

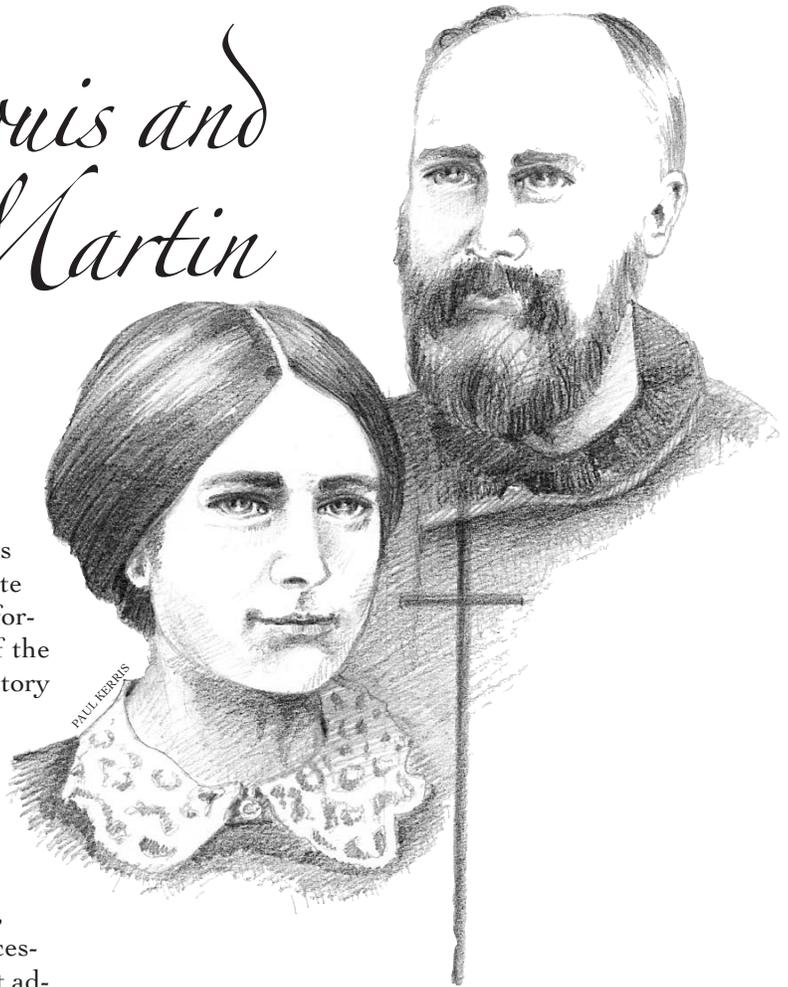
Ven. Louis and Zélie Martin

BORN 1823; DIED 1894 (LOUIS),
BORN 1831; DIED 1877 (ZÉLIE)
HUSBAND AND WIFE
FEAST DAY: MARCH 26

GOD INTENDS MARRIAGE not only to be his chosen place to procreate and educate children, but also the place where the formation of saints begins. The story of the family life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux is the story of a holy home, an incubator of sainthood. The primary concern of Ven. Louis and Zélie Martin was to grow in the divine life and to lead their children to Heaven. Everything else was secondary.

As a young man, Louis, a watchmaker, felt called to a monastic life. However, he could not learn Latin, at that time necessary for community prayer, and so was not admitted. Zélie Guérin also felt called to religious life, but her delicate health made her an unsuitable candidate for this austere calling. The two met when Zélie was apprenticed to Louis' mother, a lacemaker in the renowned city of Alençon in northern France. They were married some months later. Yet they had not completely forsaken a call to holy virginity, and did not consummate their marriage for a year, until their confessor called upon them to serve God as parents. In the next fifteen years, they had nine children, seven daughters and two sons.

Their first sorrows were crushing. Within less than four years, four of their children died. Their hope of meeting these beloved children again in Heaven was their only consolation. Thérèse, their last child, also came near death. She was sent out into the countryside with her wet-nurse to give her every opportunity for a healthier start. Eventually she joined her older sisters Marie, Pauline,



Léonie, and Céline in a beautifully warm, loving, and holy family.

Christ was at the center of the Martin home. The atmosphere of the home was soaked in prayer. Daily Mass was usual. Louis and Zélie were very generous in giving to the poor and caring for the sick. Zélie, the heart of the home, continued to work — she had her own home business supervising independent lacemaking contractors, managed by Louis who had given up his own business — but there was plenty of time for the children. In the evening, Louis would declaim poetry and sing to the children. Sundays were a time for family recreation — country walks, trips to the seashore, family visits, pilgrimages.

The children, of course, were not born saints. The most is known about Thérèse's faults; she was willful, stubborn, and prone to temper tantrums. Pauline was mischievous; Léonie struggled against an especially difficult temperament.

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Louis and Zélie made it their task to teach their daughters their faith and to gently lead them in the paths of virtue. Their loving instruction can be measured by the fact that their children felt a horror of sin and wanted above all to avoid it for love of God.

Sorrow returned to the Martin home when Zélie, ill with breast cancer for twelve years, died at forty-five. Marie was seventeen and Thérèse only four and a half. Louis and the children were devastated. He moved the family to Lisieux so that he would have help from Zélie’s relatives in raising his daughters. The older girls, as well, took responsibility for the younger ones.

One by one, the Martin daughters answered the call to religious life.

Pauline left home when Thérèse was nine to enter the Carmelite convent in Lisieux. Four years later, Marie also entered this convent, and eighteen months later Thérèse, by special exemption because she was only fifteen, was allowed to enter as well. Céline delayed her entry into Carmel to care for her father, who died just short of his seventy-first birthday after a long and humiliating decline into dementia that for a time required commitment to a mental institution. His last visit with his daughters,

two years before his death, concluded with his whispered exclamation, “Until Heaven!” Céline was received into the convent six weeks later. Léonie, after previous unsuccessful efforts to enter religious life, was received into the Sisters of the Visitation four years after her father’s death.



St. Thérèse, by Elizabeth Stefanick

The Martin family exemplifies what Jesus meant when he spoke about building one’s home on a rock (see Mt 7:24-25). The rock is hearing and obeying God’s Word. The house built on the truth will stand. There is, Jesus said, another way to build a house, namely on sand (see Mt 7:26-27). Today many homes are built on sand; many families are broken or dysfunctional. For a time, a house built on pleasure, wealth, or suc-

cess might appear to be sturdy. But when the relationship between husband and wife is under strain, the power of God’s grace is not there to help them surmount the danger, and the house falls. The Martin family endured more than its share of suffering, but they never wavered in their fidelity and obedience to Jesus. The relationship Louis and Zélie Martin had with the Lord strengthened them in times of great sorrow, and in joy they built a blessed and holy family.