

On St. Elizabeth of Hungary

Wife, Mother, Princess, Saint

Pope Reflects on Lessons to Learn From Elizabeth of Hungary

VATICAN CITY, OCT. 20, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The life of Elizabeth of Hungary -- a wife and mother, as well as a princess who lived for the poor -- is an invitation to rediscover Christ, says Benedict XVI.

The Pope affirmed this today at the general audience in St. Peter's Square, in which he reflected on Elizabeth of Hungary, a 13th-century saint and, he said, "one of the women of the Middle Ages who inspired great admiration."

Elizabeth was born to Andrew II, king of Hungary, and given in marriage to Ludwig of Thuringia. Though the marriage was arranged for merely political reasons, "a sincere love was born between the two young people, animated by faith and the desire to do the will of God," the Holy Father noted.

Ludwig began to reign over the court at age 18, when his father died, the Pontiff continued, but Elizabeth became the "object of silent criticisms because her way of behaving did not correspond to the life of the court." Her marriage celebration, for example, was not lavish, and some of the costs of the banquet were given to the poor.

The Holy Father noted: "Once, entering the church on the feast of the Assumption, she took off her crown, placed it before the cross and remained prostrate on the ground with her face covered. When a nun reproved her for this gesture, she replied: 'How can I, miserable creature, continue to wear a crown of earthly dignity, when I see my King Jesus Christ crowned with thorns?'"

And, he continued, "As she behaved before God, so she behaved with her subjects."

Happy marriage

Ludwig, however, supported her in her charity. "Hers was a profoundly happy marriage," Benedict XVI said. "Elizabeth helped her husband to raise his human qualities to the supernatural level and he, on the other hand, protected his wife in her generosity to the poor and in her religious practices.

"Ever more in admiration of his wife's great faith, Ludwig, referring to her care of the poor, said to her: 'Dear Elizabeth, it is Christ whom you have washed, fed and looked after.' A clear testimony of how faith and love of God and one's neighbor reinforce marital union and make it even more profound."

Tragedy eventually struck the happy bride: Ludwig intended to join a crusade, but he got ill and died before leaving. He was only 27. The young widow "withdrew in solitude," the Pope said, "but later, strengthened by prayer and, consoled by the thought of seeing [Ludwig] again in heaven, she again became interested in the affairs of the kingdom."

Another test awaited her, however. Ludwig's brother usurped the crown and expelled Elizabeth and her three young sons from the castle. Difficult months followed, until her name was restored and she was able to receive an adequate income to withdraw to the family castle in Marburg.

Consecrated in the world

Her spiritual director would later have to persuade her not to give up all her earthly possessions, encouraging her instead to use them for the poor.

The Pope cited her spiritual director, who reported: "[S]he built a hospital, took in the sick and the invalid and served the most miserable and abandoned at her own table."

Benedict XVI explained how Elizabeth spent the last three years of her life caring for the sick in the hospital she'd founded, becoming "what we could call a consecrated woman in the midst of the world" and forming a religious



community with her friends.

In 1231 she was struck with a severe fever and, the Pope said, she "gently fell asleep in the Lord on the night of Nov. 17. Testimonies of her holiness were such and so many that, only four years later, Pope Gregory IX proclaimed her a saint."

Benedict XVI concluded with this reflection: "Dear brothers and sisters, in the figure of St. Elizabeth we see how faith and friendship with Christ create the sense of justice, of the equality of everyone, of the rights of others, and they create love, charity. And from this charity hope is born, the certainty that we are loved by Christ and that the love of Christ awaits us and thus makes us capable of imitating Christ and of seeing Christ in others.

"St. Elizabeth invites us to rediscover Christ, to love him, to have faith and thus find true justice and love, as well as the joy that one day we will be immersed in divine love, in the joy of eternity with God."

VATICAN CITY, ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of the full address Benedict XVI gave at the OCT. 20, 2010 general audience in St. Peter's Square.

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to speak to you about one of the women of the Middle Ages who inspired great admiration: St. Elizabeth of Hungary, also called Elizabeth of Thuringia. She was born in 1207 in Hungary; historians disagree on the place. Her father was Andrew II, rich and powerful king of Hungary who, to reinforce his political ties, married German countess Gertrude of Andechs-Merania, sister of St. Hedwig who was the wife of the duke of Silesia. Elizabeth lived in the Hungarian court only the first four years of her childhood, together with a sister and three brothers. She liked playing, music and dancing; she recited her prayers faithfully and showed particular care for the poor, whom she helped with a good word or affectionate gesture.

Her happy childhood was brusquely interrupted when, from far away Thuringia, knights arrived to take her to her new headquarters in central Germany. According to the customs of that time, in fact, her father had decided that Elizabeth should become a princess of Thuringia. The landgrave or count of that region was one of the wealthiest and most influential of Europe at the beginning of the 13th century, and his castle was the center of magnificence and culture. However, behind the celebrations and apparent glory were hidden ambitions of feudal princes, often at war among themselves and in conflict with the royal and imperial authorities. In this context, the landgrave Hermann was pleased to accept the engagement between his son, Ludwig, and the Hungarian princess. Elizabeth left her homeland with a rich dowry and a large entourage, including her personal maidservants, two of whom would remain faithful friends to the end. They are the ones who have left us precious information on the childhood and life of the saint.



After a long journey they arrived in Eisenach, then on up to the fortress of Wartburg, the massive castle overlooking the city. Celebrated here was the engagement between Ludwig and Elizabeth. In subsequent years, while Ludwig learned the profession of a knight, Elizabeth and her companions studied German, French, Latin, music, literature and embroidery. Despite the fact that the engagement took place for political reasons, a sincere love was born between the two young people, animated by faith and the desire to do the will of God.

At 18, after the death of his father, Ludwig began to reign over Thuringia. But Elizabeth became the object of silent criticisms because her way of behaving did not correspond to the life of the court. In the same sense, the celebration of their marriage was not lavish, and the expenses of the banquet were given in part to the poor. In her profound sensibility Elizabeth saw the contradictions between the faith professed and Christian practice. She could not bear compromises. Once, entering the church on the feast of the Assumption, she took off her crown, placed it before the cross and remained prostrate on the ground with her face covered. When a nun reproved her for this gesture, she replied: "How can I, miserable creature, continue to wear a crown of earthly dignity, when I see my King Jesus Christ crowned with thorns?" As she behaved before God, so she behaved with her subjects. Among the "Sayings" of the four maidservants we find this testimony: "She would not eat food if she was not first certain that it came from the properties and legitimate goods of her husband. While she abstained from goods procured illicitly, she was concerned to compensate those that had suffered violence" (Nos. 25 and 37). [She gave] a true example for all those entrusted with charges: The exercise of authority, at all levels, must be lived as a service to justice and charity, in constant pursuit of the common good.

Elizabeth practiced assiduously the works of mercy: she gave to drink and eat those who came to her door, she got clothes, paid debts, looked after the sick and buried the dead. Coming down from her castle, she often went with her maidservants to the homes of the poor, taking bread, meat, flour and other foods. She would hand the food out personally and carefully oversaw clothes and shelter for the poor. This behavior was reported to her husband, who not only was not annoyed, but answered her accusers: "So long as they don't come to the castle, I'm happy!" Placed in this context is the miracle of bread transformed into roses: While Elizabeth was going through the street with her apron full of bread for the poor, she met her husband, who asked her what she was carrying. She opened her apron and, instead of bread, magnificent roses appeared. This symbol of charity is often present in depictions of St. Elizabeth.

Hers was a profoundly happy marriage: Elizabeth helped her husband to raise his human qualities to the supernatural level and he, on the other hand, protected his wife in her generosity to the poor and in her religious practices. Ever more in admiration of his wife's great faith, Ludwig, referring to her care of the poor, said to her: "Dear Elizabeth, it is Christ whom you have washed, fed and looked after." A clear testimony of how faith and love of God and one's neighbor reinforce marital union and make it even more profound.

The young couple found spiritual support in the Friars Minor who, from 1222 spread in Thuringia. From among them, Elizabeth chose Friar Rudiger as her spiritual director. When he narrated to her the circumstances of the conversion of the young and rich merchant Francis of Assisi, Elizabeth was even more enthusiastic on her path of Christian life. From that moment, she decided to follow even more the poor and crucified Christ, present in the poor. Also when her first son was born, followed by two others, our saint never neglected her works of charity. Moreover, she helped the Friars Minor to build a monastery in Halberstadt, of which Friar Rudiger became the superior. Elizabeth's spiritual direction thus passed to Konrad of Marburg.

A harsh test was her farewell to her husband, at the end of June of 1227, when Ludwig IV joined the crusade of Emperor Frederick II, reminding his wife that this was a tradition for the sovereigns of Thuringia. Elizabeth replied: "I will not dissuade you. I gave myself wholly to God and now I must also give you." However, fever decimated the troops and Ludwig himself fell ill and died in Otranto before embarking, in September of 1227, at 27 years of age. Elizabeth, on hearing the news, had such sorrow that she withdrew in solitude, but later, strengthened by prayer and, consoled by the thought of seeing him again in heaven, she again became interested in the affairs of the kingdom.

However, another test awaited her: her brother-in-law usurped the government of Thuringia, declaring himself the true heir of Ludwig and accusing Elizabeth of being a pious woman incompetent to govern. The young widow, with her three sons, was expelled from the castle of Wartburg and began to look for a place of refuge. Only two of her maidservants stayed with her, accompanied her and entrusted her three sons to the care of friends of Ludwig. Traveling through villages, Elizabeth worked wherever she was received: She helped the sick, spun and sewed. During this calvary, endured with great faith, patience and dedication to God, some relatives, who had remained faithful to her and considered her brother-in-law's government illegitimate, rehabilitated her name. Thus Elizabeth, at the beginning of 1228, was able to receive an adequate income to withdraw to the family castle in Marburg, where her spiritual director, Friar Konrad, also lived. It was he who referred to Pope Gregory IX the following event: "On Good Friday of 1228, with her hands on the altar in the chapel of the city of Eisenach, where she had received the Friars Minor, in the presence of some friars and relatives, Elizabeth gave up her own will and all the vanities of the world. She wanted to give up all her possessions, but I dissuaded her for love of the poor. Shortly after she built a hospital, took in the sick and the invalid and served the most miserable and abandoned at her own table. Having reproached her for these things, Elizabeth answered that from the poor she received a special grace and humility" (Epistula magistri Conradi, 14-17).

We can see in this affirmation a certain mystical experience similar to that lived by St. Francis: the Poverello of Assisi said, in fact, in his testament that, by serving the lepers, what was previously bitter became a sweetness of the soul and body (Testamentum, 1-3). Elizabeth spent her last three years in the hospital she founded, serving the sick, staying by the bedside of the dying. She always tried to carry out the most humble services and repugnant jobs. She became what we could call a consecrated woman in the midst of the world (soror in saeculo) and formed a religious community with other friends of hers, using a gray habit. It is no accident that she is patroness of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis and of the Secular Franciscan Order.

In November of 1231 she was affected by severe fever. When news of her illness spread, many people came to see her. Some 10 days later, she requested that her doors be closed to remain alone with God. She gently fell asleep in the Lord on the night of Nov. 17. Testimonies of her holiness were such and so many that, only four years later, Pope Gregory IX proclaimed her a saint and, in the same year, the beautiful church built in her honor in Marburg was consecrated.

Dear brothers and sisters, in the figure of St. Elizabeth we see how faith and friendship with Christ create the sense of justice, of the equality of everyone, of the rights of others, and they create love, charity. And from this charity hope is born, the certainty that we are loved by Christ and that the love of Christ awaits us and thus makes us capable of imitating

Christ and of seeing Christ in others. St. Elizabeth invites us to rediscover Christ, to love him, to have faith and thus find true justice and love, as well as the joy that one day we will be immersed in divine love, in the joy of eternity with God. Thank you.

[Translation by ZENIT]

[The Holy Father then greeted the pilgrims in several languages. In English, he said:]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our catechesis today I wish to speak about Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, also known as Saint Elizabeth of Thuringia. She was born in the early thirteenth century. Her father was the King of Hungary, and Elizabeth was known from an early age for her fidelity to prayer and her attention to the poor. Though she was married to Ludwig, a nobleman, for political reasons, she and her husband developed a sincere love for each other, one deepened by faith and the desire to do the Lord's will.

In her married life, Elizabeth did not compromise her faith in spite of the requirements of life at court. She preferred to feed the poor than to dine at banquets, and to clothe the naked than to dress in costly garments. Because of their deep faith in God, Elizabeth and Ludwig supported each other in their religious duties. After his early death, she dedicated herself to the service of the poor, always performing the humblest and most difficult works. She founded a religious community, and lived her vows until her death at an early age. She was canonized four years later, and is a patroness of the Third Order of Saint Francis. May her dedication to the poor and needy inspire in us the same love for Christ in our neighbour.