

If you've been with St. John Vianney or Holy Family the last three weeks, you know we're in the middle of a homily series on the universal call to holiness. One of the most important teachings of the Second Vatican Council is that every Christian is called to the heights of holiness—to the perfection of love in the heart—whatever our state of life may be. In the first week we asked what holiness is: being set apart by God for a particular calling and purpose—set apart from the secularity of the world and from sin so that we can live into godliness. In the second week we asked what connects with that holiness: the gift called sanctifying grace. When you are baptized, two things happen: God the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in your heart, and you receive sanctifying grace. That grace is your “treasure in heaven.” It can truly grow; I used the bank-account image two weeks ago. By our cooperation, sanctifying grace—our holiness, really ours by gift—is meant to grow throughout our entire life.

Last week, this week, and next week we are focusing on how sanctifying grace grows—how that normally works. Last week, with Carlo Acutis, we focused on the sacraments, Eucharistic adoration, and acts of charity as primary means by which grace increases in us and conforms us more to the Lord. Today we turn to a different aspect of how grace grows.

### **The Saints: Louis and Zélie Martin**

Our saints this week are Louis and Zélie Martin, the first married couple to be canonized together—canonized ten years ago this month (in fact, exactly ten years ago last week). As a first married couple canonized together, their life was fairly ordinary—and that is precisely the point. Pope Francis likes to speak of “the saints next door,” and that’s what we’re considering here.

A bit about their lives. Both were born in the first half of the nineteenth century in France and came from military families. Louis’s childhood was unsettled in that the family moved frequently. Zélie’s home was more rooted by her father’s work, but she experienced a cold home life from both parents, which left a wound. Both desired religious lives. Louis was rejected because he could not master Latin, a requirement then; Zélie was also rejected, though for less clear reasons. Louis became a watchmaker and excelled; Zélie became a lace-maker and a savvy businesswoman. Both ran successful small businesses. They met when he was thirty-four and she was twenty-six, fell in love, married, and had nine children, four of whom died in childhood.

The loss of those four children was the most traumatic part of their life. Rather than pulling them away from faith, it galvanized their faith and their marriage as they consoled one another and raised their five children to adulthood. Their home was marked by mutual love, by faith at the center of the family, and by concrete charity; they were active in the St.

Vincent de Paul Society. That’s their life—and they are saints. Simple, and we often make it complicated.

Pope Francis wrote earlier this month, on the tenth anniversary of their canonization: “The Martins teach us, above all: place Jesus at the center of your families, your activities, and your decisions.” Once more: the Martins teach us to place Jesus at the center of our families, our activities, and our decisions.

The fruitfulness of their marriage is notable beyond the ordinary. Their five surviving daughters all entered religious life. And for those who know the family, you’ve already guessed their youngest: St. Thérèse of Lisieux—Doctor of the Church and a very important saint. We turn now from Louis and Zélie to Thérèse. Although the insight came to Thérèse in prayer after she entered religious life, it’s fair to say she learned the “little way” from her parents—ordinary holy people, now canonized.

### **The Little Way of St. Thérèse**

Let me boil the little way down to one pithy line—keeping it brief: it’s not the things we do, but the love with which we do them. You can become holy cleaning the toilet, doing the dishes, going for a walk—fill in the blank. It’s not the things we do, but the love with which we do them.

How did Thérèse discover this? Growing up in a pious family, she had a great desire to be a missionary—she wanted to go to the ends of the earth to tell people about Jesus. In discerning religious life, however, she did not enter an apostolic community but the Carmelites, a cloistered community. A cloistered nun ordinarily enters and does not leave the cloister until death (barring serious reasons for medical care, which usually comes to them).

How did she reconcile missionary desire with a contemplative vocation? She prayed and struggled. She desired greatness and, reflecting on her own make-up and dispositions, realized that what she considered the “hard road” of sanctity—great external deeds—was not hers. Praying over 1 Corinthians 13, she realized that love is the center—the heart of the Church—and that for her, greatness would be found in being love, in being that heart at the center of the Church.

Looking at how she would grow in sanctifying grace and holiness, she saw that her disposition was not that of the “giant saints,” as she called them. She pictured holiness as a stairway, climbing upward in sanctity and grace, and recognized she wasn’t strong enough to climb. So, she flipped it: instead of becoming big enough to climb the staircase of sanctity, she would become little enough that Jesus would have to lift her—like an

elevator. She didn't live that long ago; there were elevators then. The point was not to become big enough to climb, but small enough that Jesus would carry her. That's the foundation of the little way. Yes, "doing little things with great love" is the tagline; but the first step is becoming little—humility. That fits today's Gospel: do not exalt yourself; humble yourself and you will be exalted. Thérèse would translate it: don't try to become big enough to climb the staircase of holiness; become small enough that Jesus has to lift you.

Two brief passages from Thérèse. First: "Holiness is not a matter of one particular method of spirituality. It is a disposition of the heart that makes us small and humble within the arms of God, aware of our weaknesses but almost rashly confident in His fatherly goodness." Father Val and I could preach an entire series on that last line—weakness paired with confidence in the Father's goodness. The point is not to beat ourselves up for our sins but to recognize them, confess, acknowledge our weakness, and say, "Lord, because I am so weak, I need You to lift me." That is a big part of becoming small.

Second, Thérèse applies this to self-denial—what we call mortification. Reflecting on her own life, she wrote: "When I speak of mortification, I don't mean the kind of penance practiced by saints. There are great souls who practice every sort of mortification since childhood, but I am not like any of them. All I did was break my self-will, check a hasty reply, and do little kindnesses without making a fuss about them, and lots of similar things." Do you see the connection with the little way? Not the big things, but the necessary things—breaking self-will, which is a strong mortification.

### **Daily Application: From "I" to "We"**

One last point—a practical starting place for the little way and humility for you and me on a daily basis. I don't always do this well myself; I'm a sinner. The normal routine when we wake up is to get caffeinated and start thinking about everything we have to do—a full list and a full day. That's the wrong move. The right move for humility and the little way is to wake, yes, get caffeinated, and then go to prayer. In prayer, instead of "What do I have to do today?" look at the same list and say, "Lord, look at all we have to do today. How are we going to get this done?" The difference is slight but crucial. I call it the "I-mindset" versus the "we-mindset." The I-mindset is not so good; the we-mindset is a beautiful place to start. As I said at SJV last weekend on the same topic: self-sufficiency is the silent killer of holiness. It operates silently because it is our default setting. Reliance on the Lord—that is the real beginning of holiness. So, let's lean into that.

Dear friends in Christ, as we receive the Lord in Holy Communion, let us ask Him to strengthen sanctifying grace within us. By the example of Louis and Zélie Martin, may we focus on little things done with great love, keeping Jesus always at the center.