

## Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231) “Glory of the Franciscan Penitents”

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*Santa Elisabetta d'Ungheria (1207-1231): “Gloria dei Penitenti Francescani”*

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### 1. Premise

In the Twelfth Century, the first Franciscan century, a hundred or more penitents (or tertiaries), who lived in the odor of sanctity, shine in the heavens. Among these leaders of the Franciscan laity, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary or of Thuringia is outstanding. She has always been venerated as the Patroness of the Third Order of St Francis, both Secular and Regular. So it does not seem possible to me to disregard this figure and her spiritual development, which should be reconstructed with historical rigor.

But two big problems immediately come to the fore, although they are not entirely new:

- a) to verify whether Elizabeth really belongs to the Franciscan area;
- b) to what extent can the saint be counted among the mystics.

I state in advance that St Elizabeth's human and spiritual development is witnessed by authentic writings<sup>1</sup> and has been analyzed by numerous studies in different languages.

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<sup>1</sup>Letter of Conrad of Marburg to Gregory IX in 1232 [*Epistola Conradi*]; The *Dicta quattuor ancillarum* (edited in a long and a short version in the years 1232-1235) are better known under the title, *Libellus de dictis quattuor ancillarum* (BHL 2493); the bull of canonization “Gloriosus in maiestate” [*Bullarium Franciscanum* I, 162] of 27.05.1235; and other documents. For the sources, we refer to: A. Huyskens, *Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der hl. Elisabeth von Thüringen*, Marburg 1908, pp. 155-160, 112-140 and 140-146. In the introduction, he states that he has taken the

I limit myself to indicating in the footnotes some recent indispensable studies for a first orientation<sup>2</sup>. For this reason, a biographer writes that "Elizabeth of Hungary is one of history's privileged persons"<sup>3</sup> and another affirms that "the body of hagiographical documents on Elizabeth is one of the richest of medieval Europe..."<sup>4</sup>.

Elizabeth was born in 1207 in Sárospatak Castle in Hungary to Andrew II of Hungary (king from 1205) and to Gertrude of Merano. She was educated in Eisenach and in Wartburg, home of her future consort to whom she was promised since childhood. While still very young, in 1221, she was given in marriage to Ludwig IV of Thuringia, to whom she bore three children, Hermann in 1222 (heir to the crown), Sofia in 1224 (given in marriage to the Duke of Brabant) and Gertrude in 1227 (who became a Premonstratensian nun and was proclaimed a saint)<sup>5</sup>.

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material from the following codices: cod. lat. 4631 of the XIII Century, kept in the State Library of Munich (Bavaria); cod. lat. 17145 of the XIII Century, also conserved in the Library of Munich; Ms 1172 of the XIII Century, in the Thomas Phillips Library, Sheltenham; Ms of St Maximin's Abbey in Trier, Rhineland (lost, but hand copied by the Bollandists); Ms 809 II of the XIII Century, Cambrai Library.

<sup>2</sup>E. Pásztor, "Elisabetta d'Ungheria," *Biblioteca sanctorum* 4, 1110-1121; R. Manselli, "Santità principesca e vita quotidiana in Elisabetta d'Ungheria: la testimonianza delle ancelle," *Analecta TOR* 18/139 (1985) 23-45; S. Gieben, "I patroni dell'ordine della penitenza," in *L'ordine della penitenza di san Francesco d'Assisi nel secolo XIII*, atti del Convegno di studi francescani, Assisi, 3-5 luglio 1972, ed. O. Schmucki (Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1973), pp. 233-243; M. Bihl, "Die heilige Elisabeth van Thiiringen als Terziarin," *Franziskanische Studien* 18 (1931) 259-293; G. Andreozzi, "Elisabetta e Lodovico i santi patroni del terzo ordine di san Francesco," (Rome: Franciscanum, 1996); A. Cadderi, *Santa Elisabetta d'Ungheria* (Padua: Edizioni Messaggero, 1988); Idem, "Canonizzazione e culto di Santa Elisabetta d'Ungheria," *Frate Francesco* 65 (1998) 51-60; E. Frascadore, "Elisabetta d'Ungheria, santa," in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* 3 (1976) 1111-1113. The main bibliographical information can be had in these studies.

<sup>3</sup>A. Cadderi, *Santa Elisabetta*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>G. Klaniczay, *Elisabetta d'Ungheria* (Langravio di Turingia), in *Il grande libro dei santi*, ed. Rome: San Paolo, 1988, p. 593.

<sup>5</sup>To satisfy the curiosity of the readers, we recall that, the two brothers of Elizabeth, Bela IV (heir to the throne) and Coleman, won fame in the struggle against the Tartars; two uncles were bishops (Egbert, Bishop of Bamberg, and Bertold, Patriarch of Aquileia); a maternal aunt was Saint Hedwig, Duchess of Silesia; the maternal aunt Agnes was the wife (not recognized by the Popes) of Phillip Auguste, King of France; St Agnes of Prague, the Poor Clare, was her cousin. St Margaret of Hungary (Dominican) and the Blesseds Cunegunda and Jolanda (widows, then Poor Clares) were her nieces. A glorious relationship of kings and saints!

Supported by her consort, Elizabeth dedicated much time to prayer and was filled with charity towards the poor, the sick and victims of the plague. She set about healing social injustices.

She was receptive to the new religious ideals preached by the first Franciscans<sup>6</sup> and in 1223 she chose the Franciscan friar Rüdiger as her spiritual guide.

Her husband Ludwig IV was also a committed Christian and in 1227 took part in the sixth crusade with Frederick II. He died in the same year at Otranto during an epidemic that decimated the crusaders.

Widowed at twenty years of age, Elizabeth and her three children had to leave Wartburg and settled at Marburg, under the spiritual guidance of friar Conrad of Marburg, her brother-in-law, who was a preacher of the crusade and an austere inquisitor against heresy.

In 1229, Elizabeth donated her own dowry to build a hospital/leprosarium in honor of St Francis of Assisi, who had been canonized on 16 July 1228.

## **2. Was Elizabeth a Franciscan penitent?**

We return to the fundamental problem in our discourse, that is, to the «vexata quaestio», whether Elizabeth belonged to the *Ordo poenitentiae sancti Francisci*. If this identity of "Franciscan penitent" were not convincingly established, then - from the Franciscan point of view - we would have to leave aside St Elizabeth, even if, as one author wrote<sup>7</sup>, "she is among the most fascinating female figures of the entire Middle Ages", and has constantly maintained a strong following in the course of the centuries.

The to and fro of opinions is part of the Elizabethan problem, as it is of very many other questions of living history.

There are those who deny that Elizabeth explicitly belonged to the order of Franciscan penitents (or Tertiaries), even if they admit that she adhered spiritually to the charism of St Francis, and they declare that the problem is not yet sufficiently illuminated by historiography<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>In 1217, the first sixty Franciscan friars arrived in Germany to undertake itinerant preaching. This first failed mission was followed in 1221 by a second, better organized, expedition.

<sup>7</sup>A. Cadderi, *Santa Elisabetta*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>E. Pásztor, *Elisabetta d'Ungheria*, 1121.

Others hold that Elizabeth's belonging to the Franciscan penitential movement is "entirely improbable, in spite of her proven great devotion to St Francis".

Instead, there are those who hold that "upon careful reading of certain documents, there should not be any more doubt about it"<sup>10</sup>. The Franciscans had their first contact with the German world in 1217, but they failed to have an impact. The mission was more realistically prepared and the Friars Minor tried again in 1221, with better success<sup>11</sup>. It was the year of fourteen-year-old Elizabeth's marriage. As Jordan of Giano attests, the Franciscans spread rapidly in Germany, Hungary and Austria.

Elizabeth came into early contact with the Franciscan missionaries. As we have said, from 1223 her confessor and spiritual guide was friar Rüdiger (Roger), one of the Friars Minor called by Elizabeth herself to officiate in the chapel of Wartburg castle<sup>12</sup>. This is a basic fact in the spiritual history of Elizabeth. The young wife heard about St Francis, and his message resonated strongly in her spirit. Jordan writes that friar Rüdiger "was really the spiritual master of St Elizabeth, and taught her to keep chastity, humility and patience, to be watchful in prayer and to dedicate herself assiduously to the works of mercy"<sup>13</sup>. Gabriel Andreozzi comments: "... we see here that friar Jordan sums up what was the penitential spirituality inspired by the Franciscans"<sup>14</sup>.

The luxurious surroundings of her princely castle, in full contrast with the options of the Poverello and with the reality of many people, must have seemed wrong to her. Elizabeth felt the need for poverty as a sharing and as a call to the works of service to the brothers and sisters. She found herself to be a Franciscan penitent by chance and through the attunement of her spirit to that of St Francis! The juridical formalisms should not be considered a primary discriminating factor. And we must be on our guard also against anachronisms, which at times make us confuse chronology and criteria.

It seems to me that the witness of the chronicler, based on personal knowledge, is very significant. Jordan was the guardian at Magonza and entrusted with finding "loci" (= places, convents) for the Friars Minor in

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<sup>9</sup>S. Gieben, "I patroni dell'ordine della penitenza," p. 245.

<sup>10</sup>A. Cadderi, *Santa Elisabetta*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup>Jordan of Giano, *Chronicle*, 17, *Thirteenth Century Chronicles*, trans. Placid Hermann (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1961), pp. 33-34.

<sup>12</sup>*Epistola Conradi*, p. 157.

<sup>13</sup>Jordan of Giano, *Chronicle*, 25: *Thirteenth Century Chronicles*, pp. 41-42..

<sup>14</sup>G. Andreozzi, "Elisabetta e Lodovico," p. 39.

Thuringia<sup>15</sup>. So he was well informed! He stresses Elizabeth's path of conversion (prayer and virtue) and her works of mercy: the pair of characteristic traits of the Franciscan penitents, in the light of the Poverello of Assisi. This means that friar Rüdiger "directed her towards the ideal of the penitents, and guided her in the exercise of the virtues proper to the movement"<sup>16</sup>.

Her husband Ludwig, before leaving for the crusade, had confided his consort to Conrad of Marburg, a severe and inflexible spiritual director. The appointment had been confirmed by the pope in Rome. After her husband's passing, Elizabeth (then twenty years of age) could embrace the life of the Franciscan penitents to the utmost. Conrad attests in the letter to Gregory IX: "After her husband's death, while your Paternity had made me worthy to guide her, she herself, aiming at the highest perfection, consulted me about the best way to gain merits ..."<sup>17</sup>.

Urged by this longing, on Good Friday of 1228 (24 March), in the church erected by the Franciscans in Eisenach, Elizabeth made her evangelical profession, as Conrad attests: "On Good Friday, when the altars are stripped, she placed her hands on the altar in a chapel of her castle where she had welcomed the Friars Minor, and, in the presence of the friars and of her relatives and children, she renounced her own will, all the vanities of the world and all that the Savior in the gospel counsels us to leave"<sup>18</sup>.

A little later, Elizabeth parted from her princely surroundings and followed her confessor Conrad to Marburg. She and her companions (Guda and Isentrude) received the grey habit of the penitents<sup>19</sup>.

The anonymous author (Cistercian) of the "Life of St Elizabeth, Countess of Thuringia", compiled between 1 May 1236 and 21 March 1239, states precisely that Elizabeth "was vested in the grey habit of the Friars Minor at Marburg": "fratrum minorum habitum griseum induens apud Marpurch in totum et publice se vitae seculis illecebris abdicavit"<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup>Jordan of Giano, *Chronicle*, 38, *Thirteenth Century Chronicles*, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup>A. Cadderi, "Santa Elisabetta," p. 91.

<sup>17</sup>*Epistola Conradi*, p. 157.

<sup>18</sup>*Epistola Conradi*, p. 157.

<sup>19</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 114, 125, 127, 128, 139. The testimony of the maids is extraordinarily important, also when the antiquity of the document (1232-1235) is taken into account.

<sup>20</sup>*Archivum Franciscan Historicum* 2 (1909) 256. The work called "The Anonymous of Zwettl" (in BHL 2495b), has been edited by Fr. Diodore Henniges in *Archivum Franciscan Historicum* 2 (1909) 240-268. The relevant codex 326 (fol 150-184) is conserved in the Cistercian monastery of Zwettl in Austria. In the

There are some who maintain that this precise statement is forced, but there is no need to forget that the author is contemporaneous with the facts narrated ("auctor huius vitae coevus erat sanctae Elisabeth") and that, on the other hand, he was not interested in the Franciscan attribution since he was a Cistercian monk.

There is still an important witness that, it seems to me, has not been duly appreciated. The *Dicta quattuor ancillarum* affirms that Elizabeth "vivo marito ipsa cum suis ancillis lanam filabat, telam fieri faciens ad vestes fratrum minorum et pauperum"<sup>21</sup>. This affirmation of her companions, namely, that Elizabeth provided the cloth for the habits of the Friars Minor, has a certain importance for riveting her particular links with the Franciscan family and her love for the evangelical ideal proposed by St Francis.

In my opinion, the converging testimonies have a probative value that is difficult to neglect. Perhaps there are not many Franciscan penitents who can boast of so many reasons for their belonging to the movement that developed among the laity in the footsteps of the Poverello of Assisi!

The fact is not to be underestimated that Elizabeth, in the years 1228-1229, dedicated the hospital of Marburg to the recently canonized St Francis. Gregory IX, in the eulogistic letter *Quoniam ut*, of 19 April 1229, speaks of the patronage of St Francis and grants a forty days' indulgence to whomever visits the hospital on the solemnity of St Francis. That was an official reply to a message from Elizabeth herself.

In running the hospital and in serving the sick, Elizabeth is joined by her former maids, the most faithful Guda and Isentrude. Also among the collaborators there figure: Ermengard, Ildegond, Elizabeth and a girl who remains anonymous. They constitute a familial community. The "sisters" wear the grey habit<sup>22</sup> that the Anonymous of 1236-1237 defines as Franciscan<sup>23</sup>. All this does not prove much, but it has a very strong circumstantial value.

Very soon, history and iconography gave a Franciscan style to Elizabeth's spiritual development. A stained glass window, fashioned in 1250 in the church of St Elizabeth of Marburg, represents the Saint who is welcomed by St Francis into the Order of penitents. Iconography has favored the representation of St. Elizabeth as the Patroness of the

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introduction, Fr. Henniges states that he is pleased to present this unpublished work on the life of Elizabeth of Thuringia, "Tertii Ordinis S. P. N. Francisci decoris et gloriae." For the dating of the codex, see pp. 241-250.

<sup>21</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 118.

<sup>22</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 114, 125, 127, 128, 139.

<sup>23</sup>*Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 2 (1909), p. 256.

Franciscan Third Order and as the Protectress of hospitals. A privileged place has been reserved for Saint Elizabeth in the lower Basilica of St Francis at Assisi, the work of Simone Martini (1317) and in the Chapel of the Roses at St Mary of the Angels, the work of Tiberio of Assisi (1506), where she is counted among the saints of the Franciscan family. There is the famous cycle in the church of Santa Maria Donna Queen of Naples. St Elizabeth is represented in almost all Franciscan churches.

The Franciscan "Martyrology for the Cycle of the Year", kept in the Rosenthal Library of Munich, datable towards the middle of the Thirteenth Century<sup>24</sup>, presents the chronological list of Franciscan saints; St Francis (4 October), St Anthony (13 June), St Elizabeth (19 November). The martyrology stresses Elizabeth's "extraordinary sanctity", her use of the discipline and her works of mercy, and affirms her belonging to the Franciscan family<sup>25</sup>.

There is another datum that, it seems to me, has not had due consideration. After the canonization, proclaimed by Gregory IX (involved so much in things Franciscan and always informed) on 27 May 1235, Elizabeth had a solemn exaltation at Marburg on 1 May 1236 with a great crowd and numerous authorities participating. Also present was the Emperor Frederick II with his consort Isabelle and his son Conrad. Immediately after the translation of the Saint, the Emperor wrote a letter to Brother Elias, the Minister General, eulogizing St Elizabeth, the Church and the Franciscan Order<sup>26</sup>. Now I ask myself: why had Frederick II written to the Minister General of the Friars Minor himself, if the Saint's belonging to the Franciscan family had not been evident?

This tradition remains constant and became part of the Franciscan spiritual patrimony. Salimbene de Adam, in his long journey, had a way of acquiring extensive information. In the *Chronicle*, of 1284, he holds for certain that "this saint, after the death of her husband, lived under obedience to the Friars Minor"<sup>27</sup>. This thesis is accepted by many authors of the

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<sup>24</sup>The codex was edited before the canonization of St Clare, which took place on 26 September 1255. In fact, the annotation "Eodem die sanctae virginis" is added at a later date to the margin of the respective day.

<sup>25</sup>*Testi e documenti sul Terz'Ordine Francescano*, ed. L. Temperini (Rome: Edizioni Analecta TOR, 1991), p. 171.

<sup>26</sup>A. Cadderi, *Santa Elisabetta*, p. 159. The letter of Frederick II to Brother Elias can be read in *Acta Imperii inedita*, ed. E. Winckelmann, I (Innsbruck, 1880), pp. 299s.

<sup>27</sup>Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, ed. Scalia, Bari 1966, p. 51: "*Ista sancta, post mortem viri sui, vixit sub obedientia fratrum minorum.*"

Twelfth Century and of successive centuries<sup>28</sup>. It is unthinkable, all the same, to pretend that there is no place for doubts, as happens in very many historical questions.

Bihl studied a large part of the original documentation and drew the following conclusion: taking the Franciscan ambience and the spirituality of Elizabeth into consideration, it is legitimate to hold that the Saint lived, interiorly and exteriorly, the ideals of the penitents of St Francis<sup>29</sup>. Adhesion to the Franciscan penitential movement would have been a factual reality, beyond juridical formalisms. It seems that this can be deduced legitimately from the documents, without forcing them and without undue appropriations.

After having examined the complex question in all its aspects, I feel that I share Bihl's position. And I believe that I am in good company.

So a continuous and uninterrupted tradition exists about St Elizabeth's historical belonging to the spirituality of St Francis, which she lived while remaining "in the world", that is, as a Franciscan Tertiary.

### 3. Spirituality and mystical theology of St. Elizabeth.

Having clarified as much as possible the "vexata quaestio" treated above, we must extract the mystical values of the young Franciscan penitent - if there are any.

The sources relative to her interior history are two in particular: the *Epistola Conradi*<sup>30</sup> and the *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*<sup>31</sup>. Conrad, the spiritual director, personally followed and guided Elizabeth's spiritual way. So he knew, close at hand, the problems and the mystical path of his disciple. Consequently his information is realistic and precious. Equally reliable are Elizabeth's companions, who were fully informed for years.<sup>32</sup> So the companions had seen and heard. And each one, "made an oath and was questioned concerning the life and the conversation of Elizabeth"<sup>33</sup>,

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<sup>28</sup>S. Gieben, "I patroni," pp. 239-242.

<sup>29</sup>M. Bihl, *Die heilige Elisabeth*, p. 293.

<sup>30</sup>Letter of Conrad of Marburg, sent to pope Gregory IX, on 16 November 1232. See footnote n.1.

<sup>31</sup>Testimony of Elizabeth's maids during the process of canonization. See footnote n.1.

<sup>32</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 127: "*Requisitae quomodo hoc scirent, singulatim examinatae responderunt quod interfuerunt omnibus hiis et viderunt ea, ipsi beatae Elizabeth multis annis commorantes.*"

<sup>33</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 127: "*iurata et interrogata de vita et conversatione eiusdem Elizabeth.*"



witnessed to the extraordinary work of faith and charity performed by the saint.<sup>34</sup>

The road of conversion, which Elizabeth traveled in a short time, was scanned with continuous prayer, with heroic charity towards the poor and with works of mercy towards the sick. Her contemplation of God and her union with the Highest Good were ceaseless.

Conrad of Marburg, her confessor and severe spiritual director, writes: "Besides her commitment to the works of the active life, I affirm before God that rarely have I seen a woman as contemplative as Elizabeth. Some of the faithful verify often enough that, when she came from private prayer, a marvelous splendor shone from her face and what appeared to be sun rays came out of her eyes"<sup>35</sup>.

Her existence was increasingly transfigured in the light of Christ while following the example of St. Francis. The maids attest to having seen Elizabeth entirely immersed in God, swept away in ecstasy<sup>36</sup>. "Her companions often came upon her motionless, with her hands raised and her eyes fixed on heaven, as though in flight after a distant vision"<sup>37</sup>. Conrad confirms how, more and more, Elizabeth "was carried away in ecstasy for some hours"<sup>38</sup> and immersed herself in the mystery of God.

Let us return again to the "Sayings of the Handmaids", one of the primary sources. The testimonies of Elizabeth's companions - writes Manselli - "have an importance so much more significant and clarifying in so far as we are dealing with persons who have, in reality, shared her personal vicissitudes and the turns of events, in daily life and intimate relationships, whose meaning, perhaps, has not yet, in all and for all, been rightly expressed. In fact, they inform us and give us particular items about minor and the least circumstances, that can be less impressive than some great acts of intense religious life, but that also throw light in their modesty, on one hand on the personality of Elizabeth herself and, on the other hand, indirectly on the manifestations and forms of her sanctity"<sup>39</sup>. From the *Sayings* of the handmaids, there emerges "a clear profile of the education and

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<sup>34</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 127-140.

<sup>35</sup>*Epistola Conradi*, p. 159.

<sup>36</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 131.

<sup>37</sup>A. Cadderi, *Santa Elisabetta*, p. 97.

<sup>38</sup>*Epistola Conradi*, p. 159.

<sup>39</sup>R. Manselli, "Santità principesca," p. 25.

formation of a princely personality, imbued quite early with a deeply religious and intensely ascetical spirit"<sup>40</sup>.

Elizabeth "is humble, charitable and very intent on prayer,"<sup>41</sup> she gets up in the depths of night to give herself over to long prayers<sup>42</sup>. Sometimes she has herself flogged by her maids<sup>43</sup>. She takes part in the religious ceremonies bare-footed, clothed in un-dyed wool and taking her place among the poorest persons<sup>44</sup>. In the rogation day processions, she follows the cross with bare feet and during the preaching of the Lenten stations she places herself among the humblest<sup>45</sup>. The maid Isentrude, an eyewitness for many years, stresses the continual sensitivity of Elizabeth towards the poor and the suffering<sup>46</sup>. Often, she goes to visit their miserable homes<sup>47</sup>, bringing food and aid<sup>48</sup>. During the great famine that struck Thuringia in 1226, Elizabeth - while her consort was absent - availed herself of all his power to help the poor, also putting all his reserves to use<sup>49</sup>.

Elizabeth, young and courageous, visits the people and especially the sick, meets all their requests, comforts the suffering and speaks to them of God, takes care of the ill, even the most repugnant ones<sup>50</sup>. Her attention to the children is touching, even when they are dirty and at times deformed<sup>51</sup>. This is the testimony of Isentrude, her maid and companion. Conrad recalls that Elizabeth took care of a paralytic child and served it night and day in all its necessities; she brought a leprous girl into her home and personally cared for her; she washed and gave medicine to a child covered with scabies<sup>52</sup>.

Manselli<sup>53</sup>, obtaining his information always from the *Dicta ancillarum*, stresses the spiritual values of work: both that done directly by Elizabeth, and that of the world of the farmer and laborer, favored by her.

<sup>40</sup>R. Manselli, "Santità principesca," p. 25.

<sup>41</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 114.

<sup>42</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 116.

<sup>43</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 117.

<sup>44</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 117.

<sup>45</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 118.

<sup>46</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 117 e passim.

<sup>47</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 118.

<sup>48</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 137.

<sup>49</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 119.

<sup>50</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 114 e passim.

<sup>51</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 119-120, 127s.

<sup>52</sup>*Epistola Conradi*, pp. 158-159; *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 127-140.

<sup>53</sup>Manselli, "Santità principesca," p. 31.

She provided tools and subsidies to alleviate their hardship. And when they could not do active work she offered them adequate assistance<sup>54</sup>.

To appease the contrast between the rich and the poor, Elizabeth sought to live in modest conditions, she dressed in humble material, and exalted detachment and poverty<sup>55</sup>. She herself valued the gift of work. Not only did she serve the poor and the sick or attend to sewing, but she cleaned the surroundings and the pots of the kitchen with untiring zeal<sup>56</sup>.

Let us listen to the description of Conrad, an eye witness of the facts he narrates. "Our sister Elizabeth had begun early to exercise virtue, so that, as throughout her entire life she had been a consoler of the poor, she then began to be the restorer of the hungry, and committed herself to building a hospital near one of her castles, in which she gathered and fed the infirm and the weak, and also distributed generously the benefice of charity to all those who begged alms there, and not only there but in all the confines and boundaries of her husband's jurisdiction, calling upon all the revenues of her husband's four principalities, going so far as to sell all her ornaments and precious clothes in favor of the poor, being in the habit of visiting personally all those who were more repugnant. She gave food to some of them, made the bed of some, carried some on her shoulders and carried out many other acts of humanity, and in all this her husband, of happy memory, never opposed her"<sup>57</sup>.

Close to her passing, Elizabeth specified that "all that she seemed still to own belonged to the poor", and begged her confessor to distribute to them, after her death, all her goods, except a worthless tunic"<sup>58</sup>.

Typically evangelical and Franciscan was Elizabeth's attitude to lepers. We turn again to the testimony of Isentrude. Once, on Good Friday, Elizabeth gathered the lepers together, washed their feet and kissed their sores. Her attention to the lepers was not only occasional, but constant and earnest: "wherever she found lepers, she sat beside them, comforting and encouraging them"<sup>59</sup>.

Manselli sees in this behavior of Elizabeth the projection of the example of St Francis and therefore her belonging to the Franciscan

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<sup>54</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>55</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 120.

<sup>56</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>57</sup>*Epistola Conradi*, p. 157.

<sup>58</sup>*Epistola Conradi*, p. 159.

<sup>59</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 120-121.

spiritual sphere<sup>60</sup>. He confirms this conviction again: "The Christianity of Elizabeth seems, therefore, already to have that sweeter and tender sentiment of religiosity that is characterized as Franciscan religiosity"<sup>61</sup>.

Widowed at only twenty years of age, with three children to educate and with additional problems with her relatives, Elizabeth faced her situation with courage and Franciscan joy<sup>62</sup>. She chose to live in chastity<sup>63</sup> and to dedicate herself to the needy with motherly affection<sup>64</sup>. She went to the Friars Minor to sing together the "Te Deum" of praise and thanksgiving to God, the Father of mercy<sup>65</sup>. Under the spiritual guidance of Conrad of Marburg, austere and demanding, Elizabeth made great progress in evangelical perfection. The maids testify to Elizabeth's detachment from material goods, her resolute refusal of a new wedding with all its inherent advantages<sup>66</sup>, her dedication to her children and her option for the poor, her strength of spirit in sustaining misunderstandings and offences, her unlimited trust in God<sup>67</sup>. Her patience was truly heroic<sup>68</sup>. Conrad comments that Elizabeth tended constantly towards the "highest perfection"<sup>69</sup>.

Manselli notes: "Elizabeth feels herself already outside the rank of princess, associating with the state of the humble, the poor and the derelict"<sup>70</sup>.

Is it not legitimate to recognize in the typology of Elizabeth's conversion an evangelical attunement with the charismatic experience of the Penitent of Assisi? Elizabeth donned a grey habit<sup>71</sup> and also the maid Irmengard was "clothed with a grey habit"<sup>72</sup>. This fact does not prove much since the grey habit was common to many penitents. However, it could acquire a certain value if it were associated with other factors.

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<sup>60</sup> Manselli, "Santità principesca," p. 32.

<sup>61</sup> Manselli, "Santità principesca," p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 121.

<sup>63</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>64</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>65</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 121.

<sup>66</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 124.

<sup>67</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 125.

<sup>68</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>69</sup> *Epistola Conradi*, p. 157.

<sup>70</sup> Manselli, "Santità principescap," p. 39.

<sup>71</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 114, 125, 127, 128, 139.

<sup>72</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 114.

Elizabeth, according to the testimony of the various sources, exercised some virtues characteristic of Franciscan spirituality. On several occasions, we have stressed her commitment to the works of mercy and her heroism in her initiatives of mortification. Elizabeth was above all a woman of prayer and mystical immersion. The companions saw her often "completely absorbed in God" and rapt in ecstasy. At times they came upon her with her hands raised and her eyes fixed on heaven, motionless and with her face transfigured<sup>73</sup>.

Once, giving into Isentrude's insistence, Elizabeth explained her ecstatic attitude: "I have seen heaven opened and my sweet Lord Jesus bending towards me; he consoled me regarding the various sufferings that have afflicted me. As soon as I saw his face, I felt happy and I smiled; when he turned his face to go away, I burst into tears. He pitied me and showed me his reassuring face once more, and said to me again 'If you want to be with me, I will be with you'"<sup>74</sup>.

But it is not possible to reveal everything, since certain mystical experiences cannot be expressed. Elizabeth declared: "It is better not to reveal what I saw there, but you should know that I was in the greatest joy, and I saw wonderful secrets of God"<sup>75</sup>.

Elizabeth lived the liturgical actions with great devotion and faith. The Dominican Theodoric of Apolda, in the years 1289-1297, recalls a significant episode that allows us a glimpse into the mystical world of Elizabeth. He tells us that a priest, at the moment of the Eucharistic consecration, saw "the face of Elizabeth resplendent with a divine light, as though it gave out the sun's rays. And the splendor was such that he could never have been able to support it with his bodily eyes, and remained for that reason stupefied and very grateful to the Lord"<sup>76</sup>. Such was her participation in liturgical prayer!

The same Theodoric recalls that Elizabeth spent Lent in prayer and abstinence, chastising her body with mortifications and giving more generous alms. On Good Friday she dressed in austere clothes and wore shoes like the poor, and washed the feet of twelve poor persons, who were at times substituted by lepers.

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<sup>73</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 122 c 131.

<sup>74</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 123.

<sup>75</sup>*Dicta quattuor ancillarum*. p. 123.

<sup>76</sup>Theodoric of Apolda, *Libri octo de S. Elisabeth, Andreae regis hungarorum filia, Ludovici landgravii Thuringiae uxore*, edited in E. Canisio, *Thesaurus Monumentorum ecclesiasticorum*, vol. IV (Antwerp 1725), p. 126.

Also the Anonymous of Zwettl, attributable - as has been said already - to an author contemporaneous with Elizabeth, draws a spiritual profile rich in detail. Elizabeth prays with insistence, she takes the discipline for love of her divine spouse, sleeps often on a hard mat rather than on a soft mattress. She gets up at night to give vent to tears and prayers, visits the poor, participates in the funerals of the humble, provides clothing for the needy and washes their clothes. During the celebration of Mass, she removes her jewelry, rings and other bodily adornments<sup>77</sup>.

I am happy to mention a quality stressed by one of the handmaids: "My mistress blessed Elizabeth always spoke the most joyful words to us handmaids, calling us her beloved or her friends"<sup>78</sup>. Perfect joy in her heart and great respect/love for her handmaids!

Sensitive to the situation of the indigent, she has all the reserves of her stores distributed, pays the debts of whoever find themselves in impossible situations<sup>79</sup>, sells her jewelry<sup>80</sup>, serves and personally washes the outcasts and ulcerated, attends to and kisses the lepers, takes on the care of burying the dead<sup>81</sup>, always with a smile on her face and with joy in her heart<sup>82</sup>.

After the premature death of her husband, Elizabeth had to put up with many sufferings and humiliations. She accepted the cross with faith and love. The "prompt and efficacious consoler the Lord Jesus Christ" intervened, sweeping her away in frequent ecstatic raptures that filled her with indescribable joy. Elizabeth exclaimed: "Lord if you want to stay with me, I also want to stay with you. I will never separate myself from you!"<sup>83</sup>

The *Anonymous* mentions finally the heroic charity of Elizabeth in the "St Francis" hospital founded by herself at Marburg: she is attentive to the lepers and the disabled. To maintain these "works of mercy" she is not ashamed to beg. "O extraordinary prodigy of our times, to be immortalized in the perpetual annals ...," exclaims the admiring author<sup>84</sup>.

<sup>77</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 117; *Anonimo di Zwettl*, cit; pp. 253-254.

<sup>78</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 138.

<sup>79</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 118.

<sup>80</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 119.

<sup>81</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 118.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. *Anonimo di Zwettl*, cit., pp. 254-255.

<sup>83</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 123; *Anonimo di Zwettl*, cit, p. 255.

<sup>84</sup> *Anonimo di Zwettl*, cit., p. 257.

The maids attest that Elizabeth immersed herself deeply in prayer, had heavenly visions, and sighed with love<sup>85</sup>. In these mystical experiences, Elizabeth lived an extraordinary union with God, the supreme Good of the universe.

I find Manselli's conclusion vigorous and clear: "[...] either through the influence of her first Franciscan confessor, or through direct acquaintance with the Friars Minor, Elizabeth had sure information about St Francis of Assisi, to whom she offers herself in a Franciscan church, and then erects a hospital in his name. Certainly, she came under his influence and, it is worth stressing strongly, in accordance with an image that was not yet that of his biographers. If in fact we want to characterize in a word all Elizabeth's personality, we must say that she is the saint closest to Francis of Assisi that her time has known. Paradoxically, she was closer to Francis, in her active living in the world, than Clare of Assisi herself, who was obliged to live within the walls of a monastery"<sup>86</sup>.

According to the same scholar, known to all and highly appreciated, not only the penitential way (*metánoia*) and the works of mercy testify to the Franciscan quality of Elizabeth, but also her love of poverty. Elizabeth placed everything at the service of the poor and felt herself detached from any goods and strongly attracted by God.

In her generosity, she ran up against Conrad who forbade her to distribute alms and to serve the sick, fearing that she would remain deprived of the necessary and would be subject to infections and plague. At times she received reprimands, blows and slaps, which she accepted in union with the buffeted Christ<sup>87</sup>. Her desire to deprive herself of everything and to dedicate herself to the needy, placing her time and means at their service, was too strong in Elizabeth<sup>88</sup>.

We hold - writes Manselli - that also here "a further Franciscan influence must be detected. As an indication, we gain the impression that Elizabeth could have had direct testimonies about the personal behavior of Francis. Let us not forget that Elizabeth lived at the moment when in Germany friars were present who had been sent from Italy and had personally known Francis"<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 123 e 137.

<sup>86</sup> R. Manselli, "Santità principesca," pp. 43-44.

<sup>87</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 118-119 e 126-127. Irmengard declares that, once, the bruises of the floggings inflicted by Conrad were noticeable after three weeks, p. 136.

<sup>88</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>89</sup> Manselli, "Santità principesca," p. 36 nt 30.

Certainly, her condition of lady and mother did not allow the total abandonment of her status as the Poverello of Assisi had done, but the reality - writes Manselli again - "allows us to evaluate how, at such a distance, as much of that example [of Francis] that could be translated was transferred into the German world. What is most striking is that feminine tone of affection, tenderness and courtesy, certainly, but inspired by what she heard of the example of Francis"<sup>90</sup>.

So the fact remains that Elizabeth "felt St Francis's example, alive and deep"<sup>91</sup>. She chose to live as a penitent, as Francis had done at the beginning of his conversion and as the first Franciscans in Germany proposed for the laity. The conflicts between Elizabeth and Conrad are reaped - according to Manselli - precisely in Elizabeth's decisive will to be poor, spurred on to the total despoiling that Francis had carried out"<sup>92</sup>.

"Elizabeth's spirituality" - writes Pásztor - began then, according to the testimony of Conrad, to take shape beyond the will of her confessor; and that appears quite significant, because he alludes clearly to the fact that, besides, she distanced herself also from the very representation that the confessor gave of this spirituality, that the roots of Elizabeth's piety are not to be sought in Conrad's own ambience, being a preacher of the crusade, inquisitor and, if you like, a Premonstratensian, but in a different ambience"<sup>93</sup>. And from the convergence of the various elements it becomes clear that Elizabeth's spiritual development fits into the evangelical project foreseen by Francis of Assisi for his penitents"<sup>94</sup>.

From the sources at our disposal and from reading them critically, we can therefore draw a positive conclusion. Interpreting the texts accurately, who does not recognize that the life of Elizabeth was impregnated with the gospel as it had been lived and proposed to the penitents by the Poverello of Assisi? She incarnated these heroic ideals, expressed in the commitment of conversion and in the works of mercy, remaining in the world, intensely active in the workshop of daily life.

That does not authorize us to apply our present-day categories anachronistically. We are not to look for a register of inscription in the Franciscan Order of Penitents, we must not expect to find a formal act of

<sup>90</sup>Manselli, "Santità principesca," p. 44.

<sup>91</sup>Manselli, "Santità principesca," p. 44.

<sup>92</sup>Manselli, "Santità principesca," p. 44.

<sup>93</sup>Pásztor, "Elisabetta d'Ungheria," in *Biblioteca sanctorum* IV, 1121. It seems instead that Conrad belonged to the secular clergy of the diocese of Magonza: cf C. A. Cadderi, *Santa Elisabetta d'Ungheria*, p. 115

<sup>94</sup>Pásztor. "Elisabetta d' Ungheria," 1121.



adhesion, we cannot lay claim to testimonies in terms that are familiar today, but which would be wrong or at least suspect in sources of a long time ago.

Elizabeth lived fully the project of life that St Francis proposed to the brothers and sisters of the order of penance. And this incontestable fact is more than sufficient to admit the Franciscan quality of Elizabeth and of the values of her spirituality. The penitential pair - conversion and works of mercy -, that she lived with extreme generosity, introduced her into the orbit of a very lively and personalized mystical life. A spirituality that plays so many gradations of the Franciscan penitential life: continuous prayer of praise and increasing communion with God, meditation on the mysteries of Christ, contemplation of the highest Good, a wide range of charitable works; these are the rhythms of a spiritual way that leads to the highest Christian perfection<sup>95</sup>.

After an existence, short but intense, consummated in love of neighbor and in joyful union with Christ, Elizabeth hastened to her eternal nuptials. She affirmed: "See, the moment has arrived when almighty God calls to himself those who are his friends."<sup>96</sup> "Now let us talk of God and of baby Jesus, since midnight is near when Jesus was born and slept in the manger, and with his omnipotence made a new star shine that no one had seen before"<sup>97</sup>.

When her passing was near - Conrad, an eye witness, recounts - the gentlest of voices were heard, an anticipation of imminent glory.<sup>98</sup>

Elizabeth, friend of Christ and friend of the poor after the style of Francis of Assisi, was welcomed into the eternal kingdom of love. All those present burst into tears that they could no longer contain. "It would be difficult to describe the sorrow and the behavior of each one." All were aware that Elisabeth "had been as a mother to all."<sup>99</sup>

And "immediately the Lord began to work [wonders] through his handmaid"<sup>100</sup>. And immediately there began the cult of the saint of the poor and the sick, who had learned from Francis of Assisi the courage to embrace lepers.

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<sup>95</sup> *Epistola Conradi*, p.157.

<sup>96</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 139.

<sup>97</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 139.

<sup>98</sup> *Epistola Conradi*, p. 159.

<sup>99</sup> *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*, p. 139.

<sup>100</sup> *Epistola Conradi*, p. 159. See the "Relatio miraculorum sancte Elzabet", in A. Huysekens, *Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der hl. Elisabeth von Thüringen* (Marburg, 1908), pp. 161-242 and 243-266.

#### 4. Process and canonization

Elizabeth died on 17 November 1231, at only twenty-four years of age, and was buried in the chapel of St Francis Hospital, Marburg. Her tomb soon became the destination of pilgrimage and a place of prodigious healing.<sup>101</sup>

Friar Conrad of Marburg became the principal promoter of her canonization. He was the one whom pope Gregory IX commissioned to prepare the case of canonization. To cope with the increase of devout visitors, he had a small church erected by the architect Walter.<sup>102</sup>

Meanwhile, friar Conrad, taken up with pastoral and community obligations, neglected his task of postulator. The pope's penitentiary, Raymond of Peñafort, entreated friar Conrad a number of times to send to Rome all the documentation and in particular a report "about the miracles".

On 10 August 1232, the archbishop of Magonza, Sigfried II, went to Marburg to consecrate two new altars in the church of the hospital where Elizabeth was buried. Before a large crowd of the faithful, Conrad presented some witnesses who told of sixty miracles that had taken place at the tomb of the saint. After the homily, friar Conrad asked everyone to give any information about Elizabeth. As a result, sixty miracles were chosen and a description of them was sent to the pope.

The letter written by friar Conrad was accompanied by a synthesis of Elizabeth's life story, that was called *Summa vitae*<sup>103</sup>. In fact, Conrad wanted to inform the pope not only regarding the miracles worked by God through the intercession of Elizabeth, but also with regard to her heroic exercise of the virtues.

Gregory IX gave a favorable reception to the information sent by Conrad and replied with messages of 13 and 14 October 1232, introducing the ritual *inquisitio* and setting up a proper working commission.

Beginning in January 1233, the commission questioned about six hundred witnesses and registered 106 miracles, transcribed on special

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<sup>101</sup>About the miracles attributed to the intercession of St Elizabeth and on the process of canonization, see the *Acts* edited by A. Huyskens, *Quellenstudien*, cit., pp. 20-30, 66-91, 140-148, 160-242.

<sup>102</sup>See A. Huyskens, "Der Hospitalbau de hl. Elisabeth und die erste Wallfahrtskirche zu Marburg," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für hessische Geschichte und Landeskunde*, Kassel 1909, f. 33.

<sup>103</sup>Conrad of Marburg, *Epistola examinatum miraculorum sanctae Elisabeth ad dominum papam*, in *Quellenstudien*, pp. 155-159; BHL 2490.

parchment and authenticated. The mass of testimonies offers a sufficient guarantee to the veracity of the facts.

But in the month of July 1233, Conrad was killed and the procedures of canonization were halted. However, they were soon resumed and in October 1234 a new commission was elected. Twenty-four miracles emerged from the testimonies. In particular, the domestics of the hospital and again Elizabeth's handmaids were heard. Their "eye witness" testimonies have constituted the base for the *Dicta quattuor ancillarum*.

All the documentation, sent to Gregory IX at Perugia, was examined in a short time and the canonization took place on 27 May 1235 (Pentecost) in the church of St Dominic<sup>104</sup>. On the following 1 June, the official bull, *Gloriosus in maiestate*<sup>105</sup>, was promulgated.

With the passing of time, history has been enriched with the contribution of popular stories and legends. In this context belongs the miracle of the roses, referred to by the legend, *Beata Elisabeth filia regis Ungarorum*, edited towards the end of the Thirteenth Century<sup>106</sup>.

At all events, history and legend trace with marvelous efficacy the spiritual visage and the charitable works of this heroic Franciscan Tertiary, who remains a living message for the humble and for the great ones of this world.

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<sup>104</sup>On 14 August 1235, the first stone of the church in her honor at Marburg was laid. The windows date from 1250. The beautiful construction in Gothic style was consecrated in 1280. In 1570 the Church was taken over by the Lutherans.

<sup>105</sup>In BP 1164-167. See also *Processus et ordo canonizationis* (Perugia 1235), in *Quellenstudien*, cit., pp. 141-146.

<sup>106</sup>BHL 2510b. The miracle of the roses: so as not to make known what she was giving to the poor, Elizabeth changed bread into perfumed roses. Cf. L. Lemmens, "Zum Rosenwunder," *Katholik* 24 (1902) 381-384.

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