

# Saint Elizabeth Of The Trinity

Elizabeth of the Trinity gave her love for the spiritual life, and her desire that all should grow in this life, to all Christians. She expressed what she wanted to do in heaven as follows: "I think that in heaven my mission will be to draw souls by helping them to go out of themselves in order to cling to God by a wholly simple and loving movement, and to keep them in this great silence within, which will allow God to communicate himself to them and transform them into himself."

With these profound words, she challenges Christians of today to stop, take a good, long look within themselves and ask: Where am I going? What priority does God have in my life? How am I being transformed in God?

The wisdom that Elizabeth possessed was mature and sound. Her spiritual life was highly developed before she entered Carmel. She left us with much to ponder before she passed away at the young age of twenty-six. Who was this unique young woman? What message does she have for us at the present time?

## Her Life

Elizabeth Catez first saw the light of day at her father's military post in France on July 18, 1880. She was born into a military family. At the time of her birth her father, at forty-eight, was a captain. Her mother was thirty-four and the daughter of a French military officer. Her parents were married the previous September. Elizabeth was their firstborn.

During her infancy Elizabeth was an incessant chatterbox and vivacious crawler. In other words, she was a live wire. This little girl had a strong will. She knew what she wanted and went after it. Her only sibling was born in 1883. Her name was Margaret, nicknamed Guite. Elizabeth was fondly called Sabeth. The sisters were as different as day and night. Guite was gentle, Sabeth went into rages. Today she would be called a brat. At that time she was called the little captain.

Two years later Elizabeth's father was diagnosed with heart trouble. When he was away on a trip his wife wrote him: "Do not drink too much beer or smoke too many cigars, take care of your health and think of us." She loved him dearly and called him her 'good Joseph.' The family was respected and the children were brought up devoutly. Joseph retired in 1885 and died suddenly in 1887.

We do not know what Elizabeth felt concerning her father's death. We do know that mother and daughters bonded together in love and with a deep respect for the fragility of life. After her husband's death, Marie moved her family to the second floor of a house that overlooked the Dijon Carmel. There, the "three" as mother and daughters came to be known, grew closer together.

A few months after the move, Elizabeth was enrolled in the Conservatory of Dijon to study the subjects taught at that time. Her primary subject was music at which she excelled. She still maintained a strong will as well as her rages. This caused her mother to threaten to send her to a house of corrections run by the Good Shepherd Sisters. Mother and sister even packed her suitcases.

However, Elizabeth was always contrite. She was an upright girl with a loveable nature and generous heart. Her straightforward approach to life led her to make good resolutions, albeit mischievously. She learned her catechism well and made her first communion just before her eleventh birthday. That evening she had her first visit with the prioress of the Dijon Carmel. The prioress told her that her name meant "house of God." This deeply affected Elizabeth. The following month she was confirmed. At that time she intensified the gift of herself to Jesus. She wished to be near him and share his joy and grief. Although her vocation to Carmel became more concrete, her irritable temper tantrums continued. They were so persistent, her parish priest said that Elizabeth would be a saint or a demon. With God's grace she transcended the demon and fulfilled the meaning of her name.

When Elizabeth was fourteen, her teacher asked the class to write a composition describing a self portrait. Elizabeth wrote: "To draw one's physical and moral portrait is a delicate subject to deal with, but taking my courage in both hands I set to work and begin! Without pride I think I can say that my overall appearance is not displeasing. I am a brunette and, they say, rather tall for my age. I have sparkling black eyes and my thick eyebrows give me a severe look. The rest of my person is insignificant. My "dainty" feet could win for me the nickname of Elizabeth of the Big Feet, like Queen Bertha! And there you have my physical portrait! As for my moral portrait, I would say that I have a rather good character. I am cheerful and I must confess, somewhat scatterbrained. I have a good heart. I am by nature a coquette. 'One should be a little!' they say. I am not lazy; I know 'work makes us happy.' Without being a model of patience, I usually know how to control myself. I do not hold grudges. So much for my moral portrait. I have my defects and, alas, few good qualities! I hope to acquire them! Well at last this tedious task is finished and am I glad!"

Two topics were not mentioned. Even though she had already won first prize at piano at the Conservatory the previous year, Elizabeth said nothing about her musical talent. The newspaper reviews said she received thundering applause and performed as a distinguished pianist, with an excellent touch and beautiful tone. The second point was that she did not mention her spiritual life. However, this aspect of her life was expressed in her personal notes and poetry written during this time.

During Elizabeth's late adolescence, her spirituality deepened. She grew in her awareness of the presence of God within her. Although she wanted to be a

Carmelite, she accepted her mother's wishes to wait until she was twenty-one before entering. She enjoyed sewing lessons, loved beautiful clothes and wore the latest hairstyles. She made many trips with her sister and mother and relished the beauty of the mountains, sea, sky and all of nature. She enjoyed her friends, parties, fine dining, playing tennis and croquet, and participating in impromptu music sessions. Although she did not speak of God, he radiated from her so vividly that perceptive people at these gala occasions could not help but notice.

During the two years before she entered Carmel, Elizabeth led a sound spiritual life. She did not make a show of her devotions or service to others. She was blessed with spiritual maturity and reached the heights of contemplative prayer. She shows us that being a contemplative depends more on our interior receptivity to God than on our external environment or canonical legislation. Because she was charming and easily loveable, she had several suitors who hoped for her hand in marriage. Her mother, who was reluctant to encourage Elizabeth's Carmelite vocation, even found the "perfect" husband for her daughter. These young men did not change Elizabeth's mind. Underneath the glitter was her serious side. At nineteen she talked with the chaplain at the Carmel in Dijon. He confirmed the Trinitarian presence in her soul in a rather loquacious manner. Later, she said that she wished the poor man would have stopped talking. All she wanted was a simple affirmation to confirm that she was on the right road.

Elizabeth entered Carmel, and received the habit on December 8, 1901. Although she desired "of Jesus" for her title, the prioress gave her "of the Trinity." Her vocation was noted for gratitude and love for her "three." She penetrated the depths of the Triune mystery by creating within her soul another kind of incarnation of the Word, a humanity in which his mystery is renewed.

In 1903 Elizabeth made her final vows. She led an exemplary Carmelite life. Her health began to deteriorate in 1905 and, after spending eight months in the infirmary, she died of Addison's disease in 1906.

### **Her Message**

In her brief twenty-six years, Elizabeth encapsulated the Carmelite attributes of reflective prayer, living in the present moment, loving God wholeheartedly and serving others with simplicity. She described her vision of a Carmelite as one "who has beheld the Crucified, who has seen him offering himself to the Father as a victim for souls and, meditating in the light of this great vision of Christ's charity, has understood the passion of love that filled his soul and has willed to give herself as he did." Her words were meant for each one of us. With the help of grace, we, too, can live in intimacy with God and in service to others. Elizabeth wanted everyone to be aware of the Trinitarian dwelling place — the "little heaven" within each person's soul, where our intimacy with God grows. She encourages us to quietly radiate the Trinitarian presence wherever we may be.

During childhood, Elizabeth's family moved frequently. She lived in the world most of her life and was comfortable with people of every class and circumstance. She lived simply and honestly, without concern about being the best or looking good. She treasured her friends and wrote or visited them often. Her warmth was authentic and came from her deep prayer life. There were no pious platitudes or "saintly" behaviors in her speech or demeanor. She exemplified the joy of being an authentic, beloved son or daughter of the Triune God of love.

The expression "praise of glory" was particularly dear to Elizabeth. It was the name she wanted in heaven. She found this phrase in St Paul's letter to the Ephesians and took it to heart. She glorified God by being aware of, and grateful for, his many blessings. She felt his glorified presence predominately in the center of her soul and found much peace in this presence. God's presence within her was a blessed refuge to which she escaped when she was out of sorts for one reason or another. We should do likewise when we are restless, tense, stressed or upset. At this still point, we can tell God our inmost secrets or that which bothers us. The indwelling three and the universal presence of God are the principal reasons why each Christian is a "praise of glory."

Elizabeth liked to dwell upon God finding rest in her soul. "I have found my heaven on earth," she said, "since heaven is God, and God is in my soul." She encourages us to reflect on that part of Mary's life between the annunciation and the nativity. This gives us concrete evidence in our understanding of the indwelling presence of God. Elizabeth's concept of God was eminently personal. He gently led her to an honest acceptance of herself. She loved and trusted God because she had the ability to love and trust herself and others. Her warmth and attentiveness to the joys and sufferings of people she met assisted her in experiencing the wonder of God within herself and within others. Her personal concept of God was contrary to the Jansenistic belief in God that was popular at the time. Elizabeth was neither overly concerned with the state of her soul, nor saw God as harsh and severely judgmental. When writing about God, her language was simple and affectionate. Love was experienced as a childlike, humble growing in God: "We shall not be purified by looking at our miseries, but by gazing on him who is all purity and holiness" she wrote. Her focus was quiet attention to an intimate God within her soul, rather than concentration on a distant God who is far away in heaven. She envisioned each incident and circumstance of life as a sacrament, which brought God to an individual and assisted an individual to become more aware of God's indwelling presence. "Every happening, every event, every suffering as also every joy, is a sacrament that gives God to the soul," she tells us. Without visions or miracles, in unsung daily activities, she located the pearl of great price. She found Jesus in rain or shine, pain or joy.

Even though reading the Bible personally was rare in her day, Elizabeth had an intense love for scripture. She shows us we need not be scholars to understand

scripture. As she prayerfully and reflectively read the gospel, she grew in God's love. She loved scripture in a personal compassionate way, rather than in an academic theological way. She was quite intuitive about the teachings of St. Paul and saw a universality in the mysteries of Christ. Her response to God's word was manifest by a deep friendship with Jesus. She did not preach the gospel with words; she lived it with her life.

In Carmel, Elizabeth used two biblical texts as guides: "to pray . . . in secret" (Matt. 6:6) and ". . . on judgment day people will be held accountable for every unguarded word they speak . . ." (Matt. 12:36). The first quote identifies the heartbeat of Carmel: Prayer in secret. This type of prayer sustains our intimacy with God and keeps it alive and well. Our love for God is equally an ultimate encounter and an unfathomable mystery experienced primarily in prayer. "Prayer is a rest, a relaxation . . . We must look at him all the time; we must keep silent, it is so simple," Elizabeth wrote. The last words take us from the first quote to the second. Noting the popularity of talk shows, cell phones, e-mail and the commonness of rumors and gossip, we easily see its validity. Many of us find it hard to keep silent before God and with others. Yet this is necessary for spiritual growth. A good way to measure how silent we are before God is to measure how silent we are when we listen to others.

The good news Elizabeth shares with us radiates from the beauty of the kingdom of God within her and within each one of us. Experiencing this beauty liberates us from making idols of material goods and getting too involved with worldly pursuits. It repeatedly brings us back to our still point, nourishes life at a deep level, and sees humanity as the family of God. Elizabeth saw each person as a house of the triune God. At the hearth of our house of God, our faith burns like a great fire of love. Our faith brings others closer to the warmth of God's love and lightens the darkness of the world.

Elizabeth remained strong willed. Once her mind was made up, she could be unyielding. She used this trait to her advantage through loving loyalty to, and perseverance in, her Carmelite life. Her deep love helped her cope with the monotony and irritants in Carmel. She counsels us about pride. It cannot be destroyed with one bold stroke of a sword. Rather, we must die to it every day. We struggle with our egos and clash with others because of our pride. Our arrogance uses others for our own advantage. Elizabeth overcame her ego by seeing God in others. She advises us to go to his infinity and find each other there. What a lovely, thought provoking idea! We must go out of ourselves before we can plunge into the depths of God within ourselves. We become more open and receptive to his love through this often-repeated act. The deepest reality of our own being is the being of God. No words are said at this sacred place within. There is nothing save a union with the indwelling three in one.

Because Elizabeth wants to help us be aware of the intricate workings of God in our souls and in our lives, she is a true soul friend for our time. Elizabeth saw herself as a helpmate to all who wish to walk on the road of loving prayer. She teaches us to let go of what holds us back on this road. We take her hand, and with her, rest in the simple, silent presence of God as he rests in us. Because we have faithfully practiced daily prayer for a long time, we can let go of our work at prayer. Our reflective prayer is changed into silence. God has taken over. We retire to this place of quietness regularly. During this precious time we dwell in the peace of Christ. Our little haven is a refuge, an abiding place, where we find protection against the wiles of the world and ourselves. Our sacred meeting place with God surrounds us with stillness and deep silence, and here within we listen to the Word.

Elizabeth encourages us to live our Christian vocation to the full, by living every aspect of our day generously and with ardor. She challenges us to plunge deeper into our spiritual life, thus broadening our understanding of other aspects of our lives and the workings of the mysteries of God therein. She truly lived her faith by showing us it is only through faith that we can begin to grasp this paradox: God, who is transcendent, who is above and beyond anything we understand, loves us personally, and cares for the smallest details in our lives.

While in Carmel, Elizabeth penned her Act of Oblation. It shows her spiritual maturity and passion for God. She passes these words on to us: "O Eternal Word, Word of my God. I want to spend my life in listening to you, to become wholly teachable that I may learn all from you. Then, through all nights, all voids, all helplessness, I want to gaze on you always and remain in your great light . . . O my Three, my all, my Beatitude, infinite Solitude, immensity in which I lose myself, I surrender myself to you as your prey. Bury yourself in me that I may bury myself in you until I depart to contemplate in your light the abyss of your greatness."

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