

She lingered in torment without a word of complaint, although her face was often contorted with pain. Once, however, after a brief respite, Anne had a visit from one of the sisters. The nun left her room in tears, saying, "I thank God for having allowed me to see that child. She is indeed a saint. Her face looks simply angelic."

Anne's "birthday in heaven" was January 14, 1922. She gazed at a picture of the Blessed Mother and repeated word for word the *Hail Holy Queen*. Then, after looking at her earthly mother for the last time, she expired.

A few days later, her body was taken to Annecy-le-Vieux and interred in the family vault. When many cures and favors were attributed to the little victim of love, the bishop of Annecy, Msgr. Du Bois de la Villabel, opened the canonical investigation into Anne's life and virtues in 1932. An exhumation of her remains then took place with the bishop, doctors, priests, Anne's mother, and other relatives in attendance. When the casket was opened, onlookers saw that the body was perfectly preserved. Those who had known Anne found her features exactly as they had been in life. Later, more than 300 people passed by the casket after waiting in cold rain and icy winds for the opportunity.

Pope John Paul II approved a decree on March 3, 1990, recognizing the heroic virtues of this eleven-year-old child by awarding her the title of Venerable. Little Anne now awaits beatification and canonization. †

Annie Zelikova

1924 - 1941
17 years old

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The life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and that of Annie Zelikova parallel each other in many respects: during their early years, both had an active spiritual life and were attracted to the Discalced Carmelite Order. Thérèse entered the cloister; Annie became a Carmelite tertiary. Both surrendered themselves to God's merciful love with their penances being offered for priests. Both made private sacrifices, concealed with a heavenly smile; in fact, Annie had what was called her "apostolate of the smile." Both corresponded a great deal, writing letters that are spiritual gems. Both died of tuberculosis at a young age, Thérèse being 24, Annie only 17; and finally, the last words of each are very similar. There are still many other instances in the life of Annie that recall similar expressions of love, resembling those of her spiritual counterpart.

But with all these similarities, there is one great difference in the two: their family backgrounds. Thérèse was born into an upper-middle-class family; Annie was a simple farm girl born in Moravia, in the

central province of what was formerly known as Czechoslovakia. We can safely assert that Annie received many of her inspirations from the *Autobiography of St. Thérèse*, one of her favorite books. She also enjoyed other spiritual books: Fr. Graf's *Yes, Father* and Fr. Wickel, S.J.'s *Ecce Jesus*.

What we know of Annie comes largely from her own writings, including her record of spiritual exercises, retreats, and the letters she wrote as an apostolate. After Communism's demise — when spiritual literature was once again allowed — other biographies followed, demonstrating that this holy farm girl's story was not forgotten during the long religious suppression. Only after the dissolution of the Communist regime was it possible to initiate the process of beatification.

Annie was born on July 19, 1924, the first child of the family headed by Alois Zelikova. A second daughter followed three years later. Their father studied carpentry but was, in fact, a small farmer. Annie's religious upbringing was described as being solidly Catholic with images of the Blessed Virgin, protectress of the Moravian people, being displayed in every home and in innumerable shrines. Even today, the Moravian people perceive the Blessed Mother as being a living presence among her people.

Annie was not a paragon of virtue from the cradle, but was sometimes headstrong and often insisted on having her own way and being in charge. After her death, her spiritual advisor returned to Annie's home to find additional information for a book he was writing about her, and remarked to her relatives that Annie couldn't have been all that perfect from childhood, as it would seem. "She must have had some faults," he insisted.

Her younger sister replied that she did have a few faults, but "Just until her first Holy Communion, not after that."

It became Annie's practice to make Holy Mass the highlight of every day. One day when the two girls did not have school, their father expected them to help in the fields. Because his land was located a good distance from the town, their walk to it would have to begin early, and this would interfere with Annie's participation in the morning

Mass. Annie pleaded with her parents, promising that she would run very fast to catch up to them after Mass, and work extra hard to accomplish the work expected of her. Her parents relented.

Annie attended a school conducted by the Sisters of the Holy Cross, whose convent and school were very close to the Zelikova's home. These nuns, especially Sr. Ludmilla, knew exactly how to encourage and advise her spiritually.

When Annie was ten years old, she was permitted to join the sisters for a three-day retreat. Since the Christmas season was fast approaching, she was to write later:

I wanted a manger with many flowers of love as possible. . . . Up to now I loved Jesus, but now my desire grew to do something, to sacrifice for Him. In school I often went to visit Him and I tried to provide Him with as much joy as possible. All this was done in a hidden way so that no one knew about it, because I confided it to no one. I thought that I could be robbed of all that happiness hidden in my heart.

She was also to write:

The second retreat I made caused many changes. My love was anxious to surrender everything, just so I could be closer to Jesus. My desire began to fly to the very heights of Carmel in which I perceived that highest union with Jesus. I don't know why I yearned for Carmel right from my childhood years, especially since I never knew a Carmelite. I just knew the Carmelite Little Thérèse; I loved her and I wanted to imitate her virtuous life. . . . I did everything with Jesus. I ran to Him with everything, even with the most ordinary things.

One day when Annie was almost fourteen years old, she heard her mother crying and telling a visitor, "But that is a sin against heaven and against the infant . . . you cannot kill it." Annie learned later that

a relative had had an abortion. Upon knowing this, Annie spent long hours before Jesus in church offering herself in expiation for sins, especially those of abortion. It was during Holy Week that she offered herself once again to Jesus. She wrote:

I begged Jesus that he compensate for sins by taking me as his property, that He take my body, my soul, my health, my life, and simply everything that I have. It was during this same Holy Week, on Good Friday, that I was overcome by an attack of coughing, and my handkerchief became red with blood. I was overwhelmed with great happiness. I could do nothing else except to thank Him.

When Sr. Ludmilla learned that Annie had not reported this condition to her mother, she mentioned to Mrs. Zelikova that perhaps Annie should have some X-rays taken. But outwardly, Annie was the picture of health, and so the mother could not understand the sister's request, and Annie was expected to continue her household and farm chores as usual, in addition to her schoolwork. Soon, however, others began to notice Annie's obvious weight loss and her pallid complexion. This time, Sr. Ludmilla persuaded the mother that Annie needed medical attention, and it was Sr. Ludmilla herself who took Annie to see a doctor. The prognosis was not good — advanced tuberculosis. The doctor expressed the opinion that Annie might live three more months, but no longer.

Although the nun was devastated by the news, Annie happily announced with her customary smile, "Christ is soon going to take me to Himself." But Annie was to live not just three months, but four more years, offering everything to Him with great love.

The parents were crushed by the doctor's prognosis and wanted to send Annie to a village in the Tara Mountains, where the clean air was deemed therapeutic. But Annie resisted a move, saying that she was in the hands of God, that she had surrendered herself to Him, and if He willed her to get better, she would do so at home as well as in the mountains. After her request to attend a retreat with the sisters was

refused, Sr. Ludmilla asked the retreat preacher, Fr. Hlouch, to visit Annie, which he did. He was so overwhelmed with her spiritual authenticity that he became her spiritual advisor for the rest of her life.

To relieve her parents' anxiety, Annie continued to apply herself to her schoolwork and to her tasks at home and in the fields, but with the beginning of 1939, she began to periodically cough up blood. It was then that they decided to keep her home from school, although she continued to be useful around the house. During this time she wrote down some of her conversations with Jesus, twenty of which have survived. Among other things, the fifteen-year-old wrote:

Dear Jesus, let my love for You be ever greater, and let that love make me forget myself completely. Everything, whether sorrow or joy, comes from Your love. May everything that I am and that I have sing You a song of praise.

Annie dearly missed attending school, where she had often stayed after class to help fellow students with difficult lessons. But she often went to the school during her illness to visit with the students and the sisters. Her last visit took place only a few months before her death.

Around this time, she was to write:

How beautiful it is to strive after a strong love, which would look only to give honor and glory to Jesus in everything. Every instant it is possible to give him much — all of one's work, every movement, every word can be uttered with great love. Let us do as much as we can, and when we are unsuccessful in something, let us remain peaceful. It not so much depends on the fruit of our work and effort, but rather on the love which led us to that task.

Annie also gives us this simple way to pray:

When I'm in the woods or in the garden or even before the tabernacle, I call on every blade of grass, on every flower, on every

grain of wheat to praise God. I wish I had as many hearts as there are songs of birds, as there are brooks and springs, as many as there are grains, leaves, as many as there are stars and clouds in heaven, so that I could give enough thanks for the gifts of God.

Toward the end of 1939, doctors informed her father that, since her condition was hopeless, they would no longer care for Annie. Annie smiled at the news and was informed by the sisters, "God is the best doctor. He will cure you when He Himself wants to do so." To this, Annie replied, "How beautiful it is that the doctors have given up on me. At least they are not going to interfere with God."

In February of 1940, Annie made a private retreat and recorded expressions that are reminiscent of those made by St. Thérèse:

During this retreat I found true beauty, which is hidden in faithfulness in little things. I always desired to do great and heroic deeds of love, but when I saw that I was unable, I was grieved by it. Now I find great heroism precisely in little things, so that now I haven't the slightest regret whether I can do something or not.

When only fifteen years old, Annie wrote with amazing wisdom to a mother who complained that, with her family duties, her spiritual life was stunted. Part of her letter to this mother reads:

All the care that you dedicate to your little boy, offer it to the Lord Jesus. Have this thought in everything: "I am doing this for Jesus." You could also unite it to the most precious sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross. Even the slightest sacrifice takes on a limitless value. . . . Really, we need not look for sacrifices, since every instant presents us with some. As much work as you must do daily, as many steps, as many words, as many smiles, all of this can be brought lovingly to our beloved Jesus. In the evening you will be amazed at how many flowers of love you picked for Him spontaneously, without being forced. The best thing is right away in the

morning to offer Him the whole day with everything that will happen to us.

Annie was finally ordered to bed on December 4, 1940 — only to be forced to leave it frequently when an elderly aunt who lived with the family became sick. Annie was expected to help the family care for this ailing relative, even though she was not feeling well herself and was in considerable pain. But because she looked so well, and performed the chores with her usually pleasant smile, her condition was not considered too serious, and her total confinement to bed was considered perhaps unnecessary.

Annie's spirit of sacrifice is authenticated in her appreciation of her great aunt, who proved to be a trying burden for the whole family. After the aunt passed away, Annie's sister remembered their conversation:

"Dad is glad that now, after the death of Auntie, the family lives in peace as in heaven," she had said.

Annie thought for a moment and then smilingly replied, "Yes, our good God gave us Auntie to help us to practice self-control and strengthen ourselves in virtue. But now this opportunity will be lost to us."

Annie had always felt herself called to be a cloistered Carmelite. When she realized she would not be healed, and that her dream would never be realized, she asked Father Hlouch for permission to admit her to the Third Order Secular of Carmel. Permission was granted from Vienna with a dispensation from the canonical age. After she had made her private vows on February 7, 1941, Annie noted that, for her, life didn't change at all; she had already been living the Carmelite commitment for some time.

Almost echoing the words of St. Thérèse, Annie was to say that she never regretted that she had surrendered herself to the love of Jesus. "I do not regret having sacrificed myself. I will never tell Jesus, 'Let up,' but rather, 'Go ahead.'"

A nun who visited during Annie's last days remembers Annie saying to her, "I must smile to my last breath. Ah, all I can give God now

are my heartbeats and my smile. Nothing is left to me except love and trust."

During her last hours on earth, her mother kept vigil with her suffering daughter. As she and the local priest's housekeeper prayed the Sorrowful Mysteries of the rosary, Annie joined them, and when the mother wanted to fetch a cloth to wipe her daughter's feverish forehead, Annie begged her mother to continue praying the rosary with her. Small as the action was, it was yet another offering to Jesus.

The dying eighteen-year-old had always wanted to die with a smile. When it was nearly five o'clock in the morning, a great smile brightened her face and she was heard to exclaim weakly, "How beautiful it all is... I wouldn't trade places... with anyone." She gazed at the crucifix she held tightly in her hands and kissed it.

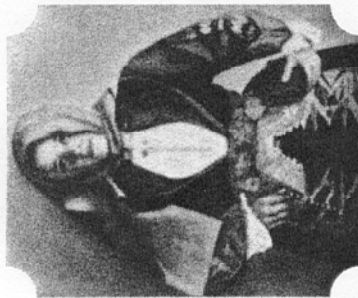
Still smiling, she went on, "My heart is beating... for Jesus. I love Him so much." After whispering, "I trust," Annie said something else her mother could not understand except for one word — "Carmel." While the morning Angelus bell was chiming, Annie died in the peace of God.

Sr. Ludmilla prepared Annie Zelikova's body for the funeral. It was dressed in white with a laurel wreath and Annie's first Holy Communion veil on her head. A palm was placed at her side, and at her feet was a bouquet of wild roses. Annie's hands fingered her beloved rosary and crucifix, while on her heart was a copy of her first Communion picture, her Carmelite brown scapular, and the Third Order Secular Rule book. Her spiritual advisor, Fr. Joseph Hlouch, conducted the funeral services. During those rites, many people expressed the opinion that Annie Zelikova was truly a saint worthy of imitation. †

Blessed Antonia Mesina



1919 — 1935
16 years old
SARDINIA



Antonia was the second born of a family of ten children. She began life in the mountainous interior of Sardinia, in the little city of Orgosolo. Her father, Agostino Mesina, was assigned the guardianship of the rural areas around the community. Antonia's mother, Grazia Raubanu, was noted for her great piety and her appreciation of her daughter, Antonia, whom she called "the flower of my life."

During her infancy and early childhood, Antonia was like all children, being lively and playful as well as obedient and affectionate. When she attended school, she was described as being well liked by both teachers and students. Her instructors noted that Antonia was well behaved, precise, and studious. Always punctual for class, she loved the duties she was asked to perform and exhibited a commendable spirit of sacrifice in bending to the wishes and welfare of her classmates.

At the age of seven, Antonia received her First Holy Communion and, when she was only ten, joined a Catholic Action group. She was proud to be a member and encouraged many to join the group, saying