



## **BLESSED ARE THE GENTLE HEARTED**

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*by Sr. Maria Marguerite  
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### **Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,**

St. Francis de Sales never believed holiness and relationship with Our Lord should be relegated only to those whose vocations were religious or priestly. Rather, as his sermons and writings attest, people from all walks of life are called to love and to be loved by God. St. Francis de Sales, embraced a loving and merciful Lord who regarded all humanity as His beloved. He counsels us to confidently entrust ourselves and all in our lives to Divine Providence ever mindful that the mercy of God is open to each and all. St. Francis de Sales taught that as followers of the gentle Savior, we too were to take up the little virtues of joy, humility, meekness, patience, and simplicity so to conform ourselves to the Heart of God. These little virtues, accessible to all, are often overlooked and deemed insignificant. “Everyone”, he writes, “wants to attain conspicuous and brilliant virtues which grace the summit of the Cross...” despite the fact that ability or opportunity might be lacking. St. Francis de Sales notes that, “very few seek to practice the little lowly virtues which, like wild thyme, grow in the shade of the Tree of Life. Yet these are always sweetest and most hardy, being watered with the precious blood of our Savior, whose first lesson to His disciples was: ‘Learn of me because I am meek and humble of heart.’ Our blessed Father further teaches: “It is not enough to practice great virtues. They must be performed in the spirit of love. For it is love alone which forms the basis of and gives weight and value to all good works in the sight of God”.

This month of February, as we look into the lives and spirituality of saints devoted to the Sacred Heart, I would like to take a glimpse at the Martin family of Lisieux: a family whose members over time comprised all vocations ~ who were touched by St. Francis de Sales ~ and who, by embracing the little virtues of the Heart of Jesus, produced a canonized saint and doctor of the Church, as well as, two blessed enroute to sainthood.

Although Bl. Louis and Bl. Zélie Martin had each discerned a vocation to religious life, their marriage became in Salesian terms, one of spouses bringing each other to God and served as a strong foundation for their Christian home. Nine children were born to Bl. Zélie and Bl. Louis, of whom five daughters survived: Marie, Marie-Pauline, Marie-Leonie, Marie-Celine, and Marie-Therese – each specially dedicated to Our Blessed Mother. With the exception of Leonie, who after some difficulty eventually entered and persevered at the Visitation of Caen, Marie, Pauline, Celine, and Therese entered the Carmel of Lisieux.

Therese, Celine, and Leonie were exposed to the spirit and wisdom of St. Francis de Sales as young children by Zélie and their aunt, Sister Marie-Dosithee, a Visitation Nun of Les Mans. The elder daughters, Pauline ~ who on Zélie’s death would become Therese’s “second mother”, her teacher, and eventual



religious superior, and Marie ~ Therese's godmother and Leonie's "second mother" ~ attended the boarding school at the Les Mans Visitation under their aunt's watchful eye. Mrs. Martin and her Visitandine sister, of whom she referred to as her "second self", maintained a special family and spiritual bond. In a letter written to their brother Isodore, Zelig writes of their ongoing correspondence ~"we talk to each other of a mysterious, angelic world above the mire of this earth". Sr. Marie-Dosithee remained involved with the Martin family throughout her life and, in doing so, enriched the family's spirituality with the gentle presence of the Visitation and its founders. She spoke the words of St. Francis de Sales to comfort Zelig on the loss of her newborn son, Joseph, thus enabling her to place this difficult situation in the hands of Providence and, in her words, "acquiesce in His will with all the energy that is in us". Likewise, when the infant Therese was plagued by an intestinal malady, the Visitandine aunt entrusted her life to St. Francis de Sales promising to especially honor her middle name of "Francoise" if she were healed. Although we can note that years later on June 9, 1895, the Feast of the Blessed Trinity, the signature that appears on Therese's Oblation to Merciful Love is Marie Francoise Therese of the Child Jesus and Holy Face, Sr. Marie-Dosithee's promise was fulfilled in Leonie who became known in the Visitation Order as Sr. Francoise-Therese. Therese, commenting on Leonie's vocational struggles in 1888, prophetically declared: "We must not worry that Leonie's attempt at religious life have been unsuccessful. After my death (9/30/1897), she will enter the Visitation Order and this time she will succeed; she will take my name and that of St. Francis de Sales".

Leonie, like Therese, suffered from a severe childhood illness where for 16 months she is said to have hovered between life and death. A novena was started to the then newly beatified Margaret Mary by Sr. Marie-Dosithee and it was reported by Zelig that, in less than nine days, Leonie was cured and "running about like a little rabbit." Leonie, afflicted with a difficult temperament, was later accepted for a short time at the Les Mans boarding school. Under the wing of the Visitandine aunt who initiated the preparation for her First Holy Communion, Sr. Marie-Dosithee helped to soften some of Leonie's obstinate and unruly tendencies by means of kindness and gentle firmness. She discovered that this method – one that our holy Mother, St. Jane de Chantal advocated – was the only one to which Leonie would respond. As a close and supportive relationship developed between them, the hopeful aunt saw promise in Leonie and believed, that with God's grace, she would rise above her problematic life "for she has a heart of gold, good judgement, and a strong, admirable character. Sr. Marie-Dosithee further predicted that "sooner or later this child will be a Visitation nun" believing that Leonie would achieve the holiness to which she was called. Upon her death, Leonie prayed that her Visitandine aunt might intercede and obtain for her from heaven the grace of continued healing and the fulfillment of the religious vocation she so desired.

Losses and trials continued to plague the Martin household over the years, yet both Zelig and Louis advanced in deep conformity to God's will with love, simplicity, patience, and trust. During the War of 1870, for example, and subsequent persecution of the Catholic Church in Rome and France, Louis gave virtuous example of his faith. He maintained his fidelity to the Church despite ridicule, insult, and danger, and became a founding member of the local Catholic Action chapter. Both Louis and Zelig, in those years of



Prussian occupation, were struggling with the loss of daughter Melanie-Therese, Zelig's advancing breast cancer and migraine headaches, and economic loss. Although the Martins, were required to accommodate nine Prussian soldiers in their war torn home, their long time practice of the little virtues enabled them to "combine, in their supernatural patriotism, a courage capable of facing danger with human sympathy that excluded all hatred." Zelig speaks in the spirit of St. Francis de Sales when she remarks during this interval: "the wisest and simplest way...is to be resigned to God's will, and prepare oneself beforehand to carry one's cross as bravely as possible...God gives me the grace not to be afraid. I am very tranquil...God is a good Father, and He never sends His creatures more than they can bear."

Zelig sought to shield her daughters from her long bout with breast cancer, but its advance brought many weeks of pronounced pain and suffering. Her fidelity to the practice of the little virtues of the Sacred Heart was a great witness to her daughters. Pauline, who cared for her mother, along with Marie and Leonie, recalled a thought of St. Francis de Sales quoted to her in a letter by the Superior of the Les Mans Visitation: "One ounce of virtue practiced in tribulation is worth more than a thousand times of peace and joy". The girls repeated this to Zelig several times at her request. After she reflected upon the meaning, Zelig would pray these words whenever the pain was particularly oppressive. The many letters Zelig exchanged with Pauline were retained by the family and read frequently after her death. Thus, the younger children were able to know the Mother who had the gift of imbuing her writing with her spirit and personality. Marie and Pauline described their mother as a woman of intelligence and energy – difficulties were nothing for her. She faced all her trials with courage, love, and faith.

The holiness, as well, attained by Louis is evidenced in this segment of an exhortation given by Canon Ducellier at the clothing of Celine (Sr. Genevieve of the Holy Face) at the Lisieux Carmel: Even though he had nothing better to offer-certainly nothing more dearly loved-he had at least one thing more intimate-himself. He had given everything; there remained only the offering of himself; he made that offer. 'God,' he said one day to one of your sisters with that charming simplicity characteristic of great souls, 'God grants me too many consolations. It is too much for this earth. I have asked the Lord to cease showering me with favors. One cannot get to Heaven that way. One cannot get there without suffering and I have offered myself...' Later, when Louis was nearing the end of his life of sacrifice and devotion, Therese said of him: "what I noticed most is the progress Papa made in perfection; following the example of St. Francis de Sales, he was able to master his natural vivacity to the point that he appeared to have the most gentle nature in the world...the things of the world hardly seemed to affect him; he easily overcame the difficulties of his life".

Their parents' legacy of virtue and love bore much fruit for the Martin daughters in their service to the Church as contemplative religious. For Therese, however, the early threads of Salesian spirituality weaved by the prayers and example of her parents and Visitandine aunt, along with God's grace and her own spiritual genius, enabled her to develop her doctrine of spiritual childhood. This Little Way of St. Therese, recognized by the universal church, elevated the 24 year-old Carmelite to one of the 33 Doctors of the Church. It is comprised of "living with the abandonment and trust of a child who knows that his father



cherishes him and could not leave him alone in the hour of danger”. Therese teaches us, like St. Francis de Sales, to maintain a disposition of heart which makes us humble and small in the arms of God, aware of our weakness and confident to the point of boldness in the goodness of the Father. Therese calls this posture “taking Jesus by the Heart” because mercy is never withheld from the soul who trusts with abandonment. Rather, it is because of our weakness that mercy is given unreservedly. Of this doctrine, Leonie, whose life had been so troubled, became an early disciple. The Visitandine Sr. Francoise-Therese studied her sister’s letters and manuscripts striving to emulate Therese’s Little Way. She learned to have confidence in God’s mercy and to entrust her struggles and faults to the Sacred Heart. Sr. Francoise-Therese learned to allow love to motivate her thoughts and actions and to become gentle with herself and others. Hers became a hidden way of holiness and total acceptance which served to transform her into pure love. Thus, her religious life became a wedding of the spiritual childhood of St. Therese and the Visitation charism of great humility before God and gentleness before the neighbor. In her death letter from the Caen monastery it is said of Sr. Francoise-Therese: “We pray that the perfume of the cloistered lives of silence and prayer led by the rose of Lisieux and by our little violet of Caen will be a blessing and support for the Church and the entire world.”

There is much we can learn from the Martin family as we walk along the path that God has placed us. Most importantly, we find shining examples of holiness – real people with real struggles who lived the little virtues of St. Francis de Sales heroically. They reveal the magnitude of love and mercy God offers to us if we but have confidence to take Jesus by the Heart. In the words of Therese: “I know well that it is not my great desires that please God. In my little soul, what He likes to see is the way I love my littleness and my poverty; it is my blind hope in His mercy, this is my only treasure.... The weaker one is, without desires or virtues the more ready one is for the operations of this consuming and transforming love.... God rejoices more in what He can do in a soul humbly resigned to its poverty than in the creation of millions of suns and the vast stretch of the heavens.”