



TERTIUS ORDO REGULARIS SANCTI FRANCISCI MINISTER GENERALIS

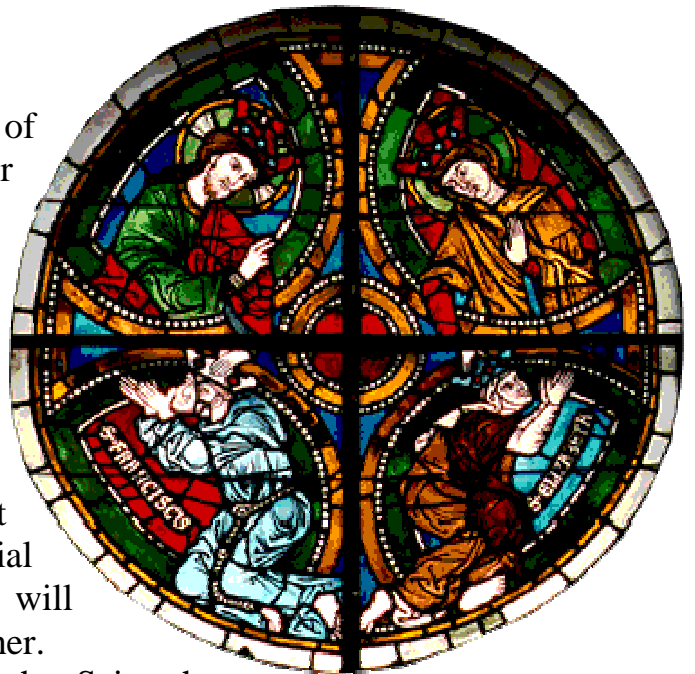
Prot. 47/2006.

*Letter of the Minister General and General Council
to all the brothers and sisters of the Third Order Regular
on the occasion of the Solemnity of St. Francis of Assisi*

SAINT ELIZABETH AND PERFECT JOY

Dearest brothers and sisters:

In this year of 2006 the Solemnity of our Seraphic Father St. Francis opens for us the jubilee year of St. Elizabeth of Hungary and Turingia which begins, as you know, on the 17th of November. As we send these greetings we would like to propose some reflections for you based on the Patron Saint of our Order. We offer these in the hope that they will expand our awareness of this important saint and, as we mentioned in the official letter for the centenary, that they will encourage a true spiritual encounter with her.



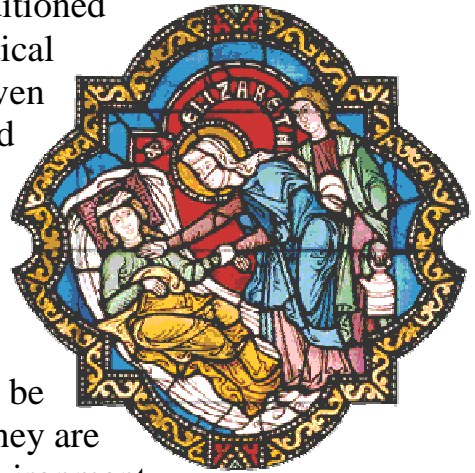
One aspect of the personality of the Saint that particularly strikes us was her capacity to maintain joy and serenity even in the most difficult trials of life. It has even been pointed out that one of the main motivations in her life can be summed up in her comment during the famous feast of charity in Marburg in which she said: “We owe it to the people to make them happy” (cf. A. Huyskens, *Libellus*, München 1911, p. 57, linea 1575).

It is said that happiness is not something that can be pursued - rather, it is a flower that can be gathered every day because it is always around you. However, you must recognize it. With the word of God we say that faith, joy, peace, and self control are gifts that we need to unceasingly ask of the Holy Spirit with the trust that He will generously respond. Within the Franciscan tradition we sum this up with the expression “perfect joy.”



I – Elizabeth: a difficult and brief life, but always joyful

The brief life of Elizabeth was very much conditioned by external forces - especially by the political circumstances and people that confronted her. Even though her husband, Lodovico, loved her deeply and did what he could do to defend her, the people of the court always held that she was a bride who brought a miserable dowry in comparison to other women who would have offered better opportunities for marriage.



In addition to this they also considered her to be too generous. It is the fear of some rich people that they are never rich enough. In the midst of this hostile environment Elizabeth's interior personality was profoundly sealed with firmness and serenity.



Faith in God and love of Jesus Christ molded the character of the Saint and made her compassionate in the face of the suffering of other people:

“With patience [Elizabeth] considered God to be her only refuge and hope” (*Ibidem*, p. 15, linea 380)

Elizabeth's encounter with the Franciscan friars in Germany, which we can define as a kind of new evangelization, confirmed the young princess in her vocation to charity and poverty. She loved to be with humble people. She loved to dress in simple clothes. She nourished the spirit of mendicancy so typical of the early Franciscan movement. She believed that if someone possesses goods they must also possess the weapons needed to protect them. She was convinced that poverty for the Reign of God was the only true antidote for the violence in the world.



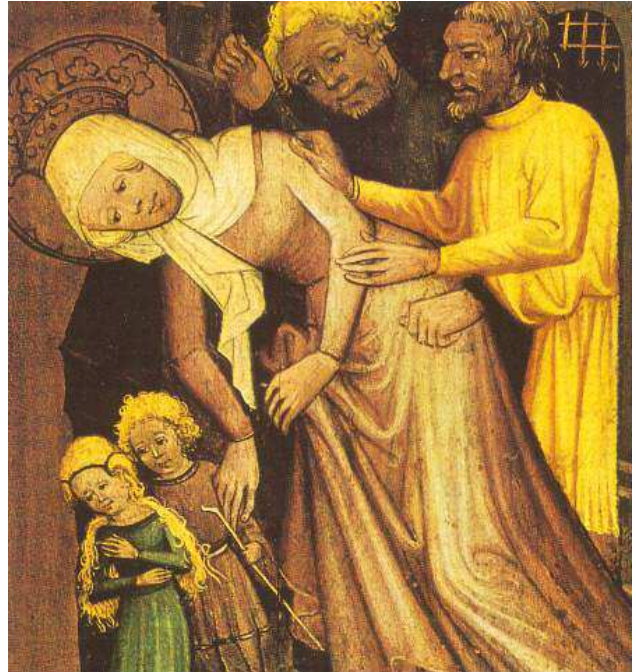
This spirit is what the current Holy Father refers to when he mentions that God responds to the violence of the world (and also to other religions) with the Cross of Jesus Christ.



Elizabeth's expulsion from the castle of Wartburg after the death of her husband was celebrated with the singing of the *Te Deum* together with the Franciscan friars who were living at the friary in Eisenach.

Various artists have captured this scene for us as they show Elizabeth being ushered out of the castle with her children to face the rigors of winter.

This experience of hardship and bad luck calls to mind the story of Brother Francis and Brother Leo in the eighth chapter of the *Little Flowers* regarding *perfect joy*. These two friars, who were knocking on the door of Saint Mary of the Angels, were refused entry and sent away into the snow as apostates and ruffians. And, instead of rebelling, they welcomed their predicament as the Will of God for their own good as they accepted the insults of the porter.



It is in this kind of patience that *perfect joy* is found.

As master singers, the troubadours of God - as the first Franciscans were at times called - surely would have narrated and sung similar stories and experiences of Francis of Assisi in Wartburg.

In this way Elizabeth would have been exposed to the good news of joy in adversity - the joy of interior liberty that flows from poverty of spirit.

The perfect joy of the Saint was also demonstrated one time when a woman who often received alms from her pushed Elizabeth so hard that she fell into a street filled with mud. Rather than react with anger and irritation she picked herself up with a *big smile* and brushed at the mud that covered her clothes (*Ibidem*, p. 35, linea 1010).

This smile signified a consistent attitude in the life of the Saint. The smile of a fool is not based on reality - but how wise is the "risus paschalis" (the laughter of Easter) as one participates in the death and resurrection of Christ.

One time after an experience of ecstatic prayer she reported:

"I saw the heavens open and my sweet Lord turned to me and consoled me for all the many anxieties and tribulations that I had suffered. I experienced great joy when this happened and started laughing. When I saw Him turn away as if to leave I started weeping. Moved by compassion, He once again turned



His serene look to me and said, ‘If you want to be with me, I will be with you’” (*Ibidem*, p. 36, linee 1055-1065).

The heavens for the saints are always “open heavens,” full of hope and joy.



When Francis encountered the leper with a welcome spirit and a hug he experienced a sweetness in his body and soul. In a similar way, when Elizabeth washed and clothed the infirm she exclaimed:

“How good it is when we are able to wash and clean the Lord” (Huyskens A., *Quellenstudien...*, Marburg 1908, p. 128).

At the end of her life, after she had survived the last attack of Satan, she contemplated on the events surrounding Christmas night and the birth of the baby Jesus.

“Now we speak of God and of the baby Jesus because it is midnight - the time Jesus was born and abandoned in the stable. With His endless wisdom God presented a new Star to the world that at first no one saw.” While she said these things Elizabeth appeared to be very happy and as if she had not just suffered evil (Huyskens A., *Libellus*, p. 78, linee 2145 – 2150).

When he was still a cardinal, the Holy Father Benedict XVI, wrote an inspired reflection on the dying Elizabeth as she contemplated the star of the baby Jesus during the silence of the night. He invites everyone to recapture the silence of the sacred night in order to taste, as Elizabeth did, the joy of the birth of the Son of God - the true light of the world. (Cfr. Ratzinger J., *La benedizione del Natale*, Queriniana, Brescia).

This event expresses the Christian and Franciscan paradox of perfect joy. Even when one takes the dark path of Sister Death, a great light can be seen.

Bishop Francois–Xavier Rey, TOR, the great missionary of Mato Grosso in Brazil,





captured this reality in his episcopal motto: “*Per crucem ad lucem* (Through the Cross to the Light)”.

II. – Christian joy is Franciscan perfect joy

During the course of the upcoming jubilee, as we grow in our knowledge and appreciation of St. Elizabeth, we also desire to learn the true secret of joy - the happiness that comes from serving the less fortunate and the capacity to be surprised and astounded by the wonders of creation.



The source from which this joy flows, as St. Elizabeth so clearly demonstrates for us, is tapped when we consign ourselves to God in simplicity and in the realization of our existential poverty. This poverty also signifies liberty from the tyranny of our idols of power, possessions, and pleasures.

More than ever, we are in need of Christian joy and the deep reality of Franciscan perfect joy.

At the base of what today is called self esteem it is necessary to have an attitude of an appreciation of life, to rejoice in it as a gift, to know that we are loved as children of God:

“because of the love you bore me before the world began” (Jn. 17:24) *“so that your love for me may live in them and I may live in them”* (Jn. 17:26).

In this way we are called to recognize the multiple forms of human joy which we can experience in our lives:

“Exultant joy in the existence of life ... peaceful joy in nature and silence; austere joy in a job well done; joy and satisfaction in the completion of a duty or responsibility; transparent joy in purity, service, and participation; and the demanding joy of sacrifice...” (Paul VI, *La gioia cristiana*, 1975).

Conclusion

Dearest brothers and sisters, we encourage you to know St. Elizabeth better. The most current scientific studies recognize her as one the most illustrious figures in the early history of the Third Order Regular and a clear example of the Franciscan charism of mercy.



The TOR General Council is coordinating the publication and translation of the oldest of the Elizabethan sources. Let us not miss this opportunity to know our Patron better - and to know ourselves better.

When the solemn opening of the 8th Centenary of the Birth of St. Elizabeth takes place on November 17, 2006, in the Basilica of Sts. Cosmas and Damian in Rome we invite all of you to participate. If you are not able to be with us physically please join us with your love and prayers.



May you have a blessed and joyful Solemnity of our Seraphic Father Saint Francis.

Friary of Sts. Cosmas and Damian

Rome, October 4, 2006

Solemnity of our Seraphic Father Saint Francis of Assisi.

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