To begin our story, let us not be afraid to admit that Zélie and Louis were children of their age, children of that 19th century that is often judged badly. Someone once defined it as “a stupid century”; someone else claimed it was for Christianity “an age of spiritual sleep and of a moralizing de-generation” (as opposed to “re-generation”) from which Thérèse managed to extract herself only by sheer strength.

The reality, as always, is much more complex.

If, on the one hand, the religious atmosphere at the time—especially in France—was already poisoned by Jansenism and much moralizing, and if it is true that believers tended to protect themselves from the world by barricading themselves behind their faith, and to live on the defensive, one must not, on the other hand, forget that the Church was at that particular time suffering one of the most violent attacks in the entire history of France.

¹ Note that this sentence is not part of the authentic letter was it was written in 1891.

There was a movement among the laity to radically de-sacralize their life and that of the entire world. With this goal in mind, laypersons put together a campaign to unhinge the Church from its social fabric: they promoted freemasonry, conceived and operated as an anti-Church; they launched a systematic aggression against every Catholic dogma and precept; they spread an anti-religious stance that reached into everyday life and undermined the unity of families; and they advanced an ever more decisive militant atheism.

“To organize a world without God” became, by the midpoint of the 19th century, the aimed-for goal, and this at a time when science seemed finally to be able to offer itself as the proper substitute for every possible religion.

This is where the most serious problems of our age, right up to our own day, have sunk down their bitter roots!

Now we have the premises needed as we move forward to judge certain aspects of the religion of the day. To some it was a time of “closing off and shutting down the little bourgeois folks,” of “overheated sentimentality,” of “mystical evasion” and of “resignation.”

Fine, that may indeed have been the outer clothing, but concealed underneath lies a decision to fight, a desire for the infinite, a thirst for spiritual and eternal values. And here lies the fertile ground from which sprung the saints of that age, saints who by God’s grace are never lacking!

In fact, every Christian is called to become holy during his or her pilgrimage on earth. Sometimes God asks a person to anticipate and prepare the ground for the future. That in fact was the mission of Thérèse of Lisieux, a mission clearly distinct from that of her peers and friends and relatives.

However, what God asked of her parents was to prepare for their little child and her new message a hearth designed to foster the two. And so we would be wasting our time in looking for non-existent psychological and spiritual conflicts between their daughter and those dear to her.

With regard to the task which Providence entrusted to them, the parents dedicated themselves to it according to what was possible. They built a thoroughly Christian world for their little one—an oasis, really—right in the midst of a 19th century entering its last quarter with an attitude of scientific pride and with the disease of arrogance.

Let us go back for a moment to explain how thoroughly strange the communal life of the Martin couple must have seemed back then—and even more so today. Above all, we must remember how both of them felt a desire to consecrate themselves to the Lord, and how this desire remained and marked them for life. In fact, it impressed on their whole existence and their whole family something which Thérèse described as “a virginal perfume.”

Louis Martin is idealistic and reflective, and nevertheless loves in equal measure both silence and adventure, contemplative withdrawal from the world and traveling to unknown countries, mathematical precision and romantic literature. At twenty-two he leaves for the monastery of the Great St. Bernard in the Swiss Alps, and applies to enter a community of monks who spend their life praising God and providing help for travelers in danger.

Zélie Guerin, on the other hand, is an impulsive, hard-working young woman: at nineteen she applies to enter the Hotel-Dieu of Alençon, a community of the Daughters of Charity, in order to consecrate herself to God through caring for the sick.

Both arrive at their respective community, and both are refused admission: Louis because he does not know Latin, something considered essential at the time for monastic life, and Zélie because of poor health.

Thus Louis adjusts to the turn of events and chooses the profession of watchmaker. He spends long hours in his precision workshop and tends his little watch shop. Zélie, on the other hand, becomes an expert at embroidery, at the art of “Alençon lacemaking,” a product which at the time was very sought after. She does so well that she is able to open her own little lace business.

The two meet when Louis is 35 years old, and Zélie 27, both of them by now convinced that they will have to live out their days in quiet and personal consecration to God while living in the world.

From their first meeting, however, they have a profound sense of being destined for one another. Zélie will recall to her daughters later on how, crossing the bridge of St. Leonard one day and crossing paths with that distinguished gentleman that was to become their father, she heard deep in her heart a voice telling her, “He is the one I have prepared for you.” Zélie told the story convinced that she had heard the voice of Our Lady. And it wasn’t the first time either....

Three months later they marry...at midnight, according to the custom of those who are seeking a wedding shrouded in intimacy and prayer.

After they unite their lives, they also unite their workshops, a task requiring lots of creative thinking and tons of patience.

Zélie marries with the desire “to have lots of children,” and yet—as happened to almost all the young women of the middle class back then—she comes to her wedding day deprived of any education in sexuality. As she begins to discover what it is, the desire for a consecrated religious life returns in a powerful way.

Louis, for his part, has prepared himself well for the sacrament of matrimony. After his death a card was found among his belongings, with an underlined note that speaks of a particular aspect of the Church’s teaching: a marriage with the desire for sexual activity without the desire for children is invalid; whereas it is a valid marriage when the two

spouses agree “to cultivate the intimacy of the heart and of the spirit, while renouncing that physical union which is allowed them.”

In this sense the marriage of Our Lady and St. Joseph was a true marriage, and in the same sense there have been in the history of the Church other holy couples who also felt themselves called to this very unusual form of marriage. Such was the case, for example, with the marriage of Jacques and Raissa Maritain, a couple whose human and spiritual greatness is well known.

Granted, a Joseph and Mary marriage is not something to counsel people about without careful discernment, and maybe not even something to recommend at all. Nevertheless it is not impossible, and it is not unreasonable—especially when looking at the marriage of Louis and Zélie Martin, which was grafted into a preceding common vocation to virginity.

Louis had already considered this possibility and recognized a sort of sign of confirmation when he saw Zélie’s extreme discomfort in this area of their common life. They then discussed it and decided to live as brother and sister. That this was not a selfish decision can be proven by the fact that right away they decided to accept into their home the child of a very large family left without its mother.

Many months went by, and then a wise confessor intervened. He helped Zélie understand that the sacrament of matrimony reaches out to sanctify everything in a couple’s common life, including their sexual life and the marital embrace. He helped her to see that her desire to have children required a healthy and natural sexual encounter with her husband.

It is not a matter of guessing and laboring with presuppositions and the like. In discussing this delicate spiritual event, we have Zélie’s own account, given in an atmosphere of special confidence. It is March 4, 1877. Zélie is by now very sick; she has only six months to live. In a letter to her favorite daughter, Pauline, she recalls her wedding day, as if at the end of her earthly life and now looking back into the past and able to distinguish the sacred mystery enclosed in that life.

“That day,” she writes, “I shed so many tears, more than I had ever shed in my whole life and more than I would ever shed. That poor sister had no idea how to console me. It wasn’t that I felt unhappy seeing her there, in the cloister; no, on the contrary: I would have wanted to be there too; I was comparing my life with hers, and the tears poured out twice as hard...I felt so unhappy seeing myself living in the midst of the world; I wanted to live a hidden life, to hide my life alongside hers.”

“You who love your father so much, my Pauline, will think that I was unhappy with him, and that I regretted the day of my marriage with him. But no, he understood me and consoled me wonderfully, because his tastes were so similar to mine; in fact I believe that our mutual affection grew precisely because of this inclination [for religious life and consecrated celibacy]. Our feelings have always been of one accord, and he has always been my consolation and my support.”

“But when we had our little children, our ideas changed a bit; we began to live only for the children, they were our happiness; and we would never have found happiness had it not been for them. To sum it up, everything came easy for us; the world ceased being a burden. For me they were a huge compensation, and so I wanted to have many children, in order to nurture them for Heaven.”

Here we have an account that is worth a long meditation. The fact that it seems very far from the normal experience of our young couples of today should not put us off or deceive us.

The truth is that we are dealing here with an exemplary experience, in which some aspects of marital life, which for many couples remain and will continue to remain obscure, come to light in an amazing way. Yet, due to its remaining in the dark, many families continue to suffer, without ever knowing this amazing truth.

What is it? Well, it all begins or should begin—during the years of youth—with the discovery that the human heart is made for the Absolute, and that nothing will ever satisfy that heart except God; that in the end there is always a solitude in the human soul that can never be filled or healed by creatures, not even the most loved creature, another human being. And this is the original “vocation to virginity,” which everyone, sooner or later, must come to feel, or risk the pain of an eternal wandering around on the surface of his or her own existence.

Anyone who then comes to know and love the Son of God made human comes to intuit with plenty of effort that this primary virginity has to concentrate itself lovingly and concretely on Him: only then is the true Christian born.

This original Christian vocation usually becomes grafted into a sacramental marriage. However, at times, it finds its expression and fulfillment—precisely as virginity—in those concrete forms of life which the Church recognizes and consecrates. In them the direct orientation of the heart towards Jesus becomes a “visible story”: time, atmosphere, resources, thoughts, affections, and works—everything is organized around “for Him and for all that is His.”

It is in this sense that a monastery is always worthy of every Christian’s “tears of desire,” even when his or her vocation leads the person away from that sacred space.

Spouses should not flee from this original desire of virginity.

The holy relationship between Louis and Zélie—even though it was conditioned by certain fears and misunderstandings—had an ideal and a truth about it, which sooner or later is placed before every Christian couple as little by little their sacramental unity manifests its power and its holy origin.

What Zélie gave such keen testimony about is very important: even in that first incomplete encounter they saw their love for one another grow all the way into harmony. Unfortunately this is something that many couples never experience, not even in the

midst of repeated physical actions designed to express and help them feel that they are “one flesh.”

Let us now move on and concentrate our account almost exclusively on the personality of Thérèse’s Mom, whom she came to know only for those first four years of her life.

“The good God gave me the grace of opening up my intelligence very quickly... Without a doubt, in His love He wanted to have me come to know that incomparable mother whom He gave me, but which His Divine Hand was in a hurry to crown in Heaven!”

It was especially in relation to their children that the Martin couple fulfilled that particular virginity which was theirs: precisely because the children were for the parents every day and in every way “the place of happiness and of pain,” they were also recognized and accepted as belonging ultimately to God the Father and thus loved for this their ultimate destiny.

Zélie and Louis Martin had nine children: two sons and seven daughters. Thérèse was the last one, born when the mother already knew that she had a tumor in her breast.

Day after day the parents experienced the truth that the children were really God’s. They learned to accept the difficult alternation of birth and death, of sickness and healing, of getting worse and getting better, the cycle which was the lot of children back then. Parents today have to endure their children falling ill too, yet they have doctors and all sorts of medicine available, so that the battle is usually won and the danger overcome. Not so in the 19th century, when giving birth was already a serious risk that left babies at the end of their strength, and all sorts of illnesses went not only untreated but undiagnosed. For intestinal disorders, for example, there existed only empirical treatments; respiratory illnesses lasted months, treated with some treatment causing blisters between the shoulders; diamond-skin disease (red soldier or swine rose disease) was super dangerous and rubella [German measles] could decimate an entire neighborhood. And then there was that diagnosis of “a languishing illness” which meant that the doctors had no idea what was going on except that the child was now inexplicably dying.

Zélie lost two sons and one daughter, all within their first year of life. Another daughter, her most beloved one, died in her fifth year. Five daughters survived. Thérèse, during her first years almost died a few times, yet showed an incredible desire to live.

For anyone interested, there is in print the *Correspondance familiale*, the letters of Zélie, by which one can come to understand—almost as if listening to her speak—how this mother lived through the birth and growing up of her little ones: we hear of her ineffable joy and indescribable torments as she guides the education and inclinations of each child while overseeing her lace shop which kept her on her feet from four in the morning until eleven at night. There are pages full of suffering and pages full of tenderness, and from all of them a transparent light shines forth, that “virginity” of which

we have already spoken—that faith, that orientation and direction of the heart towards the long-awaited meeting with one’s Beloved in Heaven, God.

Most of all we find pages of suffering, so let us look at a few. Here is Zélie’s account of the death of Héléne at five years old: “That which hurts me the most and which I can’t get over, is that I didn’t better understand her condition...I had the doctor come and he told me that he found no obvious illness, and that he saw no need to come back, unless she became worse...”

“Sunday evening she became oppressed by something. Right away I sent for the doctor. He was not in, and did not come until Monday morning. He told me the child had a fever and a congested lung, that the lung was in serious danger and that we should feed her only broth...after he left, I looked at her sadly, with her eyes glazed over, no life, and I began to weep.”

“Then she put her little arms around me and hugged me and tried to console me as best she could; all day long she kept repeating over and over, ‘My poor Mommy who cried!’ I spent the whole night next to her, a terrible night. In the morning we asked her if she wanted to take some broth: she said, ‘Yes,’ but then she couldn’t swallow it. Nevertheless she made a huge effort, saying, ‘If I eat it, will you still love me?’ Then she took it, but was suffering terribly, and didn’t know what to do. She was looking at the bottle of medicine the doctor had ordered for her, and wanted to drink it, saying that when she had finished it, everything would be healed. Then towards 9:45 am she told me, ‘Yes, soon I will be healed, yes, right away...’ At that very moment, while I was holding her, her little head fell against my shoulder, her eyes closed and five minutes later she was no longer alive...”

“This experience has affected me so deeply, that I will never forget it. I wasn’t expecting such a sudden end, and neither was my husband. When he came back into the room and saw his poor little daughter dead, he began to sob, ‘My little Héléne, my little Héléne!’ Then together we offered her to the Lord.” (Letter of Feb. 24, 1870)

“Together we offered her to the Lord.” To see one’s own child die is certainly a tragic experience, and yet the Martin couple shared that experience with almost every family of their time and space. And even today there are many couples who know such incredible pain. What makes the Martin couple such an example—models of the Christian life—was their “offering,” this conscious celebration of a mystery: since they had brought about this life (Héléne) in the Name of the Creator (such is the meaning of “to procreate”), they re-entrusted or gave her back into His hands, His personal hands, not just to some vague, obscure chance happening or cosmic mocking.

Of course this does not at all mean forgetting or suffering less acutely. Rather, it means continuing to believe in the life one has given to one’s children, maintaining a relationship with them and continuing to spend oneself for them.

One month after the death of little H  l  ne, Z  lie writes, “Ever since I lost that little child, I feel a burning desire to see her again...not one minute in the day passes that I don’t think of her.” (Letter of March 27, 1870)

Z  lie continues to celebrate the little one’s birthday each year: “Yesterday was the 11th year since the birth of little H  l  ne, and I thought so much of her; I will be very happy to see her again in the next life.” (Letter of Oct. 14, 1875) Z  lie will always keep talking to her little ones, down in the reservoir of her deepest prayer life.

To her brother—who himself had lost a child—she writes, “Yes, it is really hard, yet, my dear one, don’t grumble. God is in charge, and for our good He can allow us to suffer a lot, and even more, but His help and grace will always be there for us...I just want to know above all if the child was still alive when it was baptized. The doctor should have baptized it before it was born. When we see a little creature in danger, we should always begin from that starting point....” (Letter of Oct. 17, 1871)

To her sister-in-law on that same occasion, Z  lie gently shares her own painful experience: “May the good God grant you the grace to accept His holy will [Love]. You dear little one is next to Him, He sees her, loves her, and you will see each other again one day. This is a great consolation, one that I have been feeling and continue to feel still. When I closed the eyes of my dear little children and was burying them, I felt much pain, and yet I have always accepted His will [Love]. I didn’t complain about the pain and the anxieties that I had put up with for their sake. Many people would tell me, ‘It would have been better not to have had them at all.’ I couldn’t take that kind of talk. I don’t believe that all the pain and anxieties can compare to the eternal happiness of my children. And besides, they are not lost forever. Life is short and full of unhappiness, but we will see each other again up there.” (Letter of Oct. 17, 1871)

Even little Th  r  se, our saint, was in danger of dying during her first months of life: “Yesterday, while I was going to see my little Th  r  se, and the doctor was with me, I said to myself, “...we will only be happy when all of us, we and our children, will be together up there. And I offered to God my little daughter...”

“I have done everything in my power to save my little Th  r  se’s life; so, if God wants it otherwise, I will do my best to accept the trial as patiently as possible. I really need to become more courageous; I have suffered a lot in my life.” (Letter of March 30, 1873)

From the beginning Z  lie realizes that her task is to “raise up children for Heaven.” This implies above all the long, patient, and joyful work of helping them to grow up, educating them in the Faith, helping them toward their eternal, happy destiny. And this goal is not frustrated simply because God brought them home to Heaven at such a young age.

Using his training in psychoanalysis, someone has written volumes trying to show how “morbid” it is to face death with such acceptance as Z  lie Martin’s. Isn’t it truly strange, this science which holds as normal that a mother should resign herself to

accepting what is absurd and makes no sense—contenting herself with drawn-out suffering, in order to then “heal” in forgetting—while it claims as morbid and negative the attitude of anyone who finds in his faith a help for life, and even shivers of hoping-waiting.

“These two feelings, sorrow and joy (sorrow over “having lost a beautiful child on earth,” but joy “at the thought of having an angel in Heaven”) often come together within me: I know that life is short and that soon we will see each other again.” (Letter of Nov. 5, 1871)

When the children overcame the inevitable crises of infancy, they still required and merited all the powers of heart and mind to help them grow up well both in body and soul. And it was a feast, in spite of the daily grind. “It is such a sweet work, taking care of one’s own children! Even if this was the only thing I was asked to do, I think I would be the happiest of women. But they really need to have their father and me working together to provide them with a dowry; otherwise when they are grown they won’t be happy with us!” (Letter of April 14, 1868)

The truth is that Zélie Guerin lived out her motherhood as one sustained prayer: she would ask for the grace needed, gratefully accept it when God gave it, and lovingly take care of it and put it to use. If at times God asked for the gift back (as, for example, when Hélène died), she grieved in sorrow, but she never felt betrayed by Him. She would trust and adore Him anyway, right in the midst of the difficult turn of events—difficult, but certainly not wicked. And she was able to do this because she didn’t turn to God only during those times of crisis, as many people do when it seems that God’s way has turned dark, yet ignore Him when things are going well. No, Zélie felt herself at home in God’s world, especially with the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Here is a letter to her daughter Pauline, in which she tells her of the spiritual circumstances of her conception: “Wednesday will be the Immaculate Conception, a big feast for me! On this day the Holy Virgin has granted me many big graces...I will never forget the 8th of December, 1860, when I prayed to our Heavenly Mother and asked her to give me a little Pauline, but I can’t think about that time without laughing, because I was completely like a little girl asking for a doll from her mother, and I acted like one. I wanted to have a Pauline like the one I now have, and I added all the littlest details [about my request], because I was afraid that the Holy Virgin might not understand exactly what I was asking for. It was without a doubt necessary above all that she have a beautiful little soul capable of becoming a saint. And yet I also wanted her to be very gracious. All this is not very nice, sure, but I think it’s beautiful the way it all worked out just the way I wanted it to. (Letter of Dec. 5, 1875)

We can smile about her endearing devotion. And yet there is a fact that can make us shudder with emotion. Here is this Mom making her prayer “to the Virgin for a little girl” on the day of the Immaculate Conception, at the morning Mass on December 8, 1860. And then Pauline is born on September 7, 1861, exactly nine months later. On September 8, the Feast of the Blessed Mother’s birthday, the little girl is baptized (her best birthday!).

We then find out that the above-mentioned dialogue with the Immaculate One on the day of her feast never ceased after that.

The mother continues: “This year I will go again to find the Holy Virgin, bright and early, so that I can be the first one there, and as usual I will offer her my candle. But I will not be asking for any more daughters; I will ask her that those she has already given me might become saints, and as for me, that I might be able to stay close to them, but that they have to be much better than me.” (Letter of Dec. 5, 1875)

Here we find the key word to help interpret what happened: the word “holiness.”

Zélie Guerin was a woman of amazing energy, immersed in her work to the point of almost being overcome by it. Her lace workshop was transformed into a little enterprise that enabled so many women to work out of their homes, that in order to help her out, her husband reached the point where he gave up his own work of watchmaker and jeweler.

We can see how she struggled with a demanding family life (we need only think of her nine pregnancies in thirteen years!).

All this, however, did not prevent Zélie from keeping before her eyes her one great work or worry: the sanctification or growth in holiness of her children, and—in the process of humbly carrying out this work—her own sanctification. “I want to become a saint,” she writes, “but it won’t be easy; there is a lot to whittle down, and the wood is as hard as a rock. It would have been better to put one’s hand to the plow sooner, while it was easier, but better later than never.” (Letter of Nov. 1, 1873)

Holiness is above all “the unbounded confidence in God’s love,” in His presence and companionship, given that He really calls Himself “Emmanuel” (God with us).

To her sister-in-law Zélie confides, “Look, my dear sister, you who are once again expecting a child: I do worry about your health, but ultimately the good God does not give anyone more than she has the strength to carry. So many times I have seen my husband worry about my health when I was pregnant, whereas I was so calm, and would tell him, ‘Don’t be afraid; the good God is with us.’ And at the same time I was overloaded with work and all sorts of thoughts, and yet still going about with a steady trust that I was being sustained from on high.” (Letter of May 5, 1871)

One day she was telling her daughter about someone she knew who was a pretty good person, but “with really liberal ideas!,” who made her suffer because of his lack of faith: “...the other day he was telling me that ‘God doesn’t care about us’...it hurts me that such good friends think such thoughts. I know very well that God cares about me! So many times in my life I have realized this, and I have so many memories of His care that they will never drop out of my memory.” (Letter of March 12, 1876)

To her daughters in boarding school she writes, “We need to serve God really well, my dear daughters, and try one day to be among the company of the saints whose feast day we are celebrating today.” (Letter of Nov.1, 1873)

“You are a good little daughter, very affectionate and sweet, but not yet devout enough.” (Letter of Oct. 10, 1875)

“Keep being a good and holy little daughter.” (Letter of January, 1876)

“I really hope that Marie (the oldest daughter) will be a good girl, but I would like her to be a saint, and I would like you, my Pauline, to be a saint too. I too want to become a saint, but I don’t know where to start; there is so much to do, that I will just hold on to the desire. Often during the day I say, ‘My God, I would like to be a saint!’ But then I don’t do the works! But now is the time for me to get going....” (Letter of Feb. 26, 1876)

In actual fact Zélie’s most radiant works were precisely those of being the teacher and educator, and she did them very well without ever slacking, in spite of the other duties that threatened to engulf her. To prove this it would suffice simply to document her long and frequent letters to her daughter away at boarding school, letters rich in “weekly stories,” that help the young girl to experience the whole atmosphere of the home: the joyful and the sorrowful events, the growing up of her other sisters, the news from the neighborhood, humorous happenings, hints about family worries. And all of it mixed with sweet and exacting advice from this mother who expects the best from her daughter, especially before God.

The rest of her responsibilities consisted of a good and tiring daily routine.

All the children knew that the day could not start without “offering the heart to the Lord,” using the form learned from listening to their mother: “My God, I offer You my heart; take it, if You like, in such a way that no one else might possess it but You alone, my dear Jesus.”

Mom herself marvels as she recalls, “This morning at 5:30, when I got up, Celine (the second youngest, before Thérèse) woke up, and I asked her if she wanted a piece of chocolate. She didn’t answer because she was making her offering of the heart to God with total concentration...later on, laughing, I called out to her, ‘My little angel’ and I said to her, ‘who calls you that?’ and she answered, ‘my wet nurse!’ Then I said, ‘Do you remember to pray for her now that she has died?’ She responded, “I haven’t forgotten her even once: every day I say an Our Father and a Hail Mary for her.” (Letter of Nov. 19, 1876)

The daughters knew that every morning, when the bells rang at 5:30, Dad and Mom would leave to go to “the poor people’s Mass” [the early Mass for the blue collar folks on their way to work]. Sometimes, hearing them leave, the littlest one, Thérèse, would wake up and say, ‘Mama, I will be really good...’” Yes, one can help little children towards peace in all sorts of ways!....

Their examination of conscience was done sitting on their mother’s knees, because she was the one who helped turn this somewhat difficult aspect of the sacrament of forgiveness into something good and full of tenderness.

All the little hardships of life—from learning to read and write to healing little arguments, to being afraid of the dentist—were faced with the outlook of “giving pleasure-joy to Jesus.” In fact, the children were trained to count their “good deeds,” what we used to call “flowers.” Yes, there is a risk in growing up with a religious training too focused on counting one’s own acts of charity, but it is without a doubt infinitely less than the risk of not doing anything, either in order to love or to feel oneself loved by God.

Within this rather normal fabric of life were interwoven all the attitudes that parents have and pass on to their children: love for the poor, even at the cost of long, bothersome labors; solidarity with one’s neighbors, even in really unpleasant circumstances; the attitude of the mother towards the workers.

The distribution of the weekly paychecks was so sacred that Zélie did not want to reschedule it, not even on the day when she lost a child. And Sunday afternoon was always reserved for visits to the homes of any of her workers who were sick. She did all sorts of acts of kindness for those in need.

“If you are pleased with the chambermaid I sent you,” she writes to her sister-in-law, “try to hold on to her, because it is really difficult to find a good one. It’s not just the paycheck that guarantees the affections of domestic workers; they also need to feel that we love them. We need to show them sympathy, and not be too rigid with them....you know how very lively-high-strung I am, and yet all the domestics I have had have loved me, and I love them so very much. The one I have right now would get sick if she had to leave [find another job]; I am sure that even if someone offered her 200 francs more she would not want to leave us. It is true: I don’t treat my domestics less well than my daughters.” (Letter of March 2, 1868)

Zélie even had to undergo the most difficult experience that a mother could have: a daughter with a difficult character, that no one knows how to deal with. She was affectionate but moody. She would go back and forth between outbursts of generosity and incredible stubbornness. She would rebel against her mother and secretly be totally dominated by, be the slave of, the housemaid. If she wanted something, she was capable of screaming for hours. At boarding school they labeled her “a horrible child,” to the point of finally kicking her out. Zélie, with absolute honesty, comments, “When our children are not like the others, we must bear the responsibility.”

The mother’s assessment of this strange little daughter is so lucid, to the point of being [seemingly] without pity, and yet Zélie never changed her plans for her daughter: she offered to God every labor, every suffering, and every prayer so that Léonie might still become a saint.

There were constant attempts to find the right moment for the teacher to reach the heart of the young girl: “This afternoon I had her sit next to me while I read her some prayers, but right away she grew bored and told me, ‘Mom, tell me something about the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ.’ I wasn’t in the mood to do it, since I always have a sore throat, and it wears on me. Finally I forced myself and told her the story of Our Lord’s

life. When I got to the Passion she was crying. I liked seeing such feelings in her.” (Letter of Sept. 7, 1875)

Zélie would write to one of her daughters: “(Léonie) has less gifts of nature than you all, and yet she has a heart that wants to love and be loved, and only a mother can show her at every moment the affection which she needs...” (Letter of June 25, 1877) Her mother offered her life for this: “If she didn’t need the sacrifice of my life in order to become a saint, I would [still] do it happily.” (Letter of Jan. 18, 1877) Zélie succeeded in completely winning over the spirit of her poor “difficult” daughter just a few months before her [Zélie’s] death: “She has started to show me a constantly increasing affection. She doesn’t leave me anymore; she has come to the point where she shares with me her deepest secrets. Little by little the fear and love of God are penetrating into her heart. But if you only knew how gently-sweetly I treat her...she wants to make her First Communion at the end of May, and this requires a daily preparation; every moment...well, blessed be the Good God.” (Letter of May 10, 1877)

In spite of repeated failures, this daughter—after the death of the mother—ends up a success: she will discover her very own personal calling, her vocation. She will become a Visitation nun and die at a ripe old age, venerated as a saint because of her humility, sweetness-gentleness, her balance-common sense acquired by means of long years of dedication to God and to her neighbor, and by always following the example and teaching of “little Thérèse,” the youngest daughter.

To the worries about education that filled the heart and mind of Zélie were added the worries of a particularly turbulent era. We are talking about the years of the fall of the Second Empire in France: the French soldiers were returning in defeat and the Prussian troops with the black flags and skulls on their helmets were marching around in a horrible way in the streets of Alençon. They would demand lodging, animals, all kinds of goods. The Martins had to accept nine Prussians in their house. No meat or milk was to be found. “Everyone in the city is crying—except for me,” Zélie writes.

Her business was up and down, with times of crisis that made her fear the worst: “How much toil and hard work for this cursed place of Alençon, which is filling up my suffering to the brim! I earn a little bit of money, true, but my God, at what cost!...It is costing me my life, because I think it is shortening my days; and if the Lord doesn’t protect me in some special way, I don’t think I’ll be around long...” (Letter of Dec. 23, 1866) “When I began my Alençon lace business, I ended up sick with all the worries. Now I am more reasonable about it, I worry less, and I accept all the unpleasant obstacles that happen or could happen. I tell myself: the Lord wants it this way, and I don’t think about it any more.” (Letter of Feb. 14, 1868)

“My business is going badly, really badly, it couldn’t get any worse. I truly believe that I have reached the end of my reign, in spite of my preference, since I would have wanted to work all the way to the end for my children. We already have five, without counting those who might still come, since I am hoping to have still three or four more!” (Letter of May, 1868)

Her daughters would often hear her affirming: “The Lord is giving me the grace not to become frightened; I am at peace.” “God is a good Father who never gives His creatures a burden heavier than what they can carry.”

Zélie was able, with her untiring work, to put together a good inheritance, and yet she was not attached to money. She would say, “I don’t stir up any desire to get rich; I have more than I could want. At the same time it seems crazy to me to give up this work, especially when I think about how I have five children to take care of. For their sake I want to go all the way...if I were alone and had to go back and put up with everything I have suffered for the last 24 years up to today, I would prefer to die of hunger, because just thinking about it all I feel a shuddering come over me.” (Letter of Feb. 6, 1876)

By now she is more than 40 years old and sick. Louis is already 50. And behold, another child is on the way. There is no lack of worry, both for the mother and for the soon-to-be newborn into the world. The last one survived only a few months. She writes: “I am crazy about children; I was born to have them. But the time is coming soon when I won’t have any more. I will be 41 the 23rd of this month: this is the time for becoming a grandmother!” (Letter of Dec. 15, 1872)

Oh, but what profound joy and acceptance we see, before any worries begin, as she writes to her sister-in-law a few months after Thérèse’s birth, the one who is to become the Saint of Lisieux: “When I was carrying her in my womb, I noticed something that has never before happened to me with my other daughters: if I was singing, she would sing with me...I’m sharing this with you, because no one else would believe me.” (Letter of Jan. 16, 1873)

Zélie was not able to dedicate many years to this last little one, since she was only able to be with her for her first four years of life. Nevertheless, in her autobiography Thérèse records the most tender and meaningful memories that her Mom wrote about in her letters. When the little girl is not yet three, Mom recounts with amusement, “The little one is an imp without equal; it comes up to me to hug me, wishing me dead: ‘Oh, how I wish you would die, my Mommy!’ They scold her and she says, ‘But it’s because I want you to go to Heaven; you are always saying that we have to die to get there!’ And thus, carried away with love, she also wishes her father would die.” (Letter of Dec. 5, 1875)

A few months later Zélie again recounts: “Little Thérèse...is always most gracious and tells me that this morning she wanted to go to Heaven and that because of that she will be as good as a little angel.” (Letter of March 12, 1876)

Certain psychoanalytical claims have focused in on this “desire for death” that St. Thérèse showed, imagining dark and troubled conflicts between a mother obsessed with her work, with illness and with thoughts of the beyond, and a child who wants to live. The fact is that certain “experts” are convinced that “the desire for death” and “the desire for Heaven” amount to the same, given that Heaven is seen as a useless fantasy. They fail to picture a Christian mom that is truly able to speak to her children about Paradise and eternal life in a sweet and attractive way.

Even Luther—who was notoriously conflicted—said one day while holding his child in his arms: “Children have such beautiful thoughts about God, because they believe that He is in Heaven and that He is their God.”

At four years old the thought of Heaven is still close and familiar, but already it is attaching itself to the problem of salvation, of good and evil, of danger. The mother again recounts: “The other day Thérèse asks me if she will get to Heaven. I tell her, yes, if she is really good. She answers, ‘Yes, but if I am not really good, I will go to hell...but I know what I will do: I will run away up there with you who would be in Heaven. How would God manage to get me? You would hold me really, really tight in your arms....’ I could read it in her eyes: she is convinced that the Good God can do nothing to her if she is in the arms of her Mama.” (Letter of Oct. 28, 1876)

We can say that Thérèse’s whole spiritual adventure and teaching are already entirely contained in this most light-filled point of view: for her it was enough to understand that the arms of her mother were the sign and sacrament of the merciful arms of her Heavenly Father.

It is similar to another richly symbolic childhood attitude of hers, also full of her determined logic: when she was learning to take her first steps, she found it hard to climb up stairs. So what Thérèse would do is position herself at the bottom close to the first step and then call out, “Mama!” not moving from there until she heard the voice saying, “Yes, my little child!” Only at that response would she lift her little foot and try to get up the first step, and on from there. She needed to call and get an encouraging response at each step.

Later on, in educating the young novices [in the convent], she will teach them that there is no better way to learn to go climb up to God than asking Him at every step.

Meanwhile Zélie’s health goes downhill before everyone’s eyes. The breast gland, which for a while now has caused her to suffer, has grown more and is giving her ever-increasing pain. Finally it is decided to go to the doctor. One is found, as famous as he is brutal, “with an indifferent and annoyed tone of voice, with a grimace on his face...because he doesn’t believe in anything..., doesn’t know how to say a good word nor even to be benevolent, and is content to show indifference.” (Letter of June 14, 1877)

But Zélie is grateful to him, because at least she is able to find out the whole truth. She tells the sister-in-law: “Finally I went to Doctor X, who after having examined me thoroughly, palpated me, told me after a minute of silence, ‘Do you know that what you have is really serious? It is a fibrous tumor. Would you shrink back from an operation?’ I answered, ‘No, even though I was certain that instead of saving my life, this operation would cut short my days.’ And I explained to him the reason for my conviction so well that he once again said, ‘You know that, as for me, all of this is the truth, thus I cannot advise you to have the operation, since it would be very uncertain.’ I asked him if there was a one in a hundred chance [of success]. He answered me evasively...he offered me a prescription. I told him: ‘What good would that do?’ He looked at me and replied, ‘Nothing. It’s just to make the sick person feel a little better...’” (Letter of Dec. 17, 1876)

She tries hard to keep her relatives calm: “If God thought I would be really useful on earth, He certainly would not have allowed me to have this illness, because I have prayed to Him very much, asking Him not to take me from this world as long as my daughters need me...I don’t see things in a tragic light, which is a great grace that God is giving me...whatever may happen, let us make use of the special time that is still allowed us, and let us not worry about it; it will always be whatever God wants.” (Letter of Dec. 17, 1876)

On the eve of what will be her last Christmas, she goes to Lisieux for a new consultation with a doctor friend, but everyone continues to advise her against an operation. She writes about it to her husband: “Let us place ourselves in the hands of God, He Who knows much better than we do what is needed. ‘It is He Who wounds and binds up’...I am not here freely except to be with you, my dear Louis.” (Letter of Dec. 24, 1876)

As this tragic last December comes to a close, Zélie is able to affirm that “I am like those children who do not worry about tomorrow; I am always expecting happiness.” (Letter of Dec. 31, 1876) She insisted: “Let us go forward and as lightly as possible. Now everyone is less in anguish, and I try more than ever to make sure it continues like that. How I wish we could all not talk about it anymore! What good does it do? We have done all we should do, so let us leave the rest in the hands of Providence...If I am not cured it will be because God is fighting hard to have me....” (Letter of Jan. 5, 1877)

The family is upset and insists on a pilgrimage to Lourdes; Zélie accepts it, above all for the sake of her husband and children. Everyone is so convinced of obtaining a miracle that they are buzzing with impatience. Even Zélie sometimes convinces herself that the Holy Virgin will hear so many prayers. Yet she is above all concerned about the faith of the daughters, that it not falter in the case of eventual failure. She says simply, “Our Lady will cure me if it is necessary.”

“I will do everything possible to obtain a miracle; I am counting on the pilgrimage to Lourdes, but if I am not cured, I will try to sing on the way home anyway.” (Letter of Feb. 20, 1877)

She says to the children: “We must dispose ourselves to accept generously the will of God, whatever that may be, since that is always what is best for us.” (Letter of May 1877)

On the eve of the pilgrimage she confesses, “I have done the work of four, and four people who can work without wasting time. I have lived a tough life...now I can finally breathe a sigh of relief. I see the departure sign, as if they were telling me, ‘You have done a lot; come and rest.’ But I have not done a lot! These children are not yet raised. Ah, if it wasn’t for them, death would not frighten me.”

The trip—which Zélie made carrying with her the three oldest daughters, especially the “difficult one” whom she wanted to entrust to Our Lady—was most painful, and the disillusionment of the daughters was huge. She came back home reassured, without any

sadness: “As happy as if I had obtained the grace asked for: which has brought fresh courage (to Dad) and has brought renewed good feelings to the home...I am putting Lourdes water on my wounds every night, and then I live in hope and peace, waiting for the hour of God to arrive...” (Letter of June 25, 1877)

To her daughter who has returned from boarding school disillusioned by the lack of a miracle Zélie writes, “I want to know if you are still upset and grumbling at the Holy Virgin who didn’t want (contrary to what the young girl had been saying) ‘to make you jump for joy’the Holy Virgin has said to us as she said to Bernadette: ‘I will make you all happy not in this world, but in the next.’” (Letter of June 25, 1877)

“Don’t worry about me; I’m not getting upset and I’m putting everything in God’s hands.” (Letter of June 29, 1877)

By now she feels increasingly exhausted: “If this thing keeps going, I’m going to go crazy. I have to keep completely still. During the day it is manageable, but at night, when I need to lie down or get up, I become afraid, because I become nauseated and feel like I’m going to faint...at five [in the morning] I had to get dressed to get to the first Mass, and I was alone because Louis was at night-time Adoration; I pulled myself up to see the time: fortunately the Holy Virgin was helping me, for I have no idea how I would have done it. It was still too early. I sat on my bed, and didn’t dare relax so that I wouldn’t have to straighten myself out a half hour later. Finally at five I called Marie so that she might be able to help me get dressed. I suffered a lot in sitting down and in kneeling in church. I had to hold on to myself to keep from crying out, and so I’m not going back to a sung Mass either...” (Letter of July 8, 1877)

The daughter Marie recounts, “When she gets tired of having her head raised up [on a pillow?] we raise her up very slowly with the pillows until she is completely seated [upright]. But this never happens without incredible pain, because the least little movement makes her cry out in torment. And yet with what patience and acceptance does she put up with this sad illness! She never leaves her Rosary; she is always praying, in spite of her sufferings. We all admire her, because she has incomparable courage and energy. It has been fifteen days now, and she is still praying her Rosary, all the time on her knees at the feet of the Holy Virgin [statue] in her room, the one she loves so much. Seeing her so sick, I wanted to make her sit down, but it was useless.” (Letter of July 8, 1877)

She still has the strength to write a few last letters: “You tell me not to lose my trust, and that is what I do. I know really well that the Holy Virgin can cure me, but I can’t get rid of the fear [feeling?] that she doesn’t want that, and I tell her openly that a miracle right now seems pretty doubtful to me. I have made my decision and I’m trying to act as if I have to die. I really need not to waste any of the little time left for me to live. These are days of salvation which will never come by again; I want to make the most of them.” (Letter of July 15, 1877)

“Sunday morning, after a night that was not too bad, I rose at five to go to Mass...only with the utmost effort was I able to take a step. When I had to step down

from the sidewalk a whole special maneuver was needed. Fortunately there weren't many people on the street. I really promised myself that I would not go back to Mass when I'm like this." (Letter of July 24, 1877)

"These last 24 hours I have suffered more than in my whole life. Poor Louis, every now and then he held me in his arms like a little child." (Letter of July 27, 1877)

At the beginning of August 1877, having overcome the exhaustion, she wanted to stop by the church: "Friday she went to Mass at seven o'clock because it was the First Friday of the month. Dad had to guide her, because without him she would not have been able to make it there. He told us that once they arrived, if someone had not been there to push open the door, they would never have been able to get in." (Letter of the daughter, Marie, August 9, 1877)

She would often repeat: "O You Who created me, have mercy on me."

Zélie died at dawn, August 28, 1877. The last lines she wrote were: "If the Holy Virgin does not cure me, it is because my time is done and the good God wants me to rest somewhere other than on earth." (Letter of August 16, 1877)

Thérèse, who was only four years old, described the unconsolable loss in this important passage: "Her last week on earth, Céline and I were like little exiles. Every morning Madame Leriche (a neighbor) would come and get us and we would spend the whole day with her. One day we didn't have time to say our prayers before leaving the house...very timidly Céline pointed it out to Madame Leriche, who concluded, 'Well then, my little children, you can say them now.' Then she put the two of us in a large room, and went away. Céline looked at me, and we said, 'Ah, she isn't like Mama. She always made us say our prayers!'" (Manuscript A, 42) [Story of a Soul]

This is the unforgettable inheritance that a mother can bequeath even to a four-year-old child, an inheritance that continues to increase in fruits of holiness and intimacy with God: "She always made us say our prayers!"

And the daughters will always remember with tears what her constant attitude and almost her whole project and the joy of her life was: "I have entrusted everything to the will [Love] and the grace of God." (Letter of April 22, 1866)

When Zélie died at 47 Louis Martin was 54 years old. He was left with the serious task of continuing the education of their five daughters, the oldest seventeen and the youngest, Thérèse, barely four and a half years old. He carried around with him unforgettable memories and the affectionate testimony his wife had given about him: "Louis makes my life sweet. He is truly my holy husband; I would wish a husband like him for every woman." (Letter of January 1, 1863)

At the moment he faced the serious decision of whether to leave Alençon or not, in order to move to Lisieux, the home of Zélie's brother and sister-in-law. His whole world was tied up with Alençon: his workshop, of which he had become owner and administrator, the house full of memories and comforts, the Catholic circle he loved to

visit, the cultural and charitable activities to which he had committed himself, the carefully chosen friendships, his beloved “Pavilion” (a little estate to which he would withdraw for meditation and for his favorite sport, fishing).

Everyone counseled him to stay, and yet he understood that he had to think above all of his daughters. The first-born, Marie, recounts: “He told me that for our sake he would make any sacrifice; if it was necessary he would renounce his own happiness and even his own life. In order to please us he does not shrink from any difficulty, does not hesitate one instant: all he needs is to know what his duty is and that it is for our good.”

For Louis too what Zélie had once said held exactly true: “Ever since we had our children, we have lived only for them; this was our happiness and we have found it only in them.”

For the Martin girls the memory of their parents will always be marked by this certainty: Dad and Mom sought their own happiness in the happiness of their daughters; herein lie the joy and the security of knowing that one is a son or daughter.

So the whole family moved to Lisieux, one of the oldest and most typical cities of the region of Normandy, and took up residence in a beautiful, somewhat out-of-the-way, rustic little villa surrounded by a spacious garden. There the daughters were able to grow up not far from the discreet and maternal eyes of their aunt (Zélie’s sister-in-law), a wise and generous woman able to make up to some extent for the absence of their mother.

People in the city became accustomed to seeing the tall gentleman, very distinguished, with an already white beard—“with the bearing of a knight and the appearance of a saint”—who used to go out accompanied by a flock of young women, holding a little blond, lively child by the hand. In the parish church people used to compete with one another in offering them at least two nearby chairs: “This was not difficult”—Thérèse will recall later—“because everyone found it so pleasant seeing an older, handsome gentleman with such an endearing little daughter, that they went out of their way to offer us a seat.” (Manuscript A, 60)

It was on the stage of this little city—which because of St. Thérèse would become famous throughout the world—that a holy drama came to unfold, one which, in order to be understood, requires us to look at some “theological premises.”

Jesus came to earth above all to reveal to us the face of our Heavenly Father: that Infinite Love which has created us and that Mercy without limits which has redeemed us. All of His words and actions, and His very Person, were oriented toward this: from His way of being Son—totally Son—we were able to come to know our Heavenly Father and entrust ourselves to Him. “He who has seen Me has seen My Father,” says Jesus, “because I am in My Father and My Father is in me!” That is why Jesus referred to His Father with that most tender and familiar expression which Hebrew children, in their

earliest years, use to call their father (“Abba!”). And that is how Jesus taught us to call His Father when we pray.

From then on, every Christian family lives out (or should live out) something of that mystery. Every Father should lead his child and hand him over into the sure, trustworthy hands of the Father Who is in heaven.

But this happens only if “while the child looks at his earthly Daddy, Daddy looks at his heavenly Father.” It is necessary to go forward “from face to face.”

But if this is the secret of all paternity-fatherhood, then we can intuit how much more dramatic and sacred the mystery becomes when the plan of God is precisely that of offering the world an amazing example of “sonship.”

If therefore Thérèse is venerated by the Church as “the most beloved child in the whole world” and if the “new way” taught by her is that of “spiritual childhood” or, as I prefer to say, “ecclesial childhood,” then it is not hard to understand how the “sacrament of fatherhood” must have worked in her life in an extraordinary way.

So Louis Martin had the vocation and the gift of incarnating the infinite and sweet fatherhood of God in his every-day and fascinating human fatherhood, in such a way that “the image and its likeness” almost became confused with the original.

Tertullian, back in the 3rd century, was already teaching that there is only one Heavenly Father (“such a Father: no one!” “*tam Pater nemo!*”), without forgetting or neglecting the proper vocation of parents in imaging Him. And that is how Louis Martin, precisely in being “such a father,” fulfilled his call to holiness and became a saint.

We can now return to our account of how he fulfilled so generously the mission given him.

At Lisieux their family life flowed from one day into the next in such a way that the natural and supernatural aspects intertwined with one another. There was neither interruption nor any show of force: the natural was lived out supernaturally and the supernatural naturally. That is to say, every person, every event, every thing went along according to its own proper nature and value as a sign; i.e. everything hearkened back to something “bigger,” “truer,” “better,” “more beautiful,” and this “hearkening back” was a cultivated habit. Every person, event, thing was treated as a sacrament, that is, everything was seen as pointing to God, “a grace of God.”

This does not mean that family life was without any problems. If that were so, then why hold the life of this family up as an example?

Thérèse, for example, from the time of her mother’s death, was no longer the happy, impetuous, expansive, obstinate child of before. She had become timid, hypersensitive, quick to cry and fall ill, and even some episodes halfway between psychopathology and the influence of mysterious negative forces.

What saved her was precisely the atmosphere that her father carefully maintained: “I was nevertheless surrounded by the most thoughtful and considerate affections. Papa’s most tender heart had reached the point—besides the love that it already had—of a truly maternal love.” (Manuscript A, 45)

Coming from St. Thérèse, when we remember that Thérèse explained the characteristics of God’s love precisely as Him knowing how to be both a father and a mother, these are not sentimental words. In the convent she will write a poem in which she says, “Oh You Who knew how to create the heart of mothers/ I discover in You the tenderest of fathers!”

At the same time it was the older sisters who took on the role of mother for little Thérèse, striving not to neglect any of Zélie’s teachings. The day began at 5:30 a.m. The older ones went with their father to Mass at 6. “It’s the only Mass,” Louis would say, “that the women in service jobs and the blue collar men can go to. At this Mass we are together with the poor.” And they did this summer and winter, year round, even in bad weather. Only later on, in order to accommodate the younger daughters without forcing them to get up at an ungodly hour, did he give in to going to the seven o’clock morning Mass.

On the way back home, the girls would begin to chat, while Louis normally remained silent. He enjoyed a daily communion with Jesus, and explained his silence thus: “I continue my conversation with Our Lord.”

Once home, Pauline would go and wake little Thérèse. “In the morning you would come and wake me: you would ask me if I had offered my heart to God, then you would help me get dressed while talking to me about Him. Then with you at my side I would say my prayers.”

Thus the day would begin in the Martin home. After that the little one would learn to read and write, study grammar, catechism, and sacred history [“His-story”]. (At that time children were given their school education, if possible, at home until the age of 8.)

In the afternoon there was the never-to-be-missed walk with Papa, which always included a brief visit to the Blessed Sacrament, and each time in a different church in the city—in other words, a small gift that cost little. Then back home to do chores and homework. Whatever time was left over, when the weather was good, would be spent in the garden helping Papa take care of the flowers, the chickens and rabbits.

Once in a while they would go on a nice outing: Thérèse would accompany her father on a fishing trip, trying a little fishing herself, even though she usually preferred to stay seated by herself in the grass. She recounts: “During that time I would have really deep thoughts, and my soul, without even knowing what meditation was, immersed itself in real prayer...I would listen to far-off buzzing, the murmur of the wind and the distant music coming from the soldiers’ barracks, and my heart would get melancholic. Then earth seemed to me a place of exile, and I dreamed of Heaven.” (Manuscript A, 50)

All adolescents at times have similar “romantic” inclinations and vague perceptions of “the infinite,” but Therese wasn’t even five yet! But the fact is that she lived in an atmosphere which made it normal to have thoughts of eternity, so much so that “Heaven” was the first word she learned to write!

Even the delicious marmalade croissant—prepared for the afternoon snack—which by late afternoon had become colorless and stale, reminded her that only in Paradise will there be joys that are never ruined.

During their walks there were also the regular encounters with a poor person, and it was Thérèse’s responsibility to give the person some money. (In her autobiography one can see what profound meaning she drew out of that little action.)

At home there was a whole domestic “liturgy”: when, for example, the grown-ups went to church during the month of May, the little one would organize her own little Marian ritual in the kitchen, accompanied by the maid.

Solemnities were prepared for with deep joy and carefully explained; Sunday above all was lived out as “the feast of the Good God, the feast of rest.” Everything had to express this meaning: from the special breakfast to the fact that Papa kissed Thérèse even more tenderly than usual. It was seen in the visit with relatives and in the evening walk when the little one would amuse herself by letting Papa guide her by the hand without watching, so that she could fix her eyes on the star-studded heavens and discover her own “T” written there. “Look,” she said to her father, pointing out the shape of the constellation Orion, “my name is written in Heaven!”

The heart of Sunday was without a doubt Solemn Mass. For the child the rites were no doubt too long and the sermons too often incomprehensible, even if she forced herself to try to understand. “Yet I would look more at Papa than at the preacher, and his handsome face spoke to me of so many things. At times his eyes would shine with emotion, and he would force himself to hold back his tears. He seemed not to be bound to the earth, so much did his soul immerse itself in eternal truths.” (Manuscript A, 60)

For a child, to have a father who gets moved to tears before his God must certainly be a special experience!

More unforgettable than all else were the winter evenings (we must remember that back then there was no television, radio, electric light, central heating...). They would gather around the hearth; first Papa would play checkers with Marie, the oldest; then he would put the little ones on his knees and sing some romantic songs for them with his beautiful baritone voice. Or, he would recite some poetry of Victor Hugo or Lamartine, or tell a fable of La Fontaine, or do amusing imitations of someone—and this he excelled at, and Thérèse too, as she grew older had a special gift of mimicry—or he would on the spur of the moment come up with a game and even with toys.

Family prayer in the evening would close out the day, and Thérèse—who always received the place closest to Papa—adds, “All I needed to do was to look at him, to find out how the saints prayed.”

Everything in the home evoked the fatherhood of God and His heavenly dwelling: at the end of the school year, even if schooling was done at home, there were exams to be taken in the presence of Papa, then the reading of the final grades, and finally the awards to be given out. “My heart was really pounding, when I would receive an award and a crown; for me it was like the image of the universal judgment [at the end of time].”

And when the father took her to the ocean for the first time, she was enchanted before such a holy sight: “I couldn’t do anything but just look and look; it’s majesty, the tumult of the waves, everything spoke to my soul of the greatness and power of God.”

Is it any wonder that at sunset—while the sun shone on the ocean and left a golden trail, with a sail boat gliding on it—the little child thought spontaneously of “the luminous trail of grace” and decided never to wander away from it, so that she might “row in peace beneath the watchful eye of Jesus.” (Manuscript A, 73)

This episode comes back when Thérèse was 7 years old. The little one certainly had a rare capacity for introspection and even more rare spiritual sensitivity, and yet she also had a father who was completely carefully that nothing might disturb the purity of this little soul.

Therese recounts how—at this same beach—she and her father met some men who had come by to compliment him and ask him “if this graceful little child was his”; “Dad replied ‘Yes,’ but I realized that he was making signs to them not to compliment me.” And this is also how her older sisters treated her, to the point that Thérèse adds, “It was the first time that anyone called me graceful,” since no one in the family had ever said “a word capable of allowing vanity to enter into my heart!”

Nevertheless every morning the sisters would dress her elegantly, and Papa required of them to make up her hair with long curls, which back then was a complicated ritual.

If we imagine a family atmosphere that was morbid and too sentimental, we are really making a mistake. Thérèse herself marveled at how had been possible “to educate me with so much love and thoughtfulness, without ever spoiling me.” “They didn’t condone even one imperfection: I was never scolded without cause, and yet neither did they ever go back on a thing once it was decided.” (Manuscript A, 64)

Thérèse will remember with displeasure her whole life long how just one time she answered her father back when he asked her for something, “Take care of it yourself!” She had been reprimanded, and after that remark of hers (she was about 3 years old) she never again spoke a disrespectful word.

Thus, when she had grown up she was able to say, with absolute sincerity and simplicity, something which shakes us to the core: “From the age of three, I have never said ‘No’ to the good God.”

Here we need to pay attention. We are not giving a biography, either of Thérèse or of her father. If that were the case, we would need to go into depth about so many other

aspects: how the family reacted in the face of problems, worries, inevitable disagreements, the big social, political and religious questions of the time.

But we are not going into depth about any of that. We are merely recounting “the childhood memories of Thérèse,” especially those that have to do with her father. These memories reveal how her conscience became indelibly marked from childhood, so much so that upon this conscience she built her holiness and her doctrine. Children do not in the end grow up by means of our way of dealing with life and its big problems; rather they grow up by means of our way of dealing with their little humanity.

These memories have been spread throughout the whole Church, and there is no end to the number of conversions they have brought about. Why? Because of so many rich and thoughtful little things done for her, whereas almost all other children barely have some vague and pale memory of their relationship with their father?

Hers was without a doubt a privileged and unique experience. And yet that is precisely what God wants to offer to all of us: the demonstration of the sacrament of Fatherhood. It is on the indestructible basis of these memories that Thérèse will go on to say: “It is so beautiful to call God ‘our Father’!” “I say to the Lord whatever I wish.” And she was convinced that He “gives us all that He makes us desire.”

What a precious gift this design is, a design made up of so many thoughtful, gracious episodes—like a collection of miniatures designed to show forth the Fatherhood of God. Anyone who has not understood this has hardened himself and will destroy this “sacred history,” continuing to imagine and describe complicated Freudian behind-the-scenes actions. Against this interpretation stands the limpid account and judgment of Thérèse herself.

Louis Martin treated the humanity of his five daughters (he was adored by all of them, and all of them defined him as an “incomparable father”) in such a way as to give them a sensible, everyday, and attractive faith in the Fatherhood of God.

In exchange they had such an attachment and estimation of their earthly father, that it knew no bounds. “I couldn’t even think, without shuddering, that Papa could die. One time he had climbed up a ladder, and since I had stayed below underneath, he cried to me, ‘Move away, little one, so that in case I fall I won’t squash you!’ Upon hearing this I felt an interior revulsion, and instead of moving away I clung to the ladder, thinking, ‘At least if Papa falls I won’t have the unhappiness of seeing him die; I will die with him.’” (Manuscript A, 72)

“I cannot express how much I loved Papa; everything about him made me admire him. When he explained his thoughts to me (as if I were a big girl), I told him with real sincerity that if he had said such things to men in government, they for sure would have taken him and made him king, and France would be happier than it had ever been...!” (Manuscript A, 72)

All children go through, or should go through, such a period of adoring and almost divinizing their own parent. In fact we could say that God has planned this sweet stratagem in His wise, creative design, in order to attract us in a natural way to Himself.

Usually this period lasts only a short while, and is destined to disappear under the blows of misunderstandings and delusions, even though it should come back again when one has matured.

In the case of Therese the grace was so great that the natural stratagem became, without having to disappear and reappear again, a supernatural experience: for her God always remained “Papa, the good God,” and the other life was always “the hearth of the Father in Heaven,” where everyone would one day be united. (Manuscript A, 126)

And it wasn't like this only for her. The first-born, Marie, in a letter she wrote one day to her father, said, “In this life you are, with Jesus, the Paradise of your daughters.”

It is not then strange that, in a similar family, the vocations to consecrated virginity would blossom forth one after the other, given that such vocations depend on an acute sense of the Fatherhood of God and on spousal affection for His Holy Son Jesus.

The first one to leave for Carmel was Pauline, the second-born, now in her twenties, the one who had dedicated herself in a special way to being Thérèse's teacher. She was the daughter who most resembled her mother and who most inherited her mother's spirit. Louis was not surprised at her choice: he knew so well the heart and desires of his Zélie!

But he didn't expect that the first-born, Marie—on whose shoulders he had laid the running of the house—would decide, four years later at 26, to go in the same direction. The daughter recounts, “When I confided in Papa my big decision, he sighed upon hearing such news! He really had not at all expected it, since nothing would have made him guess my desire to become a religious sister. He stifled a sob and told me, ‘Ah, but without you...’ He was unable to finish. I told him, ‘Céline is already pretty grown up enough to take my place; you will see how everything will work out.’ Then my poor dear father told me, ‘The Good God could not have asked a greater sacrifice from me. I had been convinced that you would never leave me.’ And he embraced me in order to hide his emotions.”

By this point it was not difficult for Louis Martin to intuit that in time Therese too would follow the same path: he knew her quite well! Luckily there was still plenty of time, given that the Benjamin of the family was only 14 years old.

He was now 63, and in shaky health.

A few months after Marie's entrance into Carmel he was struck by an attack of brain congestion, accompanied by hemiplegia (a paralysis of one side of the body), fortunately of a passing nature. He had barely healed when Thérèse, one beautiful Pentecost Sunday afternoon in 1887, asked of him the extraordinary grace of being

allowed to enter Carmel at the age of 15. Let us listen to what she herself says of this episode:

“I confided to him my desire to enter Carmel...he said not even one word in order to dissuade me from my vocation; he limited himself to making me see that I was too young to make such a serious decision. But I defended my cause so well that Papa, with his simple and just nature, was very quickly convinced that my desire was that of God Himself and, with his deep faith, exclaimed that God was granting him a great honor in thus asking of him his daughters...

Papa seemed to possess that peaceful joy that comes from a completed sacrifice, and he spoke to me like a saint...he drew close to the wall of the garden and showed me, growing between the stones, a little white flower similar to a miniature lily. He plucked it and gave it to me as a present, explaining to me how much God had cared for it in making it grow and keeping it alive until today.

In listening to him it seemed I was hearing my own story, so great was the similarity with what Jesus had done in my soul. I received that flower as a relic and saw that in picking it Papa had pulled it out with all the roots. It seemed destined to be transplanted in another more fertile land...” (Manuscript A, 143)

Anyone who reads *Story of a Soul*—in which Thérèse recounts her spiritual life—and notices her beginning with the words “The story of a little white flower,” should not immediately think of the languid style of the late romantic era; the saint of Lisieux is merely thinking of the symbolic gesture—thoughtful and powerful—done by her Papa during the most solemn moment of his mission, when the aged parent accepted the grace and offered his most beloved daughter to God.

Even though the father became immediately convinced “that the desire of Thérèse was that of God Himself” (how profoundly he must have known the heart of both to reach this conviction!), within the family a storm broke out. The relatives spoke of extreme imprudence, the superior of Carmel didn’t even want to hear of it, and the city was ready for gossip and criticism.

Yet Louis accompanied his daughter to the bishop of whom he awaited the decision. The bishop tried hard to convince the young girl to wait, believing that among other things he was siding with the father, and being left astonished when he realized the father was siding with Thérèse.

They did not get the permission, but in the chancery office people commented “that nothing like this has ever been seen: a daughter as passionate about offering herself to God as the father is about giving her to Him.”

So they took part in a diocesan pilgrimage to Rome, where Thérèse, going against all the customs of the day, during the audience clung to the vestments of the very old Pope Leo XIII and begged his consent. “If God wills it, you will enter,” was his response.

They had to literally pry her away from his feet, while she was still trying to explain herself, and the aged Holy Father, before the two noble guards could drag her away, placed his hand on the lips of the young girl and blessed her. When Louis Martin—introduced as the father of two Carmelite nuns—came up and knelt before Leo XIII, the Pope placed his hand on the venerable head of this aged gentleman, perhaps intuiting the mystery of what had just taken place before him.

In those words of the Holy Father and in his two gestures [of blessing each of them] Therese saw a foreshadowing of what was to come. God really wanted to consecrate to Himself the daughter and the father, and both would solemnly offer their life.

Unexpectedly the obstacles fell away, one after the other, and Thérèse entered Carmel at 15. The day that she was supposed to cross the threshold of the cloister she knelt down before her aged father, to ask his blessing. Then Louis too knelt down before his little child and traced the sign of the Cross on her forehead: “It was a scene that must have made the angels smile,” Therese noted, “to see that elder who was presenting to the Lord his daughter still in the springtime of life.” (Manuscript A, 193)

An acquaintance who had witnessed the scene, later told the father that he seemed like Abraham in the act of not refusing to give his son Isaac to God. Louis smiled: “But,” he said, “if God had asked me to sacrifice my little child, I would have raised the knife very, very slowly, waiting for the lamb and the ram.”

On the other hand, he wrote to a friend, “Yesterday my little queen entered Carmel. God alone could ask such a sacrifice. He is helping me so powerfully that, in the midst of the tears, my heart is overflowing with joy.” From that point on he was fond of saying that he too had become, like Abraham, “the friend of God.”

During that occasion everyone had the impression that the life of Louis Martin was about to end: without holding anything back he had accomplished his mission, giving back directly into the hands of the One and Only Father the daughters that had been entrusted to him, especially Thérèse, who was showing clear signs of being predestined. From Carmel she wrote to her father: “When I think of you, dear little Daddy, I instinctively think of the Lord, because it seems to me impossible to imagine anyone on earth more holy than you...and I will work really hard to be your glory in becoming a great saint.” (Letter of July 31, 1888)

Louis understood that he had been left alone by himself. (Even Céline, who had for the moment remained like a mother at his side, in order to take care of him in his old age and illness, was waiting to fulfill the same vocation as her sister.) Now he was able to and needed to complete his earthly mission of being Father, giving his daughters the ultimate and greatest Gospel example: that of going home like a little child into the arms of his God.

One day, during a visit to the convent, he allowed this little secret to slip out: “Daughters, I am going back to Alençon, where, in the Church of Notre Dame, in which I

received such great graces and such consolations, I made this prayer: ‘My God, it is too much! I am too happy; I can’t go to Heaven like this. I want to suffer something for You, and I have offered myself...’.”

He did not dare to finish his sentence in front of his daughters, and yet everyone understood that he had offered to share in the mystery of the Passion of Christ.

The most bitter suffering came upon him, that which, earlier on, he had almost prophesied when he said, “This is the greatest trial that could come upon a man.” Two strokes, one after the other, hit him, along with temporary but ever more frequent psychological degeneration: loss of memory, difficulty in speaking, hallucinations, fixations, unwarranted fears, periods of depression and exaltation, desires to run far away and hide. All of this was probably due to arteriosclerosis, together with acute attacks of uremia (a condition of having some of the components of urine, normally excreted by the kidneys, present in the blood), which at the time no one knew how to control.

During lucid moments he felt humiliated, but said, “All for the greater glory of God!” Irrational plans along with longing for holiness would get mixed together in his mind. When they brought him back after a long journey he had made in a state of confusion and without any reason for going, he said to the daughter who was asking him why he did it, “I wanted to go and love God with all my heart!” The vocational dreams of his youth resurfaced and became mixed up with the disturbances brought on by the illness.

But everything seemed to have a double dimension: on the surface there was the humiliation of dementia, and underneath the mystery of the Cross. Thus when Louis realized that in the cathedral they were collecting donations for a new main altar, he went to give them his entire and enormous sum, 10,000 gold francs.

The gesture was attributed to the irresponsibility brought on by his poor health, but Therese, from her cloister defended her father’s sacred right: he had offered to God his daughters, and now he was offering himself; it was only fitting that he be the one also to offer the altar!

Papa regained the full use of his mind for the feast of Thérèse’s “Clothing” [receiving the habit]. It was a triumphant day: the daughter in bridal vestments came out of the cloister symbolically, for an instant, into the arms of her Daddy, and thoroughly radiant, entered solemnly into the chapel of the convent. The bishop who was presiding over the liturgy, in the face of such a beautiful scene, made a mistake in the rite and intoned an unforeseen and solemn *Te Deum*.

It was like Palm Sunday, after which immediately begins Passion Week. The attacks came back again and again, ever more serious, and they had to make a gut-wrenching decision: to place their father in a home for the mentally ill.

The home they placed him in was the *Bon Sauveur* (The Good Savior), a large hospital sadly famous, amidst 1,700 other patients, while he was still in his right mind enough to understand what was happening to him. The sister in charge of the unit wrote

“It hurts me to see this handsome patriarch in such a state. We sisters are all in great pain, and the personnel too are upset. In the little time that he has been among us, he has endeared himself to all, and besides, there is something so venerable in him! He is carrying a mysterious burden. You can see that it is a trial...” And she continues, “There is something so venerable!...”

In order to remain in contact with the other patients, Louis refused a little private apartment which he could have allowed himself to have. Whatever he received as a gift from relatives he shared as if it belonged to everyone. One day the sister told him that in this hospital he could do so much good for all those other patients who had no faith: “You could be an apostle!” “It’s true,” Louis answered, “but I would have preferred to be one in a different place; and yet this is the will of the Good God. I believe that it might be in order to conquer my pride.”

In another lucid moment he explained to the doctor, “I have always been accustomed to being in charge, and now I see myself reduced to obeying. But I know why the Good God has given me this trial: I have never had any humiliations in my life, and I need to have some...”

He reached the depths when, through a misunderstanding, two notaries arrived who, without any regard for his feelings, made him sign a statement renouncing the management of his property, claiming that this was what his daughters wanted.

Meanwhile back in the city, and even in the convent, the news of his humiliating illness—it was seen at the time as a shame upon the family, and even gave rise to suspicious, slanderous remarks—was becoming the real offering which the daughters were constantly making to God.

Many people were saying that Louis had become sick because his daughters had abandoned him; others were more specific and said that it was his youngest and most beloved daughter abandoning him that caused his heart to break and his mind to fail.

“The three years of Papa’s illness,” Thérèse writes, “were the most fruitful of our whole life; I wouldn’t trade them for all the ecstasies and revelations of the saints; my heart overflows with recognition-lucid gratitude when I think of this inestimable treasure.” (Manuscript A, 206)

People had told Thérèse that at times, during his crisis, her father would cover his face with a handkerchief as if he were ashamed at being seen so humiliated. The other sisters would rend their hearts at hearing this, but for her it became a moment of illumination. She thought of the suffering face of Christ: that face which the soldiers had covered with insults, which had impressed itself on the veil of Veronica. Thérèse immersed herself in the mystery of God hiding Himself so thoroughly that He allowed His Face, that Face “most beautiful among the children of men,” to become deformed out of love.

She remembered how, one time when she was little, it seemed to her that she saw Papa in the garden, covering his face with an apron—something impossible, since at the

time he had been away on a long journey—and how she had suffered as if by way of an obscure and mysterious foreshadowing.

With her sisters she recalled that time back then which had aroused the astonishment of all, and finally she understood: “It was really Papa whom I saw walking, bent over from age, really him, who was carrying on his venerable face, on his now white head, the sign of his glorious trial. Just as Jesus’ adorable Face was veiled during His Passion, so too the face of his faithful servant had to be veiled during the days of suffering, in order later to shine forth in the Heavenly Homeland next to his Lord.” (Manuscript A, 70)

It was in the aftermath of these events that Therese changed her religious name and began to sign her letters “Thérèse of the Child Jesus of the Holy Face,” just like that, without interrupting, as if to say that the mystery of evangelical childhood, to which she had consecrated herself, would now be fulfilled in the mystery of the Suffering Son.

“The Lord loves Papa so much more than we do. Papa is the little child of the Good God,” Thérèse would write from the convent. And in fact Louis Martin seemed to surrender himself each day more and more, totally undefended, into the hands of God.

Celine, who would go every day to the hospital to get news of him, even if she could see him only once a week, would repeatedly tell him that everyone was praying for him to be cured, especially those in Carmel: “You don’t need to ask for that,” he answered, “you just need to ask for God’s will.”

In the end, being now totally paralyzed in the legs, and thus no longer being in danger of harming himself in moments of agitation, he was given over to the daughters to be taken back home. When the brother-in-law lifted him up to put him in the wheelchair, the eyes of Louis shone with joy: “I’ll repay you in Heaven,” he said.

Two days later he was brought to the convent for a visit. The daughters knew that this would be the last meeting. All they could do was look at each other and weep, seeing that their father was only able to pronounce a few monosyllables, while any kind of discussion would serve no purpose and only agitate him. At the end they told him, “Goodbye.” He raised his eyes, pointed upwards with his finger and remained like that for a long time, and then managed with much effort to say, “in Heaven.”

The first word that Thérèse had learned to write became also the last word that her father said to her.

The family cared for him as one cares for a saint. He still had some good moments, and everyone saw that the orientation of his heart and mind remained unchanged. “Ask St. Joseph that I might die a saint,” he whispered one day to the daughter who was taking care of him. And she wrote to her Carmelite sisters, “Papa had become my little child...every evening when I leave him after having said good night, I bless him without his realizing it, and afterwards the night always goes very well. It is as if I have become his mother, and I choke up at how effective the sign of the Cross is with God.”

Louis died on July 29, 1894, at the age of 71, with his eyes fixed on the daughter who was next to him, praying the beautiful prayer which begins, “Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I give You my heart, my life, and my soul...”

Therese confided, “The death of Daddy doesn’t feel like a death, but like a real life. I am finding him again, after six years of absence [when she first entered Carmel, six years ago), and I feel him around me, looking at me, protecting me.” (Letter of August 20, 1894) She wanted to compose a long poem entitled, The prayer of the daughter of a saint, for the sake of entrusting to him one by one all the sisters and herself as well as all the memories.

At the Carmelite convent they kept as a relic the last ticket that the father had sent a few years earlier, and which was like a synthesis of their whole family history. “I have to tell you, my dear daughters, that I feel moved to thank and to make you thank the Good God, because I feel that our family, even though most humble, has the honor of being numbered among the privileged families of our adorable Creator.”

And while the Church now waits to see him glorified together with his spouse—it will be the first case of the history of a couple being raised together to the honors of the altar—our mind goes back to the glorification that Thérèse had already done for him, when her father was at the height of his humiliation.

At that time she wrote to her sisters these words which seem like a prophecy: “Soon we will be in our native homeland. Soon the joys of our childhood, the Sunday evenings, our secret conversations...all of this will be given back to us forever, and with interest. Jesus will give us back the joys of which he deprived us for a moment!...Then from the radiating head of our dear Papa we will see spring forth streams of light, and each one of his white hairs will be like a sun which fills us with joy and happiness!...” (Letter of July 23, 1891)

Here is the miracle under investigation for Louis and Zélie’s cause for beatification:

Peter Schiliro, born on May 25, 2002, had grave breathing problems. The parents baptized him on June 3, convinced that he would soon die. In desperation they began a novena to St. Thérèse’s venerable parents, Louis and Zélie Martin. In a few weeks the child made an unexpected recovery. The presumed miracle was examined by the curia of the Archbishop of Milan, and in June 2003 the curia presented the relevant documentation to the Vatican congregation. The beatification should take place this year, 2008.