

# Saints for married couples

Matrimony is a sacrament in the service of communion. As explained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, matrimony (along with holy orders) is "directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so" (No. 1534). The Sacrament of Matrimony builds up the People of God, and it is in service of that mission that the sacrament contributes to the salvation of the married persons themselves.

The Church has become even more observant of and reverent toward the extraordinary witness of married persons for their holiness in recent decades. When Pope Francis canonized Louis and Zélie Martin together in 2015, the Church heralded the gift of these two disciples as worthy of universal veneration precisely as spouses to one another. Not only were they and their family held up for reverence, but so was their marital bond.

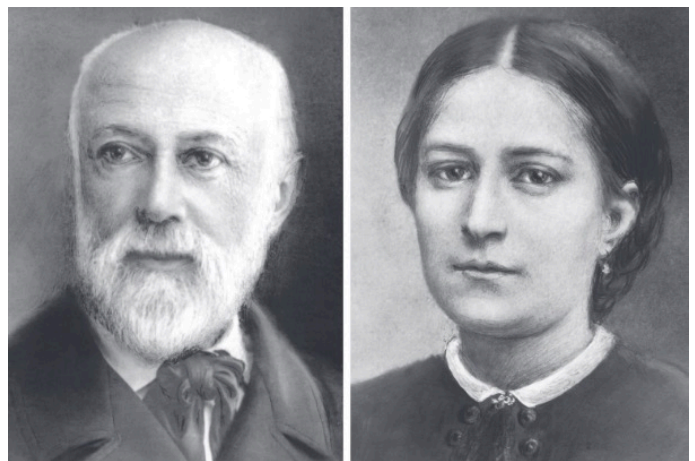
In the holiness of married persons, we can find the beauty of Christ – the beauty that saves the world. This is the beauty of lives given over in the service of communion: through enduring suffering, bestowing life and enacting charity. When we revere and follow the witness of married saints, they show us not just the beauty and meaning of marriage, but indeed the beauty and meaning to which marriage is ordered: the gift of communion in Christ.

We will look to four married couples to perceive something of their holiness and appreciate how they fulfilled their vocations in the service of communion. The first couple is the one mentioned above – Louis and Zélie – who were canonized together. The other three are couples where one spouse has been publicly revered for their holiness (St. Gianna Beretta Molla, Blessed Franz Jägerstätter and Servant of God Elisabeth Leseur) and who thereby shines light on their respective

spouses and the union shared between them. For each couple, we will review Scripture verses – ones commonly used in wedding liturgies – to which these particular spouses distinctly bear witness.

## **Louis and Zélie Martin**

In the beginning of Louis and Zélie's marriage, there was something that would strike most of us as undeniably peculiar, if not downright bizarre: For the first 10 months of their marriage, they practiced sexual abstinence. Were they against sex? Did they distrust their bodies? Were they religious zealots with extreme and unnecessary practices?



Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin were married on July 13, 1858. Both had originally desired to enter religious life. CNS photo/courtesy of Sanctuary of Lisieux

These two people, who married at midnight on July 13, 1858, had each long-cultivated a desire for the religious life. Louis wanted to enter the mountain hermitage of the great St. Bernard, while Zélie applied for admission to the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul. Neither was accepted. Each retreated into secular crafts – Louis made clocks, and Zélie made lace. What they did not leave behind, however, was the desire to dedicate

themselves to living holy lives, filled with devotion, prayer and regular practices of fidelity. When they married, they carried this deepest of all desires with them.

Their conjugal celibacy was an expression of that desire. They sought to offer their lives and their bodies in service of God, as they would have in a hermitage or convent. They developed routines of prayer, performed works of mercy and even practiced the celibacy that would have been common to the forms of life they once sought. But when, after 10 months, a confessor counseled them that the pursuit of their pious ideals should be carried out another way within the Sacrament of Matrimony – namely, in and through childrearing – they changed their celibate practice.

Looking back at those 10 months of celibacy, we might see in the Martins some laughable naiveté or unenlightened prudery. In doing so, we risk getting so caught up in our assumed sophistication that we miss the really remarkable thing, which is just how much clarity Louis and Zélie possessed as to the mission of a Christian life. From the start, their marriage was focused on maintaining their religious discipline. They did not give themselves over to the “natural course of things” because their affections or because convention recommended they do so; rather, they joined in sexual union because they came to understand it as a religious practice that elevates nature. They desired to serve God, and their marriage became the form of that service.

**“Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.”**

*– Romans 12:1*

As Cardinal José Saraiva Martins preached at their beatification Mass in 2008, “Louis and Zélie understood that they could sanctify themselves not despite marriage but through, in, and by marriage, and that their nuptials would be considered as the starting point for a rising together.” The

Sacrament of Matrimony changed how they pursued holiness. As Zélie once wrote in a letter to their eldest daughter, “When we had our children, our ideas changed somewhat” (“Story of a Family”). Every parent knows things change with kids, but Zélie is not talking about their ideas regarding how to have a good time, how much sleep they should get or how often to go out to dinner. She is talking about their ideas for how to dedicate themselves to God in loving their children. They received each of their nine children – including four who died during pregnancy or infancy – as a covenant between themselves and God. As shared in “Story of a Family,” to them, “a child was not a plaything [...] nor a creature that has become an object of dread.” Each child was “a trust received from the Creator’s hands.”

The clock-maker who once longed for the ordered life of a monastery and the master lace-maker with the refined skills to create intricate patterns set about creating a household in which, as Dorothy Day once observed, “it would be easier to be good.” Or, as Pope Francis preached in his homily upon their canonization, “The holy spouses ... practiced Christian service in the family, creating day by day an environment of faith and love which nurtured the vocations of their daughters.”

Their household became their great religious work, where they gave themselves with ingenuity and care to creating a culture where holiness was more likely to grow. Louis and Zélie, who once abstained from sexual union because of their desire to pursue holiness, dedicated their union to nurturing the holiness of their children. Through their marital union, Louis and Zélie responded to the appeal of St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans to offer their bodies in an act of worship. That worship took the form of the communion of their family.

Sts. Louis and Zélie are celebrated by the Church on July 12.

**Words from St. Thérèse**



The ninth and youngest child of Louis and Zélie is the one whom Pope Pius X called “the greatest saint of modern times.” Thérèse received the care of her mother, who died when she was young, primarily through her four older sisters, and in her father she received what she considered to be a trustworthy image of her heavenly Father’s love. Upon entering the convent at Carmel, Thérèse penned these words: “My Jesus, the King of Heaven, in taking me for Himself, has not taken me from my holy king on earth. Oh no! If my dear father wills and does not think me too unworthy, I shall remain forever the queen of his heart, and I shall try and glorify him by becoming a great saint” (“Story of a Family”).

## **Gianna and Pietro Molla**

Gianna and Pietro Molla used many words to express their love for one another. The letters spanning the duration of their relationship from their engagement until Gianna’s death in 1962 were so numerous that they were posthumously collected into a book, “The Journey of Our Love.” But amid all the words that they exchanged, the real bond of their union came through an exchange of acts of love, given in truth. Gianna’s final act of love saved their youngest child; Pietro’s great act of love came afterwards.



Gianna and Pietro Molla are pictured before they were married in 1955. CNS photo/Catholic Press Photo

In an address she gave as an adult to the Young Women of Catholic Action, Gianna shared her understanding of the truth of love at the heart of the Gospel: "Love and sacrifice are as intimately connected as sun and light," she said. "We cannot love without suffering. ... Look how many sacrifices are made by mothers who truly love their children. They are ready for everything, even to give their own blood. Did not Jesus die on the cross for us, out of love for us? Love is affirmed and confirmed in the blood of sacrifice" ("Saint Gianna Molla: Wife, Mother, Doctor").

Gianna inscribed this truth she professed in the personal motto she adopted: "Prayer, action, sacrifice." She learned this through her participation in Catholic Action, where she came together with others to pray, and then, from that regular prayer, they engaged in service to their neighbors. The sacrifice was in both sides of that movement: the sacrifice of prayer to yield their own voices to the voice of God, and the sacrifice of charity to offer their efforts for the needs of others.

Her husband, Pietro, also was formed in Catholic Action. The

most important thing he learned from his formation was “respect for my neighbor,” a lesson he credits with saving him from the influence of fascism that was growing in favor during his younger years in Italy. From prayer to action, he learned how to regard others with kindness.

**“Let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.”**

*– 1 John 3:18*

The eucharistic rhythm of their life together was initiated in their early formation as people of prayer and of service. They sought to receive the Lord in prayer and sacrament, and then serve the Lord by serving others. Three months after their wedding, Pietro wrote to Gianna of his prayer that God “may make of our new family a little cenacle where Jesus will always reign over all our affections, desires, and actions.” To give Jesus this place of honor in their family meant continually receiving him and sacrificing for him so as to allow their family to become filled with his presence.

It was with their fourth and last child that the fullness of Gianna’s sacrifice was realized. Because of a tumor on her uterus discovered during her pregnancy, she knew that carrying her baby to term would endanger her own life. Yet she was clear: Even at the cost of her own life, she wanted them to save her baby. “Each of us must prepare ourselves to be givers of life,” she had once said, and in the end, all her years of prayer and sacrifice, solitude and service, led her to this deed to give her daughter, Gianna Emanuela, life from her own life. Their family had been sealed as a cenacle for Jesus, where this mother learned to say with her life what the Lord himself had said: “This is my body given up for you.”

In the painful afterglow of his wife’s sacrifice, Pietro’s sacrifice began in earnest. Upon burying his beloved wife, he had to quickly return to the life of his family. He had a newborn and three other young children, while in his professional work he was responsible for thousands of

laborers. And yet his trials would not end with Gianna's death. Two years later, their second-oldest child contracted a terrible illness, dying in a Milanese hospital. "I've had to convince myself," Pietro recounted, "that sorrow remains a mystery even in the light of faith, and I have experienced that the only way to accept it is the way of the Crucified Jesus." In the midst of this sorrow, Pietro began a new life of love, seasoned with sacrifice for his family and for others.

In their own distinctive yet united ways, St. Gianna and her husband, Pietro, allowed their marital union to participate in the salvific work of Christ through what they professed and what they suffered. Gianna's witness was summed up in her early death; Pietro's in his long life.

St. Gianna's feast day is April 28. Pietro lived to see his wife declared a saint in 2004 He died on April 3, 2010.

### **St. Giana's Prayer**

As part of their everyday spirituality, Gianna and Pietro Molla fostered devotions to saints – especially the Blessed Mother – and made a habit of Eucharistic adoration and kept to a regular rhythm of prayer. In addition to a prayer she prayed daily to the Blessed Mother, Gianna prayed this prayer to Jesus everyday:

"O Jesus, I promise to submit myself to all that you allow to happen to me. Only make me know your will. My most sweet Jesus, infinitely merciful God, most tender Father of souls and especially the weakest, the most wretched the sickest whom you carry with special tenderness in your divine arms, I come to you to request by the love and merits of your Sacred Heart the grace of understanding and always doing your holy will, the grace of trusting in you, the grace of resting securely for time and for eternity in your loving, divine arms. Amen."



# Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter

We should not know anything about Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter. They lived in an obscure Austrian town, where they ran a farm. They belonged to an ordinary Catholic parish. They had three daughters in the first few years of their marriage. Franz served one term in the military, but refused to serve for a second because he came to see, quite clearly, that serving in the military of the Third Reich was complicit with evil. Because he refused to serve, he was arrested, then executed. His wife lived on with their three daughters. Their story should have been swallowed up like so many others under the suffocating oppression of the Nazi regime.

But we do know about them because of the accidental discovery of a researcher, who saw a note in a parish registry about one of the parish's members being a "martyr." That researcher, Gordon Zahn, investigated and unearthed the untold, unheard story of Franz Jägerstätter, who refused to pledge loyalty to Hitler. He retrieved Franz's journals, where Franz reflected on Scripture and worked out the moral complexities of his day. He received the letters Franz and Franziska had sent each other while Franz was in prison. And somehow, by an act of providence bordering on the miraculous, the solitary witness of Franz Jägerstätter was presented at the Second Vatican Council as a model of Catholic conscience.

**"What will separate us from the love of Christ?"**

*– Romans 8:35*

The Jägerstätters' letters are at first rather underwhelming. They are so ordinary, especially considering that one of them was in jail awaiting almost certain execution and the other was doing her best to manage a farm and a family on her own. But what does begin to impress itself on readers is the consistently warm and compassionate tone of these letters, written under the greatest duress. In particular, Franz was writing from a Nazi prison, where all the language and

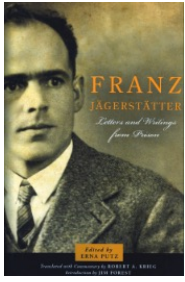
treatment around him were harsh, and compassion was all but annihilated. And yet, from within this inhospitable environment, he shaped a voice of compassion to offer his wife and their children.

What the letters and the witness of Franz and Franziska really reveal is the unlikely power of a marriage founded upon love of Christ. When the sinister national power bore down with all its force upon their family, they refused to be separated from the love of Christ. They refused to make an idol of even their family. Franz, in particular, knew that the Third Reich demanded absolute fidelity. One could not serve both Christ and Hitler. When he chose Christ, he did not abandon his family, his marriage or his country; instead, he committed himself to being a Christian father, Christian husband and Christian citizen of Austria. The cost of that commitment was his life, and his wife shared the weight of sacrifice.

The Jägerstätters choice was a fundamental one, like the one that Joshua put before all the tribes of Israel: "If it is displeasing to you to serve the Lord, choose today whom you will serve" (Jos 24:15). The temptation to accept the gods propped up by the Third Reich was nearly overwhelming, but by the strength of their marital bond, this martyr and his courageous wife said what Joshua said: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Blessed Franz is remembered on May 21.

Franz's last letter



At 4 p.m. on Aug. 9, 1943, Franz Jägerstätter was executed at Berlin-Brandenburg prison. In what he believed to be his final letter to his wife and children, Franz sought to offer them what he considered the most precious of all: the word of God on whom you can place all your trust. "Now my dear children, when your mother reads you this letter, your father will already be dead. ... Out of my experience I can say that life is painful when one lives as a lukewarm Christian. To exist this way is to have more the existence of a vegetable than to truly live. If a person were to possess all of the world's wisdom and be able to claim half the earth as his own, he could and would still be less fortunate than a poor person who can claim nothing in this world as his own other than a deep Catholic faith. I would not exchange my small, dirty cell for a king's palace if I was required to give up even a small part of my faith. All that is earthly – no matter how much, nor how beautiful – comes to an end. But God's Word is eternal" (["Franz Jägerstätter: Letters and Writings from Prison"](#)).

## Elisabeth and Felix Leseur

The ones we love best are the ones who can hurt us the most. But can that pain suffered in secret be turned into love? That was the spiritual project of Elisabeth Leseur, who shared great affection with her husband, who loved her tenderly, but who did not share his wife's Catholic faith. To the contrary, he ridiculed her faith. His hostility to faith was the greatest pain of Elisabeth's life.



Elisabeth and Felix Leseur circa

1910. Public domain

The story of Elisabeth Leseur is the story of simple and total devotion. It is the story of a woman who dedicated everything for the intention of giving her husband – “him who I love more than all” – the greatest treasure she herself had discovered: the gift of faith and the intimate love of Jesus Christ. She could not persuade her husband with words or arguments – he was too quick, too smart, too learned. All she could do was pray and treat him kindly and generously all throughout her life as a sacrifice of love. By the force of her love, she hoped to win him for Christ. The door to his heart was his affection for her and her affection for him. And so, Elisabeth offered her daily work, sufferings and good deeds for her husband’s conversion.

In her secret diaries, which her husband found after her untimely death, she captured her entire spiritual life in one penetrating paragraph:

“Let him see the fruit but not the sap, my life but not the faith that transforms it, the light that is in me but not a word of him who brings it to my soul; let him see God without hearing his name. Only on those lines, I think, must I hope for the conversion and sanctity of the dear companion of my life, my beloved Felix” (“The Secret Diary of Elisabeth”).

By the instrument of Elisabeth and Felix’s mutual subjection to one another out of love, Christ worked the miracle for which Elisabeth prayed. Her journal, his reflection on her life, his fondness for her, incited Felix’s conversion by softening his heart. And upon that softened heart, Christ wrote the truest name of love: his own.

**“Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.”**

*– Ephesians 5:21*

Felix later became Catholic and joined the Dominicans, where he was ordained a priest. He preached the word of God throughout Europe. The marriage of Elisabeth and Felix Leseur bore fruit in the service of communion.

Elisabeth's cause for canonization was opened in 1936, about 20 years after her death.

### Writings from the Leseurs

When he finally saw and accepted the beautiful faith that shone through his wife's entire life, Felix wrote of Elisabeth: "Charity was the chief force of her religious life. First, there was the love of God, and this love streams and overflows in her writings, as it filled her daily life.

And then there was the love of her neighbor."

Her own prayer journal reflects this commitment to charity and her confidence in the Lord's abounding goodness: "Help me, my God, and, without my knowing it, use me for a little good. According to a comparison I like, let me be the rough vessel giving forth light and warmth. Thou art that light; come and enlighten, through me, the souls that are infinitely dear to me" (["The Secret Diary of Elisabeth Leseur"](#)).

## Their legacies

The particularities of fidelity that each marriage calls forth is unique to each specific union of husband and wife. In these four marriages, though, married couples and those who aspire to marriage, alongside those whose calling is elsewhere, can find compelling images of the universal call to holiness that runs right through the concreteness of every human life. The Martins reveal the fruit of intentionally cultivated homes, the Mollas of sacrifice out of love, the Jägerstätters of the firmness of the spousal union to withstand oppression and violence, and the Leseurs of the power of vicarious suffering and the sweet fruits of lifelong affection. And the final gift of each of these marriages is the beauty of Christ that they

present to us.

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<b>Theology of the Body</b>
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Pope Saint John Paul II is pictured during a general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in 1980. CNS photo/Catholic Press Photo

From 1979-84, Pope St. John Paul II dedicated his Wednesday audiences to teaching what he called the Theology of the Body. These 129 general audiences dive into the vocation of marriage and how the human person is called to participate in the love of the Trinity:

- “When God-Yahweh said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone,’ (Gn 2:18) he affirmed that ‘alone,’ man does not completely realize this essence. He realizes it only by existing ‘with someone’ – and even more deeply and completely – by existing ‘for someone.’ ... The communion of persons means existing in a mutual ‘for,’ in a relationship of mutual gift.” (“Revelation and Discovery of the Nuptial Meaning of the Body,” Jan. 9, 1980)
- “The body, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden since time immemorial in God, and thus be a sign of it.” (“Man Enters the World as a Subject of Truth and Love,” Feb. 20, 1980)
- “In this description [referring to Eph 5:21-33] the Church-Body of Christ appears clearly as the second subject of the spousal union to which the first subject, Christ, manifests the love with which he has loved her by giving himself for her. That love is an image and above all a model of the love which the husband should show to his wife in marriage, when the two are subject to each other ‘out of reverence for Christ.’” (“St. Paul’s Analogy of Union of Head and Body Does Not Destroy Individuality of the Person,” Aug. 25, 1982)