

# WHAT SAINT ELIZABETH OF THE TRINITY

.....

## **teaches about the Sacred Heart**

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

It was late September when I first entered the monastery. A beautiful time of year to make a big adjustment in my lifestyle, yet I had been use to starting school for many years during this month. By the time February rolled around I was getting more acclimated to my new surroundings. Sometime toward the end of that month, my superior stopped me and announced: "Congratulations, you've made it through February!" Later, I learned what she meant. February brought only meager stimulation, it was a month of little color, constant cold, indoor residence... feeling blah. It all added up to a harder trek through the 'sands of sanctity' and a greater chance that one wouldn't persevere in the life for want of 'distraction and excitement.'

In our fast paced world, living on the edge seems to hold great appeal for many. We see this in the amount of recreational activities that are offered for our enjoyment, inviting us to be constantly on the go and serving up to our over-indulged senses every sort of titillating experience one can think of. We become use to and maybe even a little addicted to the thrill of being pressured, pumped, allured, cajoled, tempted, badgered, you name it, through so many forms of stimulation that only a mega dose of "downers" can set us free from the continual stress and strain we undergo.

As a spiritual antidote for the activism of our spirits and our lives, the Church offers us the model of Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity. Recently assuming the mantle of sainthood (by her canonization on October 16, 2016), this contemplative religious led a hidden life behind the walls of a cloister, yet touched the world through her selfless witness to the values of prayer and generous sacrifice. Born into a French military family in 1880 she was a wholesome example of youthful energy and liveliness, exhibiting in her early life a fiery temperament that sent her family some worrisome signals as to how she would eventually end up. But God's grace turned the tide in her life giving her a deep desire to give everything she had to Him. She gladly sacrificed a promising career in the field of music, along with her close friendships to enter the Carmelite monastery in Dijon (in close proximity to her family home). In the short span of six years she ascended the heights of spiritual greatness, understanding that her mission was to be a "praise of glory" and abide in the presence of her "Three." Her famous prayer "O Trinity, whom I adore," remains a masterpiece of praise and surrender to the divine indwelling of the Holy Trinity, spelling out for all spiritual seekers the importance of placing the praise of God as a priority in our daily lives. As is best observed by the scripture scholar William Barclay: "We become so involved in good works and charitable services that we leave ourselves no time for Him from whom all love and service come. It is not the things which are obviously bad which are dangerous. It is the things which are good, for the 'second best is always the worst enemy of the best.' We must be careful to see that Christ is not shouldered out of the topmost niche in life."

In today's reflections I'd like to offer some thoughts on how Elizabeth of the Trinity's spirituality leads us to a better understanding of the Sacred Heart. After all, it was from the pierced Heart of Christ that the Holy Spirit was gifted to the Church, and it is the heart of our Savior that shows us the love that God the Father has for each of us, his beloved sons and daughters. Despite the fact that we are ever 'bombarded' by temptations that pull us away from our faith, God is forever in the process of calling us back, fortifying us with insights and graces that turn our paths toward the light. Elizabeth of the Trinity reminds us that we are loved and that we should recognize that without Christ we can do nothing, therefore she counsels, "Let yourself be loved." In essence these words are another reiteration of the words of the Sacred Heart to Saint Margaret Mary, revealed during her first revelation: "My Divine Heart is so inflamed with love for humankind..." Now Elizabeth (addressing herself to her religious superior) attempts to make her understand that God wishes to work in her, to build her up by His love and for His glory, "and it is He alone

who wants to work in you, even though you will have done nothing to attract this grace except that which a creature can do: works of sin and misery... He loves you like that..." {p. 180 in *The Complete Words of Elizabeth of the Trinity*, Vol. I; ICS Publications, 1984.} However, for our part, we must strive to remain in the fidelity of His love, for she says, "You will never be commonplace if you are vigilant in love! She wisely reveals: "But in the hours when you feel only oppression and lassitude, you will please God even more if you faithfully believe that He is still working, that He is loving you just the same, and even more: because his love is free and that is how He wants to be magnified in you; and you will let yourself be loved more than these." These words seem to signify the opposite conviction that is so often heralded in our secularized culture: that we do not need God's assistance (or we need it minimally) because we can do it ourselves. On the contrary, what Elizabeth of the Trinity teaches us about the Heart of Christ is that nothing fruitful can be accomplished without His grace and without our firm belief in the reality of His existence. The power of our belief has great consequence, even though we may not immediately perceive its effects. This is what Saint Margaret Mary must have meant by quoting the words of the Sacred Heart: "If you believe you will see the power of My Heart."

In another significant spiritual writing called "Heaven in Faith," Elizabeth pens for her blood sister (Guite) a spiritual memoir that intends to encourage her sibling in the daily demands of being a young wife and mother of two children. Always focussing on God's personal accessibility, even in the ordinary circumstances of life, Elizabeth reminds her sister that the most trivial things can be divinized when we "choose love that is forgetful of self," that is, when we give God our whole heart. She is really affirming the logic of the mystics who enter into the heart of Christ through a living faith that is often devoid of the consolations that earthly attachments can satisfy. She wants Guite to know the real truth: that deep and abiding faith is transformative and gives us a taste of heaven even through the travails of this life. She says, "we carry this heaven within our soul, this heaven is under the veil of faith which covers it... how good faith is, it is heaven in darkness." (We must emphasize that these sublime thoughts coming from Elizabeth of the Trinity were written in the throes of personal suffering. Her body was being ravaged by the exhausting malady of Addison's disease, leaving her in great physical distress. Her faith was being tested and purified to the extreme, yet she tenaciously clung to the thought of being a "praise of glory" of the Holy Trinity).

In her short life Elizabeth of the Trinity was constantly reaching for something higher. She knew instinctively that God is greater than our hearts and so she strove to possess in her being the divine mystery that was so much greater than she. Only a total abandonment and surrender could do justice to this immense desire, giving itself completely to God who possesses it, and offering no resistance whatever to God's salvific plan. Her example is surely a challenge for our times where self-absorption and self-promotion are often seen as the right way to live. Her own words testify to this: "Yes, I believe that the secret of peace and happiness is to forget oneself... to throw oneself into the arms of God, glorifies him more and gives him more joy than all the falling back upon the self, and all the self-examination that makes it live in its wretchedness..." {pp. 95-96 in *Spiritual Doctrine of Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity*, Alba House Pub., 1986.}

With all divine messages and messengers, there seems to be an underlying urgency that is communicated. Elizabeth of the Trinity was no different. Living only a brief twenty-six years, her marvelous insights into the spiritual life peaked with her beautiful prayer to the Trinity, composed in 1904 (two years before her death). The Carmelite tradition (very similar to the Visitation tradition) celebrated the Feast of Mary's Presentation in the Temple on November 21. There was a renewal of vows that day and it was a day of no work. Sometime during this feast day, Elizabeth composed her prayer, filled with aspirations to the Triune God, yet addressing each of the Three Persons. It is important to note the second paragraph of this prayer as she begins: "O My beloved Christ, crucified by love, I wish to be a bride of Your Heart; I wish to cover You with glory; I wish to love You ...even to death! But I feel my weakness, and I ask You to 'clothe me with Yourself,' to identify my soul with all the movements of Your Soul, to overwhelm me, to possess me, to substitute Yourself for me that my life may be but a radiance of Your Life."

The sheer intensity of this prayer is truly a response to the request of the Sacred Heart to Saint Margaret Mary that his Heart be loved, adored, and honored. Elizabeth pours out her all in this offering. She pulls out all the stops, as it were, like one who knows how to bring the best out of anything. Humanly speaking, she could go no further, so it was no wonder that the remaining days of her life would only be a demonstration of her sincerity. God would take her at her word and in the short time left, her 'acceptable offering' would be played out through the gradual destruction that attacked her body. Yet her final words, "I am going to Light, to Love, to Life!" shine with grace-filled confidence that the Triune God would confirm her faith with the promise of eternal glory.

For us struggling pilgrims, this saint's example and message might appear beyond reach, a little too "exalted" in the dog-eat-dog world that seems to pin us down at every turn. But what Elizabeth of the Trinity brings for our consideration is the importance of not losing touch with the God who dwells in our hearts, the Heavenly Abider who is closer to us than we can imagine, the Divine Guest within who will show his face should we dare to welcome him. His presence is solace and strength when our own human resources fail us, and through it all, the amazing grace that He gives reminds us that nothing can separate us from His loving Heart. +

---

*This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on February 5th, 2017. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, March 5th, 2017 at 4:00 p.m.*