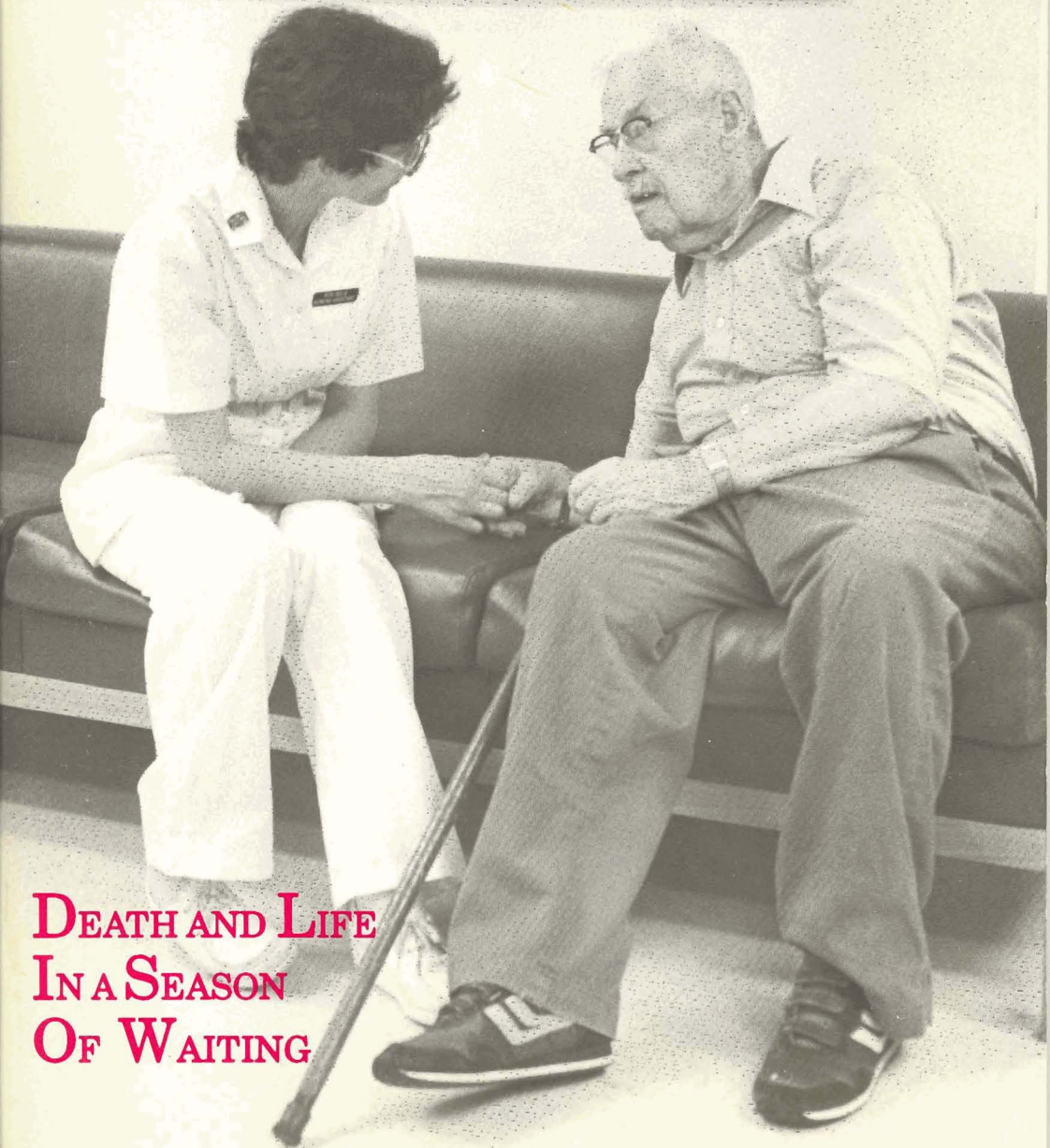


# spiritual life

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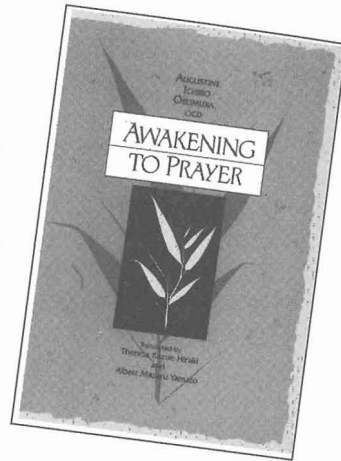


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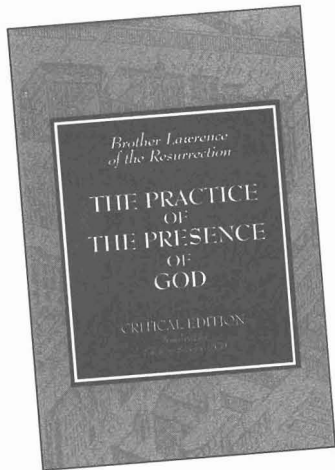


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*Janet Ruffing*

## Physical Illness: A Mystically Transformative Element in the Life of Elizabeth Leseur

**D**ESPITE REMARKABLE DEVELOPMENTS in medicine, the intransigent fact remains that people today continue to face painful terminal illnesses such as AIDS and cancer, or lives of chronic pain from other unrelievable causes. Historically, illness has been a feature of female more than male spirituality. Illness could serve as an occasion for a woman to demonstrate saintliness. Illness could also figure as a call to change one's life-style, as a feature of abnormal or uncontrollable behavior when it is associated with ecstasy, or as a manifestation of conflict over accepting mystical experience or writing about it.<sup>1</sup>

For women mystics, suffering has had mystically transformative possibilities, such as enlarging their compassion for others and uniting their suffering to the redemptive suffering of Christ. Finally, suffering has been the final wedge of pain that helped reorganize the mystic's self around a transcendent center of meaning rather than around her own self-interest.<sup>2</sup>

I intend to describe how one woman who suffered from chronic ill-health developed non-abusive, ascetical strategies toward her suffering, and how it contributed to her mystical transformation.

Elizabeth Leseur, 1866–1914, a French mystic, underwent a religious conversion when she was thirty-two and already married to the

diplomat and doctor, Felix Leseur. Although as a couple they were affectionate and devoted to one another, the agnostic Felix could not understand Elizabeth's attraction to spirituality. Their inability to share the faith that gave meaning and ultimate significance to Elizabeth's life was, by her account, her most acute and persistent form of suffering. Felix's inability to understand her spiritual orientation was further intensified by the isolation she experienced as an ardent believer in the midst of an unbelieving social milieu of the anti-clericals and modernists who comprised the majority of their friends: politicians, journalists, doctors, or university professors. At the time of her conversion, Elizabeth already suffered from chronic ill-health. She accepted the emotional suffering of isolation and hostility to her beliefs, together with her physical pain, as the sine qua non of her spiritual practice.

### Elizabeth Leseur's Medical History


Let me summarize Elizabeth's medical history. She had had hepatitis as a child, and it recurred throughout her life with attacks of varying severity. In 1889, shortly after she was married, she had an abdominal abscess from which she never completely recovered. In 1907 her health deteriorated to the extent that she was forced to lead a primarily sedentary life, receiving visitors and directing her household from a chaise lounge. In 1911 she had surgery and radiation for a malignant tumor, recovered, and then was bedridden by July of 1913. She died from generalized cancer in May of 1914.

Despite such poor health, she regularly traveled with her husband, directed their household and the regular entertaining that was expected of her, and was involved with her extended family. Even when she was so ill that she could only sit up on her chaise lounge, she received a large number of visitors who never detected how ill she was. Felix was so amazed at her equanimity and the endurance of her physical suffering that after the flare-up of her hepatitis in 1907, he stopped being negative about her spiritual practices and began to accompany her to Mass. He even took her to Lourdes in June of 1912 because he wanted to make it easier for her to do that from which she received obvious support.

### Her General Approach to Her Spiritual Life

Before analyzing Elizabeth's use of her physical suffering, I want to describe her general approach to her religious life. Although she experienced chronic ill-health, Elizabeth did not act like an invalid. In between crises of illness, she enjoyed the full range of activity in which

she could share. She remained responsive to beauty, to nature, to her family circle, and to a wide circle of relationships. She avoided becoming self-absorbed or organizing life around her physical comfort.

*She avoided  
becoming  
self-absorbed* 

Elizabeth exhibited a strong, intellectual component in her spirituality. She constantly read serious writers and classical mystics from whom she derived the principles upon which she based her life. The organizing principles of her life were love of God and love of neighbor. Although Elizabeth's sources emphasized mortification and penance, she focused all of her self-chosen penance on contradicting her natural inclination toward solitude and introversion, and instead joyfully extended herself in genuine love to her active social circle. She adopted interior strategies to resist self-absorption in her physical and psychological pain. She renounced talking about her illnesses and their effect while at the same time accepting as a penance the various ways she was required to guard her health:

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 that I am afflicted with, the precautions I am obliged to take, the discomforts it brings and the privations it imposes, there is a plentiful source of mortification.... To speak as little as possible of myself, and without affectation. Always to take part in others' joy or sadness.... In days of illness and physical prostration everything must be done with especial care, and outside sensation must be kept in abeyance by great recollectedness. Not to allow myself the slightest movement of impatience, and to fight unceasingly the temptation to irritability.... To ask Jesus that there may show in me a little of the sweetness and gentleness of His heart. To forget myself for all. To renew every day from our Savior my too-soon-exhausted store of tenderness, strength and serenity.<sup>3</sup>

In this approach to mortification, she followed Francis de Sales who recommended moderation and internal, hidden strategies instead of external practices.<sup>4</sup> With uncommon clarity, charity was the organizing principle of her asceticism. She did everything she could to embody a serene, peaceful love in the midst of every situation. From the beginning, she organized her spiritual life around a disciplined pattern of prayer, meditation, reading, sacramental practice, and writing. She adopted the time-honored positive practices that fostered growing intimacy with God and increasing self-knowledge. When she was able, she also worked on charitable projects for poor families and she funded other charitable activities. She was concerned about the "poor" or the "least," but her deteriorating health restricted her ability to respond to this concern after 1907.

Since Felix was among those without faith, she focused her sense of mission on a ministry to him and to the unbelievers she knew so well, expressing a serene, joyful, peaceful love as a way of bringing God to them. This she did not by discourse, but by example and by a quality of personal presence that pointed beyond herself to the Presence sustaining her. She prayed and offered her suffering for Felix's conversion and for faith for all the others. This focus for mission came as a call to her: "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, who need that I should give them a little of what God has given me" (p. 43). In the passage that follows she describes her belief:

More than others I love these beings whom divine knowledge does not enlighten, or rather whom it enlightens in a manner unknown to us with our restricted minds. There is a veil between such souls and God, through which only a few rays of love and beauty may pass. Only God, with a divine gesture, may throw aside this veil,—when the true life of these souls shall begin. And I, who am of so little worth, yet believe in them because I believe in that divine mysterious law which we call the Communion of Saints. I know that no cry, no desire, no call proceeding from the depths of our soul is lost, but all go to God and through Him to show who moved us to pray. I know that only God performs the intimate transformation of a soul and that we can but point out to Him those we love, saying: "Lord make them live." (p.53)

She embraced the asceticism entailed in being immersed in an unbelieving milieu that left her isolated and alone.

How can we account for the experience Felix and others had of Elizabeth that is so contrary to the negative effects of suffering as described by Dorothee Soelle?

Suffering produces fruits like curses, imprecations, and prayers for vengeance more readily than reform and insight. Suffering causes people to experience helplessness and fear; indeed intense pain cripples all power to resist and frequently leads to despair.<sup>5</sup>

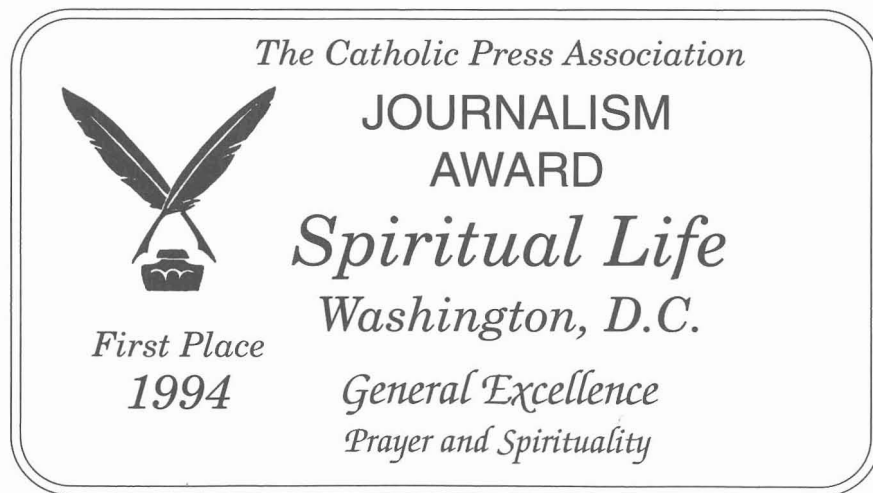
Elizabeth transformed her suffering into pure love. She was enabled to do this through the experience of union with Jesus in her suffering, her belief in the redemptive value of her suffering, her trust and confidence in God's will, her persistence in resisting the negative effects of her pain on her relationship with others, and her ability to allow her suffering to tutor her in surrender and love for God. As her mystical transformation progressed, so too, did her capacity to love.

The experience of suffering is distinctively different when it constitutes the mystical way. There are typically three stages. Suffering is embraced as a way of dying to selfishness, of making the person free and

open. This opens the person to receptiveness to God. When God is encountered in the pain, the mystic radiates a peace and serenity that is not a result of lack of feeling, but rather a connection to a deeper level of reality than the pain level. This connection results in a capacity for love that is nearly invulnerable because "it has become more independent of the fulfillment that comes from the outside; it is more unconditional."<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth Leseur's writings indicate that these three stages are simultaneous. She recognized that God was with her, bringing her to a oneness with God that she described as abandonment to his will. To the very end of her writings, she continued to monitor her reactions to pain. She exhibited tremendous force of will and vigilance to maintain her freedom to choose her response. Yet those who knew her experienced incredible serenity, peace, and valor. Perhaps this discrepancy between the subject's description of undergoing suffering and an abstract schema is a key to understanding the process.

There is something that is simultaneous about experiences of mystical consolation and the temptation to self-absorption. She experienced meaningfulness in the suffering, the conviction of union with Jesus regardless of the passing affective states caused by the illness itself, an increase in love of God and love of others, yet she also resisted narrowing her world. Under the stress of chronic pain, disciplined ascetical choices remain essential.<sup>7</sup> The constancy of such physical pain differentiates it from the more periodic mystical suffering in which ascetic vigilance seems to relax at later stages of mystic development. For Elizabeth, it was essential to focus on the love at the heart of reality, to sense or believe in the presence of God in her, to believe in the efficacy



for others of this endurance, to be receptive to God, and to surrender to God in and through the suffering.

### Resistance to Negative Effects of Pain

Elizabeth had already learned to manage her pain before her religious conversion. Her husband did not describe a marked difference in his wife's ability to handle pain after her conversion. She had already developed methods of response focused on self-discipline instead of on relationship with God. She regularly studied languages, history, art, and philosophy. She had learned to divert attention from her physical condition and to appreciate art, culture, and natural beauty through travel.

After her conversion, her pain intensified because of her psychological isolation. She responded to the pain of hearing her beliefs ridiculed by offering the pain for the good of those causing it and by betraying no irritation toward them socially. Thus she extended her pain control to the social world as well as to the interior world. After her conversion, her suffering, both psychological and physical, took on a transcendent meaning for her. It became a means of growth toward self-transcendence and a means to help others. In November of 1903, seven months after her "new life" began, she described her suffering and her response to it:

More than two painful months in the dejection of almost continual physical suffering, and with terrible anxiety on Juliette's account; the miserable belief that my illness will last as long as I do, always impeding my life. Complete resignation, but without joy or any inner consolation. The resolve to use my misfortunes for the good of souls. To fill my life with prayer, work and love. To maintain calm through everything. To love more than ever those who are the dear companions of my life. (*Wife's Story*, p. 76)

Her struggle with self-control is evident. In July, 1904, she wrote: "Painful time of illness. Always the same uncertain future. Yesterday, weakness and tears, which I regret. Today the resolution to give way no more, with God's help; to become joyful again; to subdue the body through the soul, which belongs more than ever to God, in suffering more than in joy" (p. 81). In the same entry she described joy in response to a gift from her husband and the affection he expressed with it. Despite receiving this affectionate support, she resolved "never to give way to the indolence of mind and body that come with a poorer state of health; to keep up my energy and force myself to be neither sad nor discouraged" (p. 82). Such entries were consistent to the end of her life. She

also expressed a growing sense of oneness with Christ and a conviction that suffering was a way of traveling to God. In October 1912 she shows the same vigilance over her reactions:

Spoke too much of myself; too much self-absorption, in which I caused others to share. Renewed resolution of silence, mortification.... Complete abandonment and offering of myself to God. More amiability and friendliness with my neighbor.... (p. 174)

### Belief in the Redemptive Value of Her Suffering

Elizabeth drew on several strands of the spiritual tradition to support her conviction about the meaningfulness of her suffering for her own good and for the good of others. These included: belief in the communion of saints; the themes of reparation and love in devotion to the Sacred Heart; Catherine of Siena's mysticism of suffering; and suffering as a means toward union with God in the theme of abandonment characteristic of post-reformation French spirituality. Once Elizabeth experienced the undeniable presence of God, a belief in the communion of saints emerged as a significant theme in her writings. This doctrine consoled her in several ways. She recognized that one person living in union with God effected positive graces for others, both living and dead, regardless of whether or not she experienced it. This conviction resulted in a fundamental attitude of hope. Secondly, she expected to experience complete union, not only with God, but with her "beloved companions" in the next life. Thus she was motivated by the hope that although Felix could not participate in her love for God in this life, there would come a time when their complete union would be realized at the spiritual as well as the psychological level. This belief also offered her some spiritual companionship in her social isolation.

When her soul-friend, Soeur Gaby, entered her life in 1911, Elizabeth was deeply sustained by their oneness in spiritual things. Sharing her thoughts and feelings with Soeur Gaby, Elizabeth was often consoled by their oneness in sacramental communion and in their being one heart and soul in God:

Our paths are not fundamentally all that different since the same Friend accompanies us, the same light guides us, and we perceive the same destination, where we will find ourselves in the tenderness and common joy where we will together adore Him whom we try together to love well and serve here below.<sup>8</sup>

Devotion to the Sacred Heart was very popular in Elizabeth's time. She responded to two themes in the devotion. She offered her considerable physical and psychological pain in reparation to the Sacred Heart

for the conversion of unbelievers, and she received Jesus' love for humanity that was the deeper core of this devotion. Experiencing God's love for her, she wanted others to share in that love. Elizabeth's appropriation of this popular devotion was balanced by a strong liturgical and scriptural spirituality. She read and meditated on the Gospels daily, which deeply influenced her view of Jesus. Her sense of the Sacred Heart devotion was connected to the entire Paschal Mystery—Jesus' overcoming suffering through the Resurrection. Hence, for her, the communion of saints meant sharing in the resurrected life.

Elizabeth frequently referred to Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila as important models and guides for her spiritual life. She seemed to have thoroughly absorbed their mystical teachings on suffering as an integral aspect of the mystical path. In the *Dialogues*, Catherine of Siena saw her suffering as service. Redemptive suffering was simultaneously Christ's and hers. Sharing in this suffering could redeem others as well as oneself.<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth was thus convinced that her vocation had become one of prayer and suffering for the good of others when her illness reduced her to inactivity.

### Union with Jesus in Her Suffering and Suffering as a Tutor

Elizabeth understood that her suffering had the potential of increasing her union with Jesus, sharing in his redemptive work, and that suffering could tutor her in surrender and abandonment to the divine will.<sup>10</sup> Her physical pain was the material at hand for total transformation. After several severe physical crises, Elizabeth demonstrated how even severe pain had not shaken her confidence. She was convinced that God would fulfill all of her requests, especially Felix's conversion for which she had made a pact in March 1911, to offer her suffering for him. She described "terrible migraines of such violence and unaccustomed duration that it was impossible to keep any food down." The doctor assured her that this phase would end in three months to a year. She wrote to Soeur Gaby: "I have suffering in perspective again; ask God to sustain me, and if it is his will, to shorten this trial; I am very weak physically and would like to be joyful again."<sup>11</sup>

Elizabeth did not arrive at such solid conviction and harmony with God's will, which brought with it so much suffering, without periodic experiences of union with Jesus. These she described primarily in her letters to Soeur Gaby, where her writing is more lyrical than her journal entries. The letters reveal many moments of feeling the divine presence as well as many times without any sensible consolation. Elizabeth took the moments of transparency as evidence of a growing union with

Jesus that continued even when she was too ill or emotionally exhausted to feel it. Her conviction seemed only to have deepened her sense of the efficacy of her suffering to bring her closer to God. In a letter written in 1911, she described a moment of such transparency:

In times when the Divine Master draws near, when he allows us to see through the veil which separates us from Him a little, is it not true, that in some weak fashion, and alas fleetingly, but nonetheless, very real, we have a vision of eternity?<sup>12</sup>

A few weeks later, she wrote she was full of spiritual aridity:

Everything seems colorless, consolations have disappeared, and in the views of some, we are then in the Divine light which veils itself in order to humiliate us. Perhaps it is this consoling thought in these hours of stripping which opens us more for God because we offer Him, with effort, the ennui which we formerly gave with a joyful heart. Since he himself shared in the most intimate distress and interior abandonment, are we not able from a distance, to unite ourselves to his agony, to his cross, and accept these trials by which he guides us to love and self-forgetfulness with a firm heart if not a joyful one?<sup>13</sup>

Despite lack of consolation, she expressed a love and a trust that was not dependent on passing moods. In the darkness of persistent faith she was met by a profound peace and trustworthy love.

## Conclusion

Elizabeth's lifelong struggle to overcome the pain and disability of her multiple illnesses as well as the spiritual suffering caused by her religiously hostile environment was the primary transformative element in her mystical quest. She accepted her pain in such a way that it led her into deeper intimacy with God by tutoring her in her limitations and by opening her to God. In opening to God, she also opened herself in outgoing love to her immediate family and her entire social milieu. She shifted her preoccupation from her pain to the needs and spiritual good of others. She adopted a series of spiritual exercises that helped her to sustain a vision endowing her suffering with meaning and to resist the natural tendency to become self-absorbed in her pain.

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## NOTES

1. See Elizabeth Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), pp. 37-44, and Caroline W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) for the role of physical suffering in the lives of the women she discusses.
2. In some theological frames of reference the value of physical suffering was so overestimated that some women ruined their health through their self-chosen austerities. However, such self-abuse usually took place during the period of initial conversion, in the ascetic rather than during the mystic phase itself. Many women later repudiated these austerities and refused to recommend their imitation to people they counseled. Catherine of Siena is a notable example of espousing moderation for others in her mature phase.
3. *A Wife's Story: The Journal of Elizabeth Leseur*, translation of *Journal et pensées pour chaque jour*, by V.M. (New York: Benziger, 1919), p. 118.
4. See Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 184-189.
5. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 21.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 127. (I am following Soelle's stages of the mystic way here.)
7. Elizabeth's strategies for avoiding "pain" behavior as her primary mode of interacting with her family and social world have been rediscovered in contemporary pain

- control. See for example, "A Way of Life for Controlling Pain," in Wayne and Charles Oates, *People in Pain: Guidelines for Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), pp. 103-119.
8. *Lettres sur la souffrance* (Paris: Gigord, 1924), p. 180. (Translation mine.)
  9. See Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 175-180 for her analysis of illness and suffering in Catherine of Siena.
  10. For a description of "abandonment" in French spirituality, see s.v. "abandon" in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon Wakefield (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), pp. 1-2, or s.v. "l'abandon" in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, tome 1, cols. 1-49. This was the language Elizabeth inherited for both her understanding of divine providence and her response to God's will. At times her language does suggest that God is purposefully "humiliating" her when she experiences her human weaknesses, but she usually writes with a conviction that God is basically loving rather than one who tortures or who extracts love at the price of pain. At times she does personalize her pain as sourced in God. More frequently, one glimpses an unshakeable conviction in God's love for her, for us, and an invitation to participate in that which for her entailed physical suffering.
  11. *Lettres sur la souffrance*, p. 336.
  12. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167.
  13. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

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