

Formation program for the Eighth Centenary of St. Elizabeth of Hungary

Year One: The life of St. Elizabeth

Month 10. Her penitential and prayer life

During her husband's lifetime, Elizabeth had vowed to preserve continence should she survive him. But now she desired a total renunciation. On Good Friday, March 24, 1228, Elizabeth placed her hand on the altar of the chapel of the Friars Minor in Eisenach, renouncing "the pomps of the world, her own will, and everything that Our Lord counsels us to renounce in His Gospel." Some months after that, she was clothed in a simple poor gray habit and professed as a penitent in Marburg. Once again some Franciscan friars were present. Her ladies-in-waiting, Guda and Isetrude, were professed with her, as were two poor women, Irmingard and Elisabeth. They lived the penitential life together.

The Pope who canonized Elizabeth, Gregory IX, wrote: "She clothed herself in the religious habit, in which she did not fail, until her last day, to celebrate within herself the mystery of the Passion of the Lord."

Elizabeth was now able to fulfill her desire to live in poverty. Indeed she loved poverty so completely, that she told her Franciscan confessor, Brother Gerard, that she would like to live completely dependent on alms, like the lepers.

Elizabeth was devoted to the active life of charity and compassion, but she was equally devoted to a life of prayer. Her confessor, Conrad of Marburg, said: "In spite of these works of the active life, I say before God that I have rarely seen a more contemplative woman. For some men and women religious frequently saw her as she was coming from her secret prayers, with her face wondrously radiant, as though sunbeams were coming from her eyes."

Spiritual reflection:

The meaning of the life of penance is a continual turning toward God. Through it, we renounce the old life of selfishness, and undergo a death to self to live a new life with God. Elizabeth undertook this life of penance seriously and sought to die completely to self to live for God.

She did this while living in the world rather than in the cloister. Life in the world, however, should not kill the life of prayer. In fact, constant prayer is necessary to maintain our relationship with God when we are faced with the distractions of the world. Elizabeth shows us that prayer and contemplation are indeed possible while we are engaged in the active life.

Gospel: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23).

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