

## Royal Holiness in the Daily Life of Elizabeth of Hungary: The Testimony of Her Servants

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*Santità principesca e vita quotidiana in Elisabetta d'Ungheria:  
la testimonianza delle ancelle*

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**D**espite the many studies that continue to explain the importance and historical impact of Elizabeth of Hungary, our most precious testimony is still that which comes from her *Life*. Compiled by an anonymous author, it is based on testimonies that in many ways seem to be direct quotations taken from the "canonization process," or at least from the collection of testimonies concerning her holiness. Particularly important among these must have been those of the women who lived with her, either as a girl and young wife, or as a penitent under the severe directives of Conrad of Marburg.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This is not the place for a complete bibliography on Elizabeth of Hungary. We will limit ourselves to a few works we have found directly useful: A. Wyss, *Hessisches Urkundenbuch. I, Urkundenbuch der Deutschordens-Ballei Hessen*, Leipzig 1879 (hereafter, *LCon*); A. Huyskens, *Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der hl. Elisabeth, Landgräfin von Thüringen*, Marburg 1908; Idem, *Der sogenannte Libellus de dictis quatuor ancillarum S. Elisabeth confectus*, Kempten-Munich, 1911 (hereafter, *Life*), to which must be added G. G. Meerseman, "Le deposizioni delle compagne di S. Elisabetta di Turingia in un frammento conservato nell'Archivio di Stato a Friburgo," in *Miscellanea in onore di G. Battelli*, Rome 1979, pp. 367-80. There are also the works by K.H. May, "Zur Geschichte Konrads von Marburg," in *Hessisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte*, 1 (1951), pp. 87-109; W. Maurer, "Zum Verständnis der heiligen Elisabeth von Thüringen," in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 65 (1953-54), pp. 16-64, and finally the

These testimonies are even more revealing, coming as they do from persons who actually shared the vicissitudes of her life. Perhaps the importance of these close daily relationships has not been fully brought out thus far. Indeed, they provide us with information about the smallest incidents. While these may be less impressive than some great spiritual feats, nevertheless even in their modesty they shed light on Elizabeth's personality and reflect her style of holiness. What we have, then, is a sharp picture of the education and formation of a royal personality, who was soon imbued with a deeply religious and ascetical spirit. It is a realistic portrayal of a life that divides into two parts: that of the powerful wife of the landgrave of Thuringia, and that of a woman humiliated and deprived of her rights after the loss of her husband, the real reason for her power.<sup>2</sup>

Among the women servants whose testimonies we will discuss here, Guda and Isentrude are especially important because they lived with her for a long time. Conrad of Marburg eventually dismissed them, "because he was afraid we [Guda and Isentrude are speaking] would say something to her about her former glory and this would upset or sadden her." He replaced them with a girl who was "very contemptible" and a "widow of noble rank, deaf and very severe."

Of the two former servants, Isentrude is definitely the most vivid, perceptive and careful observer. Her statements are often confirmed by Guda, but at times she explains and clarifies for us the real personality of Elizabeth. What, then, is Elizabeth's holiness as seen by Isentrude and Guda? And how was it explained when she was still wife of the landgrave of Thuringia, with considerable financial resources at her disposal and undisputed authority?

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studies contained in *Sankt Elisabeth, Fürstin, Dienerin, Heilige*, Marburg 1981, and the contribution by A. Patschovsky, "Zur Ketzerverfolgung von Marburg," in *Deutsches Archiv* 37 (1981), pp. 641-93. On the question of holiness, women's holiness in particular, see the fundamental work by A. Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Age*, Rome 1981.

<sup>2</sup>The question of women's holiness, especially in royal families, is an interesting subject, though not yet sufficiently studied in its many and varied manifestations. In any case, see A. Vauchez, *op.cit.*, *passim* and K. Elm, "Die Stellung der Frau in Ordenswesen, Semireligiosentum und Häresie zur Zeit der heiligen Elisabeth," in *Sankt Elisabeth*, pp. 7-28.

<sup>3</sup>*Life*, pp. 48-49; *LCon*, p. 33.

Let us begin by saying that she showed no unwillingness to marry the landgrave. There is none of that rejection of married life we sometimes find in princesses devoted to a spiritual life and matters of spiritual perfection. In fact, one of the traits we will need to study in order to understand a woman who, we believe, is much more complex than appears at first glance, is her undisputed love for her husband and children. Sometimes in the case of her children this caused problems with certain of Conrad of Marburg's spiritual directives, even though there was no actual conflict.<sup>4</sup>

But let us return to her relationship with her husband. It is clear that she accompanied him on his official journeys, putting up with whatever inconveniences they might encounter. For example, on their way to one of the imperial diets she had to be satisfied with dark bread that was so dry it had to be soaked in water. There was nothing else to eat for a group of people who wished to fast on Saturday.<sup>5</sup> Even more important for understanding the remarkable depth of sentiment and spirituality in this marital relationship is what we are told about her husband, who was worried lest his wife suffer too much on account of her great desire to pray. He would beg her not to overdo her mortifications, and often while she was praying he would take her by the hand and plead with her to return to bed, "concerned as he was about her discomfort."<sup>6</sup>

We also have an episode from daily life that is very significant. Elizabeth used to ask the servants to wake her during the night to pray, even though the landgrave, always concerned about his wife, often pretended to be asleep. The "attendants" and the princess had come to an understanding that they would wake her by tugging on her foot. Now it often happened that they pulled the husband's foot by mistake, and the witness tells us that, having been awakened and knowing the reason why, he bore it patiently.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*Life*, passim, especially p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>*Life*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>*Life*, pp. 21-22: "Blessed Elizabeth would frequently rise to pray at night, while her husband begged her not to injure herself. Sometimes he would take her by the hand, while she was praying, and plead with her to return [to bed], since he was concerned about her discomfort."

<sup>7</sup>*Life*, pp. 21-22: "It happened that Isentrude, wishing to rouse her [Elizabeth], pulled on the master's foot. Having been awakened and knowing her

Another episode is no less humanly delicate in the context of an asceticism that matures in married love. Once awake, she would kneel on a rug and pray for such a long time that she would fall asleep. Reprimanded by her servant for not sleeping with her husband, she replied that since she could not pray always, she would at least mortify herself by withdrawing "from my very dear husband." There is also the expression *surgens a viro* ("rising from [her] man"), which occurs in a context where the landgrave is always referred to as *maritus* ("husband") and where indiscreet expressions of any kind are never used. If we interpret this as referring to the conclusion of the marriage act, we will understand better the disconcerting fact that she would then go into a "separate room" and have herself beaten by her servants. Then, after a prayer, she "returned joyfully to her husband's bed."<sup>8</sup>

What we have here is the personality of a woman and wife, real and alive, for whom married life involves no feelings of guilt, as if it were somehow less valid or good than the state of virginity. Here, then, we must at least downplay the testimony of the Letter of Conrad of Marburg, who heard her complain that she had been married and thus could not die a virgin.<sup>9</sup> His testimony is at least debatable, as is shown from another aspect of her daily life, which typifies Elizabeth's holiness and also shows her desire to please her husband. Isentrude recalls that when Elizabeth's husband was gone she would spend time in deep prayer, vigils and scourging, and would dress as a widow. But when she knew that her husband was about to return, she would dress in the style required by the occasion, saying: "It is not for pride of the flesh but for love of God that I wish to adorn myself properly, indeed elegantly (but modestly), so as not to be an occasion of sin to my

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[Isentrude's] intent, he bore it patiently."

<sup>8</sup>*Life*, p. 22: "Although I cannot pray always, I will do this violence to my flesh: I will withdraw from my very dear husband. Rising from [her] man, she had herself severely beaten by her servants in a separate room. Then, after a prayer, she returned joyfully to her husband's bed."

<sup>9</sup>*LCon*, p. 32: "Two years before she was entrusted to me, while her husband was still alive, I came as her confessor and found her complaining that sometimes she had had marriage relations and could not die in the flower of virginity." We get the impression here that Conrad is intensifying some of Elizabeth's expressions for reasons of hagiography, since the testimony of her servants is so much more valid, explicit and psychologically authentic. This is especially true of Isentrude, who seems to be well informed about Elizabeth's state of mind and is most careful to preserve the characteristics of her spiritual life.

husband, lest perhaps something about me displease him, but that he might love me only in the Lord with such due marital affection that together we might await the reward of eternal life from him who sanctified the law of matrimony."<sup>10</sup> When it comes to a historical understanding of the married state in thirteenth-century life, especially in the case of royalty, I think the importance of these words has not yet been sufficiently appreciated. On the other hand, they let us see in the personality of Elizabeth a woman who is alive and aware, and in whom asceticism did not (and never would) extinguish a real understanding of life in its many aspects.

To be sure, this ascetical need found a way to express itself in meaningful deeds, even while respecting the values and dignity of a woman of rank. Once again it is Isentrude who helps us understand and appreciate. We know that church law required women to participate in the rite of purification after childbirth. This ceremony, in some ways penitential in nature, was becoming (at least for the German nobility) an occasion for pompous display. But while the latter would go to the church "in the majesty of a great company," Elizabeth would go dressed in wool, barefoot, with no solemn escort. Passing through the street from the castle to the church, she carried the baby in her arms, "following the example of the Blessed Virgin, and offering the newborn on the altar with a candle and a lamb." When she returned home, whatever had been used for the ceremony was given to a poor woman.<sup>11</sup> She took part in the other religious ceremonies barefoot and dressed in rough wool, and "for the stational preaching" she always sat among the poorest.<sup>12</sup> Here we see clearly that, even though she was still landgravine, she chose to move and sit among the lowest classes and take part with them in the services. While her husband was still alive, she spun wool with her servants and made clothes with them, which were always supposed to be used for the poor and for the Friars Minor.<sup>13</sup>

Expanding on this part of her testimony, Isentrude insists on this devotion, this need to help the poor, and indeed, anyone who might be in need. This included even the dead, for whom she seems to have had a special respect. In any case, the meaning of this deeply-felt compassion and

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<sup>10</sup>*Life*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>11</sup>*Life*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>12</sup>*Life*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup>*Life*, p. 25.

understanding of human suffering goes far beyond ascetical motives. It seems to come not only from a deep piety, but also from a sensitivity that is among this saint's more important traits. Indeed, she is unique among her peers.<sup>14</sup>

Isentrude insists, as we have said, on her kindness and human compassion. She presents us with episodes from life that are amazingly concrete. Inasmuch as these deal with events small and insignificant in themselves, they shed light on how ladies of noble birth were prepared for life at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Thus we read that one time, wishing to relieve the hunger of a poor man who wanted milk, she tried to milk a cow. But the animal, "behaving disrespectfully," would not let her and instead gave her a good kick—as farmers know from experience. Her compassion toward the poor reached its peak, as Isentrude tells us, in her regular visits to them. She spared nothing: neither expense, nor difficulties traveling, nor feelings of revulsion no matter how unpleasant their wretched condition might be.<sup>15</sup>

No less important (in fact we consider it essential to an understanding of Elizabeth's type of holiness) is the constantly-mentioned fact that she was not content simply to give what was needed; she habitually accompanied her charitable deed with consoling and affectionate words. She never stopped giving aid, not even in 1226 when her husband, the landgrave, left for the general curia in Cremona and Thuringia experienced a period of grave famine. During this time of great want and general hunger, Elizabeth arranged (as far as we can tell from the sources) for a properly "rationed" distribution of the basic necessities through daily distribution of food. For this, she drew from what Isentrude calls special "granges," that is, reserves kept in storehouses for extraordinary circumstances. This fact, we believe, should be seen not only as an act of charity, but also as a special sign of the sovereign power enjoyed by the landgravine during her husband's absence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>We do not mean that Elizabeth was the only noblewoman in the Middle Ages to feel compassion toward the poor. Rather, we must specify the type and form of this compassion. She wished to place herself—spiritually, while her husband was alive, but de facto after she became a widow—in a social state of utter poverty.

<sup>15</sup>*Life*, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup>*Life*, p. 27. This is worth stressing, inasmuch as her use of power to provide for the needs of the poor seems to characterize Elizabeth's uniqueness: it is as landgravine that she is a saint. If, as Karl Bosi has recalled, a "pauper" was one

Isentrude next turns her attention to what Elizabeth did in the castle at Wartburg, the place where we know she spent most of her time. She practiced all the works of mercy, overcoming any problems that arose from conditions in the castle itself. She went wherever she could, always giving "general alms" and personally visiting several times a day those who could not move for some reason. Again, the element of comfort and spiritual support is emphasized: "...consoling them and speaking to them about patience and the salvation of their soul. And she satisfied the desire of each one in all things, in both food and drink, even selling her finery to provide food for them." And Isentrude, stressing that the young landgravine could not tolerate bad air, tells how in the summer she would visit the sick and tenderly care for them.<sup>17</sup>

But perhaps the most important attribute of a royal holiness that we would not hesitate to call exceptional is her maternal sense. In fact, when Isentrude tells us that she nursed all manner of sick people, no matter how repulsive, she stresses the motherly attributes of her behavior. For example, when visiting homes with many children, she treated them with such affection that they regarded her as mother. In our portrait of a holiness that is *sui generis*, we cannot omit from Irmentrude's testimony one detail that is more immediate and telling than any longwinded account. These children were so fond of her that they not only called her mother, but "when she entered the house, they would run to her and gather around her." Even if they were mangy, dirty and disfigured, Elizabeth would pat them on the head, take them in her lap, and buy little toys for them to play with.<sup>18</sup>

She also felt a strong social obligation to work. This she did regularly, and we even know some of her limitations. For example, she knew how to spin wool but not flax. When helping others she paid special attention to those who were unable to work. For those who could do farm work, she provided the tools, and she made it as comfortable as possible for them to do their work. She gave them, for example, the equivalent of today's

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who lacked all means of defense and legal protection, then the "powerful" landgravine helped the "paupers" by giving them what they need, but especially by aiding and protecting them in virtue of her sovereign power.

<sup>17</sup>*Life*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>18</sup>*Life*, pp. 28-29: "Besides these [the sick], in the same house she had many poor children whom she provided for generously, treating them so kindly and sweetly that they all called her mother...."

overalls and covering for their feet so they would not hurt themselves. As mentioned, she would give money to those who were unable to work; or she would give pieces of silk cloth to poor women, cautioning them not to use it for vain purposes, but so they might sell it and then be able to do useful work.<sup>19</sup>

Naturally, a woman as sensitive as she could not help seeing the contrast between her own privileged status and the poverty of so many around her. This explains her awareness and regard for the reality of poverty, which is why (says Isentrude) she tried to live modestly. She often talked about poverty with the women around her and set an example, when she was among friends ["with them"], by wearing clothes made of very plain fabric and by covering her head with a cloth like a woman of the people. It was her intention, she said, to dress in this way should she ever be reduced to poverty. Isentrude deliberately adds that she was "a prophet of her future misfortunes."<sup>20</sup>

To understand Elizabeth's spirituality, both before and after she was under the care of Conrad of Marburg, we must also pay special attention to her attitude toward lepers. This is not the place to recall the medieval abhorrence of lepers, nor need I repeat what I have said elsewhere about Francis of Assisi and his conversion. This was not so much a conversion to the poor as human compassion for outcasts, especially lepers. In this regard we must emphasize Elizabeth's courageous concern for these unfortunate souls who formed part of the larger category of the poor, but whom she wished to honor and help in a special way. Although it was her custom to gather a group of poor people "at the Last Supper" and provide for their needs, on one such occasion (we do not know the year) she gathered a group of lepers and washed their feet, recalling and repeating the example of Jesus. She bandaged their sores, kissing the most hideous. Does this represent a desire on her part to imitate the example of Francis, which she had heard of? The hypothesis—I cannot call it more than that—seems all the more probable in that the witness goes on to say that "afterward," that is, after this event, wherever the landgravine encountered lepers she would sit next to them and comfort them. Most of all, she urged them to practice the virtue of patience, so that their suffering and mortification might merit for them the happiness of heaven. The observation that she came to accept them as

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<sup>19</sup>*Life*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>20</sup>*Life*, p. 31.

healthy persons, helping them every chance she had, belongs in the same context.<sup>21</sup>

The life of St. Elizabeth is divided, chronologically speaking, into two parts: that which is related to her life as a princess, and that which is related to events following her husband's death. This clear division is a help to historians who wish to shed light on the question of Elizabeth's holiness as *royal*—in other words, pertaining to someone who not only belonged to a higher social class, but also to the very limited number of the world's powerful of her time. She belonged to a class which, although not exactly regal, was not all that much lower. This is true even without considering her genealogy. Elizabeth was the daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary and a niece of one of the daughters of the king of France; and she was also linked, through other relatives, to families of the upper nobility. Nor should we forget her dignity as landgravine of Thuringia.

And so, even prescindng from the well-known *Wartburgkrieg* and the poets who allegedly took part in it, the fact that she did live in a courtly setting, where the poetry of the *Minnesänger* was in some way present, becomes significant. Important, too, is a certain feminine dimension that seems to have influenced Elizabeth and her ideal of womanhood and of a woman dedicated to God.<sup>22</sup> Thus her ideal of holiness is a balanced one. On the one hand, she was obliged by her royal dignity to accept certain demands of her state: a rich and fancy wardrobe, care for her person, use of the symbols of power when she had to appear in public beside her husband as his equal in dignity. On the other hand, her private life was marked by the severity and harshness of her penance. Proof of this (recalling what we have already said) is her penitent humility in the purification ceremony after childbirth. In her daily life there was her charitable assistance toward the poor. This was not a matter of occasional help or a sort of condescension, but rather a constant commitment to aid those in need, striving to conform to the general state of humanity and taking as her standard the lowest, even to the point of caring for lepers.

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<sup>21</sup>*Life*, p. 31.

<sup>22</sup>While in no way wishing to play down the religious meaning of Elizabeth's generosity and largess, her *joie de vivre*, her desire to dress in public according to her high state out of love for her husband—we cannot help but note that all this played an important part in the *Weltanschauung* of the poetry of the *Minnesänger*, for whom it is unnecessary to give a bibliography here.

The reality of married life must also be seen in the context of this balance. The testimony of Conrad of Marburg, it is true, tends to present Elizabeth as one who regrets her marriage and the consequent loss of virginity.<sup>23</sup> But we get the impression that Conrad is making a general statement out of something that may have been just a simple, pious remark about a *de facto* state which could, no doubt, be regarded as inferior to consecrated virginity. Conrad tends to present a picture of Elizabeth as a saint. The fact is that as priest and "postulator" of her cause he tends to downplay the fact that she was married. Her servants, on the other hand, who lived with her practically all her life, never present her as a wife who was unhappy with her state, either before or after she was widowed. On the contrary, one of the witnesses tells us plainly that she experienced the married state as having its place in the plan of providence. Those who lived with Elizabeth, then, show a greater ability to understand—more than Conrad, and even more so if we remember the fact that Isentrude was a widow.<sup>24</sup>

How, according to the testimony of her servants, does Elizabeth (prior to her misfortune) experience the desire to live a deeply spiritual life? First of all, in the calm and even-handed acceptance of her social position, which is perceived as political responsibility with regard to her husband's affairs. Recall her concern lest they be a burden to the poor during their journeys, for the latter, as we know, were obliged to provide fodder for the horses. Although the obligation was legally binding, it ended up, in fact, oppressing the very poorest, who were bound to contribute in some way.<sup>25</sup> As far as Elizabeth's personal life was concerned, she resolutely accepted work as part of the human condition. On the one hand, this meant involvement in productive activity, and on the other (since she was a rich and powerful woman), the regular ongoing practice of charity and works of mercy toward her neighbor. To all this was added (it makes us think of

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<sup>23</sup>See n. 9.

<sup>24</sup>*Life*, p. 23, already mentioned earlier with regard to the fact that she wanted to appear before her husband "more festively" adorned, explaining that she wanted to be loved "with such due marital affection that together we might await the reward of eternal life from *him who sanctified the law of matrimony*" (emphasis added). For Elizabeth, then, there was no contradiction between being married and holiness, for matrimony is made holy by God.

<sup>25</sup>See, for example, pp. 18, 19-20.

Elizabeth's own personality traits) a deep feminine sensitivity capable of genuine love for her husband and steadfast devotion to him. No less deep were her maternal feelings toward anyone who might be in need, not only of material aid, but especially of affection, kindness and love. We cannot help but sense the human and spiritual value of her gesture when she took the children of the poor into her arms, as if they were her own, and showed them signs of tenderness.<sup>26</sup>

The result was an uncommon holiness—unique in some aspects, as we have pointed out more than once. Although there were certainly acts of asceticism, the prevailing trait was a happiness that expressed itself in loving and affectionate gestures full of human understanding. Elizabeth's Christianity already seems to have that sweeter and more tender religious feeling characteristic of Franciscan spirituality.<sup>27</sup> In any case, I would say that this spirituality was destined to land in a soul ready to receive it, make it its own and live it intensely. Although there were certainly other royal saints during this time, Elizabeth's holiness shows a rare human balance, in which asceticism and involvement in real life interpenetrate and enrich each other. When Elizabeth lost her husband, she was at the high point of a life that was exceptional, not only by reason of her lofty social position and integral Christian practice, but also in all its human openness. It was a royal holiness that already contained the seeds of certain developments in which Conrad of Marburg would play a part, causing a profound spiritual about-face.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>See n. 18.

<sup>27</sup>Here we are referring to a definition given by Peter John Olivi to describe Franciscan spirituality in general; see R. Manselli, *La «Lectura super Apocalipsim» di Pietro di Giovanni Olivi. Ricerche sull'escatologismo medioevale*, Rome 1955.

<sup>28</sup>In this attempt to understand the personal and distinctive elements of Elizabeth's holiness, we deliberately leave aside the question of her relations with the Franciscan Order and Franciscanism in general. Yet we cannot help but note certain facts: Elizabeth was certainly acquainted with and had information about Francis of Assisi, seeing that she dedicated her hospital to him; she was acquainted with the Friars Minor and had relationships with them, seeing that she contributed to provide cloth for their habits; her first confessor was a Franciscan; she made her promise to live as penitent in a Franciscan church. This means that, generally speaking, she was part of a group of faithful—many of whom were women—who were followers of the spirit of Franciscanism, as was, for example, Agnes of Prague before she entered the monastery. Elizabeth is also interesting because she demonstrates the historical impact of the Franciscan ideal on thirteenth-century society. This observation

We do not mean to give the impression here that we are trying to glorify royal holiness at the expense of the much harder and more severe form imposed by Conrad of Marburg, which is no less important. But we cannot deny that under Conrad of Marburg's spiritual direction the figure of Elizabeth was shaped and modeled by the sometimes merciless severity of her director. Thus it ended up by going back, in some major features, to the rigorism of women's asceticism. But it was less original and aligned, above all, with the traditions and practices of contemporary women's religious life.<sup>29</sup> It will be interesting, then, to see how certain traits of Elizabeth the landgravine remain—sometimes in frank opposition to Conrad—even in Elizabeth the widow and penitent. What we really have are two equally strong personalities, both with their own convictions about religious duties. On most of these they agree, of course, but some of them were accepted by Elizabeth only out of obedience—indeed with demands that in some ways she tenaciously resisted.<sup>30</sup>

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should make it easier for us to understand, from a historical viewpoint, Franciscanism's great success.

<sup>29</sup>We cannot go into a discussion of Conrad of Marburg's personality here. We merely note that some of his harshness and severity are an exacerbation of ascetical traits common at the time, rather than new directions in spirituality. We need only recall what we said earlier about Elizabeth's complaining about her married state and loss of her virginity, whereas those who lived with her for years portray her as a devoted and affectionate wife, eager to please her husband, even though there is an ever-present desire for mortification, penance and asceticism. Here we must stress Elizabeth's religious and spiritual novelty, along with the new concept of holiness being expressed (under Franciscan influence), in which the laity of whatever social class (here we are interested in the nobility) could find a place.

<sup>30</sup>Several times the testimonies in the *Life* portray the contrast between the two personalities, a contrast already noted (significantly) by historians. The difference lies essentially in Conrad's desire to urge Elizabeth to a life of perfection, while at the same time feeling a need to curb her enthusiasm, which would lead her to divest herself of everything, even things needed to live. Elizabeth, on the other hand—and we should not attribute this to old habits of generosity from her days as landgravine—wished to give *without limit*. She felt a clear need to divest herself of everything, and we believe this should be seen as a sign of further Franciscan influence. As a possible indication of this, we get the impression that Elizabeth may have had direct evidence of Francis's personal behavior. Let us not forget that she lived at a time when friars were living in Germany who had been sent from Italy and

The result is a different picture of Elizabeth, who even as a widow remained under the eyes of Guda and Isentrude, who continued to visit her. But we are told this by a third servant, also named Elizabeth, who spent a much shorter time with her than the other two. She did not always understand her mistress's personality, feeling above all a *timor reverentialis* for Conrad. This Elizabeth tends to testify about detached facts rather than connected episodes that would present a unified living personality. What strikes me is the great difference from the two previous testimonies, even though individual episodes are marked by greater depth and richness of detail. But even for this part of Elizabeth's life we have some information from Guda and Isentrude, who remained deeply attached to their landgravine, even though kept at a distance by the autocratic Conrad. He was afraid, as we have said, that these two faithful souls, who had been with her since she was a child, might somehow remind her of her former grandeur, which she must not only put behind her, but for which she must even do penance.

The death of Louis, landgrave of Thuringia, from an epidemic that broke out aboard Frederick II's ships as they were leaving for the crusade, led to grave consequences for the family. Elizabeth was left with three children and with the very serious problems caused by her personal situation, namely, relations with her husband's brother and relatives. At that point they regarded her as a foreigner, forgetting that although she was born in Hungary, her mother was German, and she had been raised in Germany since she was four years old—no doubt as a German. In the face of these problems, we see Elizabeth retain her inner identity as woman, princess and saint. Without going into the details (which are beyond the scope of this research), she found herself some influential protectors, but she distanced herself from them when she realized they were thinking in terms of a second marriage. Although she was only twenty, Elizabeth would not hear of a second marriage, for reasons both emotional and spiritual. Although her marriage with Louis had been happy, she did not for all that wish to renounce the privilege of chastity to which widowhood obliged her. It goes without saying that Conrad's authority was also pushing her in this direction, and on this subject Elizabeth was in complete agreement.<sup>31</sup>

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had known Francis personally. Not to mention names, but we should at least recall those who were acquainted with Francis, such as Caesar of Speyer, or who knew him directly, such as Jordan of Giano and Thomas of Celano.

<sup>31</sup>*Life*, p. 38, from which it appears that Ecbert von Andechs, bishop of

On the other hand, we have the testimony of the servants, especially that which is generally attributed to the above-mentioned Elizabeth, one of those to whom she had been entrusted after her husband's death. One reason she was so badly treated was that she had given all her goods to the poor, including those she had brought with her from Hungary, plus any other precious objects she had left. Thus she was accused of being completely crazy by the powerful men of the time. Paradoxically, the calm and patient resignation with which she accepted these adversities—which she joyfully experienced as spiritually meritorious—were also used against her. Many even accused her of having forgotten about the loss of her husband.<sup>32</sup> And so we see a dramatic, and we might say tragic misunderstanding. On the one hand, it indicates, as far as Elizabeth herself was concerned, a definite continuity of state; while she certainly enjoyed her royal position, she was even happier when, dressed poorly and simply, she could live her private life or perform the most humble and difficult acts of charity toward those in need. On the other hand, she remained serene and happy in her practice of charity, even when she herself had become an object of pity because of the injustices, offenses and violence done against her. These acts of hostility must have been serious enough to reach the ear of the Pope. It was no accident that he entrusted her to Conrad of Marburg as her spiritual guide. Given his great prestige and personal energy, he might somehow be able to protect her from grave and unjust wrongs.

As we said before, Conrad's intervention marked a definite turning point in the spiritual life of Elizabeth. He supported her in her intention to

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Bamberg and Elizabeth's uncle, did his best to convince his niece to remarry; but he met with total resistance, to the point that she said she had decided to slash her nose in order to make herself ugly.

<sup>32</sup>*Life*, p. 45: "She experienced such insults, blasphemy and great contempt from the princes of this world that even her own family would not bother to speak to her or see her. They considered her stupid and insane for having given up the riches of the world, and they insulted and reviled her in many ways." What is noteworthy in this passage is what comes next, for it shows us her sense of joy in her former life as landgravine—a joy she maintained even amid the mortifications, hardships and sufferings that were part of her life as a widow. The *Life* continues (loc. cit.): "She bore all these things so patiently and joyfully that she was scolded for being too happy: she had too soon forgotten her husband's death, and she was happy when she should be sad." I know of no testimony more important than this to express Elizabeth's profound religious sense.

remain chaste for love of God, well aware that foregoing a second marriage would involve suffering and humiliation. For, as we are told by a servant's testimony, "had she decided to marry, she would have found better things in the world, such as glory and riches."<sup>33</sup>

As a result of this, her life took a direction which the servant summarizes in three points. We must now turn our attention to these, noting how they differ from her previous attitudes, and to what extent they agree with Conrad's spiritual directives. The three points are: contempt for all earthly goods, renunciation of all excessive (*immoderatus*) affection for her children, and the courage to ignore offenses committed against her. On these three points we have the testimony of the servant Elizabeth that she carried them out. The saint thanked God for having given her the grace to despise all worldly possessions as "mud or dung." Even more interesting is what she says about her children. She took care of them as she did everyone else, but there is something more that reveals a mother's uncontrollable tenderness, provided we know how to read and understand what she says: "I have commended them to God; let him do with them as he pleases." Trust in God is the real safeguard of a mother's love which, although restrained, is not excluded or refused. Finally, she says she felt delight in the humiliations she had to suffer because she loved nothing else but God alone.<sup>34</sup>

If we compare these expressions with what was said about her royal holiness, we immediately realize that Elizabeth no longer regards herself as a member of the noble class, but a member of the class of the lowly, the poor, the outcasts. In carrying out her plan, the servants show how more than once Conrad wanted to interfere with Elizabeth's personality. First of all, he tested her steadfastness by trying to break her will in everything, imposing the opposite of what she would have wanted. He began by dismissing the people dearest to her, including Isentrude and Guda. The two servants testify (and we have no reason to doubt the truth of their statements) how painful the separation was and how much suffering it caused Elizabeth, even though they try, as we mentioned before, to explain the reasons for it. The same two servants tell how they were replaced by two other "severe women," who, they are quick to say, mistreated her. Not only that, they also spied for Conrad, reporting to him Elizabeth's acts of disobedience, when "she would give something to the poor or ask others to do so in spite of

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<sup>33</sup>*Life*, p. 46.

<sup>34</sup>*Life*, pp. 46-47.

Conrad's prohibition." These prohibitions, they add, caused her anxiety, even to the point of illness after Conrad not only forbade her to give alms, but also to care for the sick and lepers. The two servants admit that there were reasons for this: Conrad was afraid she would be reduced to utter poverty and might catch some contagious disease. Today we would say that he felt bound by his responsibility for a princess who had been entrusted to his care and supervision by the Pope himself. What remains unique, in any case, is the fact that, as a result of the servants' spying and accusations, Elizabeth was scolded, beaten and slapped in the face by Conrad. This she accepted for love of God, "in memory of our Lord's buffeting."<sup>35</sup>

We have already mentioned a series of testimonies by one of the servants, Elizabeth, who tends to recount episodes and who stayed with her until her death, afterward (at least from 1233) becoming custodian of her tomb. The first thing she points out is that the saint wore a type of gray dress, referred to in Italy as *panno degli umiliati*, in other words, made of coarse undyed wool, a sign of the penitential state.<sup>36</sup> Let us stick to this designation, inasmuch as Elizabeth's personal state remained one of obedience and dependence on Conrad of Marburg. She founded neither orders nor monasteries; thus she could maintain an ongoing relationship with society around her, in no way forgoing contact with other people. Conrad could restrict her almsgiving (but Elizabeth must have frequently disobeyed him, if we can believe the detail that the new servants spied on her and accused her); he could forbid her from caring for the sick, at least those who were contagious; but he could not prevent her from setting up a hospital, which she ran herself, even though her servant Elizabeth managed to criticize her bad cooking, saying that she lacked experience and the necessary means. Besides, she would let the food burn in the kettles while she was absorbed in prayer; but she calmly accepted her servants' rebukes. She personally did the necessary washing, changed the beds, and—something so impressive that we find it in several sources—she took care of

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<sup>35</sup>*Life*, pp. 49-51.

<sup>36</sup>*Life*, p. 43, where Isentrude also speaks of her poor dwellings, and p. 51, where the testimony of Elizabeth begins. That the gray dress was also meant to signify a state is seen, among other things, from the fact that the fourth servant, Ermengard, was "a religious who wore a gray habit" (*Life*, p. 61). Note that it says she was a religious but without mentioning a religious order; what we have, then, is a group of women penitents.

the physical needs of a poor child who had only one eye and was suffering from a skin disease, according to the source (it was a case of scabies).<sup>37</sup>

Obviously we cannot go through all the many events in Elizabeth's life of penance, nor is this all that important for our purposes. Taking advantage of every possible opportunity, she continued her aid to the poor and her almsgiving, pointing out, whenever possible, the way to salvation. This is the meaning of the episode where she made a pretty girl named Ildegond (who also testifies, although she is not a servant) cut her beautiful hair to keep her from going to dances and risking her soul. On that occasion, according to the testimony, the saint gave proof of her remarkable psychological insight. The girl, after her understandably negative reaction, became one of Elizabeth's followers and worked with her in the hospital, remaining active there. And her hair, as Elizabeth the servant tells us, was beautiful and well groomed, even after the landgravine's death.<sup>38</sup>

We also have testimony about her understanding and compassion for a woman in labor and for other humanly sad cases. We must recall at least one of these, in order to show how Elizabeth's personality remained whole and strong. A woman, as we said, had given birth, and the saint had made every effort so that she could have the child without having to worry about material concerns. But the woman, unmindful of the help she had received, abandoned the child and ran away. Here Elizabeth shows the full measure of her strength. Entrusting the child to the wife of a knight, she had the judge of the city search for the fugitive mother.<sup>39</sup> When she was found, she told a complicated tale about her marriage. Justice was done, and after she had been punished by taking from her what she had been given before, she was mercifully allowed some aid.

The account of the servant Elizabeth is confirmed by the other servant, Ermengard, who also describes how carefully the saint kept an eye on activities in her hospital, performing even the most humble services. But she also adds information about Elizabeth's uninterrupted relationship with the people around her. This remains a characteristic aspect of her

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<sup>37</sup>*Life*, p. 52 for Elizabeth's bad cooking. See also p. 57 for the poverty in which she lived with the others; p. 61 for her activity in the hospital and the sick child; the episode coincides perfectly with the testimony of the servant Elizabeth.

<sup>38</sup>*Life*, pp. 55-57.

<sup>39</sup>*Life*, pp. 58-60.

personality, from the beginning to the end of her spiritual life, both as wife and widow. For example, she advised people not to forget to have their babies baptized immediately; she urged the sick to confess and to receive communion, even resorting to such extreme measures as actual beating to persuade an old woman who was not fulfilling her religious duties.<sup>40</sup>

At this typical moment in Elizabeth's life, an episode occurs which confirms the change and brings out its true importance. A fact-finding mission was sent by her father, the king of Hungary, who had learned of his daughter's misfortunes and the state of utter poverty in which she was living. The delegation came and found Elizabeth in Marburg spinning wool—a thing never before seen in a king's daughter—but they could not persuade her to return to her country, no matter how much they pointed out to her the poverty in which she was living and the disadvantages of living as though in exile. We do not insist on the tunic because the details we have do not change the essential fact that it was a penitent's habit. Likewise, we do not intend to go into the *vexata quaestio* of Elizabeth's status with regard to contemporary forms of religious life.<sup>41</sup> The essential thing is that, if Elizabeth did not wish to enter a monastery, we must not lose sight of the fact that neither did Conrad wish to make her enter one, even though (as we said) relations between the two were not always easy. Conrad was inclined to curb her boundless generosity, while Elizabeth wanted, in any case, to continue to practice her works of mercy, giving up everything in order to do so.<sup>42</sup>

On this point she was absolutely unyielding, as when she criticized some mendicant friars (apparently they were Franciscans, since it is said that "they had no possessions but lived on daily alms"). Their church contained beautiful gilt images for which they had spent money that could have been used otherwise, since what the images represented ought to be in their hearts.<sup>43</sup> Here we get an unexpected glimpse of Elizabeth's idea of the proper

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<sup>40</sup>*Life*, p. 63.

<sup>41</sup>*Life*, p. 65.

<sup>42</sup>With regard to clothing, it should be noted that Elizabeth and her group wore a gray habit, which the landgravine modified by patching it with cloth that was even worse. But the fact that they dressed in the same manner indicates their common intention, not a religious community.

<sup>43</sup>*Life*, p. 75.

relationship between religious and faithful. It should be deeply spiritual and involve as little recourse as possible to external means of instruction or communication. For Elizabeth, faith was something profoundly interior, expressed in one's life through deeds and continuous good example. Proof of this is the fact, in all the details and episodes of Elizabeth's life (or at least in what we are told by the servants), we never hear mention of pilgrimages to this or that place, devotion to this or that image, or imitation of this or that saint. All this has made and still makes it hard to clearly ascribe to her one or the other form of spirituality. But as we near our conclusion, it seems that some elements can be listed with considerable certainty.

First of all, whether through the influence of her first confessor, a Franciscan, or through direct acquaintance with the Friars Minor, Elizabeth had reliable information about Francis of Assisi. She offered herself to him in a Franciscan church and later built a hospital in his name. She certainly felt his influence, but it is worth emphasizing strongly that her image of him was not yet that of the biographers. In fact, if we wish to characterize Elizabeth's personality as a whole, we must say that, for her time, she is the saint closest to Francis of Assisi. Paradoxically, she is closer to Francis through her life and activity in the world than even Clare of Assisi, who was obliged to live within the walls of a monastery.<sup>44</sup>

The activity of Elizabeth of Hungary, both as landgravine and penitent, was directed toward helping the poor, the afflicted, the abandoned. Naturally, as a married woman and landgravine she could not renounce her status as Francis had done; but it lets us see how much of his example, even at such a great distance, could be translated and brought to the German world. Especially striking is its tone of affection, tenderness and gentleness—feminine, of course, but inspired by the example of Francis as she heard it. It hardly needs to be said that as a widow Elizabeth also passed to another state, that of penitent, which—let us not forget—had been that of Francis for a long time and which was still that of the Franciscans who had come to Germany. Let us not forget that Caesar of Speyer and his companions left before the *Later Rule* was approved; we do not know what were the subsequent repercussions of the *Later Rule* and the bull *Quo elongati*.

On the other hand, we must not forget the strong personality of Elizabeth, which was certainly not inclined to give in on what she regarded

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<sup>44</sup>See n. 30.

as the essential and indispensable elements of her spiritual proposal. Therefore it is worth saying again that Elizabeth must be regarded as one of the persons—men or women, laity or clerics—who felt attracted by the example of the life of Francis of Assisi. Let us not speak, then, of tertiaries or similar forms of life; let us say instead that she was a penitent who experienced the example of Francis as something deeply alive, especially as a widow. I would go further. The points of friction between Conrad and Elizabeth are summed up in her firm decision to be poor to the point of total divestiture. That is what Francis had done, and that is what Conrad of Marburg, given the responsibilities incumbent on him, absolutely wished to prevent.

Using the testimony of the servants, we have tried to glean the essential differences between Elizabeth's various personalities. What emerges is a type of holiness with two manifestations: the first royal, and the second penitent. Here a feminine soul, conscious of herself and her duties as wife, mother and penitent, chooses an example of life and carries it out at all costs, with a logic whose duty, responsibility and weight she felt all at the same time. Her contemporaries understood her well, and if they developed certain traits in her legend, they also felt their human fascination and their great depth. They remained fascinated by them, as historians do today. In the many episodes from daily life told by the servants, we find—in those traits that are most moving and alive—the reality of a woman in whom holiness and femininity converge and are perfectly fused. They create a saint who is like us, but better than us because of her deep and living commitment to charity toward those who are suffering—in deeds toward anyone who needs a helping hand or a word of comfort.