

Brief Biography



Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart

(Marie Louise Martín)

February 22, 1860 - January 19, 1940

By: R. Hannan

Marie Louise Martin was born in Alençon, France on February 22, 1860. Marie was the first-born child of nine children of Louis and Azélie Martin. Her parents named their daughter Marie in honor of Our Lady. Sadly, four of the Martin children died at infancy. Marie was baptized by Father Lebouc at the Cathedral of Saint Pierre-de-Montsort on February 23, 1860. Her godfather for her baptismal was her grandfather Isidore Guérin Sr. and her godmother was her aunt Marie Louise “Élise” Guérin. She had a strong and fearless spirit, but her mother always saw the other side of her “extraordinarily tender heart”. (SR) Marie’s temperament was straightforward and frank. (M) Her family’s nickname for her was “The Gypsy” however, later in life; her father would also nickname her his beloved “Diamond”.

In October 1868, Marie entered the Visitation boarding school in Le Mans, France at the age of eight. Her beloved aunt, Sister Marie-Dosithée, was a nun who taught at the boarding school. Marie’s aunt would give Marie spiritual and moral guidance over her life while Marie was a student at the Visitation boarding school. Due to the severe illness of her beloved aunt, Marie’s First Holy Communion was moved up one year. Marie constantly prayed to St. Joseph to intercede for her aunt’s cure and was not willing to accept her death as God’s Will. Instead, she wanted to try and change it. (M) On July 2, 1869, Marie’s prayers were answered and Sister Marie-Dosithée was there to witness her First Holy Communion. Her aunt lived for 7 years more years. It was one of the happiest days of Marie’s life for she was now in union with Jesus Christ. When this glorious day was over, she started to weep that it had all ended too soon. Marie’s mother remarked in a letter to Sister Marie-Dosithée: “Marie appears to be reserved and shy; underneath her shyness is a heart of gold.” (SR) In 1869, Marie received confirmation and chose the name of Josephine in gratitude to St. Joseph for his intercession in healing her aunt. (M) Marie and her sister Pauline sang in the Church and her family always remarked about the beauty of her voice. (SF)

On January 4, 1873, when her youngest sister Thérèse was baptized, Marie became her godmother. Later this same year, Marie contracted typhoid fever and was sent home from the Visitation boarding school as a result. She suffered a long illness with many relapses yet soon recovered. Her parents kept a vigil over her while she was suffering from this illness. On May 5, 1873, after two to three weeks of Marie’s continued suffering, her father made an eighteen-mile pilgrimage on foot to Church. Her father prayed and fasted for Marie’s cure in a valiant effort to save her life. During this time of Marie’s illness, her mother said: “You would one day take care of your younger sisters and the house after I die.” (SR)

On August 2, 1875, Marie completed her studies. She made the Honor List several times and was awarded six first place prizes such as the “Cross of Excellence” during her years at the Visitation boarding school. Marie reflected upon her experience at this school: “Oh if I had not had my aunt, whom I did not want to hurt; I should have never had remained seven years behind those grilles.” (SR) When Marie returned home for good, her mother wrote to Sister Marie-Dosithée: “Marie is now grown up; her character is of a very serious cast and she has none of the illusions of youth. I am sure that when I am no longer here she will make a good mistress of the home,

and do her utmost to bring up her little sisters and set a good example”. (SF) After completing her studies Marie would return periodically for spiritual retreats at the school. (LM)

Marie’s mother Azélie brought up the subject of marriage to her and it upset her greatly. Marie remarked to her mother that: “She would never marry, and begged her mother not bring up the subject of marriage again.” (M)

Marie, her mom and her other two sisters went on their last spiritual pilgrimage together to ask Our Lady of Lourdes to cure their mother’s breast cancer. But it was not to be. Her mother’s breast cancer was not cured and Marie made a promise to her mother before she died, that she would rear her younger sisters. Her mother told her to: “Continue to devote yourself increasingly to your sisters. Take care that in watching you, they have a good model to imitate.” (SF) Marie was seventeen when her mother Azélie died on August 28, 1877. As Azélie’s body was viewed by family and friends, Marie felt drawn to be near her mother several times and said: “I never got tired of looking at her, she seemed to be but twenty years old. I thought that she was beautiful. I felt a supernatural impression as I stood beside her. It struck me, which was quite true, that she was not dead, but more alive than ever.” (SR)

After Azélie’s death, the family moved from Alençon to Lisieux in November 1878 to be closer to their mother’s relatives. The family named the new house “Les Buissonnets” meaning “The Woods”. As Marie was making the transition from Alençon to Lisieux she described her new situation thus: “We are finally settled in Lisieux in a home charmingly situated with a large garden wherein her younger sisters can play their games.” (CW) The whole family continued to participate in acts of charity to the needy when they moved to Lisieux. Beggars would come to their house and ask for food, clothing and money and the family continually offered their services to the poor. Not only did people come to their house but the family also to those who were unable to leave their houses. Marie reflected on these acts of charity: “How I desire to save souls! But for this, one must be holy, for only the saints have power over His Heart.”

As Marie promised her mother, she took over the duties as mistress of the household and helped her aunt with their store’s accounts while the younger sisters were attending school. During this time, Marie would often accompany her father on trips to Paris to wrap up their mother’s lace-making business and also take this opportunity to attend church services during Holy Week. (LM) Marie and her family would make several pilgrimages to holy sites in France throughout their childhood.

Marie supervised her sisters’ upbringing and set a good example for her sisters to follow, “she took constant and tender care of her youngest sister.” (LM) Marie made an offering to God that her younger sisters would serve only Him. She taught them how to listen to his teachings, and how to allow oneself to be spiritually open to His will which he has placed before his children. (SS) Her youngest sister remarked: “Marie was so eloquent that her noble and generous spirit seemed to pass into mine... I loved her so deeply that I could not bear to be deprived of her

gentle companionship.” (M) Marie’s youngest sister looking back in retrospect said: “I felt that both you (Pauline) and Marie were the most tender and self-sacrificing of mothers.” (SS) Marie would rely constantly on her holy mother’s intercession from heaven in helping her rear her sisters as she wrote to her father: “I am hoping more from the protection of my holy mother than from my own poor efforts, to complete from on high the transformation of my poor sisters.” (GV) She would use examples of everyday life to illustrate to her younger sisters the virtues of living a Christ-like life. For example, Marie would say: “Look at the shopkeepers, how much trouble they give themselves to make money, whereas we can amass treasures for Heaven at every instant without giving ourselves so much trouble; all we have to do is gather diamonds with a RAKE.” (CL) Marie would also sit her younger sisters Céline and Thérèse on her knee and read to them spiritual books and instructions, making an effort to embed in their souls the comfort of living in God’s love. (CW) Marie continued to show her younger sisters how one could achieve sanctity by being faithful in the smallest matters. Marie’s youngest sister described Marie and her teachings: “It seems to me all her great and generous spirit...passed into mine. As the warriors of old taught their children the art of fighting, so she taught me about the combats of life, rousing my enthusiasm and pointing out to me the glorious palm. Marie also spoke of the immortal riches that we could so easily amass each day, about the misfortune of trampling them beneath our feet when we have only, as it were, to stoop to gather them. I regretted being the only one to hear her profound teachings; I was convinced even the greatest sinners would have been converted by listening to her, and that leaving their perishable riches, they would have sought only those of heaven.” (M) She taught her younger sisters the “self-mastery and the supernatural spirit of sacrifice. Attractive comparisons clothed the austerity of the divine requirements and led to these being welcomed without causing fright.” (MF) Marie also used stories to interest her younger sisters in saving souls. (SF) Marie had a “mother’s heart” and it was felt by all of her younger sisters. (SR) She would explain to them that the way of becoming holy is by fidelity in little things. (SR) Marie received a premonition that God would always carry her youngest sister like a baby rather than make her tread the path of suffering. (SS)

After Pauline, the second oldest of the Martin children, entered the Carmelite Monastery in Lisieux on October of 1882, Marie took full control of her younger sisters education, not only on spiritual matters but on basic school education as well. She would unite herself with her younger sisters and pray with them before they went to bed. She had a generous and loving heart towards them.

When Marie’s youngest sister Thérèse was 10 years old, she suffered from an unknown illness threatening her life. Marie never left her youngest sister’s side and looked out for her and comforted her with a mother’s tenderness. She never lost her patience in spite of all the trouble she gave her. (SS) Marie and her other sisters knelt at her sister’s bedside and prayed before Our Lady of the Smile asking for her intercession in curing her sister. Afterwards, Marie observed her sister’s physical appearance had changed for five minutes and she was convinced that her youngest sister was cured. The miraculous cure took place on May 13, 1883. Afterwards, her

youngest sister remarked about Marie: “It was indeed to Marie and her prayers that I owed the grace of a smile from the Queen of Heaven” (SS) and she also said: “Marie showed wonderful resignation; by such resignation God was glorified. Marie suffered greatly because of me, and I am immensely grateful for all the care she showered on me. Her heart told her what I needed, and a mother’s heart is far wiser than a doctor’s: it can guess what is best for her sick child.” (SS)

One of Marie’s duties was to prepare her youngest sister for her First Holy Communion. Marie worked consistently to help her youngest sister to understand the Catechism in preparation for her First Holy Communion. (M)

Marie desired to serve God by becoming a nun but she had a reservation about being cloistered. Marie waited for a sign from God before she would enter into the Carmelite Monastery even though everyone else was telling her that a sign from God was not going to happen. At the age of twenty-two, Marie met Father Almiré Pichon after he had offered a Mass Marie was attending. She confessed to him her desire of becoming a nun but was hesitant about making the full commitment. Father Pichon asked her to write down all her views regarding religious life and why she felt she was not ready to commit herself to serving him as a nun. So, Marie wrote down eight pages of her thoughts and discussed them for over an hour with Father Pichon. After this discussion, Marie felt she was now “caught in the nets of divine mercy” so she decided to make an effort to commit herself to serving the Lord as a nun. This was for Marie the sign she was looking for. She also explained: “Jesus has cast a special look of love upon me also!” (SF) On April 17, 1882, Father Pichon became Marie’s spiritual advisor and on March 25, 1885, she voluntarily made a vow of chastity. Soon, Marie would tell her father that she also was entering the Carmel and initially he was deeply distressed over the news, but after hugging her he said: “God could not ask a greater sacrifice from me. I thought you would never leave me.” (SR) Marie prepared her younger sister Céline to take over the duties of running the household and taking care of their youngest sister.

On August 1, 1886, Father Pichon wrote to Marie from Canada: “After having prayed very much, I believe I am the interpreter of Our Lord giving you the signal of departure, of going out of Egypt. Go quickly with a joyful heart to hide in His Heart.” (SR) Marie went to meet Father Pichon in Calais, France before she entered the convent. She waited there for two days and then waited at Douvres but finally found him in Paris. There was a miscommunication as to when he was to arrive back to France. On October 7, 1886, Marie went with her family to visit her mother’s grave for the last time in Alençon.

On October 15, 1886, Marie entered the Carmelite Monastery of Lisieux at the age of twenty-six and was given the name Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart. Marie’s uncle Isidore wrote to Marie regarding her new life at the Carmel: “For you, my dear, He hides the roses, the thorns alone strike your view and He is spreading them abundantly beneath your feet. The path you must follow becomes invisible because of them. However, you advance without turning your head,

being guided by a feeble voice whose few sighs you can distinguish amid the outbursts of the storm raging within your heart.” (SR) On March 19, 1887, Marie made her final profession and received the habit. In the month of February 1888, she received a letter from her sister prior to her profession: “My dear sister, you cannot imagine how deep my love for you is and how much joy I wish you here on earth. You are beloved of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, whose dear spouse you are soon to become.” (LM) Around this time, Marie’s youngest sister entered the Carmelite Monastery as well.

On May 22, 1888, Marie was professed and her youngest sister placed a crown of roses on her head. (SS) After Marie made her final profession, it was for her “An assurance of her eternal crown in heaven.” Marie wrote to her father thanking him for the beautiful gifts he had given to the Carmelite Monastery and promised him she would not let him down and also wrote: “Oh you, best of fathers, who give to God without counting the cost all the hope of your old age; yours is the glory, a glory that will not pass away. Yes, beloved Father, we shall glorify you, as you deserve to be glorified, by becoming saints. Less than that would be unworthy of you.” (SF)

In December 1894, Marie asked Mother Agnes of Jesus to have her youngest sister Thérèse write her childhood memories. Marie’s youngest sister started her manuscript in January 1895 and it was given to Mother Agnes of Jesus in January 1896. In 1895, Marie’s youngest sister approached her in the courtyard and asked her if she would become a “Victim to the Merciful Love of God.” Marie’s first instinct was to refuse her younger sister’s request because as she stated: “Indeed not, for if I offered myself as a victim, God would take me at my word, and I have a great dread of suffering. Besides, far from inspiring me, the word victim has always repelled me.” (MST) But soon after Marie’s refusal to her youngest sister’s request, Marie’s younger sister explained to her that when you offer yourself as a victim to the Love of God it is different from giving yourself over to His justice: “It does not always mean an increase in suffering but gives you the ability to love God more. Marie was convinced and she made the Oblation to the Merciful Love of God.” (MST) Marie’s found her vocation and it was Love.

In the following years, Marie dedicated herself to an “extended group of friends and benefactors to Carmel, she proved to be one of the most ardent apostles of the Act of Oblation.” (MST) In every opportunity given to her, Marie introduced her “Oblation of Love” to many people she corresponded with. Between September 8-17, 1896, Marie asked her youngest sister to write another manuscript on her “closeness to God.” In the letter which accompanied the second manuscript from Marie’s youngest sister, her sister wrote to her expressing her feelings about Marie’s influence on her life: “This child, dear godmother, whom you offered to the Lord and who speaks to you this evening, is the one who loves you as a child loves its mother...O my dear Sister, you wish to hear about the secrets Jesus confides to your little sister; however, I realize He confides in you too, for you are the one who taught me how to gather the divine instructions.” (LC) She also wrote: “How happy we both are to be able to understand the secrets of Jesus! If you (Marie) would write what you know of them, what wonderful pages we should read. But I know you prefer to keep “the secrets of the King” to yourself. You (Marie) tell me it is honorable

to reveal and confess the works of God, “yet I think you are right to keep silent, for it is quite impossible to describe the secrets of heaven in the words of earth.” (SS)

Marie held many positions in the monastery such as assistant infirmarian, gardener, refectorian and the office of bursar (procurator) from 1894 to 1933. Marie’s task also was to initiate new postulants in the ways of Carmel. (CL) Even though Marie was united with her blood sisters in the Carmelite Monastery, there was very little time for them to interact with each other while taking care of the needs of other sisters.

Marie taught her youngest sister when she first entered the Carmelite customs and her sister remarked to her: “When I meet you, you seem to me an angel... You, who are an EAGLE called to fly in the upper air and gaze upon the sun, pray for the little weak reed in the depths of the valley, the least puff of wind bends it over.” (CL) In 1915, Marie wrote to her younger sister Léonie in Caen: “I suppose that in heaven when we think of our earthly life, it will appear to us as a dream, a night passed in a bad Inn. Yes, truly our life here below is just that, and I feel, as you do, full of courage to climb the mountain of perfection, for I know well that it is Jesus who will carry me up in His arms, if I place in Him all my trust.” (GV)

Marie suffered from rheumatoid arthritis and on April 29, 1923, her arthritis attacked her muscles and severely constricted her ability to function normally. Her affliction gradually grew worse as the years went on and she was finally confined to bed in the infirmary or moved about in a wheelchair. Her inability to move on her own was the worst penance for her for she was very generous and independent. (C) She suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for twenty-six years.

In the latter part of 1924, Marie suffered severely from pneumonia causing her sisters to think she might die. Marie knew she was not going to die but expected her life to be more difficult in the coming years. On January 25, 1929, she was moved from her cell into the infirmary. Her legs and feet became consistently swollen and she was riddled with sores for eleven years. (M)

In her last years, Marie allowed many different opinions to be expressed in front of her during recreation, without making any verbal judgments for or against that person’s perception, she maintained her Oblation of Love even through the most difficult times. (C) When the suffering became too much for her to handle, she would say: “Prayer is the state of my soul. I cry to the good God day and night; My God, come to my aid! Hasten! Hasten to help me!” And to persuade him the more, I add, “Thou Who art my tender Spouse, have mercy on me!” Marie always kept the salvation of souls in her mind, stating: “I am as one in chains. I am fettered and constrained; my arms pain me. But I offer this to the good God in order that some poor soul may not be fettered and lost for all eternity.” (M)

Marie could be heard crying in her cell while she was praying for souls to be converted, using her physical pain as an offering to God to have mercy on souls that were lost. On October 15, 1936, Marie celebrated her Golden Jubilee. She received as a gift from one of her Carmelite

sisters a watercolor painting of her youngest sister crowning her on her day of profession with an autograph from Pope Pius XI on the painting. (M)

On March 8, 1937, Marie was given the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. She knew her time on this earth was almost over and strove valiantly to offer her suffering to God to save souls. In June of 1939, she wrote her last letter to her sister in Caen. In it she stated: “We shall go together side by side to heaven, and the road is so long that we feel the effects of the journey. Which of us shall enter heaven first? It will probably be I, the most infirm. But I am unwilling to ask anything of the good God, for now more than ever we have opportunities of saving souls. That is worth the pain of remaining here on earth for years more, if He wills it.” (GV)

Sometime in the latter part of 1939, Marie contracted a cold with a severe cough, which eventually turned into pulmonary congestion. She made her final confession during the second week of January 1940. On January 18, 1940, while Marie was suffering from illness, she appeared to be in a trance, speaking very little but focusing on God and her using her suffering to save souls as she describes: “Souls! Souls! ...There are so many who do not love the good God! Oh, how sad it all is! Then she remarked: Ah, how is it possible not to love so powerful, so great, so good a God Who does all for our welfare? Were I to go to hell, I would say to Him throughout eternity, My God, I love you!” (M)

On January 19, 1940, Marie’s last audible words were “I Love Thee” as she kissed her crucifix. (M) On that same day at 2:30 a.m., while she was renewing her Oblation of Love and saying the Our Father and Hail Mary, she fixed her gaze on “Our Lady of the Smile”, as she bowed her head and died. She was seventy-nine years old. The community was called immediately and they were struck by her look of great peace and joy.

After the community left the infirmary, her sisters prepared her body for burial. As Marie’s body lay still in the infirmary, Pauline found the letter Marie had written to her. As Pauline sat beside Marie in tears, she opened the letter and read it out loud. Marie told her that she would spend her eternity making God known by many, “the only true God, and Him whom Thou has sent. Eternity is not long enough for us to know the infinite goodness of the good God, His infinite power, His infinite mercy, His infinite love for us. These are our eternal delights, which will never be exhausted. Our heart is made to understand them and to be nourished by them. My only desire is to lose myself in Him.” (M)

On the morning of her death, and in the week that followed, her younger sister, inundated by mysterious perfumes, understood how “the death of saints is precious in the sight of God.” (C) On January 23, 1940, Marie’s remains were laid to rest in a vault. She lived in the convent for 53 years and achieved great holiness. (M) Marie never saw the outside world from the day she entered until the day she died (M) “Her death, like her life, was very simple and very holy. Her craving for freedom had been changed into a loving servitude. I have found Jesus within these four walls, and finding Him, I have found heaven.” (SF) “Broken by rheumatism and crippled

with pain, the “dear godmother” retained to the end, together with her witty originality, her valiant courage, without any pose, and her passion for souls. She calmly faced the divine tryst, which she liked to call “the day of great mercy”. (SF) “We are happy to die after having spent our life in loving.” (LC)

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