

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Missionaries at the Kitchen Table

There aren't many married saints—but on a World Mission Sunday, not too long ago the church moved to increase the number of them by two. It beatified a married couple: Louis and Marie-Azélie Martin, the parents of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. It's the final step on the path to canonization.

Barely a century after their deaths, the Martins really seem like people from another age. After their wedding in 1858, they lived together for almost a year without having sex. It was Marie-Azélie who finally dragged her husband off to a parish priest, who reassured him that what he had been resisting was actually something beautiful and willed by God.

With that out of the way, the Martins went on to have nine children—and five of them entered religious life.

In 2008 Pope Benedict chose for their beatification World Mission Sunday since St. Thérèse is the patroness of the missions. Though she lived a very short, sheltered life, her great dream was to be a missionary. At the urging of her mother superior, Thérèse struck up a correspondence with a young seminarian, who eventually became a missionary in Africa and who also died very young. She once wrote to him of her parents: “The good God gave me a mother and father more worthy of heaven than of earth.”

What a beautiful testimony from a daughter—and from a saint.

But the simple fact is that the missionary work of the church doesn't begin in the jungles of Africa, or the slums of India. It isn't launched in far off countries among pagans. It begins—as it did with the Martins—at home.

I like to tell parents at baptisms that they are the first teachers of their children. From them, their children will learn courage and respect, perseverance and love. It's parents who will take a tottering three-year old to that font in the back of the church, and dip those tiny fingers into the cold holy water, and show him how to make the sign of the cross.

It is parents, in fact, who are really the first missionaries. And it is husbands and wives who act as missionaries, as well, to one another.

I know that my wife has probably taught me more about love and sacrifice and faith than any of the religion teachers I had in school. And my first ministry of diaconal service—serving in faith and in charity—is to the woman to whom I made my first vow, my wife. The young Catholic writer Michael Lickona has said that marriage offers him the best chance he will have to truly love his neighbor as himself. To which I can only add: Amen. Marriage is the great classroom where I have learned that.

And family is the church where the great missionary work begins.

It begins around the kitchen table, saying grace, or over the checkbook, paying bills. It begins when wiping away the tears of a hurt child, or correcting a homework assignment, or simply listening when a young ego has been wounded because he was the last one picked for the volleyball team.

It is confronting all the hopes, heartaches and headaches that crop up in any marriage, and remembering Christ's words: “Love one another as I have loved you.” It's having a heart big enough to at least try to do that—beginning with the one you have promised to love for the rest of your life.

Louis and Marie-Azélie Martin understood that—and out of their love came one of the most remarkable and influential saints. Imagine what could happen if more of us realized that marriage is more than just a lifestyle, or living arrangement.

It is also a mission—and all of us who are a part of it are missionaries.

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