

***“HOW CAN LOUIS AND ZÉLIE MARTIN
HELP US TODAY IN OUR PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS?”***

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DIOCESAN PILGRIMAGE OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

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Throughout the day we will be praying for vocations, doing so in a variety of ways:

- Celebration of the Mass
- Praying the Rosary
- Adoration
- Vespers

In this way we are merely responding to the Lord’s invitation: *Pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers to his harvest.*

This invitation makes clear that if Jesus put so much emphasis on this matter, it is doubtless because this struggle will always be present in the Church.

After all, the Church will always need to pray for more numerous workers.

It’s a way of maintaining a posture of humility, a way of indicating our wish to have more priests, monks, and nuns in our communities.

It serves to reveal not only our faith in prayer, but also our desire in the field of vocations.

We must recognize that today they are particularly few in number. That said, we can rejoice that two seminarians are entering training in our diocese this year; we keep them in our prayers.

We must also recognize that the mission is complex. The recent synod on the new evangelization took care to analyze the new situations in which ministry will take place. There are no new infallible methods, but there is a new world to understand, to love, and to which to preach the Gospel.

Thus each year we live out this prayer and this pilgrimage, and we live it out in a particular place, in an inspiring place. In this year of 2013, the chosen place is twice as interesting:

First because it located in the diocese.

And secondly because we are welcomed by a couple, a family, a couple who did not live out what might be called a specific, consecrated vocation of priest or monk or nun. Despite both having aspired toward a religious life, Louis and Zélie Martin lived out their progression toward holiness within the sacrament of marriage.

It's a debate that sometimes appears in parishes on the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, which takes place on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday, every year.

Two ideas sometimes come head to head:

- Those who have a wider view of vocations and say we should pray for all vocations, including the vocation of marriage, for Christians committed through baptism and confirmation
- Those who have a narrower view of vocations and who say no, we should pray only for specific, consecrated vocations: priests, monks, nuns

It's the kind of debate in which each side has its share of truth. Both positions are in fact tenable: One can say that marriage is a Christian vocation in its own right.

I list here three arguments:

- 1) The recent debates on "marriage for all" [trans. note: *mariage pour tous*, the campaign for marriage between homosexuals in France] demonstrate it well. For a man and a woman to marry, to have children, to start a family, and to be faithful to each other for life... this is a proposal that is becoming more and more unusual. In France, less than 100 years ago, civil marriage (outside the church) looked strangely like religious marriage, which had a very positive aspect (natural marriage).

- 2) One can also say that marriage is a vocation because it is a means of sanctification; it is a way to grow in one's relationship with God. Indeed, the Vatican council reaffirmed emphatically that our common vocation is the universal vocation to holiness.

If one day Louis and Zélie Martin are canonized as we hope, it would be wonderful news for all couples in this area. It is obvious that couples have lived this vocation for two thousand years, but we must acknowledge that the Church has never highlighted this fact through a double canonization.

- 3) The third argument goes back to the verb "to give," in my opinion one of the most important verbs in the Bible for defining the Christian life.

Take, for example, these words from the Apostle John: "*Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*" This command in itself sums up the Christian vocation.

This verb "to give" is often used by Jesus in the gospels to explain his mission: "*No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord*"... "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"

At a sacramental level, these are the words spoken by the celebrant in the celebration of baptism: ***From now on, you are priest, prophet, and king.*** A priest, meaning, you must offer your life.

Once I understand—in my heart—that I must give my life, then many things become possible for me. I can give it in religious life, in married life, or in a life of many commitments.

Therefore, since this is thus our common and "*essential*" vocation, prayer for vocations can be expanded to include marriage.

Thus such is the first position, which is legitimate, that praying for vocations also means praying for the vocation of marriage.

Yet you will also hear people say that strictly speaking, one cannot call marriage a vocation. What are their arguments?

They start with the first pages of the Bible, the book of Genesis, the story of creation. This story explains the progressive nature of God's creative work that results in the creation of man and woman.

And what does God ordain for them? Precisely marriage.

Granted, this is not the word that is used, but we know the words well: *Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.* [Gen. 2:24]

We are in the second chapter of Genesis, in other words, before the story of the fall and original sin in chapter 3.

We are in the midst of the plan of creation, which entrusts man and woman to each other: this is their vocation; they are made for each other.

But sin destroys this plan of creation; everything is damaged, everything is upset, destroyed, and then the plan of redemption, that is, the plan of salvation, is put into place. And in this new plan, some will be specially invited not to live the reality of marriage.

Here we can refer to the words of Jesus in Gospel. This incident is well known. (Matthew 19).

3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female,

5 and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one'?

6 So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

8 He said to them, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

So Jesus came to restore what had been destroyed, and the sacrament of marriage is the sign.

10 The disciples ended by saying, "*If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.*"

11 But he said to them, "Not all can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given.

12 *For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.*"

In other words, marriage is part of God's original plan, and to choose not to marry is a special, original calling.

I purposely use the word *choose*, because we know that some people do not marry, not by choice, but simply because of the way things turn out.

We also know that this can be a cause of suffering.

But we also see Christians who are neither married nor consecrated, but who experience a very real fertility, precisely through the gift of themselves, whether that is in the Church or in lay life.

Hence the importance of this verb *to give*.

To come back to the subject, this way of seeing things allows us to understand the second position which reserves the term *vocation* for those with specific vocations, particular callings.

People who freely commit themselves to not marrying, no matter what happens, and consecrate themselves to God. There are many ways of doing this:

Priests. Monks. Nuns. Consecrated lay people. Consecrated virgins.

So now we can ask ourselves: how can Louis and Zélie help us today in our prayer for vocations? It is a broad question, and there may be many answers. In order to help us pray, I will simply bring to your attention three aspects:

- They deeply desired to live a life of holiness.
- They raised their children in an authentic Christian life.
- They raised their daughters in an environment of freedom and availability.

1) First point: they deeply desired to live a life of holiness. One could say that holiness was part of their life project.

Saint Thérèse said it herself: *"The Good Lord gave me a father and mother more worthy of Heaven than of earth."* They had no other desire than to become saints.

One day, Zélie Martin wrote her daughters Marie and Pauline, *"I want to become a saint. It will not be easy, there is a lot to cut down, and this wood is as hard as stone. It would have been better had I started earlier, when it was easier, but still, 'better late than never.'"*

Louis and Zélie understood that holiness is nothing other than the Christian life taken seriously, the experience of faith allowed to manifest itself in one's entire life.

The secret to their Christian life was summarized by three famous words: “**God served first.**” (“God must be served first”). It is noteworthy that each sought this holiness from their youth.

➤ Louis thought he was called to a monastic life, which led to two stays in the monastery of the Great Saint Bernard to become a monk

➤ Zélie, in seeking a religious life with the Daughters of Charity

Doubtless they lived in precisely this context: the belief that to be holy one had to be a member of a religious order or a consecrated person.

What is remarkable is that, as each one came to understand that they were not called to a specific vocation, they continued to live out their Christian life in the earnest desire to do God’s will without becoming discouraged.

In this they experienced the virtue of perseverance.

Also, when they met in April 1858, they were not two disillusioned or discouraged persons, but two Christians seeking to do God’s will. They gradually came to understand that they were invited to live out holiness in the sacrament of marriage.

To urge us on, let us look at several aspects of their spiritual lives. One could say many things about it. Their Christian lives were marked by a most fervent practice of the Eucharist.

➤ Without exception, Louis and Zélie went to Mass every day at 5:30 a.m.

After Louis Martin became a widower, he continued to attend Mass every day in Lisieux. When his daughters asked him why he went to the 6:00 a.m. Mass, he answered: *“Because that is the Mass of the poor and of the workers.”*

➤ They also practiced Eucharistic adoration (we will do that ourselves later this evening), a devotional practice that was being re-launched in many a parish. Louis was a member of the Society of the Blessed Sacrament, which organized a vigil of nocturnal adoration once a month.

➤ As to Louis: we know that he always refused to work on Sunday, specifically out of respect for Sabbath rest. This despite the fact that working on Sunday was a common practice that the Church was trying to fight.

A century later, Jean Paul II wrote the wonderful work *Dies Domini* (*Day of the Lord*, Apostolic letter of 1998).

Zélie lived out this holiness at the end of her life, by the way in which she would simultaneously live

➤ A deep desire for healing, so that she went on a pilgrimage to Lourdes several months before her death.

➤ A trustful surrender to God’s will even unto her death amid great physical suffering

Louis also gave evidence of holiness until the end of his life. On February 12, 1889, a doctor

decided to intern him at the Bon Sauveur asylum in Caen (he lived there for three years). During his more lucid moments, he astonished the staff with his kindness and gentleness. He accepted the situation with courage and resignation, *"I know why the Good Lord sent me this test: I never experienced a humiliation in my life, and I needed one."*

Here is a quick overview of several elements of the spiritual life and the daily holiness of Louis and Zélie Martin.

How do they help us then? The faithful prayer for vocations that we lift to the Lord must be accompanied by a desire in each one of us to give our lives.

This prayer must be for us a work of conversion, an invitation to grow in holiness.

We cannot merely pray for vocations outwardly, without committing ourselves to the same path of self-giving. Louis and Zélie will help us here.

2) Second point: They raised their children in an authentic Christian life. In the times in which we live, this second aspect seems to me essential.

In fact, in the Church today, there is no crisis of vocations: this expression is not accurate. The crisis is not one of vocations, but one of faith.

Today's church does not need to find a method that will lead to more vocations. It is not a question of marketing or publicity or communication.

Who can be surprised that there are so few vocations today?

What is at stake is the transmission of faith, yet we know that when it comes to faith, in the majority of cases everything depends on the family. Thanks be to God, there can be some beautiful exceptions, but they are just that: exceptions.

It is here that Louis and Zélie help us, here that they are precious to us.

It is not possible here to go into great detail or to analyze how the Christian life is played out in the family. But we mention here the great fundamentals.

- A life of prayer
- A sacramental life
- An ecclesial life
- A charitable life
- A social life anchored in reality

We could quote here the exact terms used by the Second Vatican Council in the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* about the elements of education:

- *Parents should initiate their children at an early age into the mysteries of the faith of which they are the "first heralds" for their children. (LG 11)*
- *They should associate them from their childhood years with the life of the Church*
- *Family catechesis precedes, accompanies, and enriches other forms of instruction in the faith. Parents have the mission of teaching their children to pray and to discover their vocation as children of God. (cf. LG 11)*

- *The parish is the Eucharistic community and the heart of the liturgical life of Christian families; it is a privileged place for the catechesis of children and parents.*
- *"The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason it can and should be called a domestic church." (LG 11)*

Each of these aspects was lived out by the Martin family.

When it came to education, there was a dimension that Louis and Zélie did not neglect: teaching charity.

They were not satisfied with being pious, spiritual, and regular churchgoers. Instead, this living faith was manifested in an active life of charity and generosity. It is a whole aspect of life and of Louis Martin's life that we could emphasize for a long time.

One might say that they put into practice the words of the apostle James: faith without works is dead.

- Louis was part of the "Circle Vital Romet" with various Catholic groups that promoted charitable acts, like the conferences of St Vincent de Paul, which had been founded by Ozanam to visit poor families.

But their charity was also evident in their everyday lives. One often hears the story of the encounter with a homeless man whom Louis and Zélie met on their way home from church in 1876. They took care of him, fed him, and ultimately got him admitted to a home.

Zélie was not to be outdone: she herself also took on social commitments in the Church. The way she behaved with her workers also demonstrated her faith powerfully.

One can only imagine that this way of living served as a genuine school of charity for their children, teaching them to be open to the poor. They were models in action and in truth of the Lord's command: "Love one another."

When Thérèse explained that she entered the Order of Carmel in order to save souls and especially to pray for priests," we see that her motivation was certainly mystical, but also came from a desire to intercede and from a very strong sense of compassion.

In this way Louis and Zélie lived out the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council without knowing it:

Parents are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators. The role of parents as educators is so important that only with difficulty can it be supplied where it is lacking. Nowadays we sometimes hear speeches from people who would like to go in the opposite direction.

Parents are the ones who must create a family atmosphere animated by love and respect for God and man, in which the well-rounded personal and social education of children is fostered. Hence the family is the first school of the social virtues that every society needs. It is particularly in the Christian family, enriched by the grace and office of the sacrament of matrimony, that children should be taught from their early years to have knowledge of God according to the faith received in Baptism, to worship Him, and to love their neighbor. Here, too, they find their first experience of a wholesome human society and of the Church.

In expressing this first point, I of course think of parents and of families.

But I also think of all those engaged in the pastoral life with young people; I think of the life of our parishes, our movements, our ministries. How are we being attentive to transmitting the basics to the younger generations?

It's a daunting challenge with which we find ourselves faced.

Praying for vocations commits all of us to walking on this path.

3) Third point: They raised their daughters in an atmosphere of freedom and availability.

This point is also crucial, as vocations will be born in families where God's call can be received in a spirit of freedom and availability.

The most important aspect in speaking of how Louis and Zélie Martin raised their children is the way in which they accompanied their daughters toward their unique vocations.

It's a very important and inexhaustible point of reflection.

Freedom is an important aspect, under a double understanding:

- Freedom in the sense of not imposing any particular way
- Freedom in the sense of accepting the choice of their daughters without turning inward

One must also recognize that their record was exceptional... all five of the girls became nuns:

Marie: in religion known as Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart, Carmelite nun in Lisieux.

Pauline: in religion known as Mother Agnès of Jésus, Carmelite nun in Lisieux.

Léonie: in religion known as Sister Françoise-Thérèse, Visitandine nun in Caen.

Céline: in religion known as Sister Geneviève of the Holy Face, Carmelite nun in Lisieux.

Thérèse: Carmelite nun in Lisieux, canonized in 1925.

Obviously, it's the family environment that was the fertile soil in which their vocations were allowed to flourish.

- Observance of the Sabbath.
- Family prayer.
- The love of Church, as it is.
- A vigilant interior life.

It would take too long to describe all five vocations here, as each one was unique and distinctive.

A side note: the care of Léonie's vocation was complicated, much like her education.

As for Thérèse's vocation, only Louis could witness it.

One could say on this subject that joy and suffering were mingled in his heart.

On June 2, 1887, which was Pentecost Sunday, after having prayed all day long, Thérèse presented her request to her father. Louis objected because of her young age, for she was not yet 15 years old, but he allowed himself to be persuaded. He added that God "*did him a great honor*

in thus asking for his children.”

April 9, 1888, the day of departure: in front of the monastery door, Louis, through his tears, blessed his daughter. The Carmel of Lisieux now housed three of his daughters: Marie, Pauline, and Thérèse.

The next day, he wrote to friends, *“My little queen entered Carmel yesterday. Only God can ask for such a sacrifice, but he is helping me so powerfully that in the midst of tears, my heart overflows with joy.”*

As we pray, we can ask that families grow in this spirit of freedom and availability.

These were the few things I wanted to share with you.

They allow us to understand that in the field of prayer for vocations (as in all prayers) the words of Jesus may be applied: *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”*

May Louis and Zélie help us to pray in truth.

May the Lord grant us to welcome a large number of workers for the harvest.

+ Jacques Habert, Bishop of Séez

Translated by Martha Zumack for “[Blessed Louis and Zélie Martin, the Parents of St. Therese of Lisieux](http://louisandzeliemartin.org)” at <http://louisandzeliemartin.org> See the [French text](#) at the [Web site of the Shrine at Alençon](#). We thank the Shrine for permission to translate this reflection, and we thank Martha Zumack for doing so.