

Saints living the Christian life as spouses

# One flesh, One spirit

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*Historically, very few Christian spouses have been declared Saints. Yet as true pillars of the Church since the beginning of Christianity, married couples offer wonderful models of life and a counter cultural ideal. In them we meet the tangible, fruitful and credible holiness of the laity through their everyday lives. And we are called to reflect and discover such people in today's world as well.*

## **A noteworthy New Testament witness**

We could start with Aquila and Priscilla. In the year 52, the Roman emperor Claudius opposed the introduction of new cults in Rome and ordered the Jews to be expelled from the city. As the historian, Suetonius explains: "He drove the Jews, who were rioting at the instigation of Chrestus, out of Rome." It is a clear reference to the division that had arisen within Judaism. It was a division between representatives of the ancient religion and those who, in the midst of it, followed Christ's teachings and were recorded as "Chrestus". Additionally, pagans of the time had only minimal and often confusing information.

It is difficult to think of all the Jews being expelled. They had been in Rome for at least 200 years, received citizenship and numbered 40,000. In any case, Aquila and Priscilla, one of many Judeo-Christian couples, had to abandon their beautiful home on the Aventine and find refuge in Corinth (Greece).

It was there that the apostle Paul, coming from Athens, found them. The *Acts of the Apostles* recounts: "There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome." The two welcomed him into their home and offered him a job. In fact, "he practiced the same trade, ... for they were tentmakers" (18:1-3). When the apostle was able to devote himself full-time to "preaching the Word" (18:5), they themselves provided for his material needs. Paul remained with them for 18 months.

The bond among them must have been very deep. In having to later leave Corinth, Paul asked the two to close their local business and follow him. Thus "Paul ... sailed for Syria, together with Priscilla and Aquila ... and they reached Ephesus." (18:18-19). There Paul left them in the city to continue his apostolic work while he continued on to Jerusalem. This Roman married couple fulfilled the mission entrusted to them by Paul and their home

became a meeting place for the growing Christian community. This is attested to in the First Letter to the Corinthians, written from what was then Ephesus: "The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church at their house, send you many greetings in the Lord " (16:19). Their work of evangelization also helped a great theologian like Apollo to know "the way of God more accurately " (18:26).

One or two years after the death of the Emperor Claudius they were able to return to Rome. They continued the proclamation of God's Word in Rome, opening their home once again to the Christian community. Paul writes a letter to the Christians of the city in 58 AD and asks: "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I am grateful but also all the churches of the Gentiles; greet also the church at their house." (*Rom* 16:3-5). Can there be a more beautiful testimony? Paul considers them authentic "co-workers" of his own and of the Gospel, to the point of risking their lives. We also find them again in the Second Letter to Timothy after returning to Ephesus to strengthen the faith of the Christians of that city (*2 Tim* 4:19). They are authentic missionaries capable of leaving home and placing themselves totally at the service of the Gospel.

### **The 'family' according to the Fathers of the Church**

By no means is this Christian couple an exception. They exemplify the new understanding that Christianity brought to married life. In a society accepting of divorce and tolerant of extramarital affairs, Christian marriage requires indissolubility and fidelity. As Aristide wrote in his *Apology*: "Christians abstain from all illegitimate union and all impure action" (15:6).

#### *Tertullian*

The conjugal holiness pursued in the first centuries was not limited to mutual fidelity. Church Fathers proposed lofty goals for spouses. An authentic spiritual communion was required as an expression and fulfillment of reciprocal love. Their state of life is declared holy and their union guaranteed by the presence of Jesus in their midst: "Who are the two or three gathered in the name of Christ, in whose midst is the Lord?", Tertullian asks. "Are they not the man, the woman and the child from the moment that man and woman are united by God?"<sup>1</sup>. Christian marriage thus attains incomparable dignity.

In *Letter To his Wife*, Tertullian describes the relationship between Christian spouses: "They are as brother and sister, both servants of the same Master. Nothing divides them, either in flesh or in spirit. They are, in very truth, two in one flesh; and where there is but one flesh there is also but one spirit. They pray together, they worship together, they fast together; instructing one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another. Side by side they visit God's church and partake of God's Banquet; side by side they face difficulties and persecution, share their consolations. They have no secrets from one another; they never shun each other's company; they never bring sorrow to each other's hearts. Unembarrassed, they visit the sick and assist the needy. They give alms without anxiety; they attend the Sacrifice without difficulty; they perform their daily exercises of piety without hindrance. They need not be furtive about making the Sign of the Cross, nor timorous in greeting the brethren, nor silent in asking a blessing of God. Psalms and hymns they sing to one another, striving to see which one of them will chant more beautifully the praises of their Lord. Hearing and seeing this, Christ rejoices. To such as these He gives His peace."<sup>2</sup>

### *John Chrysostom and Augustine*

The traditional family order with men as the undisputed heads and masters, is replaced by the image of the domestic church in which charity, concord and walking together towards God are the rule. It would be enough to recall some of John Chrysostom's teachings: "May the house become a church (...). May the grace of the Holy Spirit rest there, and may peace and harmony defend those who dwell there."<sup>3</sup> "Spouses do each thing as if they had one soul and were one body. This is true marriage, when there is great harmony between them and they are linked together by the bond of charity."<sup>4</sup>

We are witnessing the transition from the concept of *patria potestas* to that of *paterna pietas*: abortion, the exposure of newborns and the sale of children are no longer lawful. "Every father of a family," Augustine writes, "should feel committed in this capacity to love his family with truly fatherly affection. For the love of Christ and eternal life, educate all those in his home, counsel them, exhort them, correct them, with benevolence and authority."<sup>5</sup> And John Chrysostom: "I do not cease to exhort you to pray, to beg you that before anything else you will take care of the education of your children in time. [...] Raise an athlete for Christ. [...] May each of us, fathers and mothers, like the little ones whom we see working on their pictures, on their artworks with great care, take all his care for these admirable works of art."<sup>6</sup>

### **Holiness as a couple**

Despite the example of Priscilla and Aquila example and the teaching of Church Fathers, the ideal of holiness slowly shifted from the couple to the individual spouse. The choice of God and the radicalism of the Gospel are certainly personal, but it should be normal to live this together and it is certainly true that we are surrounded by a "crowd of witnesses" (Cfr. *Heb* 12:1). But pairs of witnesses recognized as such in "canonized" holiness are very few, even if some are well known. Some couples are famous more for their children's holiness than for their own, such as Gregory and Nonna, parents of Macrina, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa; and Silvia and Gordian, parents of Gregory the Great. But there are also Isidore the Farmer and Maria de la Cabeza, or Lucchese and Buonadonna da Poggibonsi, who received the penitential habit from St. Francis that would later give rise to the Franciscan Third Order. Couples who were kings and queens are also particularly frequent.

But these are generally little-known saints from a more distant past. They do not easily enlighten the journeys of couples today. For the most part, married saints were not canonized because of their marital status. Rather, they were widows or because they had closed themselves in monasteries and become nuns. When both spouses were declared saints it was because they were holy on an individual basis. Yet many have become saints not despite being married, but precisely because they are married. Is not marriage a sacrament and a way of holiness?

### **New Models of Family Holiness**

Fortunately, new models of family holiness are still being proposed today. We can start from two well-known couples: Zelig and Louis Martin, who gave life to an extraordinary family of which Therese of the Child Jesus was part, and Luigi and Maria Beltrame Quattrocchi,

who also had four children, three of whom embraced religious life. In both cases the spouses were canonized at the same time as a couple because they had walked the path of holiness together!

*Louis Martin and Marie-Azelié Guérin*

Louis Martin and Marie-Azelié Guérin were married on July 13, 1858, at midnight! They gave birth to nine children of whom only five girls survived. All five became religious. Marie-Azelié died of breast cancer in 1877 and Luigi, suffering from arteriosclerosis and paralysis, in 1894. It is significant that their initially separate causes of beatification were eventually brought forward together. Both were beatified by Pope Benedict XVI on October 19, 2008, in Lisieux, France, and later canonized by Pope Francis on October 18, 2015, during the Synod of the Family.

"When we had our children – wrote Marie-Azelié towards the end of her life in 1877 – our ideas changed a little: we lived only for them. This was our happiness. In short, everything was very easy, the world was no longer a burden for us." Yet everything was transfigured by the love shared between the two of them despite the harsh circumstances.

"The Lord," said their daughter, St Thérèse of Lisieux, "gave me two parents more worthy of heaven than of earth". She confessed that she learned the spirituality of the "little way" at her mother's knee. "Thinking of papa, I naturally think of the good God," she whispered, while confiding to her sisters. "I had only to look at my papa to know how saints pray."

Pope Francis summarized their journey on the day of their canonization: "The holy spouses, Louis Martin and Marie-Azelié Guérin, lived Christian service in the family, building day by day an environment full of faith and love."

*Luigi Beltrame Quattrocchi and Maria Corsini*

Luigi Beltrame Quattrocchi and Maria Corsini were also beatified together as a couple, on October 21, 2001, by Saint John Paul II. It was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. Luigi and Maria met in Rome in 1902 at the ages of 22 and 18 respectively. He studied law and she was a languages major. An intense correspondence characterized their seven months of engagement: letters and notes in which mutual esteem, respect and modesty between them shines through. Yet they also expressed themselves with passionate phrases as well. They were married on November 25, 1905, in the Roman basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore.

Their fourth pregnancy was particularly difficult and put the lives of both the unborn child and mother at risk. The spouses refused an abortion and Enricetta was born (whose cause for beatification is underway) in 1914. They attended Mass every day, recited the rosary and practiced adoration during the night. They were also socially involved in volunteering for UNITALSI (the Italian Union for Transporting the Sick to Lourdes and International Shrines) and helped to save over 150 people from Nazi persecution during World War II. They also assisted earthquake victims, supported the Catholic University and developed courses for engaged couples.

The relationship between them was simple and profound. "On his way out of church," Mary writes, "he said 'buon giorno' as if the day would then have a reasonable beginning." They lived this way of life for half a century until Luigi's heart attack in 1951. Mary passed away fourteen years later. The witness of the Beltrame Quattrocchi spouses, said Saint John Paul II, is "a singular confirmation that the journey of holiness made together, as a couple, is

possible, beautiful, extraordinarily fruitful, and is fundamental for the good of the family, the Church and society."

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<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *To his wife*, 2, 8, 7: SC 273, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 8, 6: SC 273: p. 148.

See [https://tertullian.org/works/ad\\_uxorem.htm](https://tertullian.org/works/ad_uxorem.htm).

<sup>3</sup> *On Genesis*, *Homily 2*, 4: PG 53, 31.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, *Homily. 45*, 2: PG 54, 416.

<sup>5</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 51, 13: NBA 24, p. 1027.

<sup>6</sup> *On the education of children*, 19.22: SC 188, pp. 120.122-124.