Léonie Martin – “Poor Léonie!”
Sister of St. Thérèse of Lisieux

There was little noteworthy to recall of her earlier life in Alençon and Lisieux where she was the antithesis of her sister in every way, in health, temperament and general behaviour. Born on 3rd June 1863, she was a sickly child from day one, prone to every ailment a child could incur, most distressing of all being a purulent form of eczema, which affected her even into her adult years. Compounding her difficulties, her little sister Hélène died at the age of 5 when Léonie was 7, depriving her of a companionship to the probable detriment of her development at that age. The demands made by her health may well have masked the underlying components of her personality; she was emotionally unstable, disruptive, capricious, disobedient to her parents. Many a parent will identify with a child falling into one or other of her negative attributes, but few with a child harbouring them all!

The notion that she was ‘different’ occurred to her and she wondered if she had been exchanged at birth for another baby? To be assured by her mother that she had never been with a nurse. Zélie, now Saint Zélie, when the end of her life was nearing from the terminal cancer had expressed a desire to be a religious, which sceptical observers would understandably question. Her aunt, Sr. M. Dosithée, however had wisdom to discern hidden worth and promise in her character and predicted a positive future for the child, who could, without being unkind, be designated the eponymous “difficult child”.

Her prediction was evidenced in a providential change in Léonie’s attitude to her mother shortly before she died, becoming surprisingly attentive and tender to her. After Zélie died, Léonie endeavoured to be more a source of consolation to her father and her sisters, the desire to become a religious never leaving her. She became more sociable, albeit still with a tendency to solitude, retiring into herself.

However, the deep seated goodness discerned by her late aunt Sr. M. Dosithée came to the surface more and more, none so striking as her attendance upon an old woman, unclean, verminous and dying, who she cleaned and comforted and after she died, prepared her body for burial. Thérèse in her biography recalls her kindness to herself could, without being unkind, be designated the eponymous “difficult child”.

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On a pilgrimage to Lourdes just two months before she died (June 1877) a heartfelt petition of Zélie to the Blessed Virgin was for the healing of Léonie and ‘make her a saint’. Léonie of slow intelligence, her schooling had been intermittent and broken, with brief sojourns at boarding school at Le Mans where her sisters Marie and Pauline had been educated, and where her Visitandine aunt Sr. M. Dosithée was a teacher. The attempts ended in failure, she being “sent home” as she was unmanageable. All her life she had expressed a desire to be a religious, which sceptical observers would understandably question. Her aunt, Sr. M. Dosithée, however had wisdom to discern hidden worth and promise in her character and predicted a positive future for the child, who could, without being unkind, be designated the eponymous “difficult child”.

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Jesus provided me with so much love
Aspects of her personality not evident before came to light. For example, when acting as assistant portress, it fell to her to receive a visiting prelate who enquired if it would be possible for him to meet the sister of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux? “I will ask our Mother Superior” Léonie replied, “but I do not think she will give permission!”. Seeing his disappointment, she added “I can assure you that you will miss nothing; it would not be worth your while!”.

In 1935, now aged 72, she was feared to be terminally ill, although ready in herself to meet the Lord. The Holy Father sent her his Apostolic Blessing and she recovered. She let it be known afterwards “If I fall ill again, be sure not to tell him”.

Of her Mother Superior’s concern for her in her old age, she asks: “why is she fearful of losing me, a cracked window-pane, a tottering, shaking old building, so easily replaced?”.

With advancing years she was faced with a prospect which appalled, of having to wear dentures! In a letter to her, her Carmelite sister Mother Agnès gently reprimanded her: “It does not matter to God whether you have a humpy forehead or cracked teeth”.

She, who had been regarded by many as a lost cause is, by God’s grace, an example of his Fatherly love for souls who feel lost and abandoned and without hope; for every parent who may have felt hurt by a child’s behaviour, for any family in distress, and indeed for souls who have not succeeded at first attempt at the religious life. She is there too for adolescents and young people swamped as they are by the raging pressures, distractions and temptations of the present secular and technological age. She knows what trouble is. St. Thérèse and Léonie, two sisters, the one gifted beyond measure and the other at the opposite extreme – is it a presumption to see the hand of the Lord in this clear manifestation that His Love is unrestricted, and reflects the Love of a Father for every child of His, the weakest as much as the strong?

Léonie, Sister Françoise Thérèse, died on 16th June 1941. The esteem in which she was held by her Congregation was demonstrated by her Order in having her body honoured by interment in the crypt of their chapel. Thousands came to pray and do her honour. Her reputation for holiness had by then percolated outside the convent walls and numerous favours were attributed to her intercession. The process of her Beatification and Canonisation was officially announced on 2nd July 2015. Many devotees of the Martin Family who were generally unaware of the transformation which had taken place in the life of Léonie were taken completely by surprise. On exhumation her body was intact and when, by the grace of God, she is beatified, will be available for the veneration of the faithful. The words of her earlier biographer, Father Albert H. Dolan O. Carm. as long ago as 1948 were providentially confirmed –

“God made the violet too”.

Nuns are people too!

Adapted from “The Martin Family” by Michael O’Connell.