

1 Louis Martin

The fathers of Louis Martin and Zélie Guérin, parents of the Little Flower, were military men. Louis was born in Bordeaux, but his family moved to Alençon, then to Strasbourg, and back once more to Alençon. Traveling as much as Louis Martin did as a child, he grew up with a love for travel, and, after his marriage and during his later life, he made many pilgrimages. The letters he wrote to his wife and daughters concerning his travels must have been of great interest.

There were relatives of the Martin family in Rennes, and in 1842 and 1843 young Louis went there to learn the trade of watchmaking with a cousin of his father. He loved Brittany “for the simplicity of manners, the wild poetry of its scenery, and the fire of its mystical temperament. He liked to wear the national costume and he studied its folklore. In his fine sonorous voice he liked to sing the songs of Brittany.”

Recently, a friend of mine brought me a book filled with reproductions of the art of the Breton peasant. There were studies of shrines erected along the roads and in the public squares of the towns. Some of these shrines are massive and almost primitive stories in stone, depicting such scenes as Christ washing the feet of His disciples, the Last Supper, and Christ hanging from the cross on Calvary. By surrounding themselves with art of this type the Breton people gave expression to the strength of their belief. No wonder it was considered a high compliment when they said of Louis Pasteur that he “had the faith of a Breton peasant.”

Louis Martin was nineteen when he went to Rennes. When he was twenty he visited the monastery of the Great St. Bernard, eight thousand feet up in the Alps, and made a retreat there. Then he settled in Strasbourg, where there were more relatives, and continued his study of clockmaking, which required a long apprenticeship. He stayed at Strasbourg with a friend of his family, Aimé Mathey. Although the Matheys were nominally Catholics, they never practiced their faith and this, of course, was a matter of grief to Louis Martin. His large-hearted warmth is indicated, it seems to me, in the continuation of his friendship with a family that regarded so lightly the things he held most dear.

He lived with the Matheys for the two years of his apprenticeship, and these were very happy years. He walked all over Alsace, and during one such walking trip, when he and young Mathey were bathing in a stream, he saved the son of the house from drowning.

In 1845 he journeyed from Strasbourg, partly by foot, partly by coach, to the Swiss frontier, and paid a visit again to the hermitage of the Great St. Bernard, this time to apply for admittance to the order that conducts the hospice. The priests there are called Canons Regular.

A canon lives in community and sings the praises of God by the daily recitation of the Divine Office in choir, but he is also prepared to preach and teach, administer the sacraments, tend to the sick, and give hospitality to pilgrims and travelers. According to its historians, the Order began at the time of Christ Himself, dating from the Apostles. There were many reforms, of course. Some regard St. Augustine as the order's founder; some as its reformer or lawgiver. When a controversy arose between the Benedictines and the Canons Regular with regard to precedence, the question was settled by Pius V in favor of the Canons, on account of their apostolic origin.

The Canons Regular whom visitors find serving at the hospice of the Great St. Bernard are, however, usually called monks. This famous monastery was founded in the year 969 and was meant by the founder

to be used for the convenience of pilgrims and travelers who crossed the Alps at a point which was always full of dangers. Perhaps it was the craving for adventure that led Louis Martin to this famous place. He had come from a family of military men and, according to Father Piat in *The Story of a Family*, he would have preferred a military career, "but now that Napoleon was dead, who was there for him to follow?" The desire for a leader is in us all, for a leader and a temporal cause, to match in grandeur the glimpses of the Absolute that come to us in rare flashes.

Louis Martin had always been a religious man, coming from an intensely religious home. The story is told of his soldier father that when some of his men in the army were astonished to see him so long on his knees after Mass he remarked, "It is because I believe."

The military atmosphere of his home undoubtedly had its reflection in Louis Martin's way of thinking, and it showed in his sense of responsibility and his attention to duty. There is about the French an exalted way of expressing themselves, a sense of reverence, a sense of awe. Perhaps the military background which gave Louis a world-view also enlarged his mind and made him meditate on the transcendence of God. On the other hand, his trade of watchmaking may have contributed to his sense of the immanence of God.

I have heard the Little Flower condemned because she came from a bourgeois atmosphere, because she lived always in comfortable surroundings. It is necessary to study her background and to call attention to the fact that her father was a man who had served seven years of apprenticeship as a watchmaker and who spent his life in that business until some time after his marriage. He had wanted to enter the Canons Regular and to spend his life in the joyous worship of God and in the hospitable love of his brother, with, perhaps, an occasional adventurous rescue of travelers for which the hospice is famous. But, rejected by the Canons Regular, not only because he did not know Latin or Greek, but also because of the ill health which attended his

studies, he made up his mind to live a holy life in the world, earning his living as a gentleman should, by the sweat of his own brow rather than that of any one else's—and one can sweat quite as much over little things as over big things. A meticulous work like that of watchmaking can be more a strain on the nerves than any heavy manual labor.

Louis Martin lived in the days of the beginnings of revolutionary thought, of Kropotkin, whose thinking was shaped by the watchmakers of the Jura mountains where Louis himself studied. He lived in those vital years of 1850–1890 when Marxism and anarchism struggled for possession of the First International. He lived at the same time as Proudhon, the unMarxian socialist, as Father de Lubac, S.J., called him, who said "Property is theft." I have often wondered whether in his long years of apprenticeship Louis Martin ever engaged in discussion of the social problems of the day. I am sure that there must have been some talk of the revolution of 1848, of the condition of the working classes. There is one passage in Father Piat's book which might indicate that in Paris he came in contact with radical groups:

The sojourn at Paris, after his Strasbourg years, which appears to have been prolonged for two or three years, was a strong test of Louis Martin's faith. The Voltairean spirit, which had ushered in the July Monarchy, still flourished in intellectual circles, despite the vigorous counter-offensive of Lacordaire and Montalembert. The ruling classes, obeying Guizot's order, "Get rich!" remained deaf to the murmurs of revolt that were rising from the working men. In vain did Frederic Ozanam raise the alarm. In order to draw attention to the danger to society, and the spiritual and material needs of the proletariat, the upheaval, bloodshed and barricades of the June days of 1848 would be needed. For the moment Paris gave itself up to scepticism and amusement.

Louis Martin came very near to danger. Taking advantage of his natural generosity, some strangers invited him to join a philanthropic club, apparently devoted to works of charity.

He inquired more closely concerning them and discovered that the club was in reality a secret society. His loyal nature was indignant. He cared only for what was open and above-board. Only evil works seek for darkness. He firmly refused the acquaintanceship and preserved his freedom.

I wish Father Piat had told us more of this “club.” Who were these “strangers”? Why are radicals more dangerous than the lukewarm, like Martin’s friend Aimé Mathey? “I had rather you were hot or cold,” Christ said. “The lukewarm I will spew out of my mouth.”

The point I would like to make is that it is too bad that Father Piat paints in dark colors the attempts to work for the people at that time. I would like to know more of that secret society which he mentions as a temptation to Louis Martin. I do not think that it was only a question of “evil works” that he was avoiding.

In making this comment there is certainly implied no criticism of Louis Martin. I am only interested in thinking along these lines because of St. Thérèse’s love for her father. It is partly because of this father, who played so great a role in her life, that she was what she was. When she told of her little way of dependence on God’s merciful love she was thinking, too, of her dearly beloved father.

Louis Martin’s vocation was a great one, although he was not to spend his days in the religious life or in a struggle to better social conditions. It was through marriage and the bringing up of a family that he was to play his great and saintly role in the world. I say saintly, although he has not been proclaimed a saint. There is a statue of him in the church in which he was baptized, just as there is a statue of the Little Flower’s mother in her baptismal church to remind the faithful of these parents.

Louis Martin was tempted in other ways, as Father Piat indicates:

His personal charm exposed him to temptations of another sort. Later on he mentioned them to his wife in confidence

and the latter profited thereby to put her young brother on his guard when he went to the capital to study medicine. "I am very anxious about you," she writes. "My husband utters gloomy forebodings daily. He knows Paris and he tells me you will be exposed to temptations which you will be unable to resist because you are not sufficiently religious. He has told me what he experienced himself and the courage he needed to emerge victorious from all these struggles. If you only knew what he has been through."

Louis Martin returned to Normandy after his years in Paris, to set up his business as a watch and clockmaker. Later he became owner of the house where he had his business. He loved his work and was not interested in marriage. He belonged to Church organizations devoted to charity, and his Sundays were given completely to the Church. Social functions had little attraction for him; his chief means of recreation were pilgrimages and long walks through the forests. He also loved to sit on the banks of a lake or stream fishing. Usually when he had fished all day he took his catch to the Convent of Poor Clares in Alençon.

Later on, his business flourished so that he bought a little piece of property known as the Pavillion—a place where he could keep his fishing tackle and where he could read and think at leisure. The property consisted of a hexagonal tower containing a ground floor and two upper stories to which access was gained by an outside staircase reaching as far as the terrace at the level of the first floor and then inside by a wooden spiral staircase. He had here only his books and his fishing tackle and guns for hunting. His Church, his work, and his recreation completely contented him for the next eight years of his life. He was thirty-five years old when he married Zélie Guérin.

2 Zélie Guérin

The story of Zélie Guérin is not so happy a one. She was born in a village on the main road between Paris and Brest. Zélie's father was a soldier who used to tell her of the insurrections of the Republican troops during the revolution which occurred in his childhood, the locked and barred churches, the Masses celebrated in secret. His own uncle was a priest who had to be concealed once in the family homestead, and little Isidore Guérin, Zélie's father, was given the job of guiding him on his journeys around the countryside. Once, the priest had to hide in the kneading trough where he was able to escape the pursuing and searching soldiers only because of the presence of mind of the child, who sat on the lid of the trough and spread out his toys and played there. The priest-uncle was later imprisoned but released in 1835.

Isidore was drafted the day before his twentieth birthday. He saw active service and was decorated. When the Emperor Napoleon III fell, Isidore went back home, only to re-enlist. He was married at thirty-nine and had three children, Marie Louise, Zélie, and Isidore. The father was stern but loved by his daughters. The mother was severe, religious, and rigidly economical. Their circumstances were very difficult. The father had refused a captaincy because the commission meant more honor than profit.

"My childhood and youth," Zélie wrote afterwards in a letter to her brother, "were shrouded in sadness, for if our mother spoiled you,

to me, as you know, she was too severe. Good as she was, she did not know how to treat me, so that I suffered deeply.” But Zélie had great comfort in her sister, Marie Louise.

Many years ago I read Balzac’s *Eugenie Grandet*, and it tells the story of a girl in a household where there was such parsimony that all the food was locked up to be doled out by the ounce from day to day. The book returns to my memory when I read of the economies of Zélie’s mother. She and her husband were able to save enough money from a soldier’s pay to enable Isidore, upon his retirement after thirty-five years of service, to buy a comfortable little home in Alençon.

So there in Alençon we have these two families living—the Martins and the Guérins—and both of them owning their own homes. The pension of Isidore Guérin was 297 francs a year. He occupied himself with working in wood and his wife opened a little café. The story is that she was so fond of sermonizing her customers that the café was a failure and was given up.

The schools were very good in Alençon and Isidore Guérin was anxious that his daughters be well-educated. They attended an academy taught by the Religious of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and of the Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. These Religious were generally known as the Picpus Congregation, so named because the community was started in a street in Paris, called the Rue Picpus, during the Revolution.

Zélie had a close friendship with her sister. Both girls grew up with a desire to enter the religious life, but Zélie, when she applied for admission to the convent, was refused. It seemed to be one of those arbitrary acts which come so often in our lives, which disconcert us, for which we see no reason. One would think that a young, healthy, pious girl who came from a hard-working family would be received with open arms by a community of teaching nuns. There is always talk about the need for vocations. And yet here she was turned down,

without rhyme or reason. Such a refusal must have meant a grave humiliation for the young girl. She must have wondered what there was in her that made the Mother Superior refuse her admittance. It shows, however, her complete acceptance of the will of God, her “abandonment to Divine Providence,” that she took the refusal with no rebellion and certainly with no sense of failure.

Surely this rejection was an example of the sowing spoken of in the Gospel. The Superior, with some deep intuition, sowed this good seed in the world, and later other convents reaped a great harvest—five young women, and one of them a canonized saint.

Zélie prayed humbly: “Lord, since, unlike my sister, I am not worthy to be your bride, I will enter the married state in order to fulfil Your holy will. I beg of You to give me many children and to let them all be consecrated to You.”

Thereupon she set about making a living in the world. The story is that she heard a voice telling her to apprentice herself to the makers of Alençon lace, for which the town is famous. There is no reason to doubt that she received such guidance. I think many of us when in a quandary as to what course to take, turn to prayer, with the immediate result that we know which way to turn, what course to take, even in such practical matters as earning a living.

It is interesting that Zélie undertook, like Louis Martin, a fine and delicate work. He turned to his watchmaking, and she to her lacemaking, both of them doing work which required absorption and attention, fine and meticulous work, slow work which could not be accomplished in a day, work made up of little moves, little stitches, to accomplish the finished product, a work which depended on faith as well as will and perseverance to complete the task.

Each lacemaker, when she had completed her apprenticeship in a school, could work at home on her specialty, and a true master of the craft was taught to co-ordinate and correct and combine the work of

the other lacemakers and produce the finished product. Zélie studied for a number of years and became so skilled that she opened an office in her home. "I am never happier," she wrote in one of her letters, "than when sitting at my window assembling my Point d'Alençon lace."

The lace for which Alençon is famous was introduced to the town as a craft in 1664, thirty skilled workers having been brought from Venice to start the industry. The lace is made of very fine handspun linen thread and worked by the needle into lace pieces of around one third of an inch in length and joined together by imperceptible stitches. Once there were over eight thousand women stitching this beautiful French lace, now only a few workers in a convent in Alençon continue this skill. Where there is originality of design, some pieces take as much as thirty-five hours of most careful stitching.

It was this work of finishing, the most difficult of all, that Zélie undertook. Her employees worked in their own homes, and she supplied the designs, assembled the work, and obtained the orders. Her work was considered the best in the country and often sold for five hundred francs a meter, which is about 39 inches. At five francs to the dollar, this would have amounted to one hundred dollars a yard. A luxury item indeed! But it was beautiful work to occupy the time one has to spend earning a living. There are not many lacemakers left in the western world today.

For ten years, between 1853 and 1863, she worked for the Paris firm of Pigache. Her sister, Marie Louise, went to Paris to arrange the business details for her. This older sister who later played a great part in the education of the two oldest Martin girls, her nieces, suffered not only from frail health but also from scruples. She was taught to read in the Apocalypse, she was rigid in the performance of her religious duties, and she suffered from her scruples for many years—a mental

suffering which contributed to her poor health. She also took upon herself a burden of corporal penances which exhausted her.

The Little Flower must have known well what scrupulosity and harshness can do to the religious life when she proclaimed her faith and confidence in the all-merciful love of God. Yet she was known for her meticulous attention to duty, the stress she laid on the little way of spiritual childhood, the offering to God of little sacrifices which meant constant attention, constant practice of the presence of God; but she also stressed the childlike confidence, the lack of self-importance which saved one from undue grief over lapses and failures.

When in 1858 Marie Louise was accepted by the Visitation nuns at Le Mans, Zélie began to think more often of marriage. She is described as being below middle height, with brown hair and black eyes, a well-shaped nose, altogether a pretty face. Sometimes there was a shade of sadness in the eyes. But generally there was a vivacity and good nature that made her very attractive.

Meanwhile, Louis Martin's mother was anxious to see him married. She was also attending some of the classes with Zélie in lacemaking and so became acquainted with the young woman; she made up her mind that here was a proper wife for her son.

A meeting which Zélie had with Louis Martin on the bridge of St. Leonard made the understanding between the two women easier. Zélie was crossing the bridge on an errand when her attention was caught by this tall, grave man of thirty-five. Perhaps their eyes met. Perhaps a glance was exchanged. Perhaps they "knew" each other, in the sense that an immediate sense of intimacy sprang up between them. For a second time Zélie heard a voice speaking to her, again on a most practical matter. "This is the man you are going to marry."

It was the mother who saw to it that the young people were brought together, and within three months the marriage took place at the Church of Notre Dame, on Tuesday, July 13, 1858, at midnight.