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Ancestral Origin—Alençon— The Father and Mother of Thérèse Martin

The ancestors of St. Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus on her father's side came originally from Athis-de-l'Orne, a borough of some importance situated in the Domfront district. As far back as the sixteenth century we find agriculturists here named Martin, but authentic record of "little Thérèse's" parentage dates from April 2, 1692. On this day was baptized in the church of Athis a child named John Martin. Of a lineal descendant of this John Martin was born a son, who was baptized in the same church, April 16, 1777, and received the name Pierre-François.

This child was later to be the grandfather of the glorious Carmelite whose life-story we are about to narrate. In him we recognize the head of that saintly family from which she has come; to his influence may be attributed in no small measure her eminent and highly developed virtues.

At the period of their son's baptism, the parents of Pierre-François Martin lived near the church of Athis¹ in the house at present occupied by registration officials and the sacristan. Afterwards they moved to a more completely rural dwelling, the "Quentinière." From here, as it would seem, Pierre-François set out for Alençon for his first military training.

The military expeditions of the Empire soon accustomed him to war, and he acquitted himself so well that we find him in 1823 captain in the 19th Light Infantry garrisoned at Bordeaux.² Here, in an old house in the rue Servandoni, on August 22, his wife, Marie-Anne-Fannie Boureau,

gave him a son, who was baptized Louis-Joseph-Aloys-Stanislás, and was third of a family of five children.³

The brave officer was absent from home at this time, his company taking part, apparently, in the expedition to Spain led by the Duke of Angoulême with purpose of re-establishing the throne of Ferdinand VII.

The child was baptized privately, and weeks of waiting for the father's return followed. But he was not to return to Bordeaux until November. It was decided, therefore, that the solemn baptism should not be deferred so long, and on October 28, 1823, the ceremony was performed in the church of Saint Eulalie by the Abbé Martegoute, chaplain of the prisons in that city.

The saintly Archbishop of Bordeaux, Mgr. d'Aviau du Bois de Sanzay, attested in writing (January 14, 1824) to the authenticity of the certificate of baptism.⁴ It was probably on this occasion that he said to the parents: "Rejoice, for this child is one of the predestined!" This prophetic vision vouchsafed to the virtuous Archbishop was truly to be fulfilled in the life then opening.

Captain Martin was himself one of the most powerful instruments of divine grace in the training of his son; from the beginning he set himself to infuse into this youthful mind his own deep faith and ardent piety. As far as his public duties permitted he watched over the education of Louis, took care to have him thoroughly instructed in religious truths, and made him also commence his classical studies.

At length the hour of retreat sounded for the brave soldier. Bearing with him the esteem of his superior officers, decorated with the Cross of Saint Louis, which he had obtained at the age of forty-seven during the Spanish campaign,⁵ Captain Martin left Bordeaux for his native district, there to seek a well-earned repose and to provide for the future of his children.⁶ With this end in view, instead of returning to the little house at Athis where his parents had lived, he went to Alençon, drawn thither by the more favourable resources of education offered in that town. From henceforth his life was to be one long series of charitable works and saintly example.

From Alençon the old soldier, accompanied by his children, went sometimes to Athis to visit the cousins and other relatives who remained in the old homes. Young Louis delighted in these visits to country homes where the service of God pre-dominated over every other thought. It was time, however, to consider his future career. The army was not without attraction for the son of Captain Martin, but what seemed to be a chance occurrence was to lead him to more peaceable occupations. In the town of Rennes Captain Martin had cousins, watchmakers by trade. During a visit there Louis discovered his taste for this profession, and began to learn it merely as an amateur. During his sojourn in Rennes he received from his parents letters which show the character of the people of Normandy ennobled by the ancient faith. From his mother, a daughter of this rural district so attached to Catholic practices, he received the following letter on August 25, 1842:

What a joy it would be to me, my dear Louis, to offer you in person my heartiest and best wishes. Yet we must bear the crosses which God sends us, and thank him every day for the favours he has bestowed. I felt that he conferred a great blessing on me when I saw you for the first time in your Breton costume, your young heart filled with enthusiasm. . . . With what joy I pressed you to my heart, for you, dear son, are the dream of my nights and the constant subject of my thoughts.

How many times do I not think of you when my soul, in prayer, follows the leading of my heart and darts up even to the foot of the divine throne. There, I pray with all the fervour of my soul that God may bestow on my children the interior happiness and calm which are so necessary in this turbulent world.

Then this true Christian, in her fear of the pernicious effects of youthful presumption in her son, adds: "Remain always humble, dear son."⁷

In Strasbourg dwelt another friend of the Martin family, also engaged in the clockmaker's business. Drawn to this city by the wish to be near one of his father's old comrades, Louis still continued the delicate work to which he had

commenced his apprenticeship. This gave him an opportunity of closely examining the mechanism of the celebrated cathedral clock which aroused his admiration. Gradually he found growing within him an attraction for this work, which requires in addition to skilled hands so much application and taste. But Louis had higher aspirations than the study of an earthly career.

He had progressed in the practice of prayer and the frequent use of the Sacraments. Under this influence his thoughts no less than his love tended towards the joys of heaven. The beauty of creation, especially as shown in its varied aspects in the land of Normandy, filled him with delight, and was to him a mirror in which he contemplated the divine Creator. At the sight of the flashing dawn or the waning sunset his handsome and clear-cut face reflected in turn his gladness in the beauty of the divine plan, or his sadness at parting with things which must pass with the day.

He had reached his twentieth year when he reflected, with faith already supported by experience, that beyond all passing earthly splendour is the light of an eternal day which shines for those happy beings who contemplate the divine beauty. He realized that this great joy must be won by toil on earth, realized too that the surest way towards possession of the eternal reward of the invisible world is voluntary renunciation of the fleeting though alluring shadows which claim our attention here below. We find this youth, then, on a morning in September, 1843, slowly climbing up the slopes of Mount St. Bernard, gazing with wondering eyes at the majestic peaks above. He had travelled across France, partly on foot, partly by stage-coach, to seek at the Monastery hidden here amid the snows the secret of his vocation.

As he climbed upward, the wonderful stillness, the peaceful aspect of the wide spaces around, formed a powerful attraction towards this holy solitude, where he hoped to find, in familiar and daily communion with the Holy of Holies, that blessed peace for which his soul thirsted. On the threshold of life, with a realization of the storms that would beset him, he already said with the Prophet at sight

of the city which was to shelter him: "*Haec requies mea in saeculum saeculi.*"⁸

Louis Martin was received by the Superior of the Augustinian Monks with that kindliness and sweetness which instinctively opened all hearts. The Prior knew immediately that this clear-countenanced youth had not come merely for a night's shelter. His desire was to shield his innocence there till death, to devote his life, in accordance with the object for which the Monastery was founded, to the rescue of unfortunate travelers buried in the mountain gorges beneath the snow, or frozen by the glacial blast.

An attraction towards solitude, or the desire to be immolated in the service of others, is not always a sure mark of religious vocation. The postulant must have already received the remote preparation which would fit him for the functions of the Order to which he seeks admission. Thus the Prior set himself immediately to find out the capabilities of his young visitor.

"Have you finished your Latin studies, my son?"

Louis replied in the negative.

"I am sorry," said the Prior, "for it is an essential condition for admission to our brotherhood. But be not discouraged. Return to Normandy, work diligently, and when you have completed your humanities, we will gladly admit you to our Novitiate."⁹

Sad at heart, the pilgrim returned down the steep of the glaciers, like a traveller who has been driven back into exile from the shores of his native land.

Would Captain Martin's means allow him to incur the expense of his son's classical studies? A loyal effort was made; Louis set himself earnestly to the study of Latin under the Curé of St. Leonard of Alençon. But illness soon compelled him to lay aside his books, and he decided finally to return to the watchmaker's workshop. After some time in Paris, where in all probability he completed his apprenticeship, he returned to the little town in Normandy made dear to him by family ties. Here he lived with his parents in the rue du Pont-Neuf, dividing his time between work, prayer,

and some suitable distractions, in which he was joined by a few chosen friends, devoted like himself to works of charity.

In this way he lived until his thirty-fifth year, thinking still perhaps of the monastic life; at all events manifesting no desire to enter the married state, although his mother wished him to marry.

About this time a young daughter of Normandy, Zélie Guérin, born at Saint Denis-sur-Sarthon (Orne), presented herself at the Hôtel-Dieu of Alençon, directed by the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul. She belonged to one of the most religious families of the district. Her forefathers had given asylum to the clergy during the Revolution, and her own father was familiar in his childhood days with the ruses employed to evade the enraged pursuers of his uncle, a priest whom they had concealed in their house. Later, this child, having come to man's estate, was to take his part, like Pierre-François Martin, in the military campaigns of the Empire, was afterwards to serve as a *gendarme*, and then to retire to Alençon after forty years of military service.¹⁰

He had three children: an elder daughter, Marie Louise, who died, a Visitation nun, at Le Mans; Zélie, with whom we shall be largely concerned in the course of our narrative; and a son, Isidore, who early gave signs of his attraction to the medical profession.

As pupil of the *Dames de l' Adoration* at Alençon, Zélie Guérin had received a careful education, as attested by her numerous successes in study; she had also been formed there to true piety, and desired to serve God in the person of His poor. She confided her wishes to the Superioress of the Hôtel-Dieu, who declared unhesitatingly that God had other designs for Zélie than the religious life.

Disappointed, but sustained by faith, the young girl remained with her brother, sister, and parents, to await the decision of Providence regarding her future.

Her father, in 1843, had purchased a comfortable house, No. 42, rue Saint Blaise, where later he lived with his children. But the expenses consequent on the education of his son and daughters had made considerable inroads on the pension of the old soldier. Zélie, understanding that she was

destined for the married state, felt that she must increase her dowry in order to meet the calls of her future life. She was in considerable anxiety as to the means of so doing, when, on December 8, 1851, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, she was suddenly interrupted in the midst of an absorbing work which excluded all freaks of the imagination. An interior voice seemed to give her this command: "Have Alençon point lace made."¹¹ This was the reply given by the Blessed Virgin to the anxious doubts which Zélie had confided to her.

The world-wide appreciation of this beautiful lace, the one kind in France worked entirely with the needle, is well known. Zélie Guérin studied the different processes of the manufacture, specialized in the assemblage of the pieces already prepared, and finally placed herself at the head of one of these enterprises for the production of that light and delicate lace destined to complete the richest attire in the land. Her employées worked in their own homes, whilst she took charge of the orders, supplied the designs, and carefully watched over the execution of the work. Soon the lace which she produced was classed amongst the most beautiful; 500 francs a metre was a not unusual price for her work, so that the profits soon grew into a capital of some importance.

Isidore Guérin, Zélie's father, lived at a short distance from the Church of Notre-Dame, and Captain Martin with his wife and son had at this time, as we know, a house in rue du Pont Neuf in the parish of Saint Pierre de Montsort.

Active, industrious, with a skilful hand, and a finely developed artistic taste, Louis Martin promised fair to become an expert in his profession; he had thoughts also of joining the lucrative business of jeweller to his trade of watchmaker. No acquaintanceship had as yet sprung up between the two families. Immersed in her daily task, Zélie Guérin satisfied herself with a petition to Providence to give her a worthy husband. Catholic not only in name, but in practice. She had asked God too, with profound faith, to bless her future union with many children, who might all be some in way consecrated to His service.

One day as she was crossing the bridge of Saint Leonard she met a young man, whose dignified and distinguished demeanour claimed her attention in a remarkable manner. She did not know him, but an interior voice made manifest to her once more the Providence of God watching over her life: "This is he whom I have prepared for thee." Those words led to the two lives being drawn together; and they were indissolubly united on July 13, 1858, in the Church of Notre-Dame at Alençon.

According to family records, the young husband, thinking, as many saints had done, to join to the blessing of Christian marriage the honour of continence, expressed this wish to his wife on the evening of their marriage. He was, without knowing it, going against what she felt to be God's design for her. Having learned this after a year, Louis renounced his plan of special perfection, and the young couple lived in conjugal fidelity, in perfect union of heart and will.

They had established themselves in the rue du Pont Neuf. The watchmaking, to which Louis had now joined the sale of jewellery, added to the Alençon point lace manufacture, proved a considerable source of income to the family. They set earnestly to work; reliable customers came in numbers; the future seemed assured.

The newly-married pair realized every day more and more the blessing of mutual charity. Endowed with a practical mind, with rare gifts of energy and untiring activity, Mme Martin was above all remarkable for her wonderful spirit of faith. One sole object dominated and directed her life. She could in all truth make this maxim of St. Françoise d'Amboise her own: "So act that in all things God be loved above all."

Louis, with perhaps a calmer disposition, his taste for religious communion with nature, his love for the poetry of light and shade ever varying with the mists of his homeland, was a model of that patient and active charity which lends so much charm and happiness to life in common. On one occasion he was seen to raise up a drunken man from the thronged street where he had fallen, then, without the

slightest regard for human respect, take his box of tools, give him the support of his arm, and with gentle but firm admonition conduct him to his home. Again, one day at a railway station, having come across a poor victim of epilepsy dying with hunger and without sufficient money to take him back to his own village, the young man took off his hat, and, placing therein the first alms himself, went round to all the passengers for money to enable the poor sufferer to reach his home.

In the service of God, more especially in devotion to Jesus in the Tabernacle, did the intimate union of the newly-married couple find its full expression. M. and Mme Martin attended Mass every morning at half-past five; they knelt together at the Holy Table; and although very frequent communion was not yet in vogue in the French parishes, they endeavoured to receive the Holy Eucharist more frequently than every Sunday.

Despite the fatiguing duties of the household and the absorbing labour of the husband's daily business, at a time too when the spirit of mortification was growing weak in the better class families, they observed to the letter the fasts and abstinence of the Church. Another practice of renunciation must have proved very meritorious for them. It was customary at that time amongst the young country folk to come to Alençon every Sunday to make their purchases or on pleasure bent. The jewellers' windows formed the chief attraction for the gentler sex. When a marriage was in view their fiancés were liberal in the purchase of rings, trinkets, ear-rings, and the other ornaments so much appreciated, especially by village folk. But when the intending purchasers came to Louis Martin's establishment on Sunday they found the door closed; all business was suspended here out of respect for the Lord's day. This line of action entailed considerable loss for the young man. Some of his friends counselled a less rigorous practice which would not at the same time militate against the day of rest:

"Leave the side-door at least open; in this way your shop will to all appearances remain closed, while purchasers can come in quietly and you will not lose good sales."

"I prefer," replied Louis, "to draw down on my house the blessing of God."

This spirit of faith so openly manifested showed itself in a still more touching way in the quiet of the home. They prayed in common, endeavouring to put into the prayer addressed to God the Father the fervour of Captain Martin, whose accents as he recited the *Our Father* moved others to tears.

A habitual practice in the household was the study of the Lives of the Saints, in whom they recognized a spiritual brotherhood.

One day, as the young wife read the life of Madame Acarie, who after giving all her daughters to Carmel, consecrated herself also to God in the religious life, she exclaimed: "All her daughters Carmelites! Is it possible that a mother may have so great an honour?"¹²

With these thoughts in her heart she was glad to see her husband take his place each succeeding month at the nocturnal Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Whenever she accompanied him on a walk into the country, her greatest joy was to turn with him into some quiet church, where, in his devotion, he would kneel before a tabernacle too often abandoned.

Absorbed in his business, Louis Martin allowed himself from time to time one little recreation. He loved fishing, and often plied the hook along the Sarthe, whiling away a few hours in the charm of horizons veiled in blue mists. In this, as in other things, he wished that honest recreation should be seasoned with charity; eel and trout were sent for the most part to the Monastery of the Poor Clares at Alençon.

Following the example of her husband, Mme Martin was always ready to relieve misery and suffering. A servant in the household fell ill with a very painful attack of articular rheumatism. Her parents were poor and could not procure for her the proper treatment. The mistress devoted herself to the servant night and day until she was completely cured. At another time, Mme Martin was compelled to appear before a magistrate in consequence of her endeavours to rescue a child from the maltreatment of two evil old

women, who had taken charge of her education, but who were exploiting her in a shameful manner.¹³

What, then, was wanting to these true Christians save to be enabled to transmit their own virtues to a numerous posterity? God gave a grand answer to the prayer of His servants; in a few years nine children were born to them.

They wished that each child from its entrance into the world should be consecrated to the Queen of heaven by receiving the name of Marie, and in time Marie-Louise, Marie-Pauline, Marie-Léonie, and Marie-Hélène, came to increase the joy of the home.

The parents, in their desire to multiply here below the noble works of their family, sought from God, by the intercession of St. Joseph, "a little missionary."

They believed that their prayer was heard when to the little daughters who filled the house with laughter and song was added a baby brother, who received the names of Marie-Joseph-Louis. Alas! scarce had he learned to smile at his mother, when, five months after his birth, he departed from this earth to intercede amid the angels for his parents and sisters.

Supplications and novenas were renewed with redoubled fervour; a priest, a child who would be a "great saint," was the goal of all their desires. Another little cherub seemed sent as an answer from above, but eight months later he too, Marie-Joseph-Jean-Baptiste, departed, to fulfil in heaven the mission that God saw fit to deny him in this world.

With this second cross, they understand that "the thoughts of the Lord are not our thoughts, His ways are not our ways."¹⁴ And they ceased their supplications for a missionary. But who, considering the lives of the remaining children of Louis Martin, would have the hardihood to say that God had rejected his petition?

The two elder daughters were now old enough for school. Mme Martin considered that she could not do better than confide them to the care of her saintly sister, the Visitation nun, so Marie-Louise and Marie-Pauline were sent as boarders to the convent at Le Mans.

In order to meet the additional expense of educating her children and provide generally for her growing family, the courageous mother resolved to apply herself with renewed energy to the development of her lace industry. She accepted large orders, devoted long hours to the training of her workers, attended personally to the extensive commercial correspondence entailed, and brought to her artistic work so much activity and good taste that in a short time the renown and extent of her enterprise had greatly increased.

Such a life of activity left little time for recreation or rest. Mme Martin made a virtue of necessity. "Truth to tell," she wrote, "I seek no other recreation than to sit at my window putting together the pieces of my 'Point d'Alençon.'" ¹⁵

In spite of all preoccupations her greatest joy was in her family life; it was, in fact, her one joy on earth, and she endeavoured to fulfil every duty to her children with characteristic simplicity, devotion, and good-will.

She had, as we know, one brother, Isidore Guérin, who, before he became the exemplary Catholic that we find him later, had been, as a young medical student, drawn to the dissipations of Paris life. We find his sister addressing to him at the time letters such as these:

I am, my dear brother, greatly disquieted on your account, My husband constantly speaks to me with apprehension concerning you. He is well acquainted with Paris, and says that you will be surrounded by temptations which you will not resist because you are not sufficiently grounded in piety. He has given me an account of some of his own experiences, and shown me what courage is required to come out victorious. If you but knew through what trials he has passed! I beseech you, my dear Isidore, to act as he acted, be fervent in prayer, and you will not be carried away by the torrent. If you go under once you are lost. It is but the first step that counts on the road to evil as on the path to virtue; afterwards you will be carried on by the current.

If you agree to do one thing which I am going to ask of you, and which you might well be willing to give me as a New Year's gift, I shall be happier than if you gave me all Paris. You live quite near