

LETTER TO THE ORDER
FOR THE CANONIZATION OF LUIS AND ZELIE MARTIN
ROME, 18 OCTOBER 2015
WORLD MISSION DAY

Dearest brothers and sisters in Carmel,

Next Sunday, 18th October, in St Peter's square, Pope Francis will solemnly inscribe in the canon of the Saints, the married couple Luis Martin and Zelie Guérin, the parents of St Therese of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face. The Church will propose them to the faithful throughout the world as examples of Christian life in the world, so that they may become a source of inspiration and companions along life's journey, from whom they can receive stimulus, light and comfort.

For all of us it is a reason for great joy and gratitude to the Lord, since it occurs as we have just concluded the celebration of the V centenary of the birth of St Teresa of Avila, mother of our religious family, in which the Church herself recognises that there is a place particularly rich in credible witness to the beauty and love of God.

This canonization is a further sign that the Lord gives us to confirm our faith and revitalise our journey as Carmelites, who are called to experience the "aggressive tenderness" of the Spouse (cf *Evangelii gaudium* 85), who out of his love wishes to kindle hope in the hearts of all people. We are living in an historical period marked by profound transformation, touching all areas of human life – morality, culture, religion, society, finance – at a global level, unleashing tension and fear. Feelings of insecurity and mutual diffidence come into existence, situations of injustice and instability are created, which are a severe trial to living together in peace and trust between people, essential for advancing together in a fruitful way.

The biblical vision of humanity, with its double division into male and female, and the understanding of its meaning with regards to life, are no longer a shared patrimony but are even questioned. At the centre of this battle for life there is the natural family, founded on the simple awareness of the providential difference between man and women which, within a committed relationship based on reciprocal love, allows human life to come into existence, be cared for and makes human life grow, not just for oneself, but for every human being.

The canonization of the Martin husband and wife is a sign of the times that ought to question us deeply since it has an epoch-making value. The Church, guided by the Spirit, decided – for the first time in its history – to canonize a married couple together, during the celebration of the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which has as its topic the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and the contemporary world. It will take place on the Sunday dedicated to the World Mission Day.

An exemplary family?

One and a half centuries have passed since Luis and Zelig were married in Alençon at mid-night on 12th July 1858. Since then many things have radically changed, whether it be in the Church or in European culture. In what sense can their marriage and the story of their family be a model for our times, when the model itself of family and present-day practices are so far distant from what they believed in and lived?

First of all, it is necessary to free ourselves from the prejudices and cultural clichés that immediately appear as antiquated and stale, belonging as they do to the eighteenth century. If we take a closer look at the life of the Martin family, we see a man and a woman who lived an everyday life, marked by difficulties which even today can be understood by us, because they are simply human: they were no longer quite young, according to the standards of that age (when they got to know each other – and after a few months were married – she was 27 years old and he 35). They got married and joined their lives together, learning day after day to share their abilities, their responsibilities, their burdens, joys and sorrows. Luis had a watchmaker's shop, Zelig had begun on her own a business to produce the famous Alençon lace. Their combined work guaranteed them a certain financial freedom, which was never lived either with ostentation or apprehension, despite the fact that, at a certain point, the social and economic conditions became difficult as a result of the consequences of the war between France and Prussia (1870-1871). Both of them working, bearing nine children, taking care of them, facing the sorrow caused the death of four of their children at a most tender age, was not at all easy, above all for Zelig, a business woman, who had the responsibility of providing work and therefore sustenance for her workers and their families. Luis was always at her side, sharing the difficulties with his wife, with serenity and sweetness, giving her comfort by his constant closeness, and at a certain point, putting aside his own work, to come to the aid of his wife's needs, whom he saw growing constantly more tired, helping her to carry on her business, particularly when the illness advanced, which was to strike the young woman down, leading to her death in 1877, when she was only 46 years old.

Luis thus lived as a widower until his death which came 17 years later, following a humiliating sickness which affected his mental faculties. He provided for his five daughters and their education, devoting himself totally to them. He decided to move from Alençon to Lisieux, uprooting themselves in order to give to his daughters the possibility of being cared for by their aunt Celine, with whom there was a relationship of respect and affection. The whole five of his daughters entered a convent. Accompanying them in this step – above all the tiny Therese, the specially loved one – was not a small sacrifice for him, but he accepted it as a generous act of offering his life and his children to God, as he had always done together with Zelig. On the other hand he had selected for his family St Joan of Arc's motto: *The first served is God.*

Marriage: vocation and friendship

This brief list of some of the concrete facts of family experience of Luis and Zelig allows us easily to make the analogy with the experience of so many families who today must face financial difficulties, reconcile the frenetic rhythm of work activities with the

education of their children, to give sense to the sufferings that inevitably knock on the door, putting family harmony at risk. But the reason why the Church holds their witness to married life as exemplary is quite deeper and concerns the truth of human love in the divine plan for creation.

If we go to the source of their experience, we immediately find two traits that make them relevant in illustrating how a relationship of love can “function” and in this way give a word of hope to couples, particularly the young, who are discouraged by the example of so many marriages “on the rocks” and, while preserving the desire in their hearts, do not believe that fidelity is possible any more, resigning themselves in this way to a lower standard of life.

The first trait consists of living the encounter with the other, as well as *marriage as a vocation*. Luis and Zélie were prepared for this by their former life, given that both of them had thought of living their Christian life by consecrating themselves to God. Is not this trait, obviously, being exemplary, in as far as the sensitivity and the aptitude to feel and conceive one's own existence as a dialogue with the Creator himself, who has a good plan and points out the way through signs that indicate, through an attentive gaze, what is the way to satisfy the thirst in one's own heart. It is only by receiving oneself as a gift coming from God and learning to look at the other as an expression of the Father's love, that it is possible to build your own house on a firm foundation. This was clear to Zélie when, seeing her future husband approaching in the other direction as they were crossing the St Leonard Bridge in Alençon, heard in herself a resounding voice which said to her: «This is the man I have prepared for you».

The second trait is a direct consequence of this gaze and openness of heart: *to live the relationship with your own wife / your own husband as friendship*. The esteem and respect that come from the spontaneity of recognising gratuitously each other as allies and the pleasure of being of help to the other, contain patience, humility, tenacity, tenderness, the faith and necessary curiosity so that a relationship does not degenerate into the search for oneself in the other, in the attempt to exercise power, into the strain and stress of repetitiveness. In expressions such as these: «I follow you in spirit throughout the day; I say to myself: “At this moment he is doing the same thing”. I can hardly wait for the moment to be with you again, my dear Luis; I love you with the whole of my heart and I feel my affection doubled even more through the privation than I experience than in your presence; it would be impossible for me to live a long way from you» (*Family letters* 108); «I am always most happy with him, he makes life for me very serene. My husband is a holy man, I wish one like him for all women: this is the greeting I send to them for the new year» (*Family letters* 1); or else, «Your husband is a true friend, who loves you more than life», there is nothing sugary in this, but the expression of the solidity of a sincere affection.

The different sensitivities, the so many small details of conjugal life, that at times slowly produce a distance and cooling of intimacy, were used by Luis and Zélie as occasions to exercise a glance loaded with sympathy and tender welcome of their own diversity, as is apparent in this quotation: «When you receive this letter, I will be busy putting your workbench in order; you shouldn't get upset, I won't lose anything, not even an old dial, nor even a small piece of spring, in fact nothing, and then everything will be clean above and below! You will not be able to say that “I have only changed the

place of the dust”, because there will not be any more left (...). I embrace you with all my heart; today, in thinking that I am going to see you again, I am so happy that I am unable to work. Your wife who loves you more than her own life» (*Family letters* 46).

Transmission of life: generating and educating

At the beginning, for Zélie and Luis, to live their marriage and open themselves to life was not easy. For them it consisted in understanding that to love God with all their heart passed through giving oneself with all one's energy to the spouse, so that the heavenly Father himself could take care of his creation by continuing to build up his Church as a family of God's children. It was the sincerity of their search for God's will and their docility to the advice of a priest who was guiding them, that made them understand the beauty of the vocation of marriage, that they had thought to live in continence. Nine were the children born from their union filling their life with joy: «when we had our tiny children, our ideas were a bit changed: we now live only for them, this was our happiness and we have never found it in anything but in them. In short, everything turned out most happily for us, the world was no longer a weight. For me it was the great reward, because I desired to have many of them, to raise them up for Heaven. Among them, four are already well taken care of and the others, yes, the others will also go to that heavenly kingdom, laden with greater merits, since they will have fought the longer» (*Family letters* 192).

In this passage, shine through some central aspects of the way to live in relationship with children, which families of today have need to rediscover: the birth of a child is a gift, always – even if its life be brief or troubled – since it comes from God and leads to God. To educate means, then, to bring to their awareness their own good origin, the heavenly Father, teaching them to desire heaven and to live this life – the difficulties, the commitment and the sufferings – as a preparation, something precious if accepted with faith and love, as steps in a journey that leads to the goal and increases the worth of the person.

All this is convincing and becomes truth that moulds awareness and gives strength to their steps, when children can see it and almost breathe it in the flesh of their own parents as something which gives meaning to time and activities. Zélie's longing for sanctity, for herself and for her own dear ones, was constant, however with the awareness of their own limits and of time lost: «I want to make myself holy: it will not be easy, there is much to put into shape and the wood is as hard as a rock. It would have been better to begin earlier, when it was less difficult, but, in the end “it is better late than never” (*Family letters* 110). She wrote to her brother: “I see with pleasure that you are very well thought of in Lisieux: you are beginning to become a person of merit; I am most happy about this, but first of all I desire that you be a saint” (*Family letters* 116). Also faced with Leonie, a daughter of difficult character, who at school was described as “a terrible child”, yet in the painful awareness of her great limits – “from a poor baby she has been covered with defects as if by a mantle. You never know how to take her” (*Family letters* 185) – she never lacked trust, nourished by faith in God's goodness and in abandonment to his plan for salvation: «God in his goodness is so merciful that I have always hoped and still do hope» (*ibid*).

We know well, from the testimony of St Therese, the great intimacy Luis had with God and how this shone through his face: «At times his eyes became bright with tears and he forced himself to hold back the tears; he seemed no longer to be tied to the earth, in so far as his soul immersed itself in eternal truths» (*Manuscript A*, 60); «it was sufficient for me to look at him to know how the saints prayed» (*Manuscript A*, 63). During his illness, in moments of awareness, while feeling himself humiliated, Luis repeated: «Everything for the greater glory of God!»

In an atmosphere of this type, what is spiritual is the substance of life and things have light shed upon them from the viewpoint of eternity, in a “natural” manner. In this way the family can reacquire its original distinguishing feature, frequently misunderstood in our days, of being «*the first place where we learn to communicate*», understanding communication as “*recognising and creating closeness*” (Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 49th World Communications Day), 17th May 2015).

A sensitive couple, welcoming and generous

Attention to one another and gratitude for being just as they were, practised in their marital relationship and poured out again in care for the moral and spiritual growth of their children, had in the Martin family an important complement: generous charity, welcoming the poor, attention to those in need. Love for God, when it exists, is inseparable from love for neighbour and, in a special way, from those who are in need of help. In the life of Zelig and Luis there are many episodes clearly standing out which show the beauty of their dedication towards their neighbour – beginning with the workers who formed part of their own lace business being treated as their children (cf *Family letters* 29) – because they were the body of Christ, people especially loved by God (cf *Evangelii gaudium* 24.178). It was attention to the whole person, to their body and their soul, which resulted in just wages, sharing of the family’s table, the search for care and a bed for the homeless, a preoccupation with giving the comfort of the palpable closeness of God at the moment of death by looking for a priest, generosity in helping financially a brother in difficulty, pleasure in being at the service of the joys of others, support in the suffering of those struck by a sorrow, visiting the sick.

The Martin couple’s attention to the poor formed part of a style of poverty that deeply impressed on the souls of their daughters the real meaning of the presence of Jesus and the truth of his Gospel. Their moderation was not stinginess, but an attitude that contrasts tenderness of heart with withdrawing oneself into avarice for one’s own time, own energies. The joy of poverty, which renders humanity rich, is nourished by the experience of possessing one’s own richness in welcoming Christ’s grace, by recognising and acknowledging our own weaknesses and faults, by receiving God’s mercy, to live in union with Him, in agreement with our brethren, towards whom there are feelings of mercy: «My God, how sad is a house without religion! How frightening death seems to them! [. . .] I hope that our good God will have pity of this poor woman; she has been so badly brought up that it is quite excusable» (*Family letters* 145); I pray a lot to St Joseph for the maid’s father who is seriously ill, I feel very sad that that poor soul might die without confessing himself» (*Family letters* 195); «I have had so much trouble that I have become ill myself [. . .] still I must remain on my feet a part of the nights to take care of

the maid» (*Family letters* 123); «I insisted so much that my husband decided to sell part of his shares in Land Credit, with a loss of one thousand three hundred Franks on the eleven thousand gained. If my brother has need of money he will ask for it immediately and tell me if it is necessary to sell the rest» (*Family letters* 68); «I have pleaded with him to come here whenever he has need of anything, but he has never come. Finally, at the beginning of winter, your father met him one Sunday that was very cold: he had bare feet and his teeth were chattering. Overcome by pity for this unfortunate man, your father began to do everything he could to get him into the Hospice. [. . .] Your father would not give in: he took this situation to heart and pulled out all stops to get him into Les Invalides» (*Family letters* 175).

The source of their holiness of life

In the sermon at the prayer vigil for the Synod on the family, which we just celebrated in St Peter's square on 3rd October, Pope Francis said: «To understand the family today, let us enter into the mystery of the Family of Nazareth, into their hidden life, daily and in common, like that of the greater part of our families, along with their sufferings and their simple joys; a life woven of calm patience in adversity, of respect for each one's condition, of that humility that is liberating and bears fruit in service; a life of fraternity, that overflows into feeling oneself part of a united body. The family is a place of gospel holiness, obtained in the most ordinary of conditions. Here is breathed in the memory of the generations and roots are sent down that allow us to go far. It is a place of discernment where one is educated to recognise God's plan for one's own life and to embrace it with trust. It is a place that has no price, a discreet presence, fraternal and supportive, that teaches how to go out from oneself to welcome others, to pardon and be pardoned».

This description gives us the measure of the contemporaneity of the Martin family. Their canonization shows to all families, first of all to Christian families, the extraordinary beauty of ordinary things, when one's own story is received from God's hand and is offered back to Him, with the reassuring knowledge that «the wisest and most simple thing in all this is to resign yourself to God's will and to prepare yourself beforehand to carry your own cross as bravely as possible» (*Family letters* 51), placing yourself «in the frame of mind to accept God's will generously, whatever it may be, since it will always be what is better for us» (*Family letters* 204).

Interior peace, the faithful tenacity in taking on, in a positive manner, the challenges life places before us, the capacity to live relationships with generosity by placing the other person in their uniqueness at the centre, which characterised the marriage of Luis and Zelig and their rapport with their children, are not the fruit of special gifts or of mystical experience. Rather, they pour out from taking God's will seriously, by entering into discussion and living to the fullest the Church's life, by receiving daily the grace of the Eucharistic sacrament and strengthening the bond with Jesus in adoration of his faithful and constant love offered in the consecrated Host, by praying personally and as a family gathered around the Virgin Mary, by taking part personally in the charitable works of the parish with a joyful willingness even in the midst of so many duties. And in all of this, to have time to listen to the children always, disposed to correct them with firmness and gentleness, to recount to them the life of

Jesus, to take care of their interior life by making space for God by an approach of trusting abandonment to his mysterious and real presence. To feel yourself looked upon with admiring wonderment and respected for your own unrepeatable individuality, recognised as an unconditional good, even when your own condition is a source of suffering, is a patrimony of well-being and positivity that cannot be bought and is indestructible for the person who receives it. It is human experience that the closer you draw near to God's gaze, the result is the opening of the doors of your heart enabling you to run along the paths to sanctity, as the story of this family clearly demonstrates.

The assiduous search for intimacy with the Lord and Mary, lived in an exemplary manner by Luis and Zelig, is the most precious message left as an inheritance to their own children and to us the children of St Teresa. In their canonization we can accept the invitation to the Teresian Carmel to be more a family, to discover the beauty and the importance of our daily responsibilities, learning humbly from the family, who live with commitment their own vocation and mission.

It is of great encouragement to verify that truly «uttering a “yes” pours out consequences that go far beyond ourselves and spreads into the world». In looking at the Martin couple and at the visible fruits of the sanctity of their being of one heart and one soul, we have a better idea of how, by learning to communicate, we become «communities who know how to accompany, to rejoice together and be productive, and we understand that «Families should be seen as a resource rather than as a problem for society. Families at their best actively *communicate* by their *witness* to the beauty and the richness of the relationship between man and woman, and between parents and children». (Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 49th World Communications Day, 17th May 2015).

It is my hope that, beginning with the grace that we receive through this canonization, we commit ourselves to knowing in full detail the witness of this couple by reading also their correspondence and that we become creatively part of the way that the Church is tracing out, inviting us to rediscover the family as a subject never to be ignored for evangelization and a school for humanity.

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