

SAINT THÉRÈSE THE LITTLE FLOWER

The Making of a Saint

by

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*And we know that to them that love God,
all things work together unto good, to
such as, according to his purpose, are
called to be saints.*

—Romans 8:28

*More than ever I realize that the smallest
happenings of our life are guided by God.*

—St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

A saint is not a freak. He is, as we all are, a being born with a normal share of human frailties and burdened with hereditary flaws and powers such as afflict and strengthen all the sons and daughters of Adam. He has not escaped the stain of Original Sin. And as he passes from infancy, through adolescence, to maturity, he, too, is subject to the multitude of influences that press upon us all, and he has our own same freedom to accept or reject them.

Therefore, when we study a saint, we cannot know him fully unless we know what these influences were, how he was tugged this way and that, who his parents and teachers were, the effect on him of his brothers and sisters, his friends and his acquaintances. We know, of course, that it is the grace of God which makes a saint. But we are left free to co-operate with that grace or to turn aside from it. The choice is ours. In this matter, God waives His omnipotence. He persuades. He does not compel. And often, as the stories of the saints repeatedly show, He does not always choose to act directly upon the soul. He sometimes prefers to use agents, to allow His creatures to act for Him in the work of making a saint.

So it was with the great saint of modern times, St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus. Sanctity has its myster-

ies which we shall never understand in this life, and it is foolish presumption to pretend we can fully explain it, either its genesis, its development, or its full flowering. We can describe, but we cannot penetrate into its fiery depths. Even the great mystical saints stammer or fail when they try to tell what they know. Yet it is only the very core of saintliness which resists all our probings, but there is much that we can understand and profitably discuss.

I have already written about St. Thérèse,* but since then much new material about her family has appeared, and we have, for the first time, the complete text of her autobiography as she wrote it. With every fresh disclosure it becomes more and more apparent that God used her family and later the community of nuns she entered as His instruments in fashioning her into a saint. She was not born with the halo of sanctity already in position. As a saint she was—always under God, it must be understood—created by her family and her fellow nuns. Today the family is no longer the key unit of civilization. Over too much of the world, the state is supreme and overrides both the natural and the supernatural rights of the family. In her person and in her teaching, St. Thérèse offers us both an example and a body of precepts which are invaluable. A knowledge and understanding of her environment, which, given her total response to grace, made her sanctity inevitable, are of equal value. That is what I attempt to offer here.

* *Storm of Glory* (New York: Sheed and Ward). 1950.

Chapter 2

FAMILY BACKGROUND

The roll of saints includes kings and beggars, men and women of all degrees, some with a lineage as long as their arm, others unable to name their grandparents. The family of St. Thérèse—her immediate ancestors—were not distinguished by rank, wealth or intellect, nor were they anonymous peasants, living from hand to mouth without a penny to call their own. They were people who had a small, but honorable and well-defined position in the state. Her paternal grandfather, Pierre François Martin, was born in 1777 in Normandy. When he was twenty-two, he joined the army and made soldiering his profession for the next thirty-one years. He followed Napoleon's eagles through Prussia and Poland and fought for him in France when the Emperor's days of power were numbered. He won promotion and, after the restoration of the Bourbons, reached the rank of captain.

At the age of forty-one, he married the eighteen-year old daughter of another army captain, also a veteran of the Grande Armée. They had five children. The third was Louis Joseph Aloys Stanislas Martin, who was to be the father of St. Thérèse. He was born in Bordeaux on August 22, 1823, and until he was seven and his father retired, the family moved from one garrison town to another,