



**Lay Sanctity,
Medieval and Modern**
A Search for Models

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Elizabeth Leseur: A Strangely Forgotten Modern Saint

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One form of the individual apostolate . . . is the witness of an entire lay life which is rooted in faith, hope and charity.

Vatican II: On the Apostolate of the Laity

Since Vatican II began to shift the attention of all members of the church to their universal call to holiness, so eloquently and persuasively argued in *Lumen Gentium*, lay members of the church, both theologians and people in the pews, have been critiquing the process of canonization, reviewing the list of officially recognized saints, and asking “Where are we?” Most recently, the complicated issues related to canonization both as a social process and as a pedagogical tool of the papacy have been skillfully and accessibly described in Kenneth Woodward’s best-seller, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who becomes a Saint, Who Doesn’t, and Why*.

His is only the latest of a series of popular and scholarly treatments of this question since the council.¹ The teaching in *Lumen Gentium* crystallized the suspicions of the majority of the laity over the centuries. If all are called to one and the same holiness, then why the paucity of canonized lay saints? Even more, when the record is analyzed with an eye to who these “lay” saints are, they turn out to be a strange lot. Their lives seem to bear little resemblance to the normal structures and concerns of lay life. The married are scarcely represented at all, and for those who are venerated, the reasons for their canonization have nothing to do with marriage as a path of holiness.²

Although much could be said about the clerical church’s ambivalence about sanctity and sexuality, the issues are perhaps a bit more complex. Lawrence Cunningham aptly describes the long-standing tensions in the tradition on sainthood, in which martyrdom

became the first category of saintliness, followed by the confessor, who as type combined the ascetic with the miraculous. Hence, the role of saint as model or exemplar, someone to be imitated or at least admired as a guide to one's own holiness of life, became obscured by the saint as intercessor, a miracle-worker, a locus of religious power.³ Finally, when the ideal of celibacy came to dominate all models of holiness, sanctity or the life of heroic virtue came to be identified with virginity, thus successfully excluding the majority of Christians as candidates for sainthood.

Nevertheless, the process of saint-making remains rooted in two separate streams: the authenticating process of the magisterium and the recognition by the people of those they choose to imitate, as well as those to whom they pray for intercession. Despite the official process's bias for the miraculous rather than the paradigmatic, the faithful long for the example of saintly people who have confronted similar cultural or personal situations in their lives and demonstrated the action of God's grace working in and through them. Whether canonized or not, people instinctively revere those who offer concrete models of holiness of life that can in some way illumine their own callings and serve as positive encouragement toward their Christian discipleship. It is in this context that I present a noncanonical, saintly married woman whom I believe is a credible model close enough to our own times to offer such hope and encouragement to women today.

A contemporary of Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles de Foucauld, Elizabeth Leseur (1866–1914) was a married woman and mystic who offers a compelling model of saintliness, lived in the context of marriage and a thoroughly secular milieu in France. Having undergone a spiritual conversion in her early thirties, several years after her marriage to Felix, a journalist, diplomat, and unbeliever, she appeared to have taken for granted that she was to live out this deepening life of union with God precisely in her married life and the secular social milieu within which she had heard and heeded this call. Like Thérèse of Lisieux, whose sanctity was already being promoted shortly before Elizabeth's death at the age of forty-eight of generalized cancer, Elizabeth embraced a path of hidden union with God while radiating to those around her a loving presence. Elizabeth's world, unlike that of Thérèse, was not a cloistered world but one peopled primarily by those who were hostile to religion and

incapable of appreciating or sharing the deep spiritual core which alone gave meaning to Elizabeth's life. Her marriage to Felix was a happy and loving one. Her sole complaints were their inability to conceive children and to share faith. Both of these were sources of considerable suffering for Elizabeth. A final source of suffering was her chronic ill-health from the early days of their marriage and the physical pain which resulted from the cancer which caused her death.

Elizabeth kept a spiritual journal from the time of her conversion through her terminal illness. She wrote a series of letters to friends which were brought together in two collections under the titles *Lettres sur la souffrance* and *Lettres aux incroyants*. Her husband, inconsolable in his grief, was converted by her writings and an occasional uncanny sense of her presence after her death. He became a Dominican priest, wrote her biography, and published her writings, which were translated into a number of languages before his death in 1950. Although these writings circulated widely through the thirties in Europe, England, and America, there has been little public mention of Elizabeth in the past thirty years.⁴ Indeed, Elizabeth's biography is poorly known, although the cause for her beatification was first initiated in 1936 and, after a delay due to the war, was reopened in 1990.⁵

As a saint for the laity, she demonstrated the following characteristics: (1) an apostolic strategy in a hostile, secular milieu; (2) a redemptive and transformative use of her physical and emotional suffering; (3) a mature sense of agency and surrender; (4) an active intellectual life; (5) devotion to her husband and family; (6) a lay pattern of devotional and ascetical life; and finally, (7) a relationship of mutuality and support in her friendship with Soeur Gaby.

Apostolic Strategy

Elizabeth, well-to-do by birth and marriage, participated in a social group that was cultured, educated, and largely antireligious. So secularized was the circle around her husband that she herself was gradually led away from the active faith of her childhood, and absented herself from the sacraments and personal prayer for a period of time. After her conversion in her early thirties, which occurred in 1898, she felt a call to minister in a loving and hidden way to those who seemed incapable of faith. She wrote: "I want to

love with a special love those whose birth or religion or ideas separate them from me; it is they whom I want to understand and who need that I should give them a little of what God has given me.”⁶ She realized from experience that argument or discussion was futile and would never be persuasive with the kinds of unbelievers she knew. Understanding that faith was a gift that only God could give, she trusted in the power of prayer and had a profound sense of the communion of saints.⁷ Thus she developed an apostolic strategy of allowing the divine presence to touch others through her without direct conversation. In 1904 she resolved:

To go more and more to souls, approaching them with respect and delicacy, touching them with love. To try always to understand everyone and everything. Not to argue, to work through contact and example; to dissipate prejudice, to show God and make Him felt without speaking of him; to strengthen one’s intelligence, enlarge one’s soul; to love without tiring, in spite of disappointment and indifference. . . . Deep unalterable respect for souls; never to do them violence if they are sensitive, but to open wide one’s soul to show the light in it and the truth that lives there, and let that truth create and transform, without merit of ours but simply by the fact of its presence in us. (*Journal*, p. 78)

And to that end, she developed her personal asceticism. To live such a vision required an almost absolute silence about the interior life that thoroughly animated her. By 1910, she is even more convinced of the need for silence:

To be gentle and smiling outside, keeping for God alone the inner life. In what concerns God: to suffer and offer. In what concerns others: to give myself, to pour out myself. In what concerns me to be silent and forget myself. (*Journal*, p. 33)

She actively embraced the suffering resulting from being isolated from other believers and from hearing her own beliefs ridiculed and mocked. She wrote to Soeur Gaby on December 1, 1911, when she was already quite ill:

Try, my dear sister, to smile at all that He sends: joy or sadness, illness, consolations or heavy aridity of spirit . . . this is how it is for me—these small social duties, totally external, often weigh heavily on a soul desirous of being more with God. There is, deep

within me, an ardent desire for retreat, for a life hidden and silent that the world and even Christians don’t understand. But I have made of this “superficial” life, accepted, and led with apparent good grace . . . a most intimate oblation to God. It is a constant source for me of renunciations and sacrifices; and since this takes place in secret, I hope that these poor offerings will benefit and serve souls well.⁸

Her circle of unbelievers could not guess the cause of her serenity but found themselves mysteriously attracted to her. One man reported sending his wife to Elizabeth for a “bath of serenity,”⁹ so remarkable was her personal presence.

Naturally introverted by temperament, and preferring a life of solitude and seclusion for reading and prayer, Elizabeth chose instead to make herself an out-going, attractive, and joyful hostess. She considered their busy social life of parties, dinners, theater, and other events part of her duty and vocation as Felix’s wife, and fulfilled this role as well as possible. So well did she conceal her intense devotional life that not even Felix ever guessed how costly it was for her to live this way. When he read her journals, he understood for the first time the divine source of her love, peace, and silent endurance of physical and emotional pain, which she offered for his conversion and the conversion of other nonbelievers.

Redemptive Use of Suffering

Elizabeth made a virtue of necessity in her preoccupation with the theme of redemptive suffering. Elizabeth herself claimed her two favorite spiritual writers were Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, both of whom emphasized the role of suffering in the spiritual life. Elizabeth seemed to have profoundly appropriated Catherine’s sense of the redemptive value of suffering on behalf of others.¹⁰ Elizabeth became extremely ill shortly after her marriage and suffered from ill-health the rest of her life. She experienced periodic flare-ups of hepatitis and went through a series of physical crises, including surgery, radiation, and the progression of cancer from 1911 until her death in 1914. Amazingly, few realized how ill she was much of the time, since she received visitors, sometimes traveled with her husband, and maintained an active social life until her final illness. Her letters and journals also reveal that she considered physical suffering to be the least of her suffering. From her

conversion experience until her death, she constantly described as her most severe suffering either the pain of living in a spiritually hostile environment or her efforts to overcome her emotional reactions to this constant "given" of her life.

Several streams of spirituality converged in her to support an absolute conviction that, although she could not personally experience the beneficial effects of her suffering for other people, nonetheless, she could offer her suffering for the conversion and sanctification of herself and others. She had appropriated Catherine of Siena's mysticism of suffering, the theme of reparation carried in the Sacred Heart devotion popular in her times, and the themes from the Gospels which emphasize the life-giving nature of the cross of Jesus transformed by the resurrection. She frequently connected these themes to the communion of saints.

Supported by these convictions about the meaningfulness of suffering, accepted and offered but not necessarily deliberately sought, Elizabeth prayed incessantly for the conversion of her husband, for her mother to experience a spiritual reality beyond her conventional Christianity, and for all unbelievers known and unknown to her. During her final illness, she reported making a pact with God, offering her sufferings for the conversion of her husband, which she expected to effect after her death and to which end she wrote him a "last testament." This conviction about the efficacy of suffering in the communion of saints and the correlative hope in a reunion with the living and the dead in the next life was supported by the spirituality of her times. However, as anyone knows, when one is actually suffering acutely without any signs of fruitfulness apparent in oneself or others, one walks by a blind and often purifying faith in order to maintain hope in the midst of the darkness and the spiritual aridity which often accompany severe illness.

A Mature Sense of Agency and Surrender

Correlative with this active surrender to God's will and oblation of her suffering, Elizabeth Leseur also clearly demonstrated a mature sense of personal agency. She expressed a well-delineated sense of self in her activities and in her relationship to God. This sense of herself as a woman in France in the late nineteenth century was largely shaped by a sense of duty, yet this implied the full development of herself as a person. She wrote in July of 1900 of her vision

for French women, a vision which she knew was not yet widely shared:

Woman, whose immense power of influence is not yet understood by the French, and who does not understand it herself always, should from now on realize her task and consecrate her life to it. To recoil from duty and sacrifice is a dishonor. Now, to bear children is a duty and often a sacrifice; it is a duty to develop unceasingly one's intelligence, to strengthen one's character, to become a creature of thought and will; it is a duty to view life with joy and to face it with energy. Finally it is a duty to be able to understand one's time and not despair of the future. All this a woman can do. As much as man she is a thinking being, acting and loving; she can proudly reclaim her right to duties. (*Journal*, p. 51)

She connected this sense of a realized person to her Christian vocation. Such duties as she outlined in the quotation above must be affected by union with God. She clearly sensed that in order to surrender herself entirely to God and God's will for her, she had a responsibility to cultivate and develop her fullest potential. The following year she reflected on how she had realized these ideals in her own situation:

I have seen clearly what I can do in my own corner of life. Above all, to try and develop in myself the instincts God has given me; to strengthen my will by regular work; to lift up my heart in the acceptance of my perpetual sufferings, and in unflinching tenderness and sympathy for all who come near me. To do the humblest things and thus possess the truth and beauty for which I long. To love and seek duty, however obscure or painful, whether intellectual or material; to miss no opportunity for an act of devotion, especially if it will not be remarked. Never willingly to give up any sacrifice unless it brings me praise or flatters that subtle pride which so quickly prevails. To go always to the little ones, the suffering, those for whom life is hard; but to have no scorn for the gay who live for themselves. (*Journal*, p. 59)

Elizabeth clearly distinguished between the healthy self-development needed by the mystic and the inflation or self-preoccupation that she named a "subtle pride." It was Elizabeth's strength of will that enabled her to fulfill her vocation of prayer and suffering, to be

so lovable and attractive to those who knew her, despite her almost constant physical pain from her various illnesses. Contemporary developmental psychologists would agree that hers was the sense of self that is required for the kind of surrender to God that she demonstrated so clearly in her letters to Soeur Gaby during the last four years of her life.¹¹

She wrote constantly of her abandonment to God's will. As her health became more fragile, she accepted with equanimity her inability to be active. She wrote in 1911: "I desire to live only for God, to generously do all I can in his service, and above all to abandon myself entirely to his will" (*Lettres*, p. 115). Yet she recognized that "what is possible and seems to be the divine will for me is action by means of suffering and prayer" (*Lettres*, p. 116). She developed this theme in an extended metaphor of herself as a boat floating on the waves, guided by God, confident she would reach the safe harbor of union with God and reunion with the beloved dead in the communion of saints.

Her letters are so consistent in her description of the alternation of consolation and desolation, of deep spiritual joy in one part of the self while experiencing pain and distaste in other parts of herself, that one is utterly convinced that this surrender is real and not merely a pious convention. In January 1912 she wrote:

Let us follow Him where His gentle hand leads us: in darkness or light, illumined on Tabor or at the foot of the Cross. . . . There is great sweetness in this total abandonment and detachment which God works in us little by little through every consolation, every personal striving. I am far from having arrived, but if God brings this work to completion in his poor servant, . . . I will be totally abandoned to him. (*Lettres*, pp. 172–73)

Intellectual Life

Although not university educated, Elizabeth exhibited a certain intellectualism which was closely related to her developed sense of self. Prior to her conversion, she disciplined herself to spend time each day in intellectual pursuits. She mastered several languages including Russian, traveled extensively, and prepared for those trips by reading art and history. Not surprisingly, her conversion process included a strong intellectual component.

At the time when she was immersing herself in languages and had lapsed in church attendance, she ran out of reading material and asked her husband for something to read. He gave her Renan's *Life of Christ*, a diatribe hostile to belief, in order to stabilize Elizabeth in her growing agnosticism. Elizabeth, much to Felix's dismay, rejected Renan's faulty argumentation and began studying the Gospels to support her intellectual assessment of Renan. For the rest of her life, Elizabeth read and meditated on the New Testament; this shaped her spirituality as much as the standard devotional piety of the times. After the Gospels, she undertook a reading program which included a number of serious writers such as Thomas Aquinas and Jerome, as well as the classical mystical literature. Like so many women before her, who found themselves in an atmosphere of religious bigotry, she reinforced herself by solid study so that she could adequately defend her position as well as nurture her faith and spiritual development.

After her conversion, she did not limit herself solely to theological material. Feeling that philosophical study was appropriate for women and deploring its neglect, she began to study philosophy, which she valued for the way it helped to order and focus her mind:

I set myself to study philosophy, and it interests me greatly. It throws light on many things and puts the mind in order. I cannot understand why it is not made the crown of feminine education. What a woman so often lacks is true judgment, the habit of reasoning, the steady, individual working of the mind. Philosophy could give her all that, and strip from her so many prejudices and narrow ideas which she transmits religiously to her sons, to the great detriment of our country. (*Journal*, p. 44)

Clear thinking remained an important aspect of Elizabeth's approach to life.

Marriage and Family

One of the most appealing characteristics of Elizabeth as a saint for the laity is how well she integrated her family life and spirituality. Tutored in the Salesian spiritual tradition, she fully accepted Francis De Sales' teaching that a life of devotion was fully compatible with marriage.¹² Since her conversion occurred several years after her marriage, she assumed that this call to a deeper, more intimate

relationship with God was to be lived as Felix's wife. Despite the pain she increasingly suffered from Felix's inability to share faith with her as they shared everything else, every reference to her husband suggests a loving and mutually respectful relationship. She felt herself to be deeply loved by Felix, supported by his presence, companionship, and expressions of affection. For instance, she wrote: "Some joyful days, because of a present from Felix, and more because of the words that accompanied it—words so full of love . . . I do not deserve this, but I rejoice in it" (*Journal*, p. 55). She felt comforted in her grief at her sister's death from tuberculosis by Felix's love, and they enjoyed one another's company when they traveled together, visited friends, and summered in the countryside with Elizabeth's family. Despite their childlessness, Elizabeth consistently described a healthy and mutually loving marital relationship. In her letters, she remarked frequently on how busy her husband was, with no trace of resentment on her part. From his side, Felix was devoted to her and remained constant in his love and affection for her throughout her multiple illnesses. The devastation he experienced at her death evidenced the depth of his love and his emotional reliance on her.

She accepted the gender expectations of her role, managing the large household and supervising the servants, planning the necessary round of dinner parties, and responding to the charitable needs of the poor. She involved herself with her extended family, her mother, her sisters and their children. The children were welcome for long periods of time at her mother's country home in Switzerland, where they enjoyed being together. Elizabeth took an active role in encouraging the faith life of her niece and nephew by preparing them for first communion and writing spiritual treatises for both of them on this occasion.¹³

Pattern of Devotional Life and Ascetical Practices

Elizabeth developed a flexible rule of life that organized her devotional life and ascetical practices, which she outlined in the part of her journal titled "Book of Resolutions," which spanned the years 1906–12. Although she gave her life a specific structure, she adopted the two principles of flexibility and charity as determinative of her practice. Her devotional life was never to interfere with either the comfort or needs of those she loved. She rigorously ad-

hered to her program when she was alone and did not need to consider the rest of the household, and she was entirely flexible where others were concerned.¹⁴ There was a daily pattern of morning and evening prayer, including meditation. She went to confession and communion every two weeks. She desired to communicate more often, if she could do so "without troubling or displeasing anyone" (*Journal*, p. 112). Monthly, she gave one day to a spiritual retreat. For her this meant as much solitude as possible, more time in meditation, an examination of conscience, reflection on her life, and preparation for death. Annually, she tried to make a few days of retreat. Her letters indicate that by 1911, she felt herself fortunate to communicate three times a week.

She also developed a clear approach to her outer life. She considered family and social responsibilities first. She lovingly placed Felix at the head of the list. She carefully monitored what she said to him about matters of faith, and by 1906 she resolved to say as little as possible. Since she was relatively healthy at this time, she adopted work she felt she could do, was actively involved with the poor, and sought to treat her servants as warmly as possible without crossing the boundary of familiarity. Finally, she developed an asceticism based on silence, self-giving, and austerity, which she defined for herself.

Silence meant not troubling others with her illness, pain, or even graces. She thus actively sought to conceal her suffering and to refrain from self-absorption in her suffering. She spoke about her interior experience only if she judged it to be beneficial for someone seeking spiritual guidance from her. By self-giving she meant a radiant and active charity—real love expressed in every relationship and activity in her life. And for personal austerity, she avoided anything harmful to herself physically.

I must . . . watch and improve my health since it may be an instrument in the service of God and of souls. But in this illness . . . the precautions I am obliged to take, the discomforts it brings and the privations it imposes, there is plentiful source of mortification. (*Journal*, p. 116)

Anything else she chose for the sake of personal austerity would generally have been of actual benefit for someone else. As mentioned earlier, she continually tried to be gracious, lively, and good

company in social situations and chose to conceal and embrace the pain caused by religious hostility on many of these occasions. There was in her ascetical choices a careful ordering of all of them to charity. If they did not serve love or increase her intimacy with God, she did not embrace them.

Spiritual Friendship with Soeur Gaby

Finally, Elizabeth revealed her side of a profound spiritual friendship with Soeur Gaby, a nun at l'Hotel-Dieu in Beaune, in the correspondence later titled *Lettres sur la souffrance*. This friendship was primarily epistolary, in letters written from 1911 until shortly before Elizabeth's death in 1914. The two friends managed to visit in person once or twice a year, but the letters indicate a profound spiritual communion. For Elizabeth, this was her first and only soul-friend. She poured out her heart to Soeur Gaby, who did the same. When Elizabeth lifted her veil of silence, she offered a more intimate chronicle of her interior life, her spiritual theology, and her consummate tact.

Elizabeth wrote as often as every ten days or as infrequently as once a month. It is clear that within these letters, Elizabeth felt understood. Felix had met this sister and liked her. He appeared to have approved of this friendship, helped them visit one another, and acquired Elizabeth's letters after her death.

The letters suggest a deep spiritual and affective bond and an extraordinary respect for their different vocations. Elizabeth frequently wished she could have been more active, as her friend was, in caring for the poor, yet she always affirmed her own vocation to "pray and to suffer," recognizing this as God's will for her. Elizabeth also described her increasing abandonment to God, a growing union, yet without glossing over the periods of aridity, darkness, and suffering one would expect from someone as ill as she was. When Soeur Gaby was unable to write because of a problem with her eyes, Elizabeth felt the lack of the emotional support she had experienced from her friend's letters. Occasionally, there was a letter of spiritual direction when Soeur Gaby asked Elizabeth's advice on a particular issue. To such invitations, Elizabeth was discerning and clear in her assessment of the issues, yet she couched such advice as if she were taking it herself. There was such mutual understanding and respect that neither thought it unusual that a nun should have

sought such advice from a married woman. And indeed, Elizabeth helped her friend resolve her conflicts.

This friendship with Soeur Gaby, enjoyed only during the last three years of Elizabeth's life, finally overcame the spiritual isolation she experienced from her conversion. It was in this relationship that Elizabeth experienced the communion of saints on earth. She was completely convinced that Soeur Gaby, Felix, and herself would all be reunited someday in the heart of their Divine Master. The two women prayed for one another, prayed for one another's intentions, affectively participated in one another's lives, and supported one another on their distinct yet common journeys. Long before other laywomen and nuns began to overcome the barriers to friendship and mutuality, Elizabeth and Soeur Gaby had enjoyed such freedom and support.

Elizabeth's life and teachings offer considerable guidance as a saint for the laity. When Elizabeth's journal, "lost to the world for decades," was reissued in 1996 under the title *My Spirit Rejoices: The Diary of a Christian Soul in an Age of Unbelief*, its publisher called attention to Elizabeth's virtues, her apostolate of good example, her holy simplicity, her gracious silence, and her "incredible power of prayer." The catalogue went on to describe "the pages of her diary" as charting "a path to holiness for all who find themselves among persons indifferent or hostile to the faith."¹⁵ Surely, that applies in particular to the laity, whose vocation entails living "in the world" and working "for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven."¹⁶

The reopening of Elizabeth's cause for beatification in 1990 offers hope that she will be recognized officially by the church.¹⁷ Whether or not she is canonized as a saint, however, we can learn a great deal from a remarkable and holy woman like Elizabeth who offers a credible model of married sanctity and of spiritual transformation through the suffering occasioned by serious illness and an uncongenial social milieu.