



CONFERENCE OF THE FRANCISCAN FAMILY

WE HAVE COME TO BELIEVE IN LOVE

LETTER FOR THE EIGHTH CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF SAINT ELIZABETH, PRINCESS OF HUNGARY, LANGRAFIN OF THURINGIA AND FRANCISCAN PENITENT

To all the brothers and sisters of the Franciscan family,
especially to all the brothers and sisters of
the Third Order Regular and of the Secular Franciscan Order
May God's mercy fill your hearts.

1. The Eighth centenary, 1207-2007

During the coming year 2007, we will celebrate the eighth centenary of the birth of St. Elizabeth, Princess of Hungary, Landgravin of Thuringia and Franciscan penitent. The Jubilee year will begin on November 17, 2006, the feast day of St. Elizabeth, and will end on the same day in 2007.

The Franciscan Third Order honors her as its patroness and the whole Franciscan family counts her among its glories. We would like to take this unique opportunity to present her as an exceptional example of devotion to God the Father, in the following of Christ and in the dissolving of her whole being in the God who is Love.

In the encyclical which forms the program for his pontificate, *Deus caritas est* (DC 1), Pope Benedict XVI has recalled to us the fundamental option of a Christian, expressed in these words: *We have come to believe in God's love*. Let's hope that our faith may emerge strengthened from this jubilee encounter with Saint Elizabeth, who believed profoundly in love.

The life of St. Elizabeth displays attitudes which literally reflect the Gospel of Jesus Christ: recognition of the absolute lordship of God, the need to strip ourselves of everything and become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of the Father; the fulfillment, down to the last consequences, of the new commandment of love.

She emptied herself until she made herself available to all the needy. She discovered the presence of Jesus in the poor, the forsaken of society, the hungry, and the sick (Mt. 25). The whole commitment of her life consisted of living the compassion of the God who is Love and making it present in the midst of the poor.

Elizabeth sought the radical following of Christ, who, though he was rich, made himself poor, in the most genuine manner of St. Francis. She renounced the false appearances and ambitions of the world; the pomp of her court, comforts, riches and luxurious dress. . . She descended from her castle and planted her tent among the rejected and the distressed in order to serve them. Elizabeth, the first Franciscan woman to be canonized, was forged in the evangelical furnace of St. Francis.

Certainly the date we are celebrating on this anniversary is lost in the shadows of a remote past, enveloped in legends, but we are convinced that if, in this jubilee year we can encounter the saint and her work, beyond the legends, we will emerge enriched in our souls and our work.

2. Life and legend of Elizabeth

Elizabeth's life has been interwoven with legends, the fruit of veneration, admiration and imagination, which capture important aspects of her personality. But we are more interested in the history hidden behind those legends. We want to become acquainted with her personality, her genius and her unique and provocative holiness. The legends that surround her are the vivid colors of her portrait, they are a metaphor for the facts. We cannot discard them either.

Who was Elizabeth? A Hungarian princess born in 1207, the daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary and his wife Gertrude of Andechs-Meran. According to Hungarian tradition, she was born in the castle in the town of Sárospatak, one of the favorite residences of the royal family, in northern Hungary. Tradition usually indicates the date of her birth as July 7. We are certain only of the year.

Following the prevailing custom among the medieval nobility, Elizabeth was promised in marriage to a German prince from Thuringia. At the age of four (1211), she was entrusted to the German delegation which came to get her at Pressburg, at that time the westernmost stronghold of the kingdom of Hungary.

She was brought up at the Thuringian court along with the other children of the Landgraf's family, including her future husband, as was the custom at that time. At the age of fourteen, she married Ludwig IV, the Landgraf of Thuringia. She had three children. Elizabeth was left a widow at the age of twenty. She died in 1231, when she was 24. and was canonized by Pope Gregory IX in 1235. A record of a rich life, one in which she was crucified so that she could rise to the greatest height of sanctity, and be proposed as an imperishable example of abnegation and devotion.

A misunderstanding has taken root in the Christian people, due to legends and some not very rigorous popular biographies which say that Elizabeth was the queen of Hungary. Of course, she was never queen of Hungary, or of Thuringia, but princess of Hungary and *Landgräfin* of Thuringia in Germany. Elizabeth is traditionally represented with a crown, which she wore not as a queen, but as a princess or Landgräfin.

3. Wife and mother

Elizabeth's companions and attendants describe for us how her pilgrimage towards God started when she was still very young: from her earliest childhood all her games, dreams and prayers were directed towards a life beyond.

In 1221, at the age of 14, she married Landgraf Louis IV of Thuringia. Ludwig and Elizabeth had grown up together and addressed each other as brother and sister. The wedding took place in the church of St. George in Eisenach.

Up until 1227, Elizabeth was an exemplary wife, mother and Landgräfin of Thuringia; one of the women of highest lineage in the empire.

Their relationship as a married couple did not follow the common style of the time, ordinarily marked by motives of politics or convenience, but was one of authentic conjugal and fraternal love. As a married woman, Elizabeth devoted a great deal of time to prayer far into the night, in the bedroom she shared with her husband. She knew that she belonged completely to Ludwig, but she had already heard the call of her "other husband": "Follow me!" Deep joy and complete satisfaction sprang from this double-sided love, however, not a conflict from being divided in her soul. God was the supreme and unconditional value that strengthened Elizabeth's other loves for her husband, her children and the poor.

The miracle of the roses woven by legend does not accurately represent their relationship in their marriage. When Elizabeth was surprised by her husband with her skirt full of bread, there was

no reason at all to hide her errand of mercy from him. Therefore, there was no reason for the bread to turn into roses. God does not perform useless miracles.

Elizabeth had three children: Hermann, heir to the throne, Sophia and Gertrude; the last was born when Elizabeth's husband was already dead (1227), a victim of pestilence, as a crusader on the way to the Holy Land. She was only 20 years old.

When Ludwig died, the Landgräfin died as well, and the penitent sister came to the foreground. Biographers disagree about whether she was expelled from Wartburg castle or left on her own. Her answer to loneliness and abandonment was the song of gratitude which she asked to have sung in the chapel of the Franciscans, the *Te Deum*.

4. Elizabeth as a Franciscan penitent

Elizabeth of Hungary is the woman who most authentically embodied the penitential spirit of Francis. It has been debated whether or not she was a Franciscan tertiary. We must clarify that during Elizabeth's lifetime, the word *tertiary* was not yet commonly used. However, there were already many Franciscan penitents; many ordinary men and women followed the penitential life stressed by St. Francis and preached by his brothers.

The Friars Minor arrived in Eisenach, the capital of Thuringia, at the end of 1224 or the beginning of 1225; in the castle near the town resided the court of the Landgraf, presided over by Ludwig and Elizabeth.

The preaching of Friars Minor among the people, which they had learned from Francis of Assisi, was on the life of penance, that is, giving up worldly life, and practicing prayer, mortification and works of mercy. This way of life was described by Francis in his *Letter to all the Faithful*.

A brother Rudiger introduced Elizabeth to the penitential life which made an impression on her soul, already predisposed towards the values of the spirit. The evidence that Elizabeth was a Franciscan, which appear in the sources on her life, is undeniable:

- It is certain that Elizabeth gave a chapel in Eisenach to the Franciscan friars.
- She also spun wool for the habits of the Friars Minor.
- When she was expelled from her castle, alone and abandoned, she turned to the Franciscans and asked them to sing the *Te Deum* as a thanksgiving to God.
- On Good Friday, March 24, 1228, with her hands placed on the bare altar, she made a public profession in the Franciscan chapel. She took the gray habit of a penitent as an external sign.
- The four handmaids, who were questioned during the canonization process, also took this gray habit. This "humble tunic," in which Elizabeth wanted to be buried, expressed the religious profession that had conferred a new identity on her.
- She placed the hospital she founded in Marburg (1229) under the protection of Saint Francis, who had been canonized a few months earlier.
- The anonymous Cistercian author of Zwettl (1236) says that Elizabeth "wore the gray habit of the Friars Minor."

The commitment Elizabeth demonstrated by living in poverty, giving away all her possessions and devoting herself to begging – are not these the things that Francis demanded of his followers?

This evidence is corroborated by other sources, which illustrate Elizabeth's penitential life; such as the rules and other Franciscan documents; the *Memoriale propositi* or ancient rule of the penitents and the similarities or conformities between Elizabeth and Francis.

5. Elizabeth's two professions

In the biographical sources, we find two professions by Elizabeth and two ways of professing used at that time: in the first one, she entered the Order of Penitence while her husband was still alive. With her hands in those of the visitor, Conrad of Marburg, she promised obedience and continence.

Conrad was a crusade preacher, poor and austere, probably a secular priest. Elizabeth chose him personally, with Ludwig's consent, because he was poor.

Visitors did not necessarily have to be Franciscans. In the *Regula non bullata* (1221), St. Francis orders that "no woman in any way should vow obedience to any friar, but once she has received spiritual advice, she should carry out her life of penance wherever she likes" (chapter 12).

Three of Elizabeth's handmaids or companions made their profession along with her as well; they formed a little fraternity of prayer and ascetic life under their superior-visitor Conrad.

After her husband's death, they followed her in her exile from the castle, towards the kingdom of the poor. They were her encouragement in the bitter hours of loneliness and abandonment. With her they made a second, public, profession, on Good Friday 1228, and a community of sisters took shape. Like Elizabeth, her handmaids received the gray habit, and committed themselves to the same resolution to spread the compassion of God; they worked and ate together, they went out together to visit the houses of the poor and she sent them with food to divide among the needy. When they returned home, they all met in prayer.

This was a full religious life, for professed women, without strict cloister and dedicated to a social work: service to the poor, marginalized, sick, pilgrims. . . it was a type of consecrated life in the world. But it took centuries for such a way of life for communities of women, without strict cloister to be recognized by the Church. Monastic life was the sole canonical form allowed by the Church for women's religious communities.

Elizabeth, however, was capable of coordinating both inclinations: that of intimacy with God and active service to the poor. *Mariam induit, Martham non exuit*; she clothed herself with Mary, but did not strip herself of Martha.

Today there are some 400 women's congregations of the TOR, with some 100,000 professed women who follow Elizabeth's footsteps in the active and contemplative life, and may be called her heirs.

6. Compassionate Princess and penitent

Elizabeth's brief life was filled to overflowing with loving service, joy and suffering. Her generosity and her bond with the needy created a scandal in the court at the Wartburg. She did not fit among them. Many vassals thought she was mad. Here she met one of her great crosses: crucified between the society to which she belonged and the society of those who did not know any compassion.

Making use of her full authority when she was still Landgräfin, in her husband's absence, she had to confront the calamity of a general famine that devastated the country. She did not hesitate to empty the granaries of her husband's lands and possessions to aid the needy.

Elizabeth personally served the downhearted, the poor and the sick. She cared for lepers, the dregs of society, as Francis did. Day by day, hour by hour, poor person by poor person, Elizabeth lived and poured God's compassion into the river of pain and misery that surrounded her.

In the unfortunate Elizabeth saw the person of Christ (Mathew 25:40). He gave her the strength to overcome her natural repugnance, so much so that she even kissed the purulent wounds of the lepers.

But Elizabeth made use not only of her heart but also of her intelligence in her work of

assistance. She knew that institutionalized charity is much more effective and long lasting. When her husband was still alive, she contributed to the building of hospitals in Eisenach and Gotha. Later she built the one in Marburg, the favorite work of her widowhood. She founded a fraternity to tend to it with her female friends and handmaids or servants.

She worked with her own hands: in the kitchen, by preparing the meals; in the service of the indigent in the hospital; she washed the dishes, and sent away her handmaids when they tried to stop her. She learned to spin wool and sew clothes for the poor and to earn her living.

7. Elizabeth as Contemplative and Saint

Sanctity appears in the history of the Church as a form of madness, the madness of the cross. And Elizabeth's holiness is a real madness. In her life the supremacy of charity shines with a special radiance. Her life is a hymn to love, a love that is expressed in service and abnegation, a love that pours itself out in spreading goodness.

She wanted to live the Gospel simply, *sine glossa*, as Francis would say, in all its spiritual and material aspects. She left no writings, but many phases of her life can only be understood through a literal understanding of the Gospel. She made the program of life proposed by Jesus in the Gospel a reality:

- For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the Gospel will save it (Lk 17:33, Mk 8:35).
- Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me (Mk 8:34-35).
- If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me (Mt 19:21).
- Whoever loves father or mother . . . son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (Mt 10:37).

Elizabeth's ardent inner strength grew out of her contact with God. Her prayer was intense and constant, at times even reaching ecstasy. Her constant awareness of the presence of the Lord was the source of her strength and joy, and of her commitment to the poor. But her encounter with Christ in the poor also stimulated her faith and her prayer.

Her pilgrimage towards God is marked by resolute steps of detachment, until she was totally stripped bare, like Christ on the Cross. At the end she had nothing left but the poor gray penitential tunic, which she wanted to keep as a symbol and shroud.

Elizabeth radiated joy and serenity. The depth of her soul was the kingdom of peace. She made the "perfect joy" taught by Francis a reality in hardship, solitude and suffering. "We must make people happy," she used to say to her handmaids-sisters.

8. Conclusion

Elizabeth passed through this life like a shining meteor full of hope. She brought light into the darkness of many souls. She brought happiness to afflicted hearts. No one can count the tears she wiped away, the wounds she healed and the love she awakened.

Her holiness was an innovation rich in nuances and outstanding virtues. Now it was not only martyrs and virgins who had access to the honor of the altars, but also wives, mothers and widows.

Elizabeth made the journey of perfection of Christian love as a laywoman, wife and mother, but after her second profession, she was a woman completely consecrated to God and to the relief of human misery.

The Third Order of Saint Francis, Regular and Secular, desires to intensify the remembrance of their holy patroness during the eighth centenary of her birth and to propose her as light and model of evangelical commitment. The Franciscan family wants to honor the first woman who achieved sainthood following the footsteps of Christ in accordance with the *forma vitae* of Francis of Assisi.

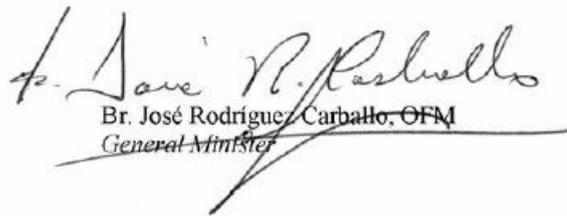
If we recall Elizabeth's birth, her unique personality and her sensitivity, it is so that through knowledge and admiration, we might convert ourselves into instruments of peace, that we might learn from her how to pour a little balm on the wounds of our surroundings, humanize our circumstances, and wipe away some tears. Let us radiate heart where, to human eyes, it seems as if the Father's compassion cannot be found. May the commitment that Elizabeth lived stimulate our commitment. May her example and her intercession light our way towards the Father, source of all love, the Good, all good, supreme good, peace and joy.

Rome, 17th November 2006

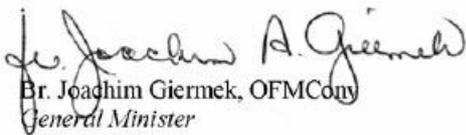
Feast of St. Elisabeth



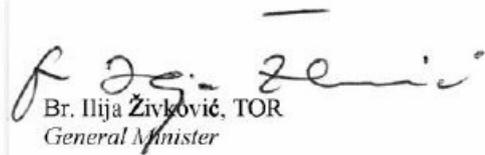
Br. Mauro Jöhri, OFM^{Cap}
General Minister
President CFF



Br. José Rodríguez Carballo, OFM
General Minister



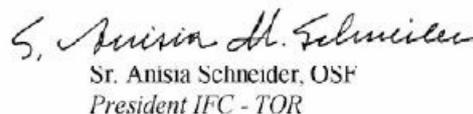
Br. Joachim Giermek, OFM^{Conv}
General Minister



Br. Ilija Živković, TOR
General Minister



Encarnación Del Pozo, OFS
General Minister



Sr. Anisia Schneider, OSF
President IFC - TOR

MAIN SOURCES

1. Conrad of Marburg, *Epistola*, also called *Summa Vitae*, a biographical synthesis.
2. *Dicta quatuor ancillarum* [Statements of the Four Handmaids].
3. Cesarius of Heisterbach, Cistercian, *Vita sancte Elysaabeth lantravie* [The life of the Landgravine Saint Elizabeth], 1236.
4. Anonymous of Zwettl, Cistercian monk, *Vita Sanctae Elisabeth, Landgraviae Thuringiae* [The life of Saint Elizabeth, Landgravin of Thuringia], 1236.

5. *Chronicle of Reinhardsbrunn*, the Benedictine monastery.
6. Anonymous Franciscan, *Vita beatae Elisabeth* [Life of Saint Elizabeth], end of the thirteenth century.
7. Dietrich of Apolda, Dominican, *Vita S. Elisabeth* [Life of St. Elizabeth], between 1289 and 1291.