

# Elizabeth of Hungary: Social Justice, Compassion, and the Franciscan Calling

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## Introduction

When she was three years old Elizabeth's father, King Andreas II, handed her over to the Count of Thuringia as a political gesture. A child in a strange land! Throughout the rest of her life, she pushed boundaries and challenged the status quo that built walls between people rather than bridges. After her marriage at age 14, the young princess followed the longing of her heart rather than the norms of the ruling class—offending many among the aristocrats. As Countess, she often left the castle to seek out the poorest and most marginalized of her subjects. As a young widow, she made herself the barefooted sister of the poorest.

Most of us are not affluent; we don't belong to a privileged class. What can we learn from our patroness that can help us understand our Franciscan vocation in today's society?

## A child abandoned in a foreign country: migrants

So many people today must leave the culture that nurtured them to find safety, work, or dignified living conditions in Canada. As a new-comer, Elizabeth was open to adapting to her new environment, even though many of the ruling family resented this "foreigner." In adversity, after her husband's death, she was so deeply connected with the German people, that she was seen as a mother, a sister, and a friend to many.

There are many foreigners in our midst today. Many willing immigrants and unwilling refugees, forced to leave their homeland because of war, poverty, or persecution. Each one has the same potential as Elizabeth to make a difference in our country. They need us to recognize not only their needs, but also their strengths. But there seems to be a growing resentment in many places toward the new-comers.

How can we counter the mistrust that keeps the migrant outside the mainstream of our society? How can we—as individuals and fraternities—create space and opportunity for those who are coming to Canada, who do not speak French or English, who cannot translate their skills and work experience into our trades and professions, who are unfamiliar with the culture and customs of their new land?

As Franciscans, we have the spiritual and moral resources to welcome as brothers and sisters those many newcomers who arrive uncertain of what to expect and too often experience prejudice and rejection here. Judgmental attitudes and fear of the unknown have no place in the hearts of the followers of St. Francis and of St. Elizabeth of Hungary.

## The logic of mercy

Pope Francis often speaks of the logic of mercy as an approach to life that rises far above the endless "yes, but" arguments that prevent us from doing the good that is within our reach. St. Elizabeth, an aristocrat by birth, was expected to follow the logic of the socially, economically, and politically privileged—in how she dressed, how she spoke, and who she associated with. But she was not afraid to go against the values of the ruling class when her conscience told her otherwise. There is a story that during a liturgy in the castle, the young Elizabeth placed her crown on the head of Christ on the crucifix. When her foster mother, Sophia of Bavaria, became

angry over this gesture, Elizabeth responded that she could not look at the crown of thorns and still wear a crown of precious stones in her own hair. She was an unconventional noble!

Bombarded today with an endless array of conflicting “oughts,” we can remind ourselves that the first and most trustworthy “ought” is found in what Francis called “life according to the Gospel.” The logic of mercy makes more sense to Christians than the logic of the stock market or that of social bias. We don’t want to let the cry of the poor be drowned out by the shouts of the intolerant. Homeless people—people who have left their homeland or Canadians without a place to live-- have a dignity that comes from God. Rough edges and unkempt looks do not diminish God’s love for them. As Franciscans how do we make the “logic of mercy” direct our lives, like it did Elizabeth’s?

### **A determined queen**

When Elizabeth was nine, the old count died and his son, Count Ludwig, betrothed her. Five years later they married. Although marriages in those days served political and economic purposes, she was happy in this new role and over the next six years brought three children into the world—Herman, Sophie, and Gertrude. Elizabeth’s openness brought love and joy to her marriage and compassion to the palace.

This love went beyond the castle wall. When a famine was spreading across the land, Elizabeth had to take responsibility for what to do because her husband was away. Instead of protecting the interests of the wealthy, she ordered the royal storehouse be opened, providing peasants with the supplies needed to stave off hunger. She herself joined them in tilling the land and planting. On his return, Ludwig horrified by his wife’s behavior, forced her back to the castle “for her protection.”

She was not your typical countess! She refused, for example, to indulge in the lavish meals served in the castle, while the people endured the famine. She objected to exploiting the work of the peasants for the comfort of the nobility. But through her actions rather than her words, Count Ludwig came not only to understand her, but to support her. The power of witness –so often doubted—aroused his conscience and affected his actions. Her determination and commitment brought the Gospel to life for him.

Joyful love for those who were “below” from her social class was more than charity for the less fortunate. It was justice that shouted out in action that the poor are not “less than” us, but our equals. Today, Pope Francis calls us to live out that same spirit of solidarity embodied by St. Elizabeth:

The presence of the poor makes us breathe the fresh air of the Gospel, where the poor in spirit are blessed (cf. *Mt* 5:3). Instead of feeling annoyed when they knock on our doors, let us welcome their cry for help as a summons to go out of ourselves, to welcome them with God’s own loving gaze. How beautiful it would be if the poor could occupy in our hearts the place they have in the heart of God! Standing with the poor, serving the poor, we see things as Jesus does; we see what remains and what passes away (Sermon for the World Day of the Poor, November 2019)

### **Thrown away**

While she was expecting her third child, the Crusades were raging and her husband Ludwig was called to serve. Before he could reach the Holy Land, however, he fell ill and died in Italy, leaving the young mother in almost inconsolable agony. Her brother-in-law took this as an opportunity to gain the throne of the deceased count and convinced the court to throw her out of the Castle. Alone in a foreign land, Elizabeth was a woman without roots and without a future—or so it seemed.

With her three children in tow, Elizabeth was determined to not let her suffering be a burden on their lives. With no place to go, she sought refuge in a convent. A short time later the authorities in the Castle decided to take back the two oldest children, so that they would be educated in the manner of the

noble class. The youngest, who was still nursing, could stay with her mother, but would have to be sent to a monastery when she was older.

Elizabeth moved to the town of Marburg, along with her baby and two close friends, where she was welcomed by a wealthy family. She was cast out but not destitute, having received a small inheritance. So she chose to not live in the estate, but in the town, where she built a house (using the money she had inherited) where she welcomed the sick, the poor, the handicapped, orphans and those with mental illnesses. The homeless, the hungry, and those thrown away by society found a home, bed, food, and compassion with the woman who herself had been thrown away by her in-laws. Other women joined her, as women so often do, in caring for those who needed care most. They prayed together, shared their burdens, and formed a small community which they named after the patron of the poor—Francis of Assisi.

We are reminded that good still opens the hearts of men and women of goodwill and love grows strong in community. As Secular Franciscans we continue to commit ourselves to compassion and justice, at the same time realizing our own need for the support and love that comes from life in community.

### **The way of the Cross**

Elizabeth followed the way of Jesus—the way of the Cross. She was the friend and sister of the poorest and shared her life and their suffering. She lived out the logic of mercy the way Jesus described it in the parable of the last Judgment (Matthew 25). She responded to what her heart was telling her: that all who pray the Lord's Prayer are called to become brothers and sisters to each other. It doesn't matter if you are a peasant or a queen, a friend or a stranger, a newcomer or a fifth generation Canadian. Those who have been here before the Europeans came and those arriving on shore long settled by past generations are called to have each other's interests at heart.

Elizabeth died three years later. As a young mother, who would have thought that her life would be so unexpectedly short? She was 24 years old. Have we been putting off something that should be done, can be done? How much time do we really have? A fitting way to celebrate the feast of St. Elizabeth of Hungary might end with these words of St. Francis:

Most Beloved Friars and Sons forever blessed, hear me, hear the voice of your Father. Great things we have promised; greater have been promised us. Let us observe the former; let us aspire to the latter. Pleasure is short; punishment, everlasting. Suffering is slight; glory, infinite. Many are called, few are chosen. Brothers, while we have time, let us do good!