



# Father Martin



*Inspired by Le Père Martin by Ruben Saillens  
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A long time ago, in a small Alsatian village in France, there lived an old shoemaker everyone called Father Martin.

He lived alone at the corner of the village's main street, in a very tiny house – so tiny that the main room served as a kitchen, a bedroom, a living room and a workshop. Despite that, he loved his home, where he had mended countless worn-out shoes. From the baker to the mayor, everyone in the village knew that if they wanted to have strong heels under their feet, they had to go to Father Martin's shop. His work as a cobbler provided him a good enough salary to eat and pay his rent, without being too rich, nor too poor.

Although Martin was always smiling and gentle, his eyes looked a little sad. It should be said that he had gone through many trials in his life: his beloved wife had died years ago, and his son had never returned from the army. Despite these hard blows, the old man deeply believed that God loved him. He had always kept his faith. That is the reason why he loved ending each day in his rocking chair by the fireplace, reading a passage from the old Bible he had kept since he was a child. Its well-worn pages had comforted him throughout the years and had given him the strength to go on.

One winter evening, after a long day of making shoes for the Christmas orders, Martin fell asleep in his chair, his Bible open on his lap. He was so tired that he had stopped reading at the



beginning of the Christmas night story, when Mary and Joseph were searching in vain for a place to bring their baby into the world. Every time Martin read this story, he was saddened by the thought that no one had opened their home to welcome the Saviour of humanity. *My house may be tiny, but if Jesus came to see me, I hope I would make room for him,* said Martin to himself that evening, yawning, before sinking into a deep sleep. Outside, the blowing wind was particularly strong, and the snow was falling heavily. But in the living room of the tiny house, everything was quiet. The only sound was Martin's soft snoring, as well as the crackling of the fire in the fireplace.

In the middle of the night, the sleeping old man heard a gentle voice calling him, whispering, "Martin, Martin." After a pause, the voice continued, "Tomorrow, from dawn to dusk, look out in the street, for I may pass by your house." Martin woke up suddenly, wondering if the Lord had spoken to him, or if he had dreamed it. He started looking behind the doors, and even in the closets, to see if anyone was hiding there. Finding no one, he went to bed and after pondering for a little while on the words he had heard, he fell asleep.

The next morning, Martin got up at six o'clock, as he did every morning. Once dressed, he lit the fireplace, ate his honey toast dipped in coffee, then sat down at his workshop table. The old man had his little rituals; his workdays were set like clockwork. From sunrise until his lunch break, he would work without a break, so focused that he never looked up until he had completed the pair of shoes he was repairing or making. Yet, on that day, he could not help but look out the window, in case his beloved Saviour appeared on the street.

*Maybe you're going crazy, my old Martin!* he said to himself. *And anyway, if Jesus visited in person, what could I even offer him?* But despite his doubts and questions, he longed for his Lord to come.

The sun had now completely risen, and an icy wind was blowing through the streets of the village that Christmas Eve. The first passers-by appeared by Martin's window: a lady skittering to the butcher's to buy a turkey to roast for Christmas Eve dinner; a father and his son heading to the bakery to buy a loaf of warm



bread. They were followed by the street sweeper, his hands and beard frozen as he was trying to shovel the pavement to allow the few passers-by to walk without slipping. Seeing him, Martin put on his scarf, went out his front door and hailed the sweeper.

“Hello friend, come take a break inside and have a hot coffee in my workshop!”

“I wouldn’t say no,” replied the sweeper, who was starting to lose feeling in his nose.

As Martin handed him a steaming cup of coffee, the two men began to chat.

“I used to hate coffee,” said the sweeper as he was taking his first sip. “But since my father passed away five years ago, the smell reminds me of his presence and warms up my heart and my palate like nothing else. This cup,” he said after another sip, “is pure comfort to my soul.” Martin asked him more about his father and he himself shared some memories of his wife, Olga. Once reinvigorated, the sweeper went back to work.



Later that morning, a little before his lunch break, Martin saw a young mother passing by his window with her baby in her arms. She was wearing a long cotton dress and a small wool cardigan but had no scarf nor a coat on her back. Martin went out to meet her and invited her inside, to warm up for a few moments by the fireplace. The young woman, embarrassed by such generosity, refused at first but ended up accepting the offer.

While cradling her baby in front of the fire, she told Martin that she had sold her coat to buy food and that she was using her only shawl to wrap around her baby. Heartbroken by her poverty, the old man shared his lunch with her.

When they finished eating, Martin climbed onto a chair to fetch a box placed long ago on the highest shelf of his workshop. After blowing the dust off the box, the shoemaker, who seemed moved, slowly opened it. Inside, there was a pair of tiny comfortable shoes, embroidered with golden thread and fastened with pearly buttons. He had made this pair of shoes with love, just before his son left for the army. Showing them proudly to his son, he had said to him, “Come back soon, my son, so that



you can meet a sweet woman to marry and have a little girl or a little boy who will wear the most beautiful shoes!" After opening the box, Martin handed the pair of shoes to the young mother with a smile filled with emotion. She warmly thanked the shoemaker before leaving with her baby, who was wearing the best shoes ever.

The afternoon was ending, and Martin had still not seen his Lord pass by. He was starting to get discouraged when he saw an old lady pulling a cart filled with salted pretzels that she was selling to passers-by. A little boy, knee-high to a grasshopper, suddenly appeared running behind her, and tried to steal a pretzel. But the old lady caught him by the collar and threatened to report him to the police. Witnessing the scene, Martin went out and ran to their encounter. He begged the old lady to let the boy go. Martin offered to pay for the pretzel and then gave it to the boy who, stunned by the shoemaker's gesture, promised to never steal anything again his entire life.

Martin returned to his studio and continued working on shoes. When night came, Martin put away his tools with a heavy heart, disappointed

that he had waited all day without seeing his Saviour arrive. *It was just a dream, my old Martin*, he said to himself with a sad smile.

However, after supper, as he sat in his rocking chair, a voice began to whisper to him, "Martin. Martin." The old man started. "Martin. Martin. Didn't you recognize me?" He turned and saw the sweeper appear before him, in a ray of light, as well as the young mother and her baby, the old lady and the little boy.

"It's me," said the voice.

And then the old shoemaker understood. He sat down in his rocking chair, opened his old Bible worn out by the years, and read these familiar words:

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matthew 25: 35, 40)

This is how Father Martin knew that it was not a dream, and that day, he had received the Saviour of humanity in his tiny house.



Focus on the Family's *Radio Theatre* story "Shoemaker Martin" is another retelling of this story. Listen to the dramatic audio for free!

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