

During this time of pandemic, we all seem to have a little less patience. Perhaps you have caught yourself being critical of others. Jesus teaches, “If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother” (Mt 18:15). I would back up one step further and encourage you to try to understand your brother or sister before you even begin to make the fraternal correction that Jesus suggests.

Everyone has heard of Saint Therese of Lisieux. She was one of five sisters who entered the convent and devoted their lives to God in prayer. Marie, Pauline, Celine, and Therese all became Carmelites ... living in the same religious community in their hometown of Lisieux, France. The lesser known sister, Leonie, is often described as having a difficult personality. She felt a call to religious life but stumbled along the way. She entered the Poor Clares, the cloistered religious order, founded by St Clare of Assisi, but was asked to leave. Later she entered the convent of the Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary and was also asked to leave twice.

Let us try to understand this temperamental sister. What made her heart so brittle that it was very difficult for her to find joy in life and in the convent? We are all born with certain dispositions ... some not always positive. The experiences we have in life and the way we are raised have an influence in shaping us ... sometimes for the better ... sometimes for the worse.

Leonie’s childhood knew its share of hardships. Leonie was closest to her sister Helene who was 18 months her junior. Close in age, the two were natural friends. When Helene died at the age of 5, Leonie lost her best friend. Three other brothers and sisters died as well.

As we live with the coronavirus and see the elderly die at a disproportionate rate, we are reminded that in past centuries, the infant mortality rate was much higher and childhood diseases were often very deadly. “Marie and Pauline had each other, and Leonie and Helene had each other – until Helene was gone. Later Celine and Therese had each other, but Leonie was without such a “partner sister” for the rest of her life.”ⁱ

Poor health was another factor for Leonie. She had chronic respiratory problems and severe eczema throughout most of her life. Academically, she may have been hampered by dyslexia which made it more difficult for her to learn.

Leonie often acted out as a child. Zelig Martin, her mother, had her own health issues and the family hired Louise, a maid, to help with running the household. Louise was very strict with Leonie and she became even more difficult. In time, Louise’s behavior was corrected, but not without leaving some emotional scars behind for Leonie.

Once Leonie was no longer hindered by Louise, Zelig’s efforts to draw her middle child to her bore great fruit. Leonie became very attached to her mother. A shock for each of the children in the Martin household was the death of their mother. Leonie, 14, and Therese, 4, struggled the most with the untimely death of their mother.

Leonie’s sisters loved her and encouraged her, but as in any family, there was a bit of sibling rivalry that may have caused some ill feelings. Therese, the youngest was her greatest supporter. She never doubted Leonie’s vocation and was confident that in time Leonie would persevere. Therese died at the age of 24. Posthumously, her spiritual autobiography helped instruct Leonie in little and ordinary ways to grow in holiness. The book “had a profound impact: four months later Leonie entered the Visitation convent ... for the third and final time (her fourth attempt at religious life) and remained there until her death.”ⁱⁱ

It is easy to be critical of another person. It is much more difficult to try to understand a person and then help them to grow in holiness. Today, we remember St Jane Frances de Chantal whose feast day we celebrate. A widow in her 30’s, she wanted to become a nun. But under a vow of obedience, she waited until into her mid 40’s. With the assistance of Saint Vincent de

Paul, Jane Frances de Chantal helped to found a religious order that gave women a 2nd, 3rd and 4th chance to succeed. The Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary was specifically founded to help women who found it difficult to enter religious life due to ill health or age.ⁱⁱⁱ

Leonie Martin struggled in life, but she found acceptance within the convent and flourished once she had the maturity and wisdom to succeed in religious life. “So, whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:17-18).

ⁱ Sammons, Suzan. What we can learn from the forgotten sister of St Therese of Lisieux

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Frances_de_Chantal