

PARENTS
OF THE
SAINTS

PARENTS
OF THE
SAINTS

THE HIDDEN HEROES
BEHIND OUR FAVORITE SAINTS

Patrick O'Hearn

TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

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*This book is lovingly dedicated to Our Lady, the
Queen of all Saints, and to my parents.*

“Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth.”

—Malachi 2:15

CONTENTS

Preface.....	xi
Acknowledgments.....	xvii
Introduction.....	1
Hallmark One (Part I): Sacramental Life.....	8
The Holy Eucharist.....	11
<i>St. Monica</i>	14
<i>Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin and Pierre Martin</i>	16
<i>Henry and Aurelia Galgani</i>	22
<i>Grazio and Maria Forgione</i>	27
<i>Stanislaus and Marianna Kowalska</i>	31
<i>José and Dolores Escrivá</i>	32
<i>Alberto and Maria Beretta</i>	34
<i>Antonio and Maria Rosa dos Santos</i>	36
<i>Servant of God Karol Wojtyła Sr.</i>	38
Baptism.....	40
Hallmark One (Part II): Sacramental Life and Our Lady.....	48
Confirmation.....	48
Holy Orders.....	52
Holy Matrimony.....	57
<i>Pierre and Marie-Anne Martin</i>	58
<i>Isidore and Louise-Jeanne Guérin</i>	60
<i>Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin</i>	63
<i>Francis and Emma Drexel</i>	67
<i>Alberto and Maria Beretta</i>	69
Reconciliation.....	71

The Anointing of the Sick.....	75
<i>St. Joseph and Our Lady</i>	83
Hallmark Two: Surrender.....	103
<i>Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin</i>	103
<i>Julius and Maria Kolbe</i>	117
<i>Luigi and Assunta Goretti</i>	139
<i>Giovanni and Margarita Sarto</i>	144
<i>St. Bridget of Sweden and Ulf Gudmar</i>	146
Hallmark Three: Sacrificial Love	151
<i>Matthieu and Marie Vianney</i>	151
<i>Gonzalo and Catalina de Yepes</i>	154
<i>Alonso and Beatriz Sánchez de Cepeda</i>	158
<i>Anna Velázquez</i>	166
<i>Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin</i>	168
<i>Stanislaus and Marianna Kowalska</i>	195
<i>Julius and Maria Kolbe</i>	202
<i>Grazio and Maria Forgione</i>	205
<i>Alberto and Maria Beretta</i>	207
<i>Ruggero and Maria Teresa Badano</i>	209
<i>Nikola and Dranafile Bojaxhiu</i>	211
<i>St. Joseph and Our Lady</i>	215
Hallmark Four: Suffering	220
<i>Francis and Margaret Bosco</i>	221
<i>Luca and Anna Maria Danei</i>	225
<i>Ruggero and Maria Teresa Badano</i>	229
<i>Nikola and Dranafile Bojaxhiu</i>	232
<i>Servants of God Karol and Emilia Wojtyła</i>	234
<i>José and Dolores Escrivá</i>	237
<i>Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin</i>	245
<i>St. Monica and Patricius</i>	266
Hallmark Five: Simplicity.....	273
<i>St. Bridget of Sweden</i>	276

<i>Francesco and Lucrezia Neri</i>	281
<i>Bernard and Anne Emmerich</i>	283
<i>François and Louise Soubirous</i>	286
<i>Isaac and Clothilde Bessette</i>	290
<i>Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin</i>	295
<i>Alberto and Maria Beretta</i>	306
<i>Bernard and Ellen Casey</i>	308
<i>Newton and Delia Sheen</i>	313
<i>John and Agnes More</i>	320
<i>St. Louis Martin</i>	326
<i>Grazio and Maria Forgione</i>	327
<i>Luigi and Assunta Goretti</i>	330
<i>José and Dolores Escrivá</i>	332
<i>Stanislaus and Marianna Kowalska</i>	339
<i>Servants of God Karol and Emilia Wojtyła</i>	349
<i>Giovanni and Marianna Roncalli</i>	350
Hallmark Six: Solitude	356
<i>Stanislaus and Marianna Kowalska</i>	362
<i>Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin</i>	369
<i>Servant of God Karol Wojtyła Sr.</i>	379
<i>Sante and Agnes Possenti</i>	382
<i>Alberto and Maria Beretta</i>	384
<i>Angelo and Maria Angelerio</i>	386
<i>Joseph and Anna de Liguori</i>	391
Hallmark Seven: Sacredness of Life	404
<i>Count and Countess of Altshausen</i>	408
<i>Tescelin and Aleth Sorrel</i>	410
<i>Bl. Joan and Félix Guzmán</i>	412
<i>Compagnonus and Amata de Guarutti</i>	416
<i>Parisio and Emilia</i>	420
<i>Giacomo and Lapa di Benincasa</i>	425
<i>John and Agnes More</i>	428

<i>Beltrán and Marina Yañez de Oñaz</i>	432
<i>Vincenzo and Cinzia Bellarmine</i>	437
<i>Luca and Anna Maria Danei</i>	438
<i>Jean-Baptiste and Jeanne Grignon</i>	440
<i>Jean-Baptiste and Anne-Barbara Labre</i>	442
<i>Joseph and Marie Jugan</i>	445
<i>Sante and Agnes Possenti</i>	447
<i>Charles and Brigid Savio</i>	449
<i>Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin</i>	453
<i>Siegfried and Auguste Stein</i>	459
<i>Innocenzo and Angela Pampuri</i>	462
<i>Stanislaus and Marianna Kowalska</i>	464
<i>Servants of God Karol and Emilia Wojtyła</i>	468
<i>Alberto and Maria Beretta</i>	469
<i>Ruggero and Maria Teresa Badano</i>	474
Conclusion	479
Saintly Sayings	488
Bibliography	491
Index	503

PREFACE

WHILE WALKING WITH my wife one December evening in 2014 as the sun was setting, the Holy Spirit unexpectedly laid this book on my heart. At the time, I was thirty years old, recently married, and had never written a book. And, truthfully, I had always dreaded writing. But somehow Our Lord, Who also began His public ministry at the age of thirty, had prepared me for this daunting project long before. Yes, everything in my life up to this point, especially my disappointments, desires, joys, and sufferings, had culminated in the *Parents of the Saints*, which took me over three years to write, including many late nights. This book was written to inspire other married couples to holiness while reminding us that our most important task as parents is to form saints.

As a young child, I devoured the lives of the saints and still do. Like many of the parents of the saints, the goal of my young life involved discovering my vocation. I remember many nights pondering what it was that God wanted of me and then pleading for Our Lord and Our Lady's guidance. Inspired by Sts. Francis of Assisi, Martin de Porres, and Thérèse of Lisieux and their love for the Holy Eucharist, humility, and hiddenness, I began making several discernment trips to the Benedictines, Carmelites, Franciscans, and Trappists in college before joining the

Benedictines for a few years as an aspiring monk. Reading these books on the lives of the saints enkindled my desire to be a religious brother, and I thought God was calling me to spend my brief time on this earth hidden from the world in a monastery interceding and adoring Him. But God had other plans.

Through some painful circumstances, God changed the course of my vocation and the desires of my heart. Eventually, He led me to the path of marriage and introduced me to the parents of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin, who changed my life forever. When God called me to marriage, I realized Louis and Zélie were two people with similar desires. Like me, they both longed for religious life, but, eventually, God led them to marriage. Ironically, every night before retiring in religious life, I knelt before a statue of St. Thérèse, which was next to my monastic cell. Looking back, I think the words of the Gospel, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9), also applies to most of the saints. Specifically, he who sees the saints unknowingly sees the hidden virtues of their parents shining through them.

Prior to encountering Louis and Zélie, I struggled for some time relating to the barefooted friar who slept on the floor or the nun who levitated in the choir loft. Many of our saints books depict such holy men and women. I still remained devoted to them, but I needed other saintly exemplars who experienced the challenges of the married vocation and, with God’s grace and Our Lady’s help, lived heroic lives. As a husband and father, I yearned to read stories on holy married couples and how they formed

their children, but those books were scarce. What were their secrets to sanctity? Were their children born saints, or did they also live extraordinary lives like their children? This quest led me to research fifty saints from the distant past to the present day, specifically with an emphasis on learning about their parents and what set them apart from others. In order to become the parents God is calling us to be, we ought to learn from those who have heroically accomplished this task. And what better guide than the over one hundred parents of the saints presented in this book.

I never intended to write a lengthy book. But, as this book progressed, I felt more and more saints whisper to me in prayer, “Tell my parents’ story. The world needs to know about our unsung heroes, who laid the foundation for our spiritual lives.” These parents have been hidden like a light under a bushel basket for centuries, and now God and their saintly children want them to shine in the present time, which is one of the darkest hours for our Church and our world (see Mk 4:21). God has the answer for our troubled times: He wants parents to cooperate with Him to raise up extraordinary souls. Our Church needs new saints more than ever—saints who will set the world on fire with the love of God and help save souls from the fires of Hell.

While discerning with the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal in New York City, it was said that one has everything there to become a saint, referring to their rich prayer life, religious vows, and love for the poor. Hence, part of my writing this book was to remind couples that you also

have everything you need in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony to live a saintly life and to raise saints. We must look no further than the godly parents of the saints. Their virtuous lives provide a sure pathway to sanctity by their heroic response to the graces of their wedding vows—graces that flow unceasingly from the pierced hearts of Jesus and Mary to generous couples. And, while each of us must listen to the Holy Spirit's unique promptings in our own lives, these devout parents have set an example for all married couples by challenging us to live entirely for God, our family, and others.

This book is neither an exhaustive list of every holy parent of a saint, nor does it capture every virtue exhibited by these hidden heroes. Also, the dearth of writings pertaining to the parents of the saints, especially those living before the last three centuries, makes it difficult to do justice to their lives. Moreover, there are many past and future holy parents whose children will never become saints due to their children's free will. The Rule of St. Benedict tells us that the abbot will one day give an account for all his children. And, if the abbot has done everything in his power to win them to Christ by his teaching and example and they still stray, only then is the abbot "acquitted at the Lord's Judgment." The same could be said of holy parents, who will not lose any of their merit, even if their children sadly stray or fall short of becoming saints, provided these parents cooperated with God's grace to instill virtue in their children and prayed for their salvation.

With the holy family as the model for raising a family, this book is written to shed light on the parents of the

saints so that individuals, regardless of their vocation, will be inspired not only to strive to be saints, but, if God calls them to the married vocation, will desire more than anything to raise their children to become saints. Yes, a father and mother who embrace the Gospel message, like the saintly parents featured in this book, can transform the world one diaper at a time, one prayer at a time, and one conversation at a time because the domestic church is the first school of the saints.

It is my prayer that you will be inspired by these holy parents and fall more deeply in love with God and His Church, and be convinced that holiness is found in the home as much as in the cloister.

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Finally, I give thanks to God for the gift of the holy parents of the saints and their splendid witness to the married vocation.

INTRODUCTION

JUNE 24, 1950, marked the first time in the Church's history that a mother would attend the canonization of her own daughter, the eleven-year-old Italian martyr, St. Maria Goretti. With God's grace, Assunta Goretti had achieved a feat that every devout mother dreams of—to raise her child to become a saint.

September 25, 2010, marked the first time in the Church's history that both a father and mother would attend the beatification of their own daughter, Bl. Chiara Luce Badano. Unlike Maria Goretti, who was stabbed to death, Chiara suffered from a lengthy bout of terminal cancer that ended her life at only eighteen. Just as the widowed Assunta Goretti remained by her daughter Maria in her dying moments, Chiara's parents watched vigilantly at their only child's bedside.

What a trial for these parents to witness the death of their daughters, both teenagers. No human pain can compare to the loss of one's child, yet no human joy can compare to the reality that one's own child would become a saint by keeping the Faith to her last breaths, fighting the good fight, and so enter into the Father's house for all eternity.

October 18, 2015, marked the first time in the Church's history that a husband and wife were canonized together:

Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin. This holy couple is not as widely known as their daughter, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who is one of the Church's greatest saints and one of only four female Doctors of the Church. Perhaps as impressive as having their beloved child become a saint was the opening of the cause for beatification and canonization for their third daughter, Léonie Martin, which occurred on July 2, 2015, in the Visitation Monastery chapel in Caen, France. Unlike Thérèse, Léonie was Louis and Zélie's most difficult child. In fact, Zélie once wrote, "It's her future that worries me the most. I say to myself, 'What will become of her if I'm no longer here?' I don't dare think about it."¹ Léonie, who became Sr. Françoise-Thérèse, a Visitation nun, could one day join her sister Thérèse and her parents among the canonized saints—oh, to be in that number! Louis and Zélie are among many holy parents of the saints whose virtues and whose secrets to raising saintly children can no longer be hidden from the world.

Few and far between are the books written on the parents of the saints, the churches named after them, and the feast days commemorating their virtues. Their mission was simple: to impart the Faith to their children and raise them to be saints. As spelled out by Pope Ven. Pius XII below, parents are the first teachers and primary educators of their children, and they are entrusted with the "solemn duty laid upon them"² to protect their children in their shell of virtuous living from the snares of Satan and to form God's adopted sons and daughters into the pearl of

¹ Martin, *A Call to a Deeper Love*, 274.

² Breiling, "A Saint to Emulate."

heroic virtue by leading them to the pearl of great price—Jesus Himself, hidden in the Holy Eucharist.

During his homily at St. Maria Goretti's canonization on June 24, 1950, Pope Ven. Pius XII spoke these powerful words to all parents. His Holiness stated:

You fathers and mothers, tell me—in the presence of this vast multitude, and before the image of this young virgin who by her inviolate candor has stolen your hearts . . . in the presence of her mother who educated her to martyrdom and who, as much as she felt the bitterness of the outrage, is now moved with emotion as she invokes her—tell me, are you ready to assume the solemn duty laid upon you to watch, as far as in you lies, over your sons and daughters, to preserve and defend them against so many dangers that surround them, and to keep them always far away from places where they might learn the practices of impiety and of moral perversion?³

Assunta and Luigi Goretti heeded this solemn duty when they came to the altar of God to pronounce their marriage vows. After Luigi's sudden and tragic death from malaria, Assunta provided Maria with an example of heroic sacrifice as she tended to the spiritual and bodily needs of her seven children. There is no question that Assunta "educated her to martyrdom," as exemplified by Assunta's cooperation with God's grace despite, at the young age of thirty-five, losing her husband and having to raise her many children alone. More importantly, Assunta

³ Breiling.

sought to protect her children from the evils that tear at the very fiber of family life by engraving morals and virtues in her children's hearts. In our present world, where the evils of atheism, egocentrism, materialism, relativism, and sexual immorality have infested our culture, parents like Assunta and Luigi Goretti are needed to raise children who would rather die than offend God. The Church needs parents who are willing to raise not just good people, but children who want to live totally for Christ during their short earthly pilgrimage so that they can live forever with Him in Eternity.

Hence, behind every holy card, image, and statue of the saints lies the story of a person who came from a father and mother. It is within this school of love, this domestic church, where most saints learned to pray, love, and receive the mustard seed of faith, which, in time, developed into heroic virtue. Fr. Stéphane-Joseph Piat, OFM, a twentieth-century French priest and an expert on St. Thérèse's family, reiterated this notion:

In order to cause a peak of sanctity to emerge, God works at and raises up a whole series of generations. Giants of holiness who rise up in isolation and detached, as it were, from the family territory, are rare. Alexis, "the saint under the staircase," who ran away on his wedding night; Francis of Assisi, whom his father cursed and disinherited; Jane de Chantal, who stepped over the body of her own son to reach the convent, remain exceptional cases. Normally,

the saint receives his early fashioning in the home circle.⁴

Unfortunately, not every saint was blessed to come from godly parents. For example, St. Hilary of Poitiers, a fourth-century bishop, was born to wealthy, polytheistic pagans. In the seventh century, the fifteen-year-old St. Dymphna was murdered by her own father because he wanted to marry her after his own wife died. In the tenth century, St. Romuald witnessed his aristocratic father murder a relative in a duel over property. Romuald atoned for his father's crime by undertaking forty days of penance, and eventually became a Benedictine monk. A few centuries later, Landulf of Aquino and his wife, Theodora, aided by their children, held their son, St. Thomas Aquinas, hostage for a year as they attempted to thwart his vocation by offering him a prostitute, whom he heroically rejected. Theodora attempted to save her family's name by allowing Thomas to escape at night so that he might follow his vocation to the Dominicans.

In the eighteenth century, St. Eugène de Mazenod grew up in a very unstable home environment stemming from his parents' tumultuous relationship over their finances and living situation. Despite Eugène's best attempts to keep his parents together, they divorced, which was extremely rare at the time. Many families would do well to remember him and seek his intercession as the patron saint of dysfunctional families. In the nineteenth century, St. Maria Bertilla Boscardin was raised by an abusive and

⁴ Piat, *The Story of a Family*, ix-x.

alcoholic father, and the twentieth century witnessed the birth of Bl. Pier Giorgio to Alfredo and Adelaide Frassati. Sadly, Alfredo was a pronounced agnostic, and his wife a lapsed Catholic. Neither parent realized their own son was dying of poliomyelitis, which ended his life at twenty-four. Despite their indifference to the Faith and their negligence during his final days—thinking his illness was merely rheumatic pains and sadness due to his grandmother’s death—Pier Giorgio greatly loved his parents. Pier recalled with fondness how he inherited his love for Tuscan cigars from his mother. He wrote, “My mother smoked over me when I was being fed at the breast.”⁵

While no parents are perfect, many saints and blessed have arisen, due to the grace of God, in spite of having godless parents. Yet many of the Church’s greatest and lesser-known saints, blessed, venerables, and servants of God were the beneficiaries of holy parents who laid their home’s foundation on solid rock, which is Our Lord and his blessed parents, St. Joseph and the Blessed Mother.

Luigi and Assunta Goretti are one of many godly parents of the saints whose mission was to raise holy children without any fanfare or recognition, save God’s glory. And their lives and virtues must be brought to light so that all might be inspired to do God’s will more faithfully and zealously. Throughout the centuries, the parents of the saints have gone unnoticed, hidden like a shell at the bottom of the ocean, covered with sand, yet protecting and forming the pearl inside, which is God’s precious saints who live on. But, unlike a pearl, forming and raising a saint takes a

⁵ Frassati, *A Man of the Beatitudes*, 68.

lifetime of hard work with God's grace. In fact, a lady who knew St. Louis Martin from his childhood wrote: "The grandmother, Madame Martin, lived next door to us; her son, Louis Martin, was the friend of my brothers. When he returned from Mount St. Bernard, I can distinctly recall him, and hear his happy mother exclaiming: 'Ah! my Louis, my dearest Louis, he is a real pearl!' She was right; and my brothers used to say to us: 'Louis Martin is a saint.'"⁶

Numerous parents of the saints displayed many virtues, and each parent was unique. Yet, based on my research, I discovered seven hallmarks that permeated their lives and even the lives of their children. These hallmarks include a devotion to the sacramental life, surrender, sacrificial love, suffering, simplicity, solitude, and the sacredness of life. And each chapter in this book centers on how these hallmarks were profoundly present in the interactions between these parents and their saintly children. Most of these devout parents lived very unassuming lives, so much so that the world and the Church rarely took notice. Yet, as will be revealed in the following pages, these parents were the hidden heroes behind the lives of the saints.

⁶ Martin, *The Father of the Little Flower*, 3.

HALLMARK ONE (PART I)

SACRAMENTAL LIFE

“Only this I beg of you, that wherever you may be, you will continue to remember me at the altar of the Lord.”⁷

—St. Monica

WHEN MEETING THE parents of a famous artist, musician, scientist, war hero, or writer, certain individuals, especially parents, might want to know out of curiosity: How did you raise such a gifted son or daughter? Had we lived at the same time and were fortunate enough to meet the parents of Michelangelo, Mozart, Einstein, St. Joan of Arc, or J.R.R. Tolkien, we might have asked: How did you, Ludovico and Francesca Simoni, inspire your son, Michelangelo, to sculpt and paint the most breathtaking works, including David, the Pietà, and the Sistine Chapel? How did you, Leopold and Anna Maria Mozart, teach your son, baptized as Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart, yet known to the world as Mozart, to compose such angelic symphonies? How did you, Hermann and Pauline Einstein, teach your son Albert to develop

⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 255.

groundbreaking scientific theories like the general theory of relativity? How did you, Jacques and Isabelle d'Arc, raise such a courageous daughter in St. Joan of Arc, who at the age of seventeen led several victories over the English army and became a martyr for the Faith? How did you, Arthur and Mabel Tolkien, ignite your son John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's vivid imagination and uncanny prose to pen *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*? Above all, we might like to know from these parents the answer to the question: How did you cultivate your children's talents? Did you teach them yourselves or utilize the world's finest tutors? Where did your sons and daughters acquire their talent?

After all, the following question was first posed to Jesus in His own country by His own kinsmen when they asked, "Where did this man get this wisdom, and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?" (Mt 13:54-55). While Jesus is the only person in the history of the world who could say that His talents and virtues originated in Himself because He is God, the saints mentioned throughout this book were not only the recipients of God's gifts, but they used these gifts exceptionally for "building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). What made the holy parents of the saints different from most parents is that they made sure their son's or daughter's talents were not buried, or used for their own glory, but instead honed them: "He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more" (Mt 25:16). And what separated the devout parents of the saints from most parents is that

they allowed their greatest love, Our Eucharistic Lord, to become their children's greatest love.

In Catholic circles, we ponder similar questions that were asked of the Lord when we meet the parents of a priest or religious sister. Many of us secretly want to know: What did you do to raise such a holy child? Was it the family Rosary? What spiritual books did your children read? Did you pray that your son or daughter might have a religious vocation? Did a holy priest or nun greatly impact your child's vocation? What can we do to raise our children to have a vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life, or at the very least lead a good life, and even more so remain Catholic for the rest of their lives? Most importantly, what can we do to raise our children to be saints? The late spiritual author and speaker Fr. Thomas Dubay, SM, conveyed the notion of human excellences that every parent hopes for in their children:

There are two kinds of human excellence, the first of which is on the level of natural talents, gifts, accomplishments. These occur in many areas and to differing degrees: intelligence, scholarship, literature, music, art, sports. The second and higher type lies on the level of personal goodness, integrity, virtue, sanctity. Here we find the beauties of selfless love, humility, honesty, patience, chastity, fidelity, generosity.

It is immediately obvious that someone can be eminent in the first area of talents and accomplishments and yet a moral wretch in the second. There

are few who excel on both levels: Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila. It should be obvious to a consistent theist that to be a saint is immeasurably more important than to be a world class scholar, violinist or an Olympic gold medalist.⁸

THE HOLY EUCHARIST

The holy parents of the saints were clearly concerned with both kinds of human excellence: natural talents, gifts, and accomplishments as well as personal goodness, integrity, virtue, and sanctity. For instance, St. Zélie once wrote to her daughter Pauline, “If you knew how happy your being on the Honor Roll made me! But if you can’t be on it again, don’t feel bad about it; I won’t be sad at all.”⁹ On the other hand, her husband, St. Louis, “showed that he was not quite pleased”¹⁰ when his daughters earned average reports for their classes. In the words of his daughter Céline, who would later become Sr. Geneviève of the Holy Face, “We were mortified on seeing his displeasure.”¹¹

Yet, for these parents, raising another Thomas Aquinas or Catherine of Siena was far more important than raising another Einstein or Mozart. While the world tells parents to raise their children to be successful no matter the cost, the parents of the saints remind us that our chief priority in life is to get to Heaven by following the Lord’s

⁸ Dubay, *Deep Conversion, Deep Prayer*, 15.

⁹ Martin, *A Call to a Deeper Love*, 199.

¹⁰ Martin, *The Father of the Little Flower*, 50.

¹¹ Martin, 50.

command, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mk 9:35). The parents of the saints were content with last place on a secular and perhaps even spiritual level, for they did not take a cursory glance at the Gospel like most; rather, they pondered the Word of God day and night, especially Christ’s words, “The last shall be first.” Let’s face it: last place carries negative connotations. Who wants to be last? Even the Pharisees had a strong aversion to last place because their pride wanted them to be preferred. According to Our Lord, “They love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues” (Mt 23:6).

On the contrary, last place does not mean that the parents of the saints put little effort into their vocations and occupations while expecting great results—this would be far from the truth. In truth, the parents of the saints aimed to give their very best because God expects a perfect effort, though, to teach us humility, the results can be far from perfect. Rather, last place meant that these godly parents let others chase after the things of this world—money, pleasure, power, and prestige—while they pursued the one true prize: Jesus Christ, present in the Holy Eucharist, Who transforms us. The saints knew that last place in this life meant first place in Heaven. Specifically, St. Zélie declared, “Only in Heaven will the poor be able to have the best, on earth one mustn’t think of it.”¹² St. Thérèse understood this well from her own father, who could have been even more financially well off, but chose to keep Sunday holy by not working. When it came to Eucharistic Adoration,

¹² Martin, *A Call to a Deeper Love*, 305.

Louis also sought the last place by sacrificing his comfort for others, as Céline noted:

This devotion to Our Lord in the Tabernacle manifested itself also by his exemplary fidelity to Nocturnal Adoration. He was one of the first to arrive at the appointed hour; and when free to choose he selected the most inconvenient hours, and gladly changed with someone else if a more favorable hour fell to his lot. At Lisieux, where this pious practice had not been established, he persuaded our uncle, M. Guérin, who belonged to the Board of Consultors of the Cathedral, to introduce it there.¹³

On June 7, 1897, less than four months before her death, St. Thérèse told her biological sister, Sr. Geneviève:

The only thing that is not *envied* is the last place; there is, then, only this *last place* which is not vanity and affliction of spirit. . . . However, “the way of man is not within his power,” and we surprise ourselves at times by desiring what sparkles. So let us line up humbly among the imperfect, let us esteem ourselves as *little souls* whom God must sustain at each moment. When He sees we are very much convinced of our nothingness, He extends His hand to us. . . . Yes, it suffices to humble oneself, to bear with one’s imperfections. That is real sanctity! Let us take each other by the hand, dear little sister, and let us

¹³ Martin, *The Father of the Little Flower*, 6.

run to the last place . . . no one will come to dispute with us over it.¹⁴

While Thérèse longed to be a martyr and to suffer more for Jesus, she finally realized that Our Lord had it right when he declared, “The last will be first, and the first last” (Mt 20:16). Like most of us, Thérèse’s revelation of real sanctity did not happen overnight. From an early age, she relied on her parents’ example, her own struggles, and much prayer to realize how she could fulfill Our Lord’s words. Most notably, Louis and Zélie reveal that those who wish to be great must strive to be the smallest, the simplest, and the least noticed in the eyes of the world. In doing so, they follow the example of Our Eucharistic Lord, Who willingly chose last place by becoming man, and Who gave us the Holy Eucharist as the greatest example of His self-effacement. Their lives will also reflect the actions of the Holy Spirit, Who acts unassumingly and unseen, but nevertheless mightily and powerfully. With God’s grace, the parents of the saints and their children were able to do the ordinary with extraordinary love and without pomp and circumstance.

ST. MONICA

As she lay dying in Ostia, near Rome, in the year 387, St. Monica, in her humility, made one final request to her son, St. Augustine, who is one of the Church’s greatest saints and prodigal sons, and, above all, the greatest pearl in his mother’s necklace of virtue. “Only this I beg of you, that wherever you may be, you will continue to remember me

¹⁴ de Lisieux, *General Correspondence Vol II*, 1121–22.

at the altar of the Lord,”¹⁵ she pleaded. For most of her fifty-six years of existence, Monica poured out her fervent prayers and tears at Mass, resulting in her two greatest converts, namely her pagan husband, Patricius, and her son, Augustine, who had renounced the Catholic Faith for fifteen years and fathered a child out of wedlock before his conversion. A paradoxical shift had begun with Monica’s request. Instead of beseeching God at each Mass for her beloved son’s conversion, Monica would now implore Augustine to intercede for her soul so that she might be delivered from Purgatory and thus enjoy eternal bliss with the Blessed Trinity. A look into Monica’s final request to Augustine also sheds light on the quote from Tertullian, an early Church Father, who famously penned, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”¹⁶ One could argue that the prayers, sighs, and tears of a holy mother are the seeds of saintly children. Or, better yet, a father and mother’s love for the Holy Eucharist is the seed of future saints. At one point, when Monica’s hope for her son’s conversion began to fade, a holy bishop reassured her with these words: “Go now, it is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish.”¹⁷ These bishop’s consoling words ought to echo in the hearts of devout parents until the end of time, especially those who pray for their wayward children’s return to the Faith.

¹⁵ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 255.

¹⁶ Tertullian, “*Apologeticum*.”

¹⁷ Cruz, *Secular Saints*, 537.

STS. LOUIS AND ZÉLIE MARTIN AND PIERRE MARTIN

In a small, northern French village lived a holy couple, Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin, whose lives will be discussed in greater detail than any other parents of the saints because their daughters documented their remarkable lives. Louis and Zélie, who lived in the mid-nineteenth century, are exemplars for raising saintly children. In addition to all five daughters entering religious life, and one of them, St. Thérèse, considered one of the greatest modern-day saints, the Martins themselves were canonized on October 18, 2015. Ironically, they never founded a religious order or died a martyr's death, but lived the little way—a life of doing little things for Jesus in their ordinary day, a practice that they passed on to their daughter Thérèse. The Martins' little way involved not only following “the way,” which is Christ, but receiving Him Who is “the way” (Jn 14:6) in Holy Communion as often as possible. For instance, Céline Martin, St. Thérèse's older sister, who was the last daughter to enter the Carmelites, and who would take the name Sr. Geneviève of the Holy Face, provided a glimpse into her parents' rich sacramental life when she declared, “Mother lived a life of deep piety. Every morning she assisted with my father at the 5:30 Mass; both of them went to Holy Communion as often as the custom of that time permitted. In addition to that, on Sundays they assisted at the Solemn High Mass, and at Vespers.”¹⁸

In fact, Zélie was so in love with the Holy Eucharist that, five weeks before her death, weakened by cancer, she still

¹⁸ Martin, *The Mother of the Little Flower*, 46.

attended Mass. Throughout their lives, Louis and Zélie were ardent devotees of the First Friday Devotions. Only two centuries earlier, Our Lord had communicated to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque His great desire that the First Friday of every month be devoted to honoring His Sacred Heart by attending Holy Mass, and that His image be placed prominently in every home as a means of offering reparation for the sins committed against Him, especially in the Holy Eucharist. Responding to Our Lord's request, Zélie wrote, "I never miss, nor does Marie and, naturally, nor does Louis, receiving Communion every First Friday of the month, no matter what difficulties we foresee that day. We change the time of the Mass we usually go to, and that's all that's needed."¹⁹ Zélie was so devoted to the First Friday Devotions that not even stage IV cancer could hinder her zeal. Her daughter Marie recalled in her August 9, 1877, letter to her aunt and uncle, only a few weeks before her mother's death: "Last Friday morning she went to seven o'clock Mass, because it was the First Friday of the month. Papa helped her along, for, without him, she could not have gone at all. On arriving at the church, she admitted that if someone were not with her, she would never have been able to push open the door of the church!"²⁰

During the Mass, the body language of the parents of the saints reflected the gravity of the unmerited gift of Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection, which are made present to us on the altar. Specifically, Thérèse wrote, "When the preacher spoke about St. Teresa, Papa leaned over and

¹⁹ Martin, *A Call to a Deeper Love*, 190.

²⁰ Martin, *The Mother of the Little Flower*, 105.

whispered: ‘Listen carefully, little Queen, he’s talking about your Patroness.’ I did listen carefully, but I looked more frequently at Papa than at the preacher, for his *handsome* face said so much to me! His eyes, at times, were filled with tears which he tried in vain to stop; he seemed no longer held by earth, so much did his soul love to lose itself in the eternal truths.”²¹

What an example Louis gave to his future saint by listening attentively to the priest’s homily. Such is the wisdom of the parents of the saints who recognized that the time spent at Mass comprised the greatest moments of their lives because it is here that Heaven and earth collide. In fact, Sunday Mass was the highlight of the Martin’s week, as Thérèse once said:

I return once more to my Sundays. This *joyous* day, passing all too quickly, had its tinge of *melancholy*. I remember how my happiness was unmixed until Compline. During this prayer, I would begin thinking that the day of *rest* was coming to an end, that the morrow would bring with it the necessity of beginning life over again, we would have to go back to work, to learning lessons, etc., and my heart felt the *exile* of this earth. I longed for the everlasting repose of heaven, that never-ending *Sunday* of the *Fatherland!*²²

Besides attending daily Mass, Louis made annual pilgrimages to France’s most stunning churches, such as

²¹ de Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 42.

²² de Lisieux, 42.

Notre Dame, Our Lady of Victories, and Chartres. While there, he offered the greatest sacrifice for his family by attending Holy Mass devoutly and interceding for them as the high priest of the Martin family.

When they were first married, Louis and Zélie made evening visits together to the Most Blessed Sacrament. After Zélie passed away, Louis continued to make daily visits to the Blessed Sacrament with Thérèse, who fondly recalled, “Each afternoon I took a walk with Papa. We made our visit to the Blessed Sacrament together, going to a different church each day, and it was in this way we entered the Carmelite chapel for the first time. Papa showed me the choir grille and told me there were nuns behind it. I was far from thinking at that time that nine years later I would be in their midst!”²³

Louis was madly in love with Our Eucharistic Lord. He would often accompany the local priest carrying Viaticum to a dying soul by holding a lighted candle in the middle of the night. In addition, Louis’s daughter Céline commented that “he always raised his hat . . . irrespective of the company with whom he was walking,”²⁴ when he passed a Catholic church. He once donated two thousand dollars for the Lisieux cathedral’s new high altar. Louis’s reverence for the Eucharist ought to inspire us today to at the very least make the Sign of the Cross when passing a Catholic church to show our unwavering belief in the Real Presence.

²³ de Lisieux, 36.

²⁴ Martin, *The Father of the Little Flower*, 6.

To understand Louis's love for the Eucharist, we must look no further than the example of his father, Captain Pierre Martin. As the spiritual leader of his family, Pierre was unabashed about his Eucharistic devotion. In fact, his own regiment chided him for praying on his knees long after Mass concluded as he savored the sweetness of the Lord whom he had just received. The captain responded to one of his naysayers, who questioned him about his extended thanksgiving, "Tell them that it is because I believe!"²⁵ That is why many of the parents of the saints and their children, including Pierre, believed that nothing on earth could compare with receiving or visiting the Most Blessed Sacrament. Thanks be to God, the love that many of the grandparents and parents of the saints had for the Holy Eucharist trickled down from generation to generation just as a waterfall trickles down the same rocks century upon century, smoothing the rocks over time while giving life to the surrounding vegetation, including a little flower like St. Thérèse. For those souls who are disposed to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion, no praise or worship song, Scripture verse, or inspiring sermon can compare to the reality of "the Word," Who became flesh in the womb of a young virgin, and Who becomes present in the appearances of bread and wine in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. And that is why Pierre was filled with prolonged gratitude in the depths of his heart well after Mass concluded, for to receive the Holy Eucharist is to receive all of Heaven, and the greater the gift, the greater our gratitude ought to be.

²⁵ Piat, *The Story of a Family*, 10.

Pierre taught his son, Louis, never to let human respect curb his zeal toward the Eucharist. Had Pierre merely gone through the motions, his soldiers might have questioned whether or not he actually believed that the Eucharist was Jesus' Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, or a mere symbol. Rather, the demeanor of Pierre and his son, Louis, suggested that they were not only receiving God, but even standing in front of the Beatific Vision—veiled, that is. In fact, when Pierre prayed the Our Father, many were moved by his devout recitation. And, just like those who were edified by Pierre's devotion to Mass and recitation of the Our Father, so too was Thérèse moved by the great devotion of her father, Louis, at Mass, which sometimes included tears. What an example that Pierre provides to grandparents and parents alike by his fervent reverence for the Mass and Our Lord's Prayer, which inspired those around him, but more importantly led his son and granddaughters to become true worshippers of God. After all, do not children and grandchildren seek to model their parents' and grandparents' behavior?

Because the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was everything to the parents of the saints, it was essential that Sunday, the Lord's Day, maintained its solemnity as the principal day for the celebration of the Eucharist because it is the day of the Resurrection. Despite ridicule from his friends, Louis remained steadfast in keeping his watchmaking store closed on Sundays due to his strict adherence to the commandments, especially the Third Commandment. Despite lucrative sales from country folk who came to Alençon on Sundays to buy goods, Louis sacrificed money

for obedience to God's commandments. Further, Louis refused to purchase anything on Sunday. According to Céline, "Once having noticed for sale on the passing cart of a hawker a grindstone that he wanted, he asked the man to hold it for him until the following day."²⁶ The Martin children were known to have eaten stale bread that was bought the day before rather than buy fresh bread on Sunday. The family rarely traveled anywhere on Sunday, with the exception of church, as they did not want to undertake anything that forced others to work. Zélie communicated Louis's love for keeping Sunday holy and how God blesses those who keep this day holy when she penned, "Here's a man who never tried to make a fortune. When he set up his business, his confessor told him to open his jewelry store on Sunday until noon. He didn't want to accept permission to do so, preferring to pass up good sales. And, nevertheless, he's rich. I can't attribute the affluence he enjoys to anything other than a special blessing, the fruit of his faithful observance of Sunday."²⁷

Louis's devotion to Sunday is a reminder to parents to curtail all unnecessary work in favor of a day of prayer and relaxation with family and friends versus society's need for constant productivity and consumerism.

HENRY AND AURELIA GALGANI

Living at the same time as Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin, Henry and Aurelia Galgani shared the same mission, that is, to raise saints. In fact, St. Gemma, who was Henry and

²⁶ Martin, *The Father of the Little Flower*, 11–12.

²⁷ Martin, *A Call to a Deeper Love*, 189.

Aurelia's fourth child and oldest daughter, was born only five years after St. Thérèse. Shortly after her birth on March 12, 1878, Henry moved the family to the town of Lucca, in Tuscany, Italy. In this land of saints, Henry wanted to provide a better education for his children. In fact, he was a direct descendant of St. John Leonardi. Henry and Aurelia's love for their children, especially Gemma, was undeniable. Henry frequently went on walks with his children and paid close attention to their growth "in virtue and learning."²⁸ Besides love, Aurelia also passed on her intense Eucharistic devotion to her children. Their son, Gino, who died while studying for the priesthood, was inspired by his parents and by Gemma's love for God. Gemma's spiritual director, Ven. Fr. Germanus, described Aurelia as:

Not only a good Christian, but a saint and a most perfect model to all Catholic mothers. Her prayer was continual. Every morning she partook of the Bread of Life with sentiments of vivid faith, allowing no obstacle to prevent her going to church, even when suffering from fever. From this divine Food she drew strength and spirit for the perfect fulfillment of her duties. She loved all her children, but above all Gemma, in whom she, better than anyone else, was able to recognize the gifts of God.²⁹

Well before Gemma could partake of the Holy Eucharist, her mother took her to Mass and to make visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament. Ven. Fr. Germanus said, "Her

²⁸ Germanus, *The Life of St. Gemma Galgani*, 3.

²⁹ Germanus, 4-5.

mother, a saint indeed, had instilled into her a knowledge and foretaste of its sweetness; and, in order to excite within her more and more a craving for the Bread of Life, she very often took her before the Tabernacle, whence Our Savior continually sends His divine rays into the hearts that long for Him, and more particularly, into guileless souls.³⁰

Because of her holy mother's example, which implanted an intense desire to receive Holy Communion, Gemma begged her father, her confessor, and the religious sisters to allow her to receive First Holy Communion earlier than was then the custom, a request to which they eventually acquiesced. Ven. Fr. Germanus once stated:

Hence her mother, well aware of her own duty and far from indulging in useless demonstrations of affection, set herself with the utmost care to cultivate in her child's soul those precious germs of all virtues. Here we see a mother becoming the spiritual directress of her daughter, and Gemma, in her turn, full of gratitude to Our Lord for having given her such a mother, was ever mindful of the assiduous and unceasing care thus lavished on her. She used to declare that it was her mother that she owed her knowledge of God and her love of virtue.³¹

Sadly, Aurelia battled tuberculosis for five years and eventually lost the fight at the age of thirty-nine, when Gemma was only eight years old. Interestingly, Gemma desired to hear her mother's last words, but her father

³⁰ Germanus, 12.

³¹ Germanus, 5.

wanted to protect Gemma from further emotional distress as she was already shedding many tears. As a result, Henry sent Gemma to stay with her aunt. Filled with spiritual foresight, and not wanting his wife's invaluable lessons to have been for naught, Henry sent Gemma to a half-boarding school run by devout nuns, the Sisters of St. Zita. The sisters' impact on Gemma was strong, as she declared, "I was in Paradise!"³² Gemma's father died at the age of fifty-seven from throat cancer, which left the nineteen-year-old Gemma and her siblings not only orphans, but also without money, as many people had maliciously taken advantage of Henry's generous heart as a chemist-pharmacist. Gemma's spiritual director summed up her situation best: "Thus, O my God, dost Thou will to try souls most dear to Thee, even in their tenderest years."³³ This is true of many of the saints' lives, especially those who lost parents when they were very young.

Although Aurelia died young, her children certainly knew, before she departed, the source and strength behind her virtue: the Holy Eucharist. Gemma inherited her mother's great love for the Holy Eucharist and longing for Eternity. Nine months after her mother died, Gemma would make her First Communion—a day her mother would have dreamt to witness. On June 19, 1887, the eve of her First Communion, nine-year-old Gemma wrote these beautiful words to her father:

³² Germanus, 11.

³³ Germanus, 9.

Dear Papa:

Today is the vigil of the day of my First Communion, a day for me of infinite contentment. I write these lines only to assure you of my love and to move you to pray to Jesus in order that the first time He comes to dwell with me, He may find me disposed to receive all the graces He has prepared for me. I beg your pardon for all my disobedience and all the pain I have ever given you, and I beg of you this evening to forget them all. I ask you to bless me.

Your most loving daughter, Gemma³⁴

Besides conveying her deep love for her earthly father, Gemma's words reveal her desire to be a pure tabernacle for the Lord. At the same time, her letter highlights the necessity of every father and mother to pray fervently for their children, especially as they are about to receive the various sacraments for the first time. Throughout her life, Gemma, like her mother, went to daily Mass. Gemma also said, "It was indeed my Mother who from my earliest years instilled into me this longing for Heaven."³⁵ Though Gemma would often ask Our Lord to take her to Heaven during her intense sufferings, she came to realize through her own mother's example that the Eucharist offers a foretaste of Heaven. This stirred in her heart a longing to one day behold Our Lord in Eternity, where He will be truly unveiled before our eyes in His full glory. The Holy Eucharist was Aurelia's only true consolation amidst her

³⁴ Germanus, 14.

³⁵ Germanus, 6.

sorrows, particularly her life-ending illness, for only Jesus can give us true peace when everything around us, including ourselves, is falling apart. Perhaps this is why Gemma once made the following resolution while on retreat: “I will often visit Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament, particularly when afflicted.”³⁶

GRAZIO AND MARIA FORGIONE

While one future saint emerged under the Tuscan sun, one of Italy’s most recognized saints was acquiring the seeds of faith from his devout parents, Grazio and Maria Forgione, in their small, southern country town of Pietrelcina. Grazio and Maria were known in their town for their great piety, which included attending daily Mass, praying the nightly Rosary, and abstaining from meat three times a week in honor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Grazio and Maria instilled in their seven children, two of whom died as infants, their great love for the Holy Eucharist and Our Lady. Grazio and Maria’s rich sacramental life was embraced by most of their children, but especially their second-oldest boy, Francesco, born on May 25, 1887, who later became St. Padre Pio. So in love was he with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass that Padre Pio, a Capuchin priest, spent several hours in preparation and often shed tears during Mass because he understood its mystery and richness. It is likely that as a child, Pio witnessed his holy parents shed not only tears of sorrow at Mass over the loss of their two children, but, more importantly, tears of gratitude because his parents understood God’s radical love: to

³⁶ Germanus, 15.

die for man and to humble Himself by becoming present in the appearance of bread.

Certainly, Grazio and Maria's devotion to the Holy Eucharist inspired Padre Pio to become one of the twentieth-century's greatest mystics: a priest conformed to the Crucified Christ by literally bearing the wounds of Christ, and whose reverence for Mass was so profound that his Masses would sometimes last three hours. Despite Grazio and Maria's solid faith and saintly son, this family also experienced a great trial, as their daughter Pellegrina led an immoral life. Another daughter, Grazia, was a Brigantine nun known as Sr. Pia, who, following the Second Vatican Council, left the convent after forty-three years. Padre Pio suffered from both of these trials brought on by his sisters and prayed for them daily. Though we are not sure whether Pellegrina ever returned to the Faith, what a cross Pio's parents faced to know that the greatest treasure they tried to instill in their children, namely the Holy Eucharist, had been rejected by their prodigal daughter, who sought the bread that perishes. Like Grazio and Maria, God sends each person trials to deepen their love for Him and to detach them further from the world. Unfortunately, sometimes our greatest trials come from those nearest and dearest to us. Grazio and Maria witness to the fact that even if parents are living saints, their grown children have free will and can choose to follow another path. Most parents tend to blame themselves, but it is not always their fault. All Grazio and Maria could do now was increase their prayers for their daughter, especially at Mass, keep the doors of communication open, and hope for the best.

To quote the words of the bishop who advised St. Monica when her frequent admonitions to Augustine fell on deaf ears, “Speak less to Augustine about God and more to God about Augustine.”³⁷ Adding to his parents’ sufferings, Padre Pio was restricted by the Holy See from celebrating Mass publicly for several years, and the Vatican released a public statement expressing doubt about the supernatural nature of his stigmata—the wounds of Christ present on his hands and feet.

From the years 1909 to 1916, Padre Pio’s superior sent him home to recover from an illness. It was there at home that he finished his last year of seminary, maintained his Capuchin vocation, was ordained, and began his priestly mission. After his ordination on August 10, 1910, which occurred before the required age of twenty-four due to fears over his impending death, Pio celebrated Mass at the local parish and taught at the local school. He lived in his own home near his parents’ house, which was purchased as a result of his father’s hard work. As Pio began to heal, we can only imagine his family’s prayer life, especially their daily Rosary as well as their holy conversations, now that Pio could share the spiritual lessons from his seminary and religious formation. At the same time, what a cross and joy for Grazio and Maria—the cross being that their son was sick, and perhaps the fear that he might never rejoin his order, mixed with the joy of being able to attend their son’s Masses regularly. What a dream come true for saintly parents like Grazio and Maria Forgione.

³⁷ Madrid, *Search and Rescue*, 9.

Five years after recovering from his illness, Padre Pio was assigned to the Capuchin friary in San Giovanni Rotondo, where he would spend the remainder of his earthly life. Not being able to see Padre Pio whenever they wanted was one of the greatest offerings that his parents, and all parents of religious, can give to the Lord. In fact, Padre Pio often commented that leaving his parents for religious life “felt like his very bones were crushed.”³⁸ His mother said at the time of his departure, “My son, do not think of your mother’s sadness at this moment. My heart is bleeding, but St. Francis has called you and you must go.”³⁹ Despite San Giovanni Rotondo being over one hundred miles from his parents’ home in Pietrelcina, the family maintained strong communications through letters and visits, and above all through prayer and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. On her last visit to see Pio, the seventy-year-old Maria knelt down to kiss her son’s hands for each of the family members, a sign of reverence to her priestly son and his consecrated hands. As she was about to kiss his hands for herself, “Padre Pio raised his arm saying: ‘Never! The son should kiss the hand of the mamma, not the mamma the hand of the son!’”⁴⁰ Such was the devotion and humility of Padre Pio, who recognized that without his mother’s love for the Eucharist as well as his father’s sacrifices, as will be seen later, he may never have become a priest. In fact, Pio’s father moved to San Giovanni Rotondo after his wife passed away around 1938 to be near his son and would

³⁸ Rega, *Padre Pio and America*, 11.

³⁹ Rega, 11.

⁴⁰ Rega, 95.

spend the last eight years of his life living with one of Pio's spiritual daughters, American-born Mary Pyle, who cared for him. Grazio loved to attend his son's morning Mass each day, so much so that, as he aged and the climb to the monastery became difficult, he rode on a donkey.

STANISLAUS AND MARIANNA KOWALSKA

Living around the same time period as the Forgiere parents was another pious couple named Stanislaus and Marianna Kowalska. Their third daughter, Helen, was born at eight o'clock in the morning on August 25, 1905, in Głogowiec, Poland. She would become St. Maria Faustina of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Helen's religious name offers a glimpse into her parents' love for this august sacrament. Our Lord once beautifully revealed to Faustina in the last year of her life something so many of us take for granted: "But I want to tell you that eternal life must begin already here on earth through Holy Communion. Each Holy Communion makes you more capable of communing with God throughout eternity."⁴¹ Long before Helen became Faustina, she witnessed her parents' great love and fidelity for the Blessed Sacrament. Faustina inherited her devotion to the Holy Eucharist from her father, especially by spiritually uniting herself to the Mass when, on rare occasions as a young girl, she could not attend due to sickness or poverty—the sisters had only one dress, which they shared among themselves. Sr. Sophia Michaelenko best described Stanislaus's devotion as follows:

⁴¹ Kowalska, *Diary*, 640.

These practices were characteristic of Stanislaus' personal faith—simple but deep. He himself would never miss Mass on Sunday and the feasts of the Church; and, as was the custom then, he would receive Holy Communion on the feasts of Easter and Christmas and perhaps some other major feast days. Later, when age would keep him from going to church, he would hang a watch over his bed so that, in spirit, he could participate in the Sunday Mass that was being celebrated in the church. Stanislaus likewise managed his household according to the commandments of God and of the Church, an age-old Polish heritage. One of his sons, who was later the organist of the parish church stated, "As to religion, Father was very demanding of us and of Helen, for which we are now very grateful."⁴²

JOSÉ AND DOLORES ESCRIVÁ

Another holy couple, José and Dolores Escrivá, lived at the beginning of the twentieth century in Barbastro, Spain. On September 19, 1898, they were united in the Sacrament of Matrimony in a side chapel at the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption. As parents, they handed on their great love for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass to their six children, María del Carmen, José María, María Asunción, María de los Dolores, María del Rosario, and Santiago, who would inherit their great love for the sacrament of love, as it is commonly called. One in particular would stand out among them, José María, who would

⁴² Michalenko, *The Life of Faustina Kowalska*, 15.

become St. Josemaría Escrivá. Note: He later combined his first two names due to his great love for St. Joseph and Our Lady. In 1928, he founded Opus Dei, which is Latin for “the Work of God,” whose mission is to help lay people sanctify the ordinary, especially their homes and their work. The seeds of Opus Dei were planted by the holy example of Josemaría’s parents. He once reflected upon his blessed youth, “My mother, my father, my sisters, and I always went together to Mass. My father gave us alms that we happily brought to the disabled man who leaned against the wall of the bishop’s house. After that, I went on ahead to get holy water to give to my family. Then, Holy Mass. Afterward, every Sunday, in the chapel of the Christ of the Miracles, we prayed the Creed.”⁴³

In addition to Sunday Mass with his family, Josemaría’s father would arrive punctually at weekday Mass every morning around seven at the nearby Church of St. James, when they lived in their Logroño apartment. Like his father, Josemaría became an ardent lover of the Eucharist, especially during seminary, when he was noted for frequently visiting the Most Blessed Sacrament during his free periods and sometimes spending the entire night before the Eucharistic King as he sought God’s light and grace. In fact, Josemaría once wrote, “I like to call the Tabernacle a prison—a prison of Love. For twenty centuries He has been waiting there, willingly locked up, for me and for everyone.”⁴⁴

⁴³ de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, 34.

⁴⁴ Escrivá, *The Way, Furrow, The Forge*, 778.

ALBERTO AND MARIA BERETTA

While many of the parents of the saints raised children who would become religious priests and nuns, they also bore saintly children who were “secular saints,” i.e., lay saints who were either married or single. Alberto and Maria Beretta, a holy Italian couple, were preparing the Church for one of her greatest lay saints in their daughter, St. Gianna Beretta Molla, when they exchanged vows only six years after the birth of St. Josemaría Escrivá. The Berettas’ love for God was so profound that the late Cardinal Martini, archbishop of Milan, wrote, “A family like that is a model for today’s families.”⁴⁵ Their eleventh son, Giuseppe, who was born directly before the saint and later became a priest, wrote these words about his parents’ rich sacramental life, which sheds light on how Gianna became St. Gianna:

Mamma was really the valiant woman of the Scriptures. Her day began early, at 5:00, when Papa awoke to go to early Mass and begin his day’s work before the Lord and in the Lord’s name. He went alone, because Mamma stayed home to prepare breakfast and, in a small lunch box, his midday meal. When Papa left for work in Milan, Mamma passed through our bedrooms to awaken us, caressing our faces. We knew that shortly she would go to church to assist at Holy Mass, and we dressed quickly to go with her, happy to kneel beside her to prepare ourselves to receive Jesus in Holy Communion and to make our

⁴⁵ Molla, *Saint Gianna Molla*, 23.

thanksgiving with her. What marvelous words she would suggest we tell Jesus! Then we would return home, have breakfast, and be off to school.⁴⁶

It is no coincidence that Jesus tells us: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). Were not Alberto and Maria’s “little deaths” to sleeping in each morning like the grain of wheat? Instead of sleeping in, the Berettas gave God the first fruits of their day by attending Mass. This couple witnessed to their thirteen children that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the greatest prayer of the Church and the best way to start the day. Even mental prayer, fasting, and good works are all secondary, since they flow from the graces received at Mass. The Berettas heeded the words of St. Peter Eymard, who lived less than fifty years before their time, when he so beautifully declared, “In order to comprehend the value of the Holy Mass, you must remember that this sublime act is in itself greater than all the good works, virtues, and merits of all the saints together, the Blessed Virgin Mary not excepted, from the beginning until the end of time. For each Mass [makes present] the sacrifice of the God-Man Who, dying as man and, as God, raising His death to the dignity of a divine action, gives it thereby an infinite worth.”⁴⁷

The Berettas recognized that in order for them to live their vocations heroically and give themselves throughout the day to their spouse, their children, their coworkers, and

⁴⁶ Molla, 24.

⁴⁷ Eymard, *Holy Communion*, 29.

their neighbors and work in a virtuous manner, they must first give themselves to Jesus, Who in turn gives Himself totally to each communicant, allowing them to radiate His fragrance to others. For Our Lord's fragrance, composed of sacrifice and sweetness, can only exude from souls who seek first to put on Christ and to be consumed by Him.

ANTONIO AND MARIA ROSA DOS SANTOS

While France and Italy have no shortage of saints, and some would argue that both countries have the most canonized saints, one country emerged on the world's stage near the end of World War I due to Our Lady's apparition in the tiny village of Fatima, Portugal, where Antonio and Maria Rosa dos Santos passed on the Faith to their children. Both parents were noted for their fidelity to the Church's laws and feast days. Maria Rosa taught catechesis at the local church and ensured that her family prayed the Rosary together. Antonio and Maria Rosa's love for the Eucharist was communicated to all of their seven children, but especially their youngest child, Servant of God Sr. Lucia dos Santos, whose cause for beatification was opened in 2008 by Pope Benedict XVI.

In Fatima, in 1917, the Blessed Mother appeared to Lucia along with her cousins Jacinta and Francisco Marto, who were recently canonized on May 14, 2017, by Pope Francis. Four years before Our Lady appeared to Lucia and her cousins, Lucia received her first Holy Communion in 1913 at the age of six, right around the time Pope St. Pius X issued the decree *Quam Singulari*, which lowered the age of communion from twelve to seven, the age of discretion.

While at home, Maria Rosa taught the catechism to Lucia to prepare her for Holy Communion, and also sent her to the local church for further instruction. By thoroughly preparing their daughter for her First Communion, Antonio and Maria Rosa were taking their responsibilities seriously rather than simply going through the motions. Lucia's words on the day of her First Communion echo the sentiments of her parents and her great love for the Holy Eucharist. She wrote, "I felt as though transformed in God. It was almost one o'clock before the ceremonies were over. . . . My mother came looking for me, quite distressed, thinking I might faint from weakness [due to the Communion fast from midnight at that time]. But I, filled to overflowing with the Bread of Angels, found it impossible to take any food whatsoever."⁴⁸

Antonio and Maria Rosa remind all parents that their primary duty is to educate their sons and daughters in the Faith and, most of all, to provide a witness that the Eucharist is the greatest treasure in this life. Many parents send their children to religious education classes or Catholic schools hoping that this will keep them in the Faith. However, even if these institutions and their faculty are faithful to the teachings of the Church, which should be the expectation of every parent, a father and mother can never shirk their primary duty to make sure that their children know the why of their existence, which is "to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in Heaven."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Apostoli, *Fatima for Today*, 16.

⁴⁹ Kelley, *The New Joseph Baltimore Catechism*, 9.

SERVANT OF GOD KAROL WOJTYŁA SR.

Three years after Our Lady of Fatima appeared in Portugal in 1917, one of her favorite devotees, Pope St. John Paul II, who credited his survival from an assassination attempt to the intercession of Our Lady of Fatima, was born in Poland. After John Paul II's mother died, he and his father attended Mass every day before he attended school and prayed with the scriptures in the evening.⁵⁰ Karol Wojtyła Sr. fostered his son's great love for the Holy Eucharist through daily Mass. While many fathers enjoy priceless quality time with their sons fishing, hunting, or attending a sporting event, Karol Sr. communicated to John Paul II that the manliest thing a father and son can do together is attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. By his very prayer life and devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament, Karol Sr. manifested Isaiah's words, "The father makes known to the children your faithfulness" (38:19).

Karol Sr. represents one of the many holy parents who revealed the splendor of the Holy Eucharist to their children by his own faithfulness. As seen in this section, others like Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin were of the same mindset. As the personal family acquaintance and biographer of the Martin family, Fr. Piat, described, the Eucharistic devotion and virtue of Louis and Zélie left a sort of indelible mark on their children. His words personify not only the Martins, but serve as a summary of every devout parent in this chapter:

⁵⁰ See Evert, *Saint John Paul the Great*, 4.

Their parents lived only for God, with the sole intention of accomplishing his will. They understood authority to mean service, which consisted in directing the souls confided to them toward the good. By example, more than by words, they instilled virtue and piety, knowing how to correct faults, inspire generosity, and make the most austere lessons attractive. Young children, observers and imitators that they essentially are, cannot be indifferent when they see those whom they cherish most attend daily Mass, observe strictly the abstinences and fasts stipulated by Church law, sanctify Sundays with inviolable fidelity, supernaturalize the duties of their state, venerate priests, take an active part in parish affairs and preside over the different rituals of the family liturgies: morning and evening prayer, grace before and after meals, and Marian devotions during the month of May.⁵¹

Make no mistake, the parents of the saints were convinced that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the most powerful and most important prayer in the world. And, therefore, these parents realized that the best way to teach their children to love the Mass was to esteem it above everything, as seen throughout this chapter.

At the same time, these devout parents show us that there is no greater gift a parent can pass on to their sons and daughters than the Holy Eucharist. Other gifts will never satisfy or last—toys will be abandoned, clothes will

⁵¹ Piat, *Celine*, 17–18.

be outgrown, cars will break down, and sports teams will disappoint, but the Holy Eucharist is the gift that never stops giving and always satisfies. Above all, the Holy Eucharist transformed the children of godly parents into saints destined to bask forever in the beatific rays of the most Holy Trinity.

BAPTISM

Before these holy parents could feed their children with the Bread from Heaven and the real manna in the desert from Holy Mother Church, they wanted to ensure that their sons and daughters were members of God's family through Baptism and consecrated them to the service of God.

Most parents are filled with awe and gratitude toward God when they behold their child for the first time. Some parents immediately begin to survey their new baby to see whose physical features he or she possesses. Some may even think about the child's future, while others contemplate which name in the Canon of the Mass will be the most fashionable for their child: Cyprian or Felicity? Some may even go one step further to ponder what order their child might join: the Benedictines, Carmelites, Dominicans, or Franciscans. The possibilities are endless for their child. No parent knows what the future holds, but simply knowing that God holds the future is enough to quell any anxieties.

Only one mother in the history of the world knew her Son's fate, and she is the Blessed Mother. Our Lady's eyes were the first and last eyes that Jesus saw on this earth.

Despite the indescribable joy to nurse God from her very breasts, Our Lady knew the prophecy: her Son was to die for the sins of many. She had to share Jesus with the entire world, just like every mother of a priest. Her child was not her own, but God's. Therefore, the parents of the saints revealed the importance of imitating Joseph and Mary by consecrating their children to God, just as Christ was presented in the Temple as prescribed by Jewish Law. As each child was born, St. Zélie Martin would say, "Lord, grant me the grace that this child may be consecrated to You, and that nothing may tarnish the purity of its soul. If ever it would be lost, I prefer that You should take it without delay."⁵² So urgent was Louis and Zélie's desire to baptize their children that their children received the sacrament either the very day of their birth or the following day if the child was born at night.

The same was also said of St. Maria Goretti's mother, Assunta, who sought to free her children from the bonds of Original Sin, which she loathed, by having her children baptized at the earliest opportunity, which was the day after their birth. These devout parents' zeal for Baptism reveals the solicitude parents should have for this sacrament, which forgives all sin and deifies the soul with the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity. Louis and Zélie recognized that their children were God's and not their own. Once their children were baptized, the Martins made sure their children carried out their baptismal promises by leading them in morning and evening prayers. Specifically, Zélie taught her children to recite the following prayer each morning:

⁵² Martin, *The Mother of the Little Flower*, 7.

“My God, I give you my heart; please accept it that no creature, but You alone, my good Jesus, may possess it.”⁵³

Louis once remarked to the priest at the Baptism of his first child, Marie-Louise, “This is the first time that I have come here for a Baptismal Ceremony, but it will not be the last.”⁵⁴ Contrast Louis’s response with today’s culture, in which many parents are quick to announce to friends and relatives after having two children, “We are done,” as if they themselves are God and can determine when a child ought to be born. According to the Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes*, “Children are the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents.”⁵⁵ The day after the birth of Marie-Françoise-Thérèse, now known to the world as St. Thérèse, the Little Flower, on January 3, 1873, Zélie wrote to her sister-in-law describing the birth and upcoming Baptism of this future great saint:

My little girl was born last night, Thursday, at eleven-thirty. She’s very strong and in very good health. They tell me she weighs eight pounds. Let’s say six, which is still not bad. She seems very sweet. I’m very happy. However, at first, I was surprised I was so sure I was having a boy. I’d been imagining this for two months because I could feel she was much stronger than my other children. I barely suffered a half hour. What I felt before was practically nothing. She’ll be baptized tomorrow, Saturday. The only thing missing

⁵³ Martin, 10.

⁵⁴ Martin, *The Father of the Little Flower*, 36.

⁵⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, 50.

to make the celebration complete is all of you. Marie is going to be the godmother, and a little boy close to her age will be the godfather.⁵⁶

Thérèse's Baptism was delayed an extra day as they awaited the arrival of the godfather, Paul-Albert Boul, who was almost ten years old and whose father was Louis's friend. Thérèse was baptized by Louis's close friend, Fr. Dumaine, at their home parish, the Church of Notre-Dame. On a side note, Pauline, Zélie's second-oldest daughter, said Thérèse's delayed Baptism caused Zélie increased stress for she had already buried four children, and Zélie feared for this child's life.

Roughly eight years after St. Thérèse's death, St. Faustina's parents, Stanislaus and Marianna Kowalska, took their child, named Helen, to the baptismal font just two days after her birth. Standing in the center of their village in Swince Warckie, St. Casimir Church welcomed one of Poland's greatest saints. The Sacrament of Baptism was administered by the parish priest Fr. Joseph Chodynski. The baptismal certificate along with the baptismal font, which still stands, recall this glorious event:

On this day, August 27, 1905, at one o'clock in the afternoon, the following took place. Stanislaus Kowalksi,⁵⁷ farmer, aged 40 years of Glogowiec, having petitioned for Baptism in the presence of Francis Bednarek, aged 35 years, and Joseph Stasiak, aged

⁵⁶ Martin, *A Call to a Deeper Love*, 103–4.

⁵⁷ NB. In Polish, the last name "Kowalski" ends in "i" for male family members, while it ends in "a" for female family members.

40 years, both farmers of Glogowiec, presented to us an infant of female sex, born of his wedded wife Marianna nee Babel, aged 30, at eight o'clock in the morning on August 25th of this year in the village of Glogowiec. The child received the name Helen in Holy Baptism, which was administered on this day, and the godparents were Constantine Bednarek and Marianna Szewczyk. The document has been signed by ourselves, having been read to the petitioner and to the unlettered witnesses.⁵⁸

Interestingly enough, “by ourselves” referred to Fr. Chodynski and Faustina’s father, who signed the baptismal certificate with an “X” as he did not know how to write his own name.

Five years after Faustina’s birth, another future saint was born in the small village of Skopje, Albania, on August 26, 1910. Her name was Agnes, and her parents, Nikola and Dranafle Bojaxhiu, had their third child baptized the very next day. Nikola called his daughter his “little Gonxha,” which means “flower bud,” because of his strong devotion to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who was not even canonized at the time, but whose holiness had already spread like a wild-fire across Europe. Peering into Agnes’s eyes as the priest poured the water over their daughter’s head and baptized her “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” little did Nikola and Dranafle know that their daughter would one day become St. Teresa of Calcutta, taking the name of her father’s favorite saint.

⁵⁸ Czackowska, *Faustina*, 33.

Almost ten years later, Karol and Emilia Wojtyła welcomed their third child and second son, Karol Jr., on May 18, 1920. He was baptized by the military chaplain, Fr. Franciszek Zak, a month later at St. Mary's Church on June 20, 1920, and was given the name of Karol Jozef. As his parents hovered over the baptismal font as the priest baptized Karol Jr., did they have any idea that their son would someday become Pope St. John Paul II, one of the greatest popes in the history of the Church? Probably not. But did John Paul II think his parents were saints? Certainly yes. In fact, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, the saint's closest friend and long-time secretary, who attended the opening cause for Karol and Emilia's beatification on May 7, 2020, nearly 100 years to the day of the pope's Baptism at the same church, declared, "I heard from him many times that he had holy parents."⁵⁹ Holiness often comes full circle because "saints are born of saints."⁶⁰

Of the many splendid churches and monuments throughout the world, some are overlooked because of their simplicity. In Assisi's historic Cathedral of San Rufino, a marble baptismal font located in the back corner would forever link three parents and three saints. Most tourists pass by without noticing it or appreciating its significance—the same thing can be said about the Sacrament of Baptism. Baptism is something lost to many in our Church because of its invisible effects, but not to the parents of the saints. In the late

⁵⁹ "St. John Paul II's parents' sainthood cause has officially opened."

⁶⁰ Fr. Sławomir Oder, postulator for the cause of canonization of John Paul II, as quoted in the Catholic News Agency's article "St. John Paul II's parents' sainthood cause has officially opened."

twelfth century, St. Francis of Assisi's mother, Pica, took him to the cathedral's baptismal font and gave him the baptismal name Giovanni. Roughly thirteen years later, Bl. Ortolana and Favorino Sciffi brought their daughter Clare to this same baptismal font. Besides St. Clare of Assisi, this couple raised another saint in Agnes of Assisi, Clare's youngest sister.

While Favorino greatly opposed his daughters' vocations, Ortolana later followed them to the convent after her husband's death. Prior to her marriage, Bl. Ortolana laid the foundation for a holy marriage and saintly children by a life of deep prayer, which included a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She is buried in the same church as her holy daughters, which hearkens back to the words from the funeral rite: "In the waters of baptism, (name of deceased) died with Christ and rose with him to new life. May he/she now share with him eternal glory."⁶¹

Seven centuries later, St. Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows, whose baptismal name was Francesco, was baptized on the day of his birth at the same font as his patron, St. Francis. It is very likely that Gabriel's parents implored God and, in a special way, St. Francis during the Litany of Saints that precedes the Rite of Baptism to help their son become a great saint.

While ensuring that their children had food, clothing, and shelter, the parents of the saints desired above all that their children were filled with sanctifying grace, which flowed from their Baptism. These parents gave their children natural life by way of the Holy Spirit, "the author and

⁶¹ Doyle, "Funeral Mass for Non-Baptized. When to Call a Priest?"

giver of life,” but now the Church would give their children supernatural life through the sacraments. It is important to remember that Baptism is only the beginning of the Christian life, for it ought to lead us to the other sacraments, as will be seen in the next chapter. And, just as every human being begins the size of a mustard seed, so does our faith. We all start small, and we must all start somewhere, but we are all called to continue to grow in our physical bodies and in our faith. And one day, with God’s grace and daily perseverance, we will have faith the size of a towering tree.