



## Reflecting on St. Therese of Lisieux, and Families Coping with Mental Illness

by the mother of an adult with mental illness

The family will be in the spotlight in several events this fall. First, the World Meeting of Families will convene in Philadelphia Sept. 22-25, and the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Family will meet in Vatican City Oct. 4-25. In addition, the first couple ever to be canonized at the same ceremony, Louis and Zelig Martin, will be so honored Oct. 18, during the Synod of Bishops. The Martins lived ordinary but holy lives in nineteenth-century France. They were parents of nine children, including St. Therese of Lisieux, Carmelite nun and a doctor of the church.

Families whose members bear the burden of mental illness note another fall observance: since 1990, the first week in October has been designated as Mental Illness Awareness Week to encourage public education about this important issue.

This confluence of events seems more than mere coincidence to the one in four families affected by mental illness. Many Catholics know that Louis Martin suffered a psychotic illness late in life and was confined to an asylum. In St. Therese, they find a companion on

this journey into the often frightening world of mental illness. Her writings provide some direction and comfort to families who experience the stigma of mental illness, terror that their beloved ill family members will harm themselves or others, sorrow in their relapses, and confusion about next steps. In family parlance, they know that St. Therese "gets it."

A mother of a person with mental illness identified some of Therese's thoughts, in bold below, as having been helpful as she tried to cope with her child's illness. The mother's comments follow Therese's.

**"He guides and inspires me every moment of the day. Just when I need it, a new light shines on my problems."** So many decisions await families when their loved ones become ill: whom to consult? How will expensive care be paid for? Who will care for my loved one when I am gone?

**"What pleases the good God in my little soul is to see me love my littleness and my poverty, it is seeing the blind trust I have in his mercy."** Families become isolated when their loved ones develop

mental illness. No one sends a card, no one brings a meal, no one asks about the ill person's health. Families spend thousands of dollars on conventional and alternative care, trying to find answers. While they search for a cure, their ill family members often live in excruciating pain. Spiritually and often financially, families feel poor. Knowing that God is a God of mercy paves the way to hope.

**"Jesus has always shown me the only way that leads to the fire of divine love: it is that of a little child who, full of trust, falls asleep in its father's arms."** Families aware of St. Therese's "little way" are encouraged to trust—that despite false starts, medication changes, scarce services, destruction of property, suicide attempts—they are held in God's arms. Sometimes, it's the only image that helps.

**"Everything is grace."** Many friends of St. Therese come to some understanding and belief in the truth of this statement. Even if outcomes are not what they had hoped, if every day brings new challenges, if life plans need to be altered, this is a grace-filled journey. God is with us.