Caesarius of Heisterbach

THE LIFE OF SAINT ELIZABETH AND THE SERMON ON HER TRANSLATION

From the Latin edited by Albert Huyskens, Annalen des Historischen Vereins für den Niederrhein 86 (Cologne, 1908)

English translation

Contributed to Mind of the Church by a friend of the library who wishes to remain anonymous

---

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About this translation · 3
The Letter of Dedication · 3

The Life of Saint Elizabeth

Prologue. Her fame and her miracles · 5
Chapter 1. Her family and her country · 5
Chapter 2. The meaning of her name · 6
Chapter 3. Her childhood · 7
Chapter 4. Master Conrad of Marburg · 9
Chapter 5. Her marriage to Landgrave Louis · 9
Chapter 6. Her humility and her care for the sick while her husband lived · 11
Chapter 7. Her vow of obedience and her scruples about food · 11
Chapter 8. Her prayers by night · 12
Chapter 9. Her words to noble ladies; the three crowns · 13
Chapter 10. Her devotion at Mass and her humility as a mother · 14
Chapter 11. Her works of mercy while her husband lived · 14
Chapter 12. Her obedience to Master Conrad · 15
Chapter 13. The famine; the hospital below the castle · 15
Chapter 14. Her poor children, and the little pots that did not break · 16
Chapter 15. Her wise almsgiving; the jug of beer · 16
Chapter 16. Her love of poverty; the lepers on Holy Thursday · 17
Chapter 17. Driven from her home · 17
Chapter 18. The old woman and the mud · 19
Chapter 19. Her vision in Lent · 19
Chapter 20. At Bamberg; her husband’s bones come home · 20
Chapter 21. At Marburg: the gray habit and the hospital · 20
Chapter 22. Master Conrad tests her obedience · 21
Chapter 23. Landgrave Conrad joins the Teutonic Order; the inquiry into her life · 22
Chapter 24. The testimony of Elisabeth and of Irmgard · 22
Chapter 25. She lives by spinning · 23
Chapter 26. The Hungarian count finds her spinning · 24
Chapter 27. The young man who burned with her prayer · 24
Chapter 28. The great almsgiving, and the girl with beautiful hair · 25
Chapter 29. The ungrateful mother · 26
Chapter 30. Her choice of poverty and obedience; the visit to Altenberg · 27
Chapter 31. Her discretion and her humility with her maids · 28
Chapter 32. Her tears, and the gilded carvings · 28
Chapter 33. Her last illness and her holy death · 29
Chapter 34. The fragrance of her body; her funeral · 30

Sermon on Her Translation

Part 1. The city set on a hill · 32
Part 2. The six gates of mercy · 32
Part 3. The four towers: the cardinal virtues · 32
Part 4. The hidden city, and the danger of pride · 33
Part 5. The city is set on the mountain: miracles and canonization · 34
Part 6. The translation of her body · 35
Part 7. The holy oil · 36
Part 8. The cedar, the cypress, the olive, and the plane tree · 36
Part 9. What the oil means · 37
Part 10. Why so many miracles through a married woman? · 37

About this translation

Saint Elizabeth. Elizabeth of Hungary was born in 1207, the daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary. As a small child she was sent to the court of the Landgrave of Thuringia, in central Germany, and at fourteen she married the young Landgrave Louis. Theirs was a happy and devout marriage, and they had three children. Even as a great lady she fed the hungry, nursed the sick, and lived as simply as she was allowed. Louis died in 1227 on his way to the Crusade. Elizabeth, a widow at twenty, left the court, took the plain gray habit of a penitent, and built a hospital at Marburg, where she served the poor and the sick with her own hands under the strict direction of her confessor, Master Conrad of Marburg. She died there on 17 November 1231, only twenty-four years old. Miracles were soon reported at her tomb, and Pope Gregory IX declared her a saint at Pentecost in 1235.

The author. Caesarius of Heisterbach (born about 1180, died about 1240) was a Cistercian monk of the abbey of Heisterbach, in the hills across the Rhine from Bonn, near Cologne. He entered the monastery as a young man around 1199 and spent the rest of his life there, serving as master of novices and later as prior. He is best remembered for his *Dialogue on Miracles*, a large collection of edifying stories told to novices, and he also wrote sermons and lives of saints.

Why he wrote. On 1 May 1236 Elizabeth's body was solemnly raised from its grave at Marburg and placed in a new shrine, in the presence of the Emperor Frederick II, many bishops, and an enormous crowd of pilgrims. This ceremony is called a "translation." A monk of Heisterbach who had been there brought home a short account of her life. The Teutonic Knights, who now kept her hospital and tomb at Marburg, then asked Caesarius to write a fuller Life of their patroness. He did so in 1236 or early 1237, as his opening letter to Prior Ulrich explains. He drew mainly on two earlier writings: the short account that Master Conrad sent to the Pope in 1232, and the sworn statements of Elizabeth's four maidservants, gathered for her canonization. Caesarius retells these in his own words and adds his own reflections. Soon afterward he also wrote a sermon on the translation, which praises Elizabeth as a "city set on a mountain" and tells of the holy oil that was found flowing from her bones. The two works belong together, and they are given here as one.

The Latin text. This translation was made directly from the Latin as edited by Albert Huyskens: "Des Cäsarius von Heisterbach Schriften über die hl. Elisabeth von Thüringen," in *Annalen des Historischen Vereins für den Niederrhein*, volume 86 (Cologne, 1908), pages 17–59.

About this translation. The aim has been to be faithful to what Caesarius wrote while keeping the English plain and readable. The chapter and part titles were added by the translator to help the reader find the way; Caesarius did not divide his work like this. Bible passages are translated as Caesarius quotes them, and the references follow the old Latin (Vulgate) numbering, which for the Psalms is usually one number lower than in most modern Bibles. The notes are the translator's. Where Elizabeth's name has a Latin form or an old spelling, the familiar English "Elizabeth" is used, except for her maid of the same name, called "Elisabeth" here to keep the two apart.

The Letter of Dedication

To the venerable brothers, most dear in Christ, Ulrich the prior and the other brothers of the house of the Teutonic Order at Marburg, Brother Caesarius, priest and monk in the Valley of Saint Peter, offers the service of his prayers, such as they are.[1]

Our monk Christian came back to us after the translation of your patroness, the holy and God-beloved Elizabeth.[2] He told us something of the great things that were done there and are still done every day, and he brought with him a little booklet in which her way of life was written down briefly and simply. Speaking for you, he urged and begged me earnestly to work this short account of her life into a full history. My will to carry out the work was ready, in hope of a reward; but my learning was not equal to it, and I confess I was

very much afraid, knowing that it is more honorable for me to keep silent about such great matters than to write about them unworthily. But the same brother pressed me to write, more and more often and more and more insistently, and at last, won over by his advice and his charity, and putting my hope in blessed Elizabeth, I agreed, entrusting my boldness to the grace of God. For Master Conrad, her director, had intended before his death to lay this very task on my littleness, as I have learned from the reports of several people.[3]

And since that holy woman lived simply and humbly in this world, I think she will be better pleased if the simplicity of her holy life is set forth in a simple style, keeping to the truth of the story, than if it is decked out with the flowers of rhetoric to make a show of worldly learning. How pleasing her life was to God is shown by the great number of her miracles; and if these were not handed down in writing for those who come after us, they would soon slip from the memory of the living. Therefore, dearest brothers, wishing to satisfy your desire, I have taken over some chapters of the writing sent to me word for word, and not only in substance; some I have improved by adding reflections; and some I have left untouched.[4]

---

[1] Ulrich was prior of the house of the Teutonic Knights (the Teutonic Order) at Marburg, which had charge of Elizabeth's hospital and tomb. The "Valley of Saint Peter" is the old name of Heisterbach, the Cistercian abbey in the Siebengebirge hills near Bonn where Caesarius lived.

[2] Elizabeth's body was solemnly raised and moved to a new shrine at Marburg on 1 May 1236, in the presence of the Emperor Frederick II and a vast crowd. This is the "translation" celebrated in the sermon translated below.

[3] Master Conrad of Marburg, a priest and preacher, was Elizabeth's confessor and spiritual director from 1226 until her death. He was murdered on 30 July 1233.

[4] The "little booklet" was an account of Elizabeth's life based on Conrad's own summary and on the sworn statements of her maidservants (the work known as the *Sayings of the Four Handmaids*). In Huyskens' edition the passages Caesarius took over from it are printed in small type; this translation does not mark them. The Latin phrase is literally "not by sense but by words."

The Life of Saint Elizabeth

Prologue. Her fame and her miracles

For the nineteenth of November.[1]

Elizabeth, venerable and dear to God, born of noble parents, shone out like the morning star among the mists of this world with the splendor of her virtues. The glory of her miracles makes known how many were her merits in this world and how great her rewards in heaven. For what region or province within the bounds of the Church does not know her name and her merit? Set now upon the lampstand, she gives light to all who are in the house of God. Well may we apply to her the words of the wise man: "As the sun rising in the world in the high places of God, so is the beauty of a good woman for the adornment of her house." She is truly a lamp shining upon the holy lampstand, spreading the splendor of her virtues far and wide by the glory of her miracles.[2] For, to say nothing of the place where her most holy body rests, where very great and frequent miracles are worked through her merits and prayers, even in distant regions, as the books of her miracles bear witness, many benefits are granted to the sick when they call upon her name. These are your gifts, O Christ, who are pleased not only to crown with eternal rewards in the homeland of heaven those who serve you devoutly, but also, while they are still on the road of this present life, to honor them with signs and wonders for our edification.

So that the merits of blessed Elizabeth may shine out more fully, I have thought it necessary to set down in writing, for those who come after us, her family and her country, her riches and her worldly glory; because, as the Apostle says, "it is not the spiritual that comes first, but the natural, and then the spiritual."[3]

---

[1] The Latin heading gives the day as the thirteenth day before the Kalends of December, that is, 19 November, the day of Elizabeth's burial and her feast in the Middle Ages. Today her feast is kept on 17 November.

[2] Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 50:6 and 26:21–22, numbered as in the Latin Bible.

[3] 1 Corinthians 15:46.

Chapter 1. Her family and her country

She was the daughter of Andrew, King of Hungary, who died not long ago, and who rejoiced and exulted greatly to be the father of such a daughter.[1] Her mother was called Gertrude. She was the daughter of the most noble Duke of Merania, and her brothers were Berthold, Patriarch of Aquileia, and Ekbert, Bishop of Bamberg. Both are still living, and like the noblemen they are, they govern nobly the churches entrusted to them.[2]

The King of Hungary loved their sister, his wife, very dearly, and for her sake he favored and promoted the Germans, of whom there are a great many in the kingdom of Hungary. The Hungarians, driven by jealousy and goaded by envy, plotted to put the king himself to the sword with his whole household, that is, with his wife and children. When the queen learned of it, she was more anxious for her husband than for herself, and urged him to escape the trap laid for him by flight. She herself, entrusting herself to the grace of God, won from the Hungarians the crown of martyrdom by her innocence. Such was the martyrdom of righteous Abel, who was killed in his innocence through his brother's envy and so deserved to be the first among the martyrs. And that the death of this blessed queen was turned into a martyrdom for her, because of the innocence of her life, is witnessed by the miracles that are said to take place where she was killed.[3]

See, then, from what a noble and devout family blessed Elizabeth took her origin. If she drew the nobility of her flesh from her mother's flesh, it is no wonder if from her mother's spirit, as from a fountain of devotion, she could also draw holiness, helped by her mother's merits and prayers together. Daughters often take after their mothers, in their ways as well as in their looks, just as virtuous children are sometimes born of virtuous

parents and vicious children of vicious ones. But let this be enough about this blessed woman's family and country. We must not linger long on things of the flesh, for my mind is eager to tell of her virtues and her spiritual deeds. And since a person is pointed out by her name, let us first look at the name of this blessed woman.

[1] Andrew II, King of Hungary, died in 1235. These words show that Caesarius was writing soon afterward, about 1236–1237.

[2] Gertrude of Andechs-Merania. Berthold was Patriarch of Aquileia from 1218 to 1251; Ekbert was Bishop of Bamberg from 1203 until his death in June 1237, so the Life was written before that date.

[3] Queen Gertrude was murdered in 1213 by a party of Hungarian nobles. Caesarius's picture of her sending the king to safety is his own; other sources say the king was away on campaign at the time.

Chapter 2. The meaning of her name

When blessed Elizabeth was baptized in Christ, together with the name she put on the power of the name. For Elizabeth means "the seventh of my God," and so foreshadowed the grace that was to be in her. This blessed woman became the heir not only of the name but of the holiness. Because from the very hour of her rebirth in baptism this venerable woman was to be endowed with the sevenfold grace of the Holy Spirit, she was not undeservedly called Elizabeth, that is, "the seventh of my God."[1]

So it was with that earlier Elizabeth, the old woman and new mother. Through the Holy Spirit she recognized the grace of her son, who leapt in her womb at the coming of Christ; and when those who had gathered on the eighth day to circumcise the child wanted to call him Zechariah after his father, she answered, "Not so; he shall be called John," for she understood well the power of that name. Since John was filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb, when he was born and circumcised he was rightly named John, that is, "the grace of God," or "he in whom is grace," by his mother the prophetess. And so that name was for John a true foretelling of the gifts to come. In the same way the blessed Elizabeth of whom we are speaking, because she was to be made bright with the sevenfold grace of the Holy Spirit, rightly had to be named "the seventh of my God" in baptism, which is the womb of the Church.

For there are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and piety, and the spirit of the fear of the Lord.[2] Any one of these gifts can be called "a seventh," that is, one of seven; just as, in the same way, according to the Catholic faith any Person in the Holy Trinity may be called "a third," that is, one of three. So this blessed woman, whom almighty God predestined and chose from eternity, so that he might rest in her soul by the sevenfold grace of his Spirit, was quite fittingly called Elizabeth, that is, "the seventh of my God."

"Of *my* God," I say. Notice that it is not simply "the seventh of God," but "of my God," with the possessive word added. For though the Lord God is the God of all by creation, he is not the God of all by their receiving him, by worship and devotion, but only of the good. That is why David so often says in the psalms, "God, my God": by this he shows that God is the God of all by their making, but, as was just said, of the faithful alone by worship and devotion.

Elizabeth also means "the fullness of my God." This meaning of the name, too, was true of her and fitted her virtues. For, as will be told below, she fed the Lord in the least of his brothers, giving food and shelter to the poor and needy, who are the members of Christ.[3] And God fed her in many ways in return: spiritually, by teaching, and by the sacraments.

The grace of God is food that refreshes and strengthens the soul. It has the bread of divine contemplation and the wine of devotion, and the voice of God who fills the soul says: "Eat, O friends, and drink deeply, my dearest ones."[4] How abundantly she drank of divine contemplation, even to holy drunkenness, she alone could know who tasted it, and God, who filled her hunger and her thirst with both gifts.

The food of teaching, that is, the word of preaching, which is drink in its plain letter and food in its hidden meaning, she took so eagerly that, like one starving, she followed Master Conrad of Marburg and the other preachers of Christ on her own feet to many different and distant places where they preached. She took this food without ever tiring of it, knowing that it is written: “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it”; and again, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth,” and so on.[5] And so, brothers, since the word of God is the life of the soul, we should listen to it gladly, often, and with profit. He listens to the word of God with profit who keeps in his heart what he has heard and carries it out in deed. And this, we believe, is what blessed Elizabeth did.

With the food of the sacrament, that is, the Body and Blood of Christ, she was found worthy to be filled with such reverent fear and such burning love that she always received into her soul not only the sacrament with her mouth, but the very reality of the sacrament, that is, spiritual grace. For she had understood that the Savior said: “My flesh is truly food, and my blood is truly drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”[6] For this reason she was eager to receive Communion gladly and often, yet always with fear and reverence, thinking herself unworthy of so great a sacrament.

Since Elizabeth was named as was said above, let us see how she made use of this sevenfold grace of the Spirit from her very childhood.

---

[1] These meanings of the name come from the old lists of Hebrew names handed down from St. Jerome. The Hebrew name Elisheba is usually explained today as “my God is an oath”; in Hebrew the words for “oath” and “seven” are closely related.

[2] Isaiah 11:2, as given in the Latin Bible.

[3] The printed Latin is evidently damaged at this point (it reads, word for word, “For of the Lord by works least”). The translation follows the sense the passage requires, recalling Christ’s words in Matthew 25:40: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

[4] Song of Songs 5:1.

[5] Luke 11:28; Matthew 4:4.

[6] John 6:56–57 in the Latin Bible (6:55–56 in most modern Bibles).

Chapter 3. Her childhood

Guda, a devout virgin, was about five years old when she was given as a companion to blessed Elizabeth in the fourth year of Elizabeth’s age. After Elizabeth’s death Guda was questioned about her life and conduct, and she stated on oath that blessed Elizabeth was eager for the things of God from her infancy, directing all her actions to God, in her games as well as in serious matters.[1]

When she was five years old and did not yet know her letters at all, she would often throw herself down before the altar and open a psalter in front of her as though she were praying; and, as a sign of her good nature to come, she often made genuflections in secret. She looked for chances, in all sorts of ways, to slip into the chapel that stood within the royal palace carefully and without embarrassment. When her maids were watching her, she would run toward the church as though in a game, pretending she wanted to catch one of the girls; then she would leap over the threshold, and on bended knees, with her hands spread out before the altar, she would give herself to prayer, her face pressed to the floor. She thought of another way of getting into the chapel: in a sort of game of hopping on one foot, she would chase the little girls toward the chapel; and when she could not get in under the cover of a game, she would at least kiss the threshold and the walls of the church.

He who sanctified John the Baptist in the womb, granting him before he was born to sense that Christ, the Wisdom of God, was near, and who gives understanding to little children, as we have the example of the little boy Cyricus,[2] granted this little Elizabeth, when she was only five, to taste and understand heavenly things.

There are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The two higher ones, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, belong to the contemplative life; the other five, the spirit of counsel and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and of piety, and the spirit of the fear of the Lord, belong to the active life. The fear of the Lord teaches us to turn away from evil; piety teaches us to do good; knowledge, to tell good from evil; fortitude, to stand firm in the good; counsel, to keep discretion in all things. But understanding and wisdom lift the mind up to heavenly things. Since secret prayer and meditation on heavenly things belong to contemplation, blessed Elizabeth began the first years of her life with the more perfect life. How far she advanced in that life, like the heavenly living creatures,[3] now rising up to contemplation, now coming back to the active life, what follows will show.

To say nothing of serious matters: even when she played with the girls for rings or some other such thing, she put her hope of winning and gaining in God, promising him a number of genuflections with as many Hail Marys. And when she could not fulfill her vow without being noticed and embarrassed, she would say to one of the girls, "Let's lie down on the ground and see which of us is taller." And so, stretching herself out on the ground to make her many genuflections, she measured herself against a good many of them, as she herself admitted later, paying her vows in this way and avoiding any appearance of showing off. In every game, whether for rings or for pennies, she gave a tenth of what she won to poor girls. These were the beginnings and signs of future perfection and holiness in such a young child, and so were the things that follow.

When she was a little older, she longed to have Saint John the Evangelist as her apostle, as the lover of chastity, and to imitate him, although God in his wonderful providence had arranged things otherwise. So when, following the custom of ladies, the names of all the apostles were written separately on candles or on slips of paper and laid together, all mixed up, on the altar, and each woman drew one apostle for herself by lot, she prayed first, and then, just as she wished, she drew Saint John as her apostle by lot three times running.[4] This shows that the loving Lord fulfilled the loving desire of the girl in this very thing. In John's honor she never refused anything she was asked, whether it was to give a gift, or to forgive an offense, or to do or leave undone anything at all.

When she was made to go to bed before she had finished the prayers she had vowed, she would make up what was lacking by praying in bed. Every day she denied herself something for the love of God, breaking her own will in some matter. For when some game was going just as she wished, she would say, "Now that I am winning, I will stop for God's sake," understanding that this earned merit. Again, when there were several rounds in a dance, after one round she would say to the girls, "One round is enough for me; I will give up the rest for God." She did many other things like these. As a girl she also used to make many good vows, hoping to please God by them: for instance, not to have her sleeves sewn on before Mass on feast days, and not to wear gloves on Sundays before noon.[5] From these and similar things that have to do with adorning the body and with the vanity of the world, which would take too long to tell, she abstained by vow out of reverence for God.

In her girlhood, too, she humbly kept God before her eyes, called upon him in everything she did, named him tenderly, and loved him with all her heart. Though much could be said about these things, this little must suffice, since the said Guda does not remember more at present.

When Guda was asked how long she had stayed with her, she answered that, as was said above, she was with blessed Elizabeth and served her after the death of her lord the landgrave, until Elizabeth made her profession and put on the gray tunic from the hand of Master Conrad of Marburg. And then Guda herself put on the tunic together with her, solemnly confirming, by taking that same habit, the vow of chastity that she had made many years before into the hands of the same Conrad.[6]

---

[1] Guda was one of Elizabeth's four maidservants who gave sworn testimony in 1235 for her canonization. Their statements survive as the *Sayings of the Four Handmaids.*

[2] St. Cyricus (Quiricus), a child of three, was martyred with his mother St. Julitta in the early fourth century; the legend tells how he confessed Christ before the judge.

[3] The living creatures of Ezekiel 1:14, which "ran and returned," were often taken as a picture of holy souls who go up to contemplation and come back to the works of charity.

[4] Noble ladies drew an apostle by lot, by candles or slips bearing the apostles' names placed on the altar, to have him as a special patron.

[5] In the fashion of the time, close-fitting sleeves were sewn onto the dress each time it was put on. To go without this finery until after Mass was a small act of self-denial.

[6] Elizabeth made her religious profession and took the gray habit on Good Friday, 24 March 1228, in the Franciscan chapel at Eisenach. The gray tunic was the plain undyed dress of penitents.

Chapter 4. Master Conrad of Marburg

This Conrad was a very learned man and a most famous preacher. He attacked vice most fiercely; he was a terror to tyrants and a tireless pursuer of heretics, who began to spring up, or rather to come out into the open, under his preaching. He first received authority to preach from the lord Pope Innocent, against the Saracens, and in this he had great success, signing countless people with the cross.[1] Then, under Innocent's successors, Pope Honorius of blessed memory and the one who holds the Roman pontificate today, that is, the lord Gregory, he preached with the same and even greater authority, sometimes for the correction of morals, sometimes for the suppression of heretics. Riding on a very small mule, he went round almost all of Germany preaching. Countless crowds of people, men and women, followed him from many provinces, drawn by the words of his teaching and attracted by the great indulgences that he granted at each place where he preached.

Although Conrad wore the dress of the secular clergy, he possessed nothing in this world and did not care to possess anything: no prebends, no churches, no other dignities of any kind. He afflicted and wore down his body with constant fasting and many labors, "lest perhaps, after preaching to others, he himself should be found rejected."[2] Landgrave Louis and his wife, blessed Elizabeth, were guided by his counsel in all spiritual matters. And from him, as was said above, Elizabeth received the religious habit after her husband's death, and promised him obedience as to her spiritual father.

Burning with zeal for the faith, this Conrad was clearing the field of the Church of the weeds that were springing up in it, not only rooting out heresies by his teaching but even "binding the heretics themselves in bundles to be burned." And he was cruelly killed by certain men whom he had accused of heresy.[3] With him was killed a religious man of the Order of Friars Minor, named Gerard, who had devotedly helped Conrad in the work of preaching for some years. They say that the murderers wanted to spare him, but he would not be separated from his master; he clung to Conrad's body with the glue of charity and died with him. And because they loved each other all their lives, in death they were not divided:[4] they were killed in one place and buried in one place, that is, in the church of blessed Elizabeth. Having put these things in briefly, so that what is still to be said may be better understood, let us return to the order of the story.

---

[1] Pope Innocent III (died 1216) commissioned preachers of the Crusade; those who took the crusader's vow had a cloth cross sewn on their clothing, so they were said to be "signed with the cross."

[2] 1 Corinthians 9:27. Pope Honorius III reigned 1216–1227; Pope Gregory IX, "who holds the Roman pontificate today," reigned 1227–1241.

[3] Matthew 13:30, from the parable of the weeds. Conrad was a harsh and much-feared judge of heresy, and Caesarius, writing as a man of his time, praises his severity. Conrad was murdered near Marburg on 30 July 1233.

[4] These words are from an antiphon for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, echoing 2 Samuel (2 Kings) 1:23.

Chapter 5. Her marriage to Landgrave Louis

When the blessed and venerable maiden Elizabeth came to the age for marriage, she was betrothed and joined in marriage, against the desire of her heart, to the most noble prince Louis, the landgrave.[1] This Louis

was a young man of wonderful uprightness, adorned with virtues, an enemy of vice, and, what is greatly to be praised at such an age and in a layman, one who feared God, as was clearly shown by his judgments and his deeds. For in all the land of his principality he had made such peace that, among the Thuringians and the other peoples under his rule, the peace was so abundant that, wonderful to say, you would have thought it was the age of Augustus. If a count, a knight, a townsman, or a peasant was accused and convicted of plunder, theft, or similar crimes, he would not spare him; setting aside all favoritism and the gifts that so often blind judges, he judged and condemned the wicked strictly. He was gentle with the good and hard on the evil.

God, to whom all things are present, foresaw in him these works of justice and of mercy, which he practiced out of fear of God, and gave him as his companion a good, holy, and modest woman, as Ecclesiasticus says: "A good wife is a good portion; she will be given, as part of the portion of those who fear God, to a man for his good deeds." And the same book says: "A holy and modest woman is grace upon grace." And it is Solomon who says: "House and riches are given by fathers, but a prudent wife comes from the Lord."[2]

How devout and God-fearing this noble landgrave was can easily be judged from what I am about to tell. As I learned from the lord Theoderic, the venerable Archbishop of Trier,[3] one night when they were lying awake in bed together, blessed Elizabeth spoke to her husband in these words: "Truly, my lord, I have been thinking of a good life, one we really need, by which we could serve God with profit." When the landgrave answered, "And what life is that?" she went on: "I wish we had only as much land as one plough can work and two hundred sheep, so that you could till the land with your own hands and I could milk the sheep." At these words the landgrave smiled, delighting in her simplicity, and answered her playfully: "Sister Eve, if we had one plough's worth of land and two hundred sheep, we would not be poor, but rich!"[4]

In her was fulfilled what the wise man says: "The grace of a diligent wife will delight her husband, and will fatten his bones."[5] The bones mean the virtues; for whatever good there is in men is increased and strengthened by the grace and devotion of holy women. This landgrave was a lover of chastity and of every good thing, no doubt through the grace of his holy wife. He was careful to keep faith with her in marriage, both out of the fear of God and out of their mutual love. Some of his knights noticed this and, envious of such grace, said to him one day: "My lord, why don't you do as other princes and noblemen do? You can seldom be with our lady, and it is hard for a young man like you to be continent. Why, then, don't you take some girls?" And he said nothing. When they repeated this some time later, he was moved and answered: "Gentlemen, as you value my favor, take care never to mention this to me again. I have a wife, to whom I am bound to keep faith."

As a sign of his great devotion, this blessed man had clerics present the betrayal, passion, and death of the Savior in the castle at Eisenach, as if he could see it with his own eyes, and he paid all the costs of the play, as I learned from people who were there.[6] At that time he took the cross for the expedition against Damietta and set out to help the Holy Land; and in the service of the Savior he ended his life, commending his devout spirit into the hands of the Lord.[7]

---

[1] Louis IV, Landgrave of Thuringia (1200–1227). Elizabeth was promised to the landgrave's family as a small child and brought to Thuringia at the age of four; the marriage took place in 1221, when she was fourteen and Louis twenty-one. Caesarius's phrase "against the desire of her heart" reflects his picture of her love for chastity; other sources speak of a warm and happy marriage.

[2] Sirach 26:3 (given in the edition as 21:3) and 26:19; Proverbs 19:14.

[3] Theoderic (Dietrich) of Wied, Archbishop of Trier from 1212 to 1242.

[4] The landgrave's affectionate name for her, "Sister Eve," plays on the picture of Adam tilling the ground and Eve at his side.

[5] Sirach 26:16.

[6] A Passion play, one of the earliest recorded in Germany, staged at the Wartburg or in the town of Eisenach below it.

[7] Louis took the cross in 1226 for the Crusade of the Emperor Frederick II and died of fever at Otranto in southern Italy on 11 September 1227, before reaching the Holy Land. Damietta in Egypt had been lost by the crusaders in 1221, and many in the West

spoke of the new expedition as an attempt to win it back.

Chapter 6. Her humility and her care for the sick while her husband lived

What blessed Elizabeth did after the landgrave's death, and what kind of life she led, is told by Isentrude, a religious woman of Hörselgau.[1] Isentrude was in her service for about five years while her husband was alive and for one year after his death, until Elizabeth put on the gray tunic, and she shared her secrets so closely that hardly anything was hidden from her. When blessed Elizabeth was to be canonized, Isentrude was questioned about her life and answered on oath:

"I, Isentrude, always saw my lady Saint Elizabeth, even while her husband was alive, to be devout and humble, very charitable, and full of the fear of God." When her maids grumbled and were indignant at her humility, as though she were lowering her own noble rank and worldly dignity, she paid no attention to such talk. She would go to church at a quick pace ahead of her maids and make a number of genuflections there unnoticed, knowing that it is written: "Upon whom shall my spirit rest, but upon the humble and quiet, who trembles at my words?"[2]

Again, while she was still living in worldly splendor, she secretly took in a sick beggar who was horrible even to look at; pus flowed from his head with a foul smell. She cut his hair with her own hands and laid his head in her lap. Afterward she led him to a secluded part of her orchard, out of sight of others, and washed his head, which was full of sores and of worms. When her maids came upon her and scolded her for such a lowly and contemptible task, she only laughed, for she knew that the Savior had said: "I was sick, and you visited me," and again: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of these my least ones, you did it to me."[3]

---

[1] Isentrude of Hörselgau, near Gotha in Thuringia, was another of the four maidservants who testified in 1235.

[2] Isaiah 66:2, in the wording of the Latin Bible.

[3] Matthew 25:36 and 25:40.

Chapter 7. Her vow of obedience and her scruples about food

The same witness also said that venerable Elizabeth, while the landgrave was still alive and with his consent, made a vow of obedience to Master Conrad, saving her husband's rights. She gave her word to Conrad that she would keep perpetual continence if she should happen to outlive her husband. This vow was made at Eisenach, in the convent of Saint Catherine.

After she had made her vow of obedience, Master Conrad commanded the holy woman not to make use of any of her husband's goods about which her conscience was not at peace.[1] The blessed woman kept this so strictly that sometimes, at table beside her husband, she abstained from everything that came from the offices and exactions of his officials, eating only such food as she knew came from her husband's own rents and lawful goods and possessions. When food from those exactions was served at table, she often pretended to eat bread and other dishes with the knights, breaking them and passing them round, while she herself stayed fasting at that rich table.

When she and three of her maids, who had joined in her vow, asked the landgrave not to take it amiss that they did not eat while the others ate, but only pretended to, that devout prince answered: "I would gladly do the very same, if I did not fear scandal, and the talk of my household and of the others who eat with us. But I hope that, with the help of God's grace, I shall soon set my affairs in order in a different way."

Blessed Elizabeth, for her part, provided more privately for herself and her girls from certain goods that had been assigned to her personally as her dowry. And when food could not be bought, she would send messengers to the more respectable people of the place where she was staying and ask them for what they needed, as though she liked their food better than the food of the court. She did this only because of Master

Conrad's command, so that they might keep their consciences unharmed. So she often suffered great want, choosing to go hungry rather than eat what was unlawful, and living on nothing but five little cakes made with honey.

Among all the dishes at her husband's table she sometimes suffered from hunger and thirst, so that her husband himself would sometimes secretly warn her if he knew that the food being served at table was not lawful for her. One day, as she was dining with her husband, she abstained from the many dishes for conscience's sake. She had only five very small birds sent to her; she kept two for herself and sent the rest to her maids, and was content with these alone for that meal.

She suffered more at her maids' want than at her own, because sometimes she could not give them what they needed from those goods, and she feared they would lose heart. So she often looked for what they needed among the dues paid by the peasants; and when she found only food that they could take with a clear conscience, she would say to her maids, "Now you will eat without drinking wine." And on the other hand, when she knew that the wine came from her husband's vineyards but had doubts about the food, she forbade them not the drink but the food. But when she understood that both were lawful, she would clap her hands with joy and say, "Good for us! Now we can eat and drink without worry."

Once, as she was following her husband to a great assembly, she could find no food that they dared to eat with a clear conscience except coarse black bread, hard as a rock, which she softened in plain warm water and ate. With this meal she and her maids were content that day, because it was Saturday and they were fasting. And so, poorly fed, they rode that same day eight German miles, which make a good forty Italian miles.[2]

Because of such unusual ways, both she and her husband, who allowed them, had to put up with reproaches to their faces from their own people. They bore them with great patience, knowing that it is written: "Blessed are those who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."[3] But though she abstained from what had been gained unjustly, she still did all she could to see that those who had suffered wrong were compensated.

---

[1] That is, goods that might have been taken unjustly from the poor through the tolls, fines, and other exactions of the landgrave's officials.

[2] The German mile of the time was a long one, roughly five modern miles; the whole day's ride was something like forty miles.

[3] Matthew 5:10.

Chapter 8. Her prayers by night

Blessed Elizabeth often used to get up in the night to pray, though her husband often begged her not to wear herself out. Sometimes he would even take her hand as she rose from the bed and lovingly ask her to come back to bed, anxious for his wife's comfort. The handmaid of God knew the words of the psalm: "At midnight I rose to give praise to you for the judgments of your justice," and in another place: "Arise in the night, at the beginning of the watches, and pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord your God."[1] So that she could pray more secretly and give way more freely to the gift of tears, she told her maids to wake her at night, while she was sleeping beside her husband, so that she could pray. When they asked how they should wake her, since they were afraid of disturbing their lord, she answered with the simplicity of a dove, "Wake me in this way," and showed them.[2] One night, when the said Isentrude wanted to wake her lady in the way she had been shown, she woke the landgrave himself by mistake. He at once understood what his wife had planned and patiently put up with being disturbed.

Sometimes, because her prayers were so long, sleep overcame her, and she fell asleep lying on the carpet. When her maids scolded her for this, saying, "It would be more fitting for you to sleep in bed with your

husband than on the floor without him," the blessed woman answered: "I cannot always pray, because of the weakness of the flesh; but at least I suffer this much more, that I tear myself away from my dearly beloved husband and do violence to myself." Often she would get up from her husband's bed, go off to a more secret place, and have herself beaten hard and without mercy by the hands of her maids, and then return to bed.

It is certain that she did this often from the time she made her vow of obedience to Master Conrad; but it is also known that before that time she sometimes did it in Lent and on Fridays. And when her husband was away, she spent whole nights in vigils, scourgings, and many penances.

See how, by such a martyrdom, Saint Elizabeth strove to make herself like Christ in his sufferings. For there are three kinds of martyrdom, as Saint Gregory writes: the shedding of blood, the constant mortification of the flesh, and compassion for one's neighbor;[3] and Elizabeth had a share in all three. As has been said, she had herself beaten with very sharp rods until the blood came, and every day she put her body to death with vigils, fasting, prayer, and many other hardships, so that she could say with the prophet: "For your sake we are put to death all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter."[4] And how wholeheartedly she suffered with her neighbors in their need, the sick and those in any other trouble, and how she suffered in their miseries, the examples already given show clearly enough; and those that follow will not be silent about this martyrdom of hers, when their turn comes to be told.

---

[1] Psalm 118[119]:62; Lamentations 2:19.

[2] The Latin says only, "Wake me in this way." The *Sayings of the Four Handmaids* tells us that the maid was to wake her by pulling gently at her foot.

[3] The teaching on the three kinds of martyrdom (of blood, of penance, and of compassion) was widely repeated in the Middle Ages and was usually credited to St. Gregory the Great.

[4] Psalm 43[44]:22, quoted by St. Paul in Romans 8:36.

Chapter 9. Her words to noble ladies; the three crowns

When worldly ladies came to visit her, she made it her business to preach to them, in a way, talking with them about God and heavenly and spiritual things; and she often led some of them to humility and the practice of religion. She begged them most earnestly to give up at least some of the things that belong to the vanity of the world, such as dances, and tight sleeves sewn on fresh, or silk ribbons for winding into their hair as ornaments, and to avoid other vanities of that kind. She followed the example of the Prince of the Apostles, who warns women in his letter: "Likewise let wives be subject to their husbands, so that if any do not believe the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your holy and reverent conduct. Let your adornment not be outward, the braiding of hair, or putting on gold, or fine clothing."[1]

It is certain that there are three kinds of people to whom a special crown, the "aureole," is due: martyrs, virgins, and prelates.[2] She wanted to have a share in all three. The aureole is due to martyrs because they shed their blood for Christ; to virgins, by vow or by desire, because of the purity of their bodies; to prelates, because of their preaching. She strove to imitate them all: the martyrs, as has been said, by constant penance; the virgins by her vow of continence; and the preachers, as was said above, not only by the example of her holy life but also by words of good encouragement. For not all who are virgins in body will have the aureole: not, for example, those who long to marry and die with that wish. And in the same way, according to the witness of the blessed virgin and martyr Lucy, if a woman who had the vow and purpose of virginity were violated by force, and then lived chastely from that time on and grieved to the end over the violation, I hope that she would lose nothing of the reward of virginity.[3]

---

[1] 1 Peter 3:1–3.

[2] Medieval theologians taught that, besides the "crown" of eternal glory given to all the saved, a special added crown or "aureole" was given to martyrs, virgins, and teachers or preachers of the faith.

[3] In her legend, St. Lucy of Syracuse told the judge who threatened to have her taken to a brothel that if she were violated against her will, her chastity would win a double crown.

Chapter 10. Her devotion at Mass and her humility as a mother

So blessed Elizabeth, a lover of chastity, promised God continence into the hands of Master Conrad, while her husband was still alive, should she outlive him; and in the same way she led some ladies to take a vow of continence after their husbands' death.

The grace of devotion was so strong in her that at Mass, during the reading of certain Gospels, she would often loosen her sleeves and her necklaces and take off her rings and every other ornament. The veil on her head, too, which was neatly and handsomely arranged, she would push down and pull aside at the time of the Gospel and the Canon, and above all at the elevation of the Host. She also did something else that is worth remembering as a sign of great humility.

Blessed Elizabeth had this custom: whenever she had given birth to a child, at the end of the days of her purification, against the custom of her people, she came to church dressed in wool and barefoot, as humbly as any ordinary woman. Following the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, she carried her baby in her own arms, with a candle and a lamb, and offered the child upon the altar.[1] As soon as she came home, she would give the very tunic and cloak she had worn to some poor woman. Let the ladies take note of this, who make such processions with great pomp in costly clothes, and do not imitate the humility of the Mother of God, as the most blessed Elizabeth, the daughter of a rich king, did.

She kept the same humility at the Rogation days, following the procession in wool and barefoot, and at the sermons she always took her place among the poorest women.[2]

---

[1] This was the ceremony of the "churching" of a mother after childbirth, modeled on the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:22–24). Elizabeth had three children: Hermann (born 1222), Sophia (1224), and Gertrude (1227, born after her husband's death).

[2] The Rogation days were days of prayer and penitential processions, on 25 April and on the three days before Ascension Thursday.

Chapter 11. Her works of mercy while her husband lived

Even while her husband was alive, she spun wool with her maids and had cloth woven from it to make clothes for the Friars Minor and for other poor people, and for poor catechumens, whose clothes she sewed with her own hands.[1] She had these catechumens baptized and lifted them from the sacred font herself, so that, as their godmother, she could do good to them more freely. She also made with her own hands the garments in which poor people were buried, handling, touching, and burying their bodies. For their funerals she set aside a large white linen sheet, which she cut up into pieces. Visiting a poor sick man, she heard him complaining about some debts he owed; she paid his debts and showed him mercy besides. She would not allow the bodies of the rich dead to be wrapped in new sheets or shirts, but only in old ones, and she ordered that the better cloth be given to the poor.

She often visited and comforted poor women in childbirth. When the husbands of such women, or of other sick women, asked her for something, she would find out where they lived and go to visit them in person, however muddy and rough the road might be, hoping that the sight of them would increase the grace of compassion in her. She went into their wretched little rooms, not shrinking from their filth, and brought them what they needed and comforted them, hoping for a threefold reward: one for the labor, another for the compassion, and a third for the giving of alms. For the psalmist says: "Blessed is he who considers the needy and the poor; the Lord will deliver him in the evil day."[2] This blessing she often earned, because she did consider the needy and the poor.

One day, wanting to satisfy a poor man's craving, she tried to milk a cow in a secluded place; but the cow behaved badly and would not let her.

[1] Catechumens were adults preparing for baptism, here probably converts from Judaism or paganism.

[2] Psalm 40[41]:1.

Chapter 12. Her obedience to Master Conrad

Together with humility, blessed Elizabeth always took care to keep great patience and perfect obedience. While her husband was still alive, she was so obedient to Master Conrad that once, when he called her to a sermon and she could not come because the Margravine of Meissen had arrived,[1] and she feared to give offense, Master Conrad was displeased and sent her word by a messenger that because of this disobedience he would no longer take care of her soul. So, as a holy and God-fearing woman, so as not to lose the merit of the obedience she had promised to Conrad, she came the next day and humbly begged him to forgive the offense. When he refused, she threw herself at his feet with her maids. He laid a penance on them and had them stripped to their shifts and beaten quite severely.[2] This Conrad, as we all know, was a stern and severe man, and many feared him, above all because of the authority granted him by the Pope, which he did not fail to use.

[1] The Margravine of Meissen was Jutta, the landgrave's sister.

[2] The words "and beaten quite severely" are Caesarius's; the *Sayings of the Four Handmaids* tells the same story.

Chapter 13. The famine; the hospital below the castle

At a time of famine and high prices, when the landgrave had gone to the court of the Emperor Frederick, which he held in the city of Cremona,[1] she did not want to incur the prophet's curse that says, "Cursed is he who hides away grain among the people."[2] Feeling for the hungry from the bottom of her heart, she did not hide away the grain gathered in her granaries and barns, nor did she sell it to those who wanted to buy it, but spent it all as alms for the poor, giving each of them every day, for many days, as much as was needed to keep them alive. Joseph, when he had power over all the granaries of Pharaoh, gathered all the wealth of Egypt into the royal treasury by selling grain to the Egyptians; but blessed Elizabeth gave everything away freely for the sake of Christ.

At that time she was living in a very high castle, below which there was a large, spacious house where she lodged a great many sick people who could not wait for the general distribution of alms or get to the place where it was given out.[3] In spite of the hard climb up and down, she visited them several times every day. She comforted them when they lost heart, talked with them about patience and the salvation of their souls, and gave them whatever they wished. She even sold the ornaments she wore to feed them. And though that noble lady was of so delicate a constitution that she could not bear any foulness in the air, yet, with the help of God's grace, she bore the stench and foulness of the sick in summertime, when it is usually more dangerous, without any disgust and without harm to her health, though her maids grumbled about it. As the Apostle says: "Love is patient, is kind, bears all things."[4]

And because she was full of love, she cheerfully cared for the poor and the sick with her own hands. With her own veil she gently and tenderly wiped their faces, their spittle, and the filth of their mouths and noses, as if it were sweet spices. No wonder: she saw Christ in them, and it was Christ she cared for.

[1] The Emperor Frederick II held a great diet at Cremona in 1226; Landgrave Louis went to it in the service of the emperor. The famine in Thuringia that year is well recorded.

[2] Proverbs 11:26.

[3] The castle is the Wartburg, high above the town of Eisenach. The house below it was the first of Elizabeth's hospitals.

[4] 1 Corinthians 13:4 and 13:7.

Chapter 14. Her poor children, and the little pots that did not break

Besides these poor and sick people, she had in the same house some pearls of Christ: poor little children, shining like jewels with purity of mind and body. She provided for their needs with a mother's love, and she treated them as kindly and lovingly as if she had borne them all in the flesh. And the children in turn loved her as a mother and called her mother. They ran to meet her when she came; and as chicks gather under the wings of a hen, so these poor little ones rested and were cherished under the wings of her motherly love. And if she knew that any of these children were especially despised, with scabby heads, weak, dirty, or uglier than the rest, she took care to cherish them all the more, stroking with her own hands their heads, which were horrible to see, and laying them in her lap. "Let the little children come to me," the Lord said, "for of such is the kingdom of heaven."[1]

And since the fountain of love that welled up in the heart of this holy woman could not stand still without overflowing, she bought and brought these children little pots, glass rings, and other such trinkets suited to their age, to make them happy. And in these things the loving Lord showed his own love. For once, when blessed Elizabeth was carrying these clay and glass toys in her cloak, riding up from the town to the castle, they happened to be shaken out of her cloak and fell from a very high rock onto very sharp stones. But when they were picked up, they were all found whole, to the amazement of those who were there, and they were given out to the children for their play. For though almighty God is great in great things, he works wonders even more gloriously in the smallest things, as will be shown here and in what follows.

[1] Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14.

Chapter 15. Her wise almsgiving; the jug of beer

As has been said, Christ's handmaid Elizabeth also used discretion in giving alms. Besides the sick who received the general alms, she chose out the poorest and weakest, to whom she gave greater help. She placed them in front of her castle and gave them the leftovers from her own table with her own hand, taking much away from herself and her maids so as to feed these poor people more generously. One day, after the alms had been given out, she was sharing among them what was left of a small quantity of beer in a vessel; and when she had given to them all, the beer in the jug was not diminished, but there seemed to be as much left in it as there had been before. This is your gift, O Christ, who fed many thousands of people in the desert with a few loaves!

When the blessed woman had fed the crowd of poor people until the new harvest, she gave shirts and shoes to all who were able to work, so that they would not hurt their feet on the stubble, and gave them sickles as well, so that they could reap and live by their own labor. To the weak and those not able to work she gave little garments that she had bought in the market. She gave all these things out with her own hands.

She also had the custom of never letting the poor go, when she sent them away, without some little gift, giving something to each one. And when she had no money, she gave the poor women her veils and other silk finery, saying, "I do not want you to wear these for vanity; sell them to meet your needs," for she was looking out for the welfare of the poor. To one of these women she gave shoes, a shirt, and a surcoat. The woman was so overjoyed at the gift that she fell to the ground and was thought to be dead, crying out and saying that there had never been such joy in the world. Doctors say that a person sometimes dies of immoderate joy or grief, because the heart is loosened by too much joy and constricted by too much grief; and we have heard of both happening. Seeing the woman's danger, blessed Elizabeth was sorry she had given her the clothes.

Chapter 16. Her love of poverty; the lepers on Holy Thursday

While she was still living in her greatest worldly glory, she longed very much to be a beggar, and often talked and conferred with her maids about poverty. For she knew that the Savior had said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."[1] One day, in front of her maids, she dressed herself in the palace in a shabby cloak and covered her head with a very cheap cloth, and said, with great cheerfulness of voice and heart: "This is how I shall go about when I am begging and enduring hardship for Christ."

On Holy Thursday she always kept the solemn rite of the Mandatum, washing the feet of the poor and giving each of them a silver coin.[2] One Holy Thursday she gathered a great many lepers into a house, washed their feet and hands, and kissed the most ulcerous and horrible places. Then, throwing herself down at their feet, she gave them little gifts. Wherever she found lepers, she sat down beside them, comforting the poor wretches and encouraging them to be patient.

Knowing that there is sin in costly and excessive clothing, and that the rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen was buried in hell,[3] she gave up such things entirely. She busied herself not with showy clothes but with works of charity, with the greatest cheerfulness of face and spirit, always "stretching forward to what lies ahead."[4] The Lord, who is the fountain of love, had given her a very great gift of tears, granting her "the upper and the lower watered ground."[5] She used this gift with great discretion and without disfiguring her face, so that she could not be accused of hypocrisy or make others ashamed by her weeping.

All these things, and many other good things that the said Isentrude does not remember at present, she declared that she had seen in blessed Elizabeth while her husband was still alive; and she lived with him in a most praiseworthy way until his death. For in this life they loved each other with mutual love and encouraged each other in the praise and service of God.

Her husband the landgrave, though he was obliged by necessity to attend to the temporal affairs of his principalities, always kept the fear of God before the eyes of his mind, as appeared in his deeds. For he took the cross for the name of Christ and crossed the sea at great expense to help the Holy Land; and dying on that journey, he earned, as we hope, the kingdom of heaven, and became a citizen of the Jerusalem above. When he set out to free the earthly Jerusalem, he gave his wife, blessed Elizabeth, full freedom to do with his property everything that concerned the honor of God, leaving her as an heir who would be useful to his soul.[6] In all that has been said, the said Guda agrees on oath with Isentrude, since they were then both in Saint Elizabeth's service together.

---

[1] Matthew 5:3.

[2] The *Mandatum* (from Christ's words "A new commandment I give you," John 13:34) is the washing of feet on Holy Thursday in imitation of Christ at the Last Supper.

[3] Luke 16:19–22.

[4] Philippians 3:13.

[5] Joshua 15:19 and Judges 1:15, where Caleb gives his daughter "the upper and the lower springs"; spiritual writers took these as the tears of longing for heaven and the tears of sorrow for sin.

[6] That is, she was free to give alms from his goods for the good of his soul.

Chapter 17. Driven from her home

After the death of Landgrave Louis, Satan, who moved the Lord against righteous Job to afflict him in vain, stirred up certain of her husband's vassals against his widow, blessed Elizabeth, without cause; so much so that they drove her, most pitifully, out of the castle and out of all the possessions of her dower.[1] But the blessed woman was not consumed by the vice of impatience in the fire of so great a trial and so very violent a persecution; rather, she was proved by it, so that she could say with the psalmist: "You have tried me by fire, and no wickedness has been found in me."[2]

Hear what that blessed woman did. Going into the town that lies below the castle, she went into a poor house, the yard of a certain innkeeper, where the tavern-keeper's barrels and gear were kept and where his pigs had lain; and there that noble daughter of a king spent the night with great joy. Getting up at Matins, after midnight, she went to the Friars Minor who lived in the same town and asked them to sing the *Te Deum*, giving thanks to God for her trouble.

The next day, since none of the rich dared to take her into their homes for fear of her persecutors, she went into a church with her maids and sat there a long time like a stranger and an outcast. Her little children, to whom the lordship of that very town belonged, were brought down from the castle in the bitterest cold, and the blessed woman did not know where to turn or where to lay her little ones' heads. For her husband's brothers, being still young, were governed by the counsel of their men and their household officers.[3]

At last, compelled by need, blessed Elizabeth went into the house of a priest, where she and her people suffered great hardship, after pawning something of hers. Afterward, to afflict her still more, she was ordered to go into the house of a certain man who was hostile to her, and there she and her people were forced to squeeze into a very narrow space, though the same house had large and spacious rooms. Because her host and hostess treated her very harshly, when she left that place she said farewell to the walls, which had kept her from the cold and the rain, and said: "I would gladly thank the people, but I don't know what for."[4] And since she could find no lodging at all, she went back to the first filthy house, where the pigs had lain. So she endured a very harsh persecution, without cause, from all her husband's people.

Deprived of all her goods, she could not support her little children; so, forced by want, she sent them away to different and distant places to be brought up there. And the little that she had, she took from her own mouth and spent on the poor.

You see with what patience and cheerfulness this holy woman bore the troubles and persecutions brought upon her by her own people, which were all the harder to bear for that. I think she was not unaware of the power of patience in trouble. For as the Holy Scriptures prove, trouble borne with patience gladdens the just, proves them, purifies them, and glorifies them.

That it gladdens them, Ecclesiasticus says: "The patient man will bear up for a time, and afterward joy shall be restored to him."[5] Blessed Elizabeth knew this; and in hope of the glory that she now enjoys with great joy, she bore the troubles brought upon her, as was said above, with great gladness of heart.

That trouble proves the just, the same Ecclesiasticus testifies: "Gold and silver are tried in the fire, but acceptable men," that is, men worthy to be received, "in the furnace of humiliation";[6] and the angel said to Tobias, "Because you were acceptable to God, it was necessary that temptation should prove you."[7] How much blessed Elizabeth's patience was proved by wicked men has been told above.

That the fire of trouble purifies the just, Augustine teaches when he says: "What the furnace is to gold, the flail to grain, and the file to iron, that trouble is to the just man." And as he also says: "The furnace of trouble burns the wood of the vices to ashes and refines the gold of the virtues."[8] Whatever in blessed Elizabeth could be burned, the fire of trouble consumed, so that the gold of her merits and virtues might shine the brighter.

That trouble glorifies the just, you have in the psalm, where the Lord says of the just man: "I am with him in trouble; I will rescue him and glorify him."[9] As the Apostle says, our light and momentary trouble "works in us an eternal weight of glory."[10]

How greatly God's beloved Elizabeth has been glorified in heaven for the momentary troubles she bore on earth, the glory of her miracles shows clearly enough. But enough of this.

[1] Elizabeth left the Wartburg in the winter of 1227–1228. Whether she was driven out by her brothers-in-law and their officials, as Caesarius tells it, or left of her own accord because she was forbidden to give away her goods, the sources do not fully agree.

[2] Psalm 16[17]:3, as given in the Latin Bible.

[3] Her husband's brothers were Henry Raspe and Conrad. Henry Raspe, who became regent for Elizabeth's young son Hermann, was in fact already in his twenties.

[4] In the *Sayings of the Four Handmaids* she says: "I thank the walls for sheltering me from the rain and the wind as well as they could; I would gladly thank the people, but I don't know what for."

[5] Sirach 1:29.

[6] Sirach 2:5.

[7] Tobit 12:13.

[8] Sayings of this kind are found in St. Augustine's sermons and commentaries on the Psalms.

[9] Psalm 90[91]:15.

[10] 2 Corinthians 4:17.

Chapter 18. The old woman and the mud

A sick old woman, who often received alms from blessed Elizabeth, and medicines suited to her illness, met her as she was going to church in a narrow street, where stepping stones had been laid to cross a deep stretch of mud. The old woman, wanting to make way for her as she came, pushed her into the mud, so that she fell in with all her clothes and was covered in dirt. God's handmaid bore this wrong patiently and with a laugh; she quickly got up out of the mud and joyfully washed her soiled clothes. In this deed her great humility is commended.

Chapter 19. Her vision in Lent

One day in Lent she stayed for a very long time with her eyes fixed on the altar, on bended knees, leaning against the wall because she was weak. Afterward, when she had come back to her humble lodging and taken some food, she began to sweat from bodily weakness, and leaning against the wall she sank into the arms of the said Isentrude. Everyone except the maids already mentioned was sent out, and she kept her eyes open and fixed on the window. At last she began to smile sweetly, her face full of joy, showing by her smile that she was truly seeing something great and joyful. Then, after a good long while, she shed floods of tears. And afterward, opening her eyes, she began to smile again as before. She lay in that contemplation until after Compline, sometimes weeping with her eyes closed, and that only briefly, sometimes smiling with her eyes open, and lingering much longer in joy. At last, when she had lain like this for a long time, now smiling, now weeping, she suddenly burst out with these words: "Yes, Lord, if you will be with me, and I with you, I never want to be separated from you."

Isentrude, a noblewoman who was closer to her than her other maids, begged her very earnestly to tell her with whom she had been speaking. Blessed Elizabeth was unwilling, but at last, overcome by her pleading, she answered: "I saw heaven open, and my sweet Lord Jesus bending down to me and comforting me in the many distresses and troubles that surround me. When I saw him, I began to smile; and when he went away, I wept, joyful at his presence and sad at his absence. And he had pity on me and turned his glorious face toward me again and said, 'If you will be with me, I will be with you.' And I answered him with great joy of heart, as I had before."

Isentrude also pressed her to tell her of the vision she had had in church, while the saving Host was being offered, as was mentioned. Blessed Elizabeth answered her: "It is not fitting to reveal now what I saw there. But know that I was in the greatest joy of my heart and saw wonderful secrets of God."[1] This shows that she was not without divine revelations, but was used to them, and that she did the work of Mary in contemplating heavenly things, and the work of Martha in outward action.[2]

[1] Caesarius has shortened his source here: the vision in church that Isentrude asked about is mentioned, but it is not described in his text.

[2] Luke 10:38–42. Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet, stands for the contemplative life; Martha, who served, for the active life.

Chapter 20. At Bamberg; her husband's bones come home

The Abbess of Kitzingen, in the diocese of Würzburg, Elizabeth's aunt on her mother's side, felt for her in her misery and want and took her to her uncle, the Bishop of Bamberg.[1] He kept her in a very honorable way, intending to give her in marriage, as he had already let her know. But the maids already mentioned, who had vowed continence with her, were afraid that the bishop would use force, and they complained about this with grief and tears. Blessed Elizabeth comforted them and said again and again: "Take heart, sisters. My trust in the Lord is so firm, since he knows that my vow to keep continence, which I made even in my husband's lifetime, came from a pure and whole heart, that, trusting in his mercy, I know it is impossible that he should not preserve my chastity against every human plan and every violence. For it was not on any condition that I vowed the most perfect continence into the hands of Master Conrad after my husband's death. And hold this for certain: if my uncle the lord bishop marries me to anyone against my will, I will refuse with heart and mouth. And if I had no other way of escape, I would secretly cut off my own nose, and then no one would care to marry me, so horribly disfigured."

One day this lover of chastity was being taken to a certain stronghold, namely the castle of Pottenstein, to be kept there until she should be dispensed from her vow, as she understood; and as she was commending her chastity to God with tears, behold, by the arrangement of the Lord, the comforter of the afflicted, a messenger of the bishop suddenly arrived with orders to bring her back to Bamberg to meet the bones of her husband, Landgrave Louis, which were being brought back from overseas.[2] When the bishop had received them solemnly in procession, she said in tears: "Lord, I thank you for mercifully comforting me with the bones of my husband, which I have longed for so much. You know that, however much I loved him, I do not begrudge you him, my dearest, whom he himself and I offered to you for the help of the Holy Land. If I were allowed to have his company, I would prefer him to all the delights of the world, and would go begging with him forever; but against your will, as you are my witness, I would not buy back his life with a single hair. Now I commend his soul and myself to your grace. Your will be done with us." This is true love, where one's neighbor is loved in such a way that he is not put before the love of God!

Afterward, with her husband's vassals, who were carrying his bones to be buried in the monastery of the monks at Reinhardsbrunn,[3] she went back to Thuringia, for they promised to see to the recovery of her dower; otherwise the bishop would not have entrusted her to those nobles unless they gave security that her interests would be looked after. But after her husband's burial her interests were neglected by everyone, and she remained in her former beggary and want,

until, at the command of Master Conrad, she moved to Marburg.

---

[1] The Benedictine abbess of Kitzingen was Mechtild, a sister of Elizabeth's mother. The Bishop of Bamberg was Ekbert, her mother's brother, mentioned at the beginning of the Life.

[2] Pottenstein is a castle of the bishops of Bamberg in Franconia. Louis's bones were brought back from Italy by his knights and reached Bamberg in the spring of 1228.

[3] Reinhardsbrunn, near Gotha, was the Benedictine monastery where the landgraves of Thuringia were buried.

Chapter 21. At Marburg: the gray habit and the hospital

There, like the turtledove, she despised the joys and delights of this world and put on the gray habit, very cheap and despised.[1] There she gave away to the poor, at different times, nearly two thousand marks that she received for her dower; on one single day she gave out five hundred marks to a countless crowd of poor people gathered together.[2] Besides this, she renounced the world and gave away to the needy the ornaments

that were left of those she had brought from the house of her father, the King of Hungary, and everything else she had.

She also founded a hospital for receiving pilgrims and the poor outside the walls of the town of Marburg, on the level ground of the valley, for the town itself is built on a hill. Master Conrad was the director of this hospital; he lived in it and went out from it to preach, until the time he was killed. In this hospital blessed Elizabeth, true to the meaning of her name, fed Christ in his members, like Martha, and was fed with the word of divine preaching, like Mary. For Elizabeth, as was said above, means "the fullness of my God."

Because of what seemed to them a foolish giving away of that money, and because she had taken such a mean habit, the blessed woman had to bear abuse, insults, and great contempt from the great lords and the men of the land, so that her own people did not care to see her or speak to her, thinking her a fool and out of her mind. And when such insults could not turn her from her purpose, and she even rejoiced the more at the insults heaped on her, they reproached her, and she shunned their voices like the songs of the Sirens:[3] they said she had forgotten her husband's death far too quickly, and that she was rejoicing over what she should be grieving for.

But she listened to such words with a deaf ear, and heeded in deed the words of Master Conrad, her teacher, who had urged her to despise earthly things. And so she prayed to God, first, that he would put contempt for temporal things into her heart; then, that he would take from her the natural love she had for her children; and also, that she might think nothing of the insults heaped on her. And feeling that she had been heard in these three things, she said to her maids: "The Lord has heard my prayers. See, all the worldly possessions that I once loved I now count as dung. My children, whom the Lord gave me, I regard as strangers, as he is my witness. In losses, in slanders, and in being despised I delight and rejoice. I love nothing purely except God, who gave me everything."[4]

---

[1] The turtledove, which was believed to take no second mate after losing its first, was the old symbol of the faithful widow.

[2] A mark was a weight of silver, about half a pound. Two thousand marks was a very large fortune.

[3] The Sirens of the old Greek story lured sailors to their death with their singing. The Latin of this sentence is a little confused in the printed text; the translation gives its plain sense.

[4] Philippians 3:8. Her words about her children, which sound hard to modern ears, mean that she had given them wholly to God; she had already seen that they were well provided for.

Chapter 22. Master Conrad tests her obedience

Master Conrad, to whom she had made her vow of obedience, tested blessed Elizabeth's constancy in many ways, breaking her will in everything, so that by this her merit, as one who obeyed, might grow all the more. For this reason, to afflict her more, he commanded her things that went against her heart, and he sent away from her, one by one, those in her household whom she loved most. He took away from her service that very Isentrude spoken of above, whom she loved as her own soul, and she let her go with great heaviness of heart and endless tears. Last of all he sent away from her Guda, her companion of the same age, who had lived with her from childhood, with whom she was of one heart and one soul in the Lord; and in this he saddened her soul very much.

Master Conrad is said to have done this out of a kind of good zeal and with this intention: he feared that they might talk with her about her past worldly glory and so turn her mind away from the state of perfection. He took away from the blessed woman all human comfort in these religious women, saying that one must cling to God, not to man. That valiant woman, who had "put her hand to strong things,"[1] knew that Christ, who is the strength of God, had said, "I have not come to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me," that is, the Father;[2] and she bore all these things without a murmur in her heart and without a word of protest. She was so obedient to Master Conrad in these various commands that when these religious women came to see

her at times, she did not dare give them anything at all, not even food, or talk with them without permission. Besides this, God's handmaid bore with the greatest patience and joy many other hardships, and contempt, and many blows, which the oft-mentioned Conrad inflicted on her so that she would not fall away from her purpose.

In all these things the oft-mentioned religious women, Isentrude and Guda, agree completely. They were examined separately and affirmed on oath that these things were true; and when they were asked how they knew them, they answered that they had seen them with their own eyes, having lived with blessed Elizabeth for many years.

---

[1] Proverbs 31:19, from the praise of the valiant woman.

[2] John 6:38 (the edition refers to John 4:34, a similar saying).

Chapter 23. Landgrave Conrad joins the Teutonic Order; the inquiry into her life

When blessed Elizabeth was shining with many great miracles after her death, Landgrave Conrad, the brother of Louis, a young man of good character, helped no doubt by the prayers of Saint Elizabeth, despised the honors, riches, and glory of this world and turned to the Order of the Teutonic House.[1] Master Conrad had formed this young man in good habits and urged him to despise the world. And so that from good he might become better, helped and inspired by the grace of God, he chose the way of perfection, and to the amazement of many he despised the knighthood of this world, together with his principality, and gave himself up to the knighthood of Christ.

By his favor and help, the lord Pope Gregory and the most serene Emperor of the Romans, Frederick the Second, handed over the hospital of Saint Elizabeth, in which her most holy body rests, with all its possessions and appurtenances, to the hospital of the Teutonic House.[2] And when the religious brothers of that house were working with the lord Pope for the canonization of blessed Elizabeth, and he wished to be more fully assured of the truth of her miracles, he ordered that the witnesses both of blessed Elizabeth's life and of her miracles should be carefully examined, and should state on oath what they had to say. And this was done.

To this general taking of oaths the third and fourth meanings of Saint Elizabeth's name seem to fit. For it means not only "the seventh of my God" or "the fullness of my God," but also "my God has known" or "the oath of my God."[3] The truth that God knew about his handmaid, both in her way of life and in her miracles, needed to be confirmed by sworn testimony, so that men too might know it and believe it. Having put this in because of the oath, let us return to what we left out.

---

[1] Conrad of Thuringia, younger brother of Landgrave Louis, entered the Teutonic Order in 1234 at Marburg and became its Grand Master in 1239. He died in 1240.

[2] Pope Gregory IX confirmed the handing over of Elizabeth's hospital at Marburg to the Teutonic Order in 1234.

[3] These further meanings, too, come from the old lists of Hebrew names. Caesarius ties the last one, "the oath of my God," to the sworn testimony gathered for the canonization.

Chapter 24. The testimony of Elisabeth and of Irmgard

Elisabeth, formerly a maid of blessed Elizabeth, Landgravine of Thuringia, was questioned about the life and conduct of the same blessed Elizabeth and said on oath that after she took the habit she was with her a long time, and that she saw in her many good works, namely of mercy and humility.[1] She called the poorest, the weakest, the sickest, and the most devout to her lodging, where she lived near the town of Marburg, and served them in person. With her maids, women consecrated to God in the gray habit, she prepared food and

served it to the poor who stayed in her house, bathing them and clothing them. Among the many kindnesses that she showed to a little boy with one eye, who was covered with scabs and whom she kept in her hospital, she often carried him in her own arms to relieve himself.

Irmgard, a religious woman dressed in the gray habit, formerly also a maid of blessed Elizabeth, was questioned about her life and answered on oath: "My lady, blessed Elizabeth, after she had put on the gray habit, always used to have poor people in her house near the town of Marburg, and she served them herself. Outside her own house, too, she gave money to many people to take care of the poor. She also took pains to sell her gold rings, her silk veils, and her other finery in secret, so that the poor could be fed with the money." She also told some other works of great, of exceeding mercy, which Elisabeth had told above. It is not superfluous to repeat them, so that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may stand."[2] For she said that Elizabeth carried a little one-eyed boy covered with scabs six times in one day to relieve himself. She herself washed the boy's soiled clothes, and talked to him most cheerfully, petting him like a mother. While doing such works, she used to say: "How good it is for us that we can bathe and clothe our Lord like this!" And the maid answered her: "It is good for us, indeed, with such things; but I don't know whether others would think so."

In the hospital she cared for a leper woman, horribly foul-smelling and full of sores and pus, whom hardly anyone could bear to look at even from a distance because of the horror of it. She used to wash her, clothe her, and treat her with medicines, without any disgust. She threw herself down before her, untied the laces of her shoes, and wanted to take off the shoes themselves, but the woman would not let her. She cut the woman's nails, both on her feet and on her hands, and wiped her ulcerous face, touching it with her own hand. And for a time the woman was healed. Because of the other sick people, she lodged her at the far end of the courtyard, and visited her often and cheered her with words of comfort, very joyfully.

Whatever the poor wanted, she provided as best she could. She was also very careful about the things that concern the salvation of souls. She warned everyone she could not to neglect to have their babies baptized, so that they would not be cheated of Christ, who is the life of souls. She also urged the sick most earnestly not to neglect the medicine of confession and Holy Communion; and those who did not care about these things she rebuked sharply. Once she urged a poor old woman to make her confession and got nowhere; so, seeing that the old woman was drowsy and lazy about confessing, she gave her a few strokes with a switch, and so made the old woman go to confession.[3]

---

[1] This Elisabeth was a maid who served the saint in her last years at Marburg. She was one of the four handmaids whose sworn statements Caesarius had before him.

[2] Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16.

[3] Conrad and his time saw nothing strange in such a correction; it is told here as an example of Elizabeth's anxious care for souls.

Chapter 25. She lives by spinning

After the death of Landgrave Louis, of devout memory, blessed Elizabeth was not allowed for a time to have the use of her husband's goods, being prevented by his brother. She could indeed have had her keep from him at that time; but she did not want to live on plunder and on what was wrung from the poor. She chose rather "to be an outcast in the house of God" and, like Tobias, to lead a poor life, "than to dwell in the tents of sinners."[1] In her need she bore with earning her living like a hired worker and living by the work of her hands. For she spun wool that was sent to her from the convent of Altenberg, as everyone knows, and was paid less for it than it was worth.[2] And she not only lived by her own hands, but, what was a sign of still greater devotion, from that same pay she used to offer a few pennies at God's altar, like the widow in the Gospel.[3]

And, as the said Irmgard testifies, sometimes when she was lying sick in bed she would spin wool, for she did not know how to spin flax. Sometimes her maids would snatch the distaff out of her hands, so that she would spare herself; but so as not to be altogether idle, she would prepare wool for future work by carding it, so as not to "eat the bread of idleness." She truly is that valiant woman of whom Solomon speaks: "She sought wool and flax, and worked them with the skill of her hands"; and further on: "She put her hand to strong things, and her fingers took hold of the spindle."[4] The humbler blessed Elizabeth was, the stronger she was. For "she girded her loins with strength" by the virtue of continence, "and strengthened her arm"[5] for Christ's sake by doing lowly and despised work.

This was a great thing in a king's daughter and a prince's wife.

---

[1] Psalm 83[84]:11. Tobias, or Tobit, was a pattern of the devout poor man.

[2] Altenberg was a convent of Premonstratensian canonesses near Wetzlar. Elizabeth's daughter Gertrude was brought up there and later became its abbess; she is honored as Blessed Gertrude of Altenberg.

[3] Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4.

[4] Proverbs 31:27, 13, and 19.

[5] Proverbs 31:17.

Chapter 26. The Hungarian count finds her spinning

About the same time it happened that the King of Hungary, blessed Elizabeth's father, sent one of his counts, named Pavian, with a large company, to bring his daughter back to his own country; for he had heard that she was almost a beggar and without any comfort.[1] When the count came to the town of Marburg, he found her sitting at the distaff, spinning wool. In his great amazement he crossed himself and said, "Never before has a king's daughter been seen spinning wool!" This is what Solomon had foretold of her: "And her fingers took hold of the spindle." For she did not seek glory outside, but within, as it is written: "All the glory of the king's daughter is within."[2] For the sake of that glory, Elizabeth, the king's daughter, loving poverty and exile, could not be persuaded to return.

At that time God's handmaid had a gray cloak that was much too short for her and had been lengthened with cloth of another color; and the sleeves of her tunic were torn and mended with cloth of another color. Sometimes in winter, because she did not have enough clothes, she lay between two mattresses, lying on one and covering herself with the other, and she would say, "I am lying as if in a coffin." And she rejoiced in her troubles and cared nothing for her bodily comfort.

Once she was invited by the Abbess of Kitzingen, her aunt, and asked to take a bath. Overcome by her pleading, she at last got in; and splashing in the tub with one foot, she stirred the water this way and that and said, "There, I've had my bath," and at once got out of the tub.

How careful her conscience was even in outward things is shown also by what follows. Once, at the time when she was earning her living by the work of her hands, Master Conrad sent for her to come from Marburg to Eisenach. And since she had already received the pay for spinning wool from the convent at Altenberg, she sent back one Cologne penny with some wool that she had not spun, so as not to have anything beyond what was owed her and what she had not earned by her labor.[3]

---

[1] Count Pavian is named only here. The *Sayings of the Four Handmaids* tells of the Hungarian embassy without giving the count's name.

[2] Psalm 44[45]:14 (13 in the Latin numbering used by the edition).

[3] The penny of Cologne was one of the best-known silver coins of the Rhineland.

Chapter 27. The young man who burned with her prayer

How fervent and how powerful her prayer was is shown by the event that follows. The said Elisabeth, the maid of blessed Elizabeth, said on oath that a noblewoman named Gertrude of Leimbach came to visit blessed Elizabeth, and with her came a young man named Berthold, dressed in worldly clothes. Blessed Elizabeth called him to her and said, “You seem to me to be living rather carelessly. Why don’t you serve your Creator?” The young man answered, “O my lady, I beg you to pray for me, that God may be pleased to give me his grace, so that I can serve him.” And she said, “Would you like me to pray for you?” The young man answered, “Indeed I would.” Then she said, “You must make yourself ready to receive grace, by praying along with me, and then I will gladly pray for you.”

At once she knelt down in a suitable place in the monastery church at Wehrda, where she was at the time, and began to pray earnestly for the young man.[1] He too carefully looked for a place to pray in the same church, to make himself ready for grace. When they had been praying together for some time, the young man began to cry out loudly: “O lady, stop praying, for I am fainting away!” For he was set on fire by the great heat of her prayer: outside he was sweating, and inside he was burning, tossing his arms and his whole body this way and that, so that he could say with the prophet of the effect of her holy prayer: “It became like a burning fire in my bones, and I fainted, unable to bear it.”[2] Truly, “the prayer of one who humbles himself pierces the clouds,” and “rises like incense in the sight of God,”[3] setting the sinner’s heart on fire and enlightening it.

The young man’s lady, and the said Elisabeth, Saint Elizabeth’s maid, and Irmgard, who testifies to the same thing on oath, ran up and held him, and they found him all hot from the power of her prayer and his clothes soaked with sweat. He cried out again and again, and at last said, “In the name of the Lord I beg you to stop praying, for I am being consumed by fire!” And those who were holding him could hardly bear the heat with their hands. As soon as blessed Elizabeth stopped praying, the young man felt better in his body. After Saint Elizabeth’s death he joined the Friars Minor. Something similar happened to her on another occasion.

[1] Wehrda is a village just north of Marburg, where there was a convent church. Leimbach is a village in Hesse.

[2] Jeremiah 20:9.

[3] Sirach 35:21; Psalm 140[141]:2.

Chapter 28. The great almsgiving, and the girl with beautiful hair

After much poverty she received a large sum of money for her dower, and she called together the poor and the weak from all around Marburg, for twelve miles, to a certain place on a certain day, and ordered five hundred marks to be given out to them. And so that everything would be done properly and in order, blessed Elizabeth herself went round with her dress girded up, asking the people to sit down, so that she could pass among them and serve them after the example of Christ.[1] A rule was laid down and announced that anyone who moved from his place and took alms a second time, to the disadvantage of the other poor, would have some of his hair cut off as a mark of shame.

Then by chance a young girl named Hildegund, who had very beautiful hair and did not know about the rule, suddenly arrived. She had not come to receive alms but to visit her sick sister. She was brought before blessed Elizabeth as though she had broken the rule, and blessed Elizabeth was asked what should be done with her by law. Seeing the beauty of her hair, she ordered it to be cut off at once. Then the girl, having lost her hair, began to weep aloud. Some people who knew she was innocent came up and said that the girl had been punished unjustly. Blessed Elizabeth answered them: “At least she won’t go to dances with such hair any more.” And at once she had the girl called to her and asked her whether she had never had the thought of leading a better life. The girl answered that, if the beauty of her hair had not held her back, she would long ago have been serving the Lord in the habit

of religion. And God’s handmaid said to her: “I would rather you had lost your hair and were saved, than that you were my daughter and had gained an empire.” Soon the girl took the habit of religion and set herself to

serve the Lord in the hospital, and as a sign of her devotion she hung up her hair there. Hildegund herself told this on oath, and the parish priest of the town and many others testify to the same thing with her.[2]

On the night after the day when the generous alms of five hundred marks were given, while the moon was shining brightly, the stronger poor had gone away, but a great many of the weaker and the sick were still lying by the hedges and in the corners of the courtyard. When blessed Elizabeth saw them, she said to her people, “Look, the weaker ones have stayed behind; let us give them something more.” And she ordered six Cologne pennies to be given to each, and less to the children. Afterward she had loaves brought, and gave them out. When this was done, she said, “Now let us give these people a real treat. Let a long fire be made, and let their feet be washed and anointed.” When this was done, the poor began to sing and be merry. When blessed Elizabeth heard it, she said, “There, I told you we ought to make the poor happy.” And she was “rejoicing with those who rejoice”[3] and exulting with those who exulted.

---

[1] Luke 12:37: “He will gird himself, and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them.”

[2] The parish priest of Marburg. Hildegund’s sworn statement was among the testimonies gathered for the canonization.

[3] Romans 12:15.

Chapter 29. The ungrateful mother

The same Elisabeth as above also said this on oath about Saint Elizabeth. When Christ’s handmaid was at the village of Wehrda, a poor woman gave birth there. But because the poor woman’s hut was too far from blessed Elizabeth’s lodging, she, who never refused anyone mercy, took pity on her and ordered that she be provided with what she needed in a barn next to her house: that a hearth be set up, a fire made, and a mattress with pillows prepared, enough to cover the poor woman. And when the blessed woman came, she had the baby baptized and given her own name, Elizabeth. And when the poor woman was allowed to leave, Christ’s handmaid, out of great compassion of heart, added grace to grace: she gave her her own cloak, and the shoes that she took off her own feet, and seven Cologne pennies, and veils, and the fur of one of her maids, and sleeves to wrap the baby in, and bacon and flour besides. For four weeks she had provided this poor woman with everything she needed to live.

But the woman, forgetting all these kindnesses and returning evil for good, left the baby in the lodging and went away secretly with her husband, to whom blessed Elizabeth had also given new shoes. In the morning God’s handmaid, not knowing this, was in church; remembering the poor woman before Matins began, she called her maid and said, “I have some spices in my purse that the poor woman could use to strengthen herself and the baby; go and take them to her.” When the maid came to the lodging where she thought the poor woman was, the woman had gone and left only the baby in the house. The maid went straight back to her lady and told her what had happened. Blessed Elizabeth said to her, “Go quickly and bring the baby, so that it will not be neglected.” When she had done this, Elizabeth entrusted the baby to the care of the wife of a knight of the same village. And she had the judge of the town called at once, and told him to search the streets and lanes of the town for the baby’s mother.

When the messengers came back having found nothing, the maid told this to blessed Elizabeth, urging her to pray; for she was afraid of Master Conrad and thought he might be upset by such a thing. And the blessed woman said, “I don’t know how to ask for anything. God’s will be done.” But an hour later, called back, I believe, by blessed Elizabeth’s prayers, the poor woman’s husband returned, threw himself down before Christ’s handmaid, and confessed in front of everyone that he had been unable to go on with his wife and had come back against his will, as though forced. Asked where his wife was, he showed them, and she was brought by the maids. She too confessed her sin of ingratitude and said that she had not been able to go on without the baby. And when the bystanders judged that she deserved to be deprived of the cloak and shoes for the vice of ingratitude, and that these should be given to others, blessed Elizabeth answered, “Do what

seems just to you." And the cloak was taken from the ungrateful woman and given to a devout maiden, who soon vowed her chastity to the Lord and promised that she would serve him in the religious habit. The shoes were given to a widow.

But blessed Elizabeth, because she overflowed with the bowels of mercy, felt for the poor woman, and "overcoming evil with good,"[1] ordered that she be given furs and other shoes. And the woman took back the child she had wickedly abandoned and went away.

[1] Romans 12:21.

Chapter 30. Her choice of poverty and obedience; the visit to Altenberg

Irmgard, whom we mentioned above, testifies that she also heard this from blessed Elizabeth's own mouth: "The life of the sisters is the most despised in this world. And if there were any life more despised, I would have chosen it.[1] I could have made my vow of obedience to one of the bishops or abbots, who have possessions; but I thought it would be more useful to me and savor more of humility if I vowed obedience to Master Conrad, who possessed nothing in this life, living as a beggar and having no comfort at all."

She also said that Elizabeth used to fear Master Conrad very much, whom she had chosen as her father in the place of Christ, so that she would say: "If I fear a mortal man so much, how much more is almighty God to be feared, who is the Lord and Judge of all!"

The same Irmgard also said that Master Conrad once ordered blessed Elizabeth to come to Altenberg, because he wanted to take counsel whether he should place her in an anchoress's cell.[2] And the nuns of the convent asked Master Conrad to allow blessed Elizabeth to enter the enclosure and visit them. Master Conrad answered, "Let her go in if she wants to," fully believing that she would not go in. But she, thinking that she had permission, went into the enclosure and visited the sisters. When Master Conrad learned of this, he judged that she had incurred excommunication and quickly called her out. He showed her a book that had been made ready, and asked her whether she was willing to abide by the commands

and to swear to this because of the excommunication she had incurred by entering the enclosure; and she agreed. The same was done with Sister Irmgard, although she had not entered the enclosure but had only stood outside and, taking the key, opened the door. He told her to lie face down with blessed Elizabeth to receive absolution, and he ordered Brother Gerard to beat them well with a rather thick, long rod, while Conrad himself sang the psalm *Miserere mei, Deus*.[3] These disciplines were so severe that three weeks later, as Irmgard used to tell, the scars of the blows could still be seen on her back. Yet, by the same witness, blessed Elizabeth was beaten more harshly still.

Hear the wonderful patience of that holy woman. "We must bear such things gladly," she said, "for it is with us as with the grass that grows in a river. When the river floods and rushes along, the grass bends and is pressed down, and the flood passes over it and flows by without harming it. When the flood stops, the grass stands up again and grows in its fresh green most delightfully. So we too must sometimes be bowed down and humbled, so that afterward we may deserve to be lifted up and comforted with an increase of grace." She had wisdom along with patience, knowing that wisdom is patience's brother. There is no doubt that Conrad's severity was an occasion of great merit for blessed Elizabeth. As she herself admitted above, she feared him greatly, and fear is a great punishment.[4]

The said Irmgard also told other things that show Elizabeth's discretion, her humility, and the other virtues of her soul.

[1] "The sisters" were the gray sisters, the poor women who, like Elizabeth, had taken the gray habit of penitents and served in her hospital.

[2] An anchoress (a “recluse”) lived walled up in a small cell, usually beside a church, in a life of prayer.

[3] Psalm 50[51], the great psalm of repentance. This Brother Gerard is probably the Franciscan who was later killed with Conrad.

[4] 1 John 4:18: “Fear has to do with punishment.”

Chapter 31. Her discretion and her humility with her maids

Blessed Elizabeth was so discreet that she looked for a doctor to set her diet, so that she would not, by taking away too much food from herself, fall into too great bodily weakness and so be unable to serve the Lord with her body. On the other hand she was also afraid of falling into the vice of gluttony if she allowed herself anything in food and drink beyond what nature needed.

She was so humble that she made her maids sit beside her at table and eat with her from the same dish. And though some of them were poor and of low birth, she would not lord it over them or be called “lady,” but instructed them: “You shall speak to me as ‘thou’ and say, ‘Elizabeth, do this or that.’”[1] Once the said Irmgard said to her: “My lady, you are earning merit for yourself through us, but you do not think of our fall. We sit at your side and you eat from our dish. As much merit as comes to you by grace of your humility, so much merit we lose because of the honors you show us.” The blessed woman answered her: “Then you must sit on my lap!” and she made her do it.

Often, too, blessed Elizabeth washed the dishes and pans, which seems to savor even more of humility; and so as not to be stopped by her maids, she sometimes sent them out of the way. And when they came back, they found the dishes and the other kitchen things carefully washed, and sometimes found her still busy at that lowly work.

Blessed Elizabeth also went quite often with her maids to the houses of the poor, having loaves, meat, flour, and other food that the needy could use carried with her, and she gave it all out with her own hand. She carefully looked over their clothes and beds, and when she came home she gave herself to prayer. For she would not leave the quiet of Mary for the service of Martha. And so the sweetness of prayer, or of contemplation, seasoned for her the labor of her works of love; and by the grace of the sweetness she had tasted, she used to honor the relics of the saints most devoutly with burning incense and candles.

Then, coming back again with Leah to the fruitfulness of the active life,[2] when she gave much to the poor at one time, Master Conrad judged her to be indiscreet in this and ordered her to give no more than one penny at a time. So she took care to do one by one what she was not allowed to do all at once. When Conrad realized this, he ordered her not to give pennies any more, but loaves. And she multiplied the loaves as before. So afterward he ordered her to give nothing but pieces of bread. See how, by such a holy trick, she got around Master Conrad’s commands in her works of mercy, while keeping her obedience in everything!

And so once, when she was on her way to visit a certain hermit, and Master Conrad sent her word to come back, she answered the messenger: “We are like the snail, which draws back into its house when it rains. So let us, in order to obey, draw back from the road we had begun to travel.”

---

[1] That is, to use the familiar form of address, as one speaks to an equal or a friend, and not the respectful form used to a great lady. The printed text here calls the maid “Irmindrud”; she seems to be the same Irmgard.

[2] In the Bible, Jacob married Leah and Rachel, the sisters (Genesis 29). Spiritual writers saw Leah, who bore many children, as the active life, and Rachel, who was beautiful but long childless, as the contemplative life.

Chapter 32. Her tears, and the gilded carvings

Blessed Elizabeth was so perfect that she had her own baby, who was a year and a half old, sent away from her altogether, for fear that by loving it too much with a natural love she might be held back and drawn away from the service of God.[1] When she seemed most joyful, this blessed woman would begin to weep most, so that you could see her weeping and rejoicing at the same time. She also had this grace, that when she wept

she never disfigured her face as people do who cry; for the tears ran down from her eyes as from a most joyful and never-failing fountain. And so, about those who wrinkle up and spoil their faces when they weep, she used to say: “People like that seem to frighten the Lord away. Let them give the Lord what they have with joy and gladness.” This shows that the tears she offered in prayer or in compassion for her neighbors were not forced.

When she saw anything that seemed to savor of extravagance or vainglory, she was moved by zeal for justice and could hardly keep silent. So it was that once she came to a monastery of religious who lived on daily alms, and they showed her some carvings in their church, richly gilded. And she said to the religious, about twenty-four of them, who were standing round her: “See, it would have been better

and more useful to have spent this money on your clothing and food than on walls; and you should carry these images in your hearts.” And so when someone told her about a beautiful image that would suit her, she answered, “I have no need of such an image, for I carry it in my heart.”

She was so zealous for holiness that she could not bear it calmly if anyone in her presence spoke idle or angry words; at once she would say, “Where is the Lord now?”

Although much more could still be said about the holiness of her life, that is, about her charity, humility, patience, compassion, chastity, discretion, and the works of mercy that she showed to the wretched, we have thought it right to make an end, lest the very length of it weary our readers; for we are hastening to describe her death.

---

[1] Probably her youngest daughter Gertrude, born after her husband’s death, who was given at the age of about two to the nuns of Altenberg.

Chapter 33. Her last illness and her holy death

When the time drew near at which almighty God wished to reward the great labors, troubles, and distresses of his beloved and chosen Elizabeth, the voice of her beloved knocked at the door of her heart through the sicknesses of the flesh, the voice of one knocking at the door and calling his beloved out of the tent of the body: “Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come! For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers have appeared in our land; the time of pruning has come; the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land; the fig tree has put forth its green figs; the vines in flower give out their fragrance.”[1] As the harshness of winter and rain means the hardships of our pilgrimage, so the flowers, the voice of the turtledove, and the flowering vines mean the delights of the heavenly homeland, to which blessed Elizabeth came through the death of the flesh. The time of pruning is the time of death.

When that time was at hand and Christ’s beloved lay in bed, her oft-mentioned maid Elisabeth heard a most sweet voice, as it were within her throat; and blessed Elizabeth had turned toward the wall. After a while she turned to her maid and said, “Where are you, my dear?” The maid answered, “Here I am, my lady,” and then added, “O my lady, how sweetly you sang!” And the saint asked her whether she had heard the same song. She said, “Yes.” And Elizabeth said: “I tell you, a little bird was singing to me most joyfully between me and the wall, and its sweetness stirred me so that I had to sing along with it.” No wonder that holy soul, about to leave her exile and fly away to the mountain of heaven like a sparrow,[2] sang sweetly at the voice of the turtledove inviting her.

As her oft-mentioned maids sat round their lady as she lay there, grieving deeply over the illness of their loving mother, she said to them, “What would we do if the devil showed himself to us?” When the saint had said this, after a little while she cried out in a loud voice, as though driving away a demon: “Away, away, away!” And then she added: “Now let us talk about God and the Child Jesus, for it is near midnight, the hour when the sweetest Jesus was born and lay in the manger, and created a new star that had never been seen

before."[3]

No doubt she then sensed the presence of both: of the devil, who lies in wait for the heel, that is, the end, of the elect, as we have the example of Saint Martin, at whose death we read that the devil was present;[4] and of Jesus himself. As the devil, by his presence, terrifies, troubles, and saddens the soul that is departing, so Christ gladdens it and strengthens it by the holy sight of him. Of both these sights the bride speaks in the Song of Songs: "Arise, O north wind, and come, O south wind."[5] The north wind is a harsh wind and means the devil, who says, "I will set my throne in the north, and I will be like the Most High." The south wind, which blows from the noonday, means Christ, who is the midday, that is, the mediator between God and men. So blessed Elizabeth said to the devil, "Away, away, away!" so that he would depart; and she said, "Now let us talk about God and the Child Jesus," so that he would stay with her.

When she spoke of the Savior she was full of joy, as though she were not ill at all, so that she said, "Though I am weak, I feel no illness." And in Irmgard's hearing she said, "Now the time is near when almighty God will call those who are his friends," speaking of herself in the plural out of humility. All that day, which came before her most holy death, she remained most devout, waiting for the coming of her Bridegroom, to go in with him to the wedding feast.[6] What else is the oil in the lamp but the grace of devotion in the heart? By devotion the fire of charity is fed, so that it can shine, burn, and last. With her lamp burning, that is, with her charity aflame, this blessed woman went in to the heavenly wedding feast with Christ, whom she loved as her Bridegroom and whom she always strove to receive in his members in her own house as her dearest guest.

At the very hour of her death she lay as if asleep, and so breathed her last.[7] She died, I say, in the faith of holy Church and in firm hope of glory, so that as she died she could say with the psalmist: "In peace, in the selfsame, I will sleep and I will rest"; and in another psalm: "My flesh shall rest in hope."[8] In what hope? In the hope, surely, of a glorious resurrection. "We shall all rise again, but we shall not all be changed."[9] The change of our bodies is their glorification, which is due to the elect alone. They sleep in peace and rest in hope, happily waiting for the day of their glorious resurrection, on which those who sleep will be raised.

---

[1] Song of Songs 2:10–13.

[2] Psalm 10[11]:1: "Fly to the mountain like a sparrow."

[3] A pious tradition held that Christ was born at midnight, and that the star seen by the Wise Men was newly created at his birth.

[4] As St. Martin of Tours lay dying in 397, he saw the devil standing nearby and said to him, "What are you doing here, cruel beast?" (Sulpicius Severus, *Letter* 3). For the devil "lying in wait for the heel," see Genesis 3:15.

[5] Song of Songs 4:16. The words of the devil that follow are from Isaiah 14:13–14.

[6] Matthew 25:1–13, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

[7] Elizabeth died at Marburg about midnight on the night of 16–17 November 1231, at the age of twenty-four.

[8] Psalm 4:9 (4:8 in the edition's numbering); Psalm 15[16]:9.

[9] 1 Corinthians 15:51, as given in the Latin Bible.

Chapter 34. The fragrance of her body; her funeral

No small miracle happened at that time to the dead body of blessed Elizabeth. For though it lay unburied from the hour of her death until the fourth day, no foul smell or uncleanness at all came from that holy body, as usually comes from the bodies of the dead; instead it gave out a most sweet scent, a scent of spices, whose fragrance refreshed everyone so abundantly that one could say of her: "Your shoots are a paradise of pomegranates with the fruits of the orchard, henna with spikenard, spikenard and saffron, sweet cane and cinnamon, with all the trees of Lebanon, myrrh and aloes with all the finest spices."[1]

As that most holy body lay on the bier, wrapped in the gray tunic, with its face bound with cloths, many of those who were there, knowing the holiness of her body and burning with devotion, cut off pieces of her clothes, others tore them, and some cut off the nails of her hands or feet. Some even cut off the tips of her

breasts and one of her fingers, keeping them as relics.[2] How great was the grief of the poor and the sick who flocked there, and how loudly they cried out over the death of so great a mother, cannot be told in a few words. They mourned her with wailing voices as though she had been the dearest mother of them all and had borne them all in the flesh.

While the Office of the Dead was being said, the Abbess of Wetter, who was present, heard the most joyful singing of little birds.[3] Delighted by the sweetness of the singing, and wanting to know where it was coming from, she went out of the church, and behold, she saw a great many little birds gathered on the roof of the church, who seemed with their singing to be keeping the funeral rites. Surely that gathering and that song of the little birds was a figure of the company of the holy angels, who had gathered round this most holy body and had offered her soul to God with songs of praise.

And because blessed Elizabeth had been a noble and devout woman, during all those three days in which her body lay unburied, a countless crowd of people gathered for her funeral from the whole province, from cities, castles, villages, and monasteries; and by them her body was buried with great honor in a small chapel in the hospital at Marburg, which she herself had founded and endowed with possessions.

The most blessed Elizabeth died in the year of the Lord's Incarnation 1230, in the ... year of her life,[4] when the lord Pope Gregory, the ninth of that name, presided over the Roman Church, under Frederick the Second, Emperor of the Romans. Let us therefore give thanks, dearest brothers, to the supreme King and High Priest, Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be honor and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Here ends the Life of blessed Elizabeth.

---

[1] Song of Songs 4:13–14.

[2] Such seizing of relics from the body of a holy person was, sadly, common in the Middle Ages.

[3] Wetter is a town near Marburg with a house of canonesses.

[4] The year 1230 is a mistake in the manuscript; Elizabeth died in November 1231. The number of the year of her life is left blank in the manuscript; she was twenty-four.

Sermon on Her Translation

Part 1. The city set on a hill

"A city set on a hill cannot be hidden!"[1] These are the words of the Savior in the Gospel, and he is speaking here of every just and chosen soul whom he exalts in heaven after the death of the flesh with the dignity of its rewards, and whose special merits he makes known on earth by the glory of miracles. Such was blessed Elizabeth, formerly landgravine, the illustrious daughter of the King of Hungary, whose translation we celebrate today, and who, set now upon the mountain of heaven, is made known through the miracles which we do not doubt are worked every day through her body.

She is truly the holy city, "whose foundations are set on the holy mountains,"[2] the city of God, the city of refuge. Which of the wretched, while she was still living in the valley of tears, ever fled to her and did not find the mercy he sought? She is, I say, a city founded on the faith of the apostles and prophets, always lifted up by the hope of heavenly things, made perfect, and enriched with works of virtue.

Whether you take Bethlehem or Jerusalem to stand for blessed Elizabeth, both cities, by the meaning of their names, fit her virtues. Bethlehem, as is well known, means "house of bread" and stands for the active life; Jerusalem means "vision of peace" and stands for the life that is full of contemplation. How perfect this woman was in both lives, the book of her life shows well enough. Elizabeth means "the fullness of my God," and Bethlehem, as has just been said, means "house of bread." Because this blessed woman always strove to feed Christ in his members, Elizabeth was Bethlehem, the house of bread, not in a figure now, but in reality. She was Jerusalem as well, always seeing the true peace, that is, Christ, whether in prayer, in meditation, or in ecstasy.

---

[1] Matthew 5:14. The sermon was meant for the anniversary of the translation of Elizabeth's relics on 1 May 1236.

[2] Psalm 86[87]:1.

Part 2. The six gates of mercy

We read that the earthly Jerusalem had six gates; and these mean the six works of mercy.[1] Through the gates of the city one goes out to outward actions, and through the same gates one comes in to inner quiet. Blessed Elizabeth practiced the works of mercy in such a way that she did not withdraw from divine contemplation. From the secret place of contemplation she often went out, as through gates of justice, to feed Christ when he was hungry in the poor, to give him drink when he was thirsty, to take him in as a stranger, to clothe him when he was naked, to visit him when he was sick, and to go in person to him when he was in the prison of any kind of need.

---

[1] The six works of mercy named by Christ in Matthew 25:35– 36: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and visiting prisoners. (Burying the dead was later added as a seventh.) Nehemiah 3 names a number of gates in the walls of Jerusalem.

Part 3. The four towers: the cardinal virtues

The towers of this blessed city were the four cardinal virtues, namely justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance.[1] The work of justice is to help the wretched; the work of prudence, to beware of snares; the work of fortitude, to bear troubles; the work of temperance, to curb enticements. The venerable woman Elizabeth, while she was still in the valley of tears, practiced these four virtues very diligently.

By the virtue of justice she helped the wretched so abundantly, that is, the poor and the sick, widows and orphans, pilgrims and strangers, not only serving many of them in person but also giving out a great deal of

money for their needs. For she gave away five hundred marks at one time near the town of Marburg. To her, too, fit the words of David: “He has scattered abroad, he has given to the poor; his justice remains for ever and ever.”[2]

That she guarded in this way against the snares of the devil came from prudence. “Avarice is the root of all evils,” and “the service of idols.”[3] She escaped the snares of this vice when she kept nothing for herself and despised riches.

She stood in the tower of fortitude when she patiently bore all the wrongs done to her, giving thanks to God in everything. For after her husband’s death she was driven out most pitifully from the castle and her other dower possessions, with her children and her maids; but because she was a valiant woman,

she bore it all with an even mind.

She showed the work of temperance in herself when she so curbed the enticements of the flesh that, while her husband was still alive, she vowed continence to God into the hands of Master Conrad, should she happen to outlive him. And this she did, remaining in holy widowhood. And though she was humble and adorned with every virtue, she was careful to live so temperately that she could not be accused of indiscreet abstinence. For this reason she even looked for a doctor to set her diet, so that she would not fall into the vice of gluttony by taking too much food, or be unable to serve God by abstaining too much.

---

[1] The four “cardinal” virtues (from the Latin *cardo*, a hinge) are the virtues on which the moral life turns; see Wisdom 8:7.

[2] Psalm 111[112]:9.

[3] 1 Timothy 6:10; Colossians 3:5.

Part 4. The hidden city, and the danger of pride

As long as she was in this world, blessed Elizabeth was a hidden city. This was because, set in the valley of humility, she did not want the virtues of her soul to be made known by any miracles, knowing that miracles are common to the good and the wicked alike.

We read in the *Lives of the Fathers* of a man whose life was so excellent that he shone with countless miracles and commanded wild beasts. Because of this grace he was lifted up in pride, and, led astray by the spirit of fornication, he fell so badly that he did not deserve to receive the time for repentance that he asked of God. Saint Anthony, understanding his ruin in the spirit, mourned him, saying: “Today a great pillar of the Church has fallen.”[1]

Severus, in his Life of Saint Martin, tells a story that is partly similar but has a different ending. A certain hermit, because of the holiness of his life, had received such power from the Lord that he commanded demons and drove them out of possessed bodies merely by sending them threads from the hem of his hair shirt. Because of the honors paid him for this, he began to be troubled inwardly by vainglory, so that, fearing a fall, he prayed God most earnestly to let the devil have power over him for five months, as over those whom he used to cure. The Lord heard him; and as soon as he began to rage, he was bound in chains; and after five months he was at last cured, not only of the demon but also of the vice of vainglory.[2]

For this reason blessed Elizabeth did not wish to “walk in great things, or in wonders above herself,”[3] but, thinking humbly of herself, she was always careful to guard the grace given to her. Yet her conscience told her that the works of mercy and humility that she practiced were worthy of miracles, as can be proved from certain words of hers. She sometimes used to show her maids, whom she honored as sisters, her sleeves or other bits of her tunic, and in the simplicity of her heart she would say, with a kind of holy joke: “Ladies, if you kept these bits of cloth now, I think you would be wise; for then you would not need to go looking for them after my death, since I shall be a saint, and the Lord will work miracles through me.” If it was a

prophecy, nothing was ever truer. For after her death she shone with miracles so many and so great that hardly anyone could manage, I will not say to write them down, but even to tell them.

[1] This story is told in the Latin *Lives of the Desert Fathers*; St. Anthony of Egypt (died 356) was the father of monks.

[2] Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogues* 1.20. Severus was the friend and biographer of St. Martin of Tours.

[3] Psalm 130[131]:1.

Part 5. The city is set on the mountain: miracles and canonization

The loving Lord, wishing to make known the merits of his handmaid and to place the city of refuge, which had been set in the valley of humility, upon the mountain of heaven, made her tomb famous with so many signs and wonders that crowds of people flocked there from many provinces, to obtain healing or to pray.[1] The blind, the lame, the paralyzed, the deaf, epileptics, and people with all kinds of illnesses were healed there; and, so they say, even the dead were raised to life in that place. For Master Conrad was still alive, and through his efforts some of these miracles were written down. It is known that a great many people came to Marburg to pray or to be healed, not only from the provinces of Mainz and Trier but even from more distant ones, namely those of Cologne, Bremen, and Magdeburg. As some went away, others came, and those who had been healed told the newcomers of the power of God. Many gifts were offered there, and with them a stone church was built over her holy tomb. I was there myself about that time, and I do not remember ever in my whole life seeing so many people together as I saw in and around the town of Marburg at that time. Hardly anyone could get into the church or out of it without great difficulty.

Not long afterward Master Conrad was killed, together with his helper Brother Gerard, by certain men whom he had accused of heresy, and they were buried together in the same church. See, then, how that holy city, the city of refuge, was set in the open upon the mountain by the shining of signs, so that now its glory can hardly be hidden from anyone. Truly, dearest brothers, just as blessed Elizabeth showed herself a city of refuge on earth by lovingly helping the wretched in their needs, as was said above, so she has deserved to be set in heaven as a city of refuge, mercifully hearing the prayers of those who cry to her.

Not long after Master Conrad's death, the devout young man Landgrave Conrad, the brother of Louis who had been blessed Elizabeth's husband, moved by God and by the prayers of both his brother and Saint Elizabeth, despised the world in the flower of his youth and gave himself to the hospital of the Teutonic House. By his favor and help, as was said above, the hospital of blessed Elizabeth at Marburg was given to that same Teutonic House. From that time on the place began to grow more and more in fame and in riches, both because of the glory of its miracles and because of the conversion of illustrious persons.

The religious brothers, seeing the signs and wonders that were happening every day in that place in memory of blessed Elizabeth, began to work for her canonization; several of them, with Brother Conrad, formerly landgrave, went in person to the court of the lord Pope and made known to the Pope, both in writing and by word of mouth, the signs and healings that were taking place in memory of God's handmaid. He granted their petition and ordered the witnesses to the miracles to be carefully examined, knowing that "a city set on a hill cannot be hidden." In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 1235, on the octave of Pentecost, at the city of Perugia in Tuscany, the lord Pope Gregory canonized the venerable handmaid of Christ, Elizabeth, numbering her among the saints, and ordered that the day of her burial, the nineteenth of November, be solemnly kept throughout the whole Church.[2] And so that city was set upon the mountain, so that she who was already holy by her merits might also be called holy by the authority of the Apostolic See.

The Pope's devotion toward her was so great that he sent special letters to the various religious orders of the Church, asking and commanding them to keep the feast of Saint Elizabeth; and this was done. And soon a church of wonderful beauty and size began to be built over her body at great expense, worthy of so great a patroness.[3]

[1] The printed Latin begins this sentence with "Not wishing" (*Nolens*), which must be a slip for "Wishing" (*Volens*); the translation follows the sense.

[2] Elizabeth was canonized by Pope Gregory IX at Perugia on Pentecost Sunday, 27 May 1235; the bull of canonization was issued on 1 June, the octave day. Perugia is in Umbria, though Caesarius calls it a city of Tuscany.

[3] The Church of St. Elizabeth at Marburg, begun in 1235, is one of the first and finest Gothic churches in Germany. Her shrine is still there.

Part 6. The translation of her body

A fixed day was agreed upon and publicly announced on which the translation of her most holy body should take place. In the following year, which was the year 1236 from the Incarnation of the Lord, such crowds of people of both sexes, of every region, rank, and age, flocked together from the various kingdoms, from Germany, Bohemia, Hungary, and France, for the appointed day, the first of May, that their number was beyond all human reckoning. The glorious Emperor of the Romans, Frederick himself, put aside all his affairs and hastened to the feast of the translation, drawn and attracted by the fame of blessed Elizabeth's holiness.

The brothers, knowing how busy the emperor would be, and that the holy body could not easily be dug up when he came, did it three days beforehand. The venerable Ulrich, prior of the house, took seven brothers with him, shut the church door, threw back the earth at night, and opened the grave. And behold, when the stone was removed, such a fragrance poured forth from the holy body that all of them, refreshed by the sweetness of the scent, were filled with wonder and praised God together. For they found the holy little body, which they knew had not been embalmed with spices, entirely whole and incorrupt. Its hands were laid on its breast in the form of a cross. And they marveled much more at this: that so sweet and spicy a scent could come from a body that had been buried for almost five years, when such bodies usually smell very foul.[1]

Does not God's handmaid seem by this very thing to say to you: "My spikenard gave forth its fragrance"?[2] Spikenard is a plant of a warm nature, and it expresses the charity of that blessed woman, whose virtue deserved such a grace. Because Saint Elizabeth, on fire with the love of Christ, did not shrink from the stench and filth of the poor while she lived in the body, there was no foul smell in her body after death, so that she could say those words of incorruptible Wisdom: "Like cinnamon and fragrant balm I gave forth a scent; like choice myrrh I gave forth a sweet odor."[3]

The brothers took the holy body out of the coffin, wrapped it in purple, and laid it in a lead casket, and put it back in the grave. Meanwhile the lord emperor arrived, dressed in a gray tunic and barefoot, with great devotion and humility, the crowds pressing on him from all sides. At dawn on the first of May he came to the place, went down into the grave, and with the princes who stood by him lifted up the casket with the holy body; and with a great shout of the people, while the clergy sang out the praises of God, they carried it to the place prepared for it.

The head of blessed Elizabeth had already been separated from the body; and so that the sight of it would not cause any horror in those who saw it, the brothers removed the flesh, with the skin and hair, from the skull with a little knife. And the emperor placed a golden crown set with precious stones on her head,[4] offering it as a sign of his devotion to Saint Elizabeth, who had been a king's daughter. This translation is celebrated on the sixth day before the Nones of May, that is, on the day after the feast of the apostles Philip and James.[5]

[1] Elizabeth had been buried for four and a half years, from November 1231 to May 1236.

[2] Song of Songs 1:11 (given in the edition as 1:14).

[3] Sirach 24:20.

[4] Psalm 20[21]:4: "You set on his head a crown of precious stone." The skull of St. Elizabeth, with a crown said to be the emperor's gift, is honored today by the Elisabethine Sisters in Vienna.

[5] The feast of Saints Philip and James was then kept on 1 May; "the sixth day before the Nones of May" is 2 May.

Part 7. The holy oil

Wonders follow upon wonders. So, dearest brothers, since the Lord has been pleased to glorify his saint in this way, so that the glory of her merits might shine out still more, and since, as he himself said, "a city set on a hill cannot be hidden," he willed to show in the body of blessed Elizabeth, for his own glory and for our edification, a very great miracle and a very great sign of holiness. For a few days after her translation, when some of the brothers opened the lead casket and looked at the holy body, they saw the purest oil dripping from that holy body. They were filled with wonder and joy at this sight. They gathered up with a cloth the liquid given by God, put it into a little vessel, and kept it to give out to the faithful as a blessing. And the weak and the sick who are anointed with this oil are often healed.

Consider, brothers, how great a privilege has been granted to this saint. Though in the Old Testament there were countless just and chosen people, patriarchs and prophets and a great many others whom Holy Scripture praises, yet we do not read that oil flowed from the body of any one of them after death. Not even to John the Baptist, than whom "no one greater has arisen among those born of women,"[1] was this grace granted. In the New Testament we read of only three whose bodies or bones dripped with oil.

The first of these was the holy martyr Demetrius in Greece, who, I have read, was the brother of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite.[2] His tomb is said to pour out so much oil that his whole church is lit with that oil. And, as I have heard, there is hardly a house in Greece that is without this oil, which they keep as a remedy for illness. When Constantinople was laid waste, some of this oil was brought to us in a little silver vessel stamped with the image of the martyr.[3] And no one doubts that oil flows from the tomb and the bones of Saint Catherine, virgin and martyr.[4] The third to be favored with this privilege is the blessed confessor Nicholas, bishop of the city of Myra.[5] As the fourth sharer in this great glory we have Saint Elizabeth, a widow. And so God has been pleased to honor all the orders of the Church. In the order of martyrs the apostles and married people are also included, since nearly all of them were married and crowned with martyrdom.[6]

As I have heard from some of the brothers of the Teutonic House at Marburg, the oil drips most of all from the feet of Saint Elizabeth. This is so, I think, because she went on foot to the various huts of the poor, visiting them in mercy and doing them good. The olive tree, which produces oil, is a sign of peace and of mercy. For the Greek word *eleos* means "mercy" in Latin.

Because blessed Elizabeth was peaceable and most merciful, it is fitting that she now pours out streams of oil from her body.

---

[1] Matthew 11:11.

[2] St. Demetrius, the great martyr of Thessalonica, was famous for the healing oil (myrrh) that flowed from his tomb. The idea that he was the brother of Dionysius the Areopagite was a Western legend.

[3] Constantinople was sacked by the armies of the Fourth Crusade in 1204, and many relics were brought from there to the West, including the Rhineland.

[4] St. Catherine of Alexandria, whose relics were venerated at Mount Sinai.

[5] St. Nicholas of Myra, whose relics were taken to Bari in Italy in 1087, where the oil called "manna" is still gathered from his tomb.

[6] Caesarius means that, with these four, God honored martyrs (Demetrius), virgins (Catherine), bishops and confessors (Nicholas), and widows (Elizabeth).

Part 8. The cedar, the cypress, the olive, and the plane tree

To her also seem to apply the words that the Holy Spirit speaks through Ecclesiasticus: "I was exalted like a cedar in Lebanon, and like a cypress on Mount Zion"; and a little later: "Like a fair olive tree in the plains,

and like a plane tree by the water in the streets, I was exalted."[1]

The cedar is a fragrant tree whose wood does not rot. It stands for the grace that God gave to blessed Elizabeth's body after death, so that it neither smelled foul nor suffered decay. The cypress is a very tall tree, good for healing bodies. This is the grace of healing that the Lord gave her, since in her soul she has been exalted on Mount Zion, that is, in the height of divine contemplation. The olive bears oil, and oil flows from her body. The plane tree is a broad and spreading tree, which is why the Greeks call it *platan*, "broad."[2] And it is a very tender tree, with soft leaves, growing to the height of a vine, especially by the water in the streets. The miracles that happen at her tomb show well enough how broad and spreading blessed Elizabeth is in charity, and how very tender, by the virtue of compassion, toward those who suffer illnesses and needs. The waters stand for the peoples, because of the flowing away of our mortal life; as it is written, "Many waters are many peoples."[3] And so that she might be near those who are troubled in heart, or in body because of various illnesses, the Lord has set her "by the water in the streets."

Because the venerable Elizabeth, beloved of God, humbled herself in this world for God's sake, God has been pleased to exalt her after death both in heaven and in the world. He has exalted her in heaven, as was said above, by the greatness of her rewards; he has exalted her in the world, as we see and hear every day, by the multitude of her miracles. In heaven she seems to be likened especially to the cedar and the cypress, because of the immensity of her merits; in the world, to the olive and the plane tree, because of the variety of the benefits that she grants to the sick.

---

[1] Sirach 24:17 and 24:19.

[2] The Greek word *platys* means "broad." Caesarius's descriptions of the trees come from the old encyclopedias of natural history.

[3] Revelation 17:15: "The waters that you saw ... are peoples and multitudes."

Part 9. What the oil means

Oil, as experience itself teaches us, feeds, anoints, and gives light. Blessed Elizabeth does not cease to exercise these powers of oil in a spiritual way. Many poor people are fed every day in the hospital that she founded and endowed with possessions. She feeds spiritually, too, whenever she obtains the grace of devotion for sinners by her holy cures. She anoints the sick with her merits, and by her prayers she raises up those who are bowed down; she heals the paralyzed, strengthens the lame, cleanses those possessed by demons, and cures and relieves every other kind of illness. And God has given her this grace too, that she gives light to those who are blind in body and in heart. "He who does not love," as Saint John says, "abides in darkness."[1] So whoever obtains the first grace,[2] she gives light to the blind in mind.

---

[1] 1 John 3:14.

[2] That is, the grace of charity, from which all other graces follow.

Part 10. Why so many miracles through a married woman?

Since blessed Elizabeth was not a virgin in body, but a widow who had known a husband, many people wonder at such glory of miracles in her; and they wonder at it most of all because they know that there have been and are countless consecrated virgins, both in convents and in secular dress, who have not been granted to shine with miracles.

To this the first answer is that neither merit nor reward depends on bodily virginity, but on charity. He who loves more at the end will also have more reward from God. Miracles are not of the substance of holiness, but are certain signs of holiness. If blessed Elizabeth had remained a virgin and had shone with miracles after death, virgins might have thought that she had this grace more by the merit of virginity than by that of charity; and so perhaps virgins might have been puffed up, like the foolish virgins who have no oil in their

vessels.[1] Miracles very easily make the mind proud unless a person is careful. That is why the loving Lord put off the glory of miracles for his handmaid until after her death, since then she could no longer be puffed up.

But the chief reason for her miracles seems to have been this: blessed Elizabeth had been the daughter of a king and the wife of a great prince, and she humbled herself so much that after her husband's death she refused a bridegroom, despised riches and honors, and in great poverty and humility served the poor of Christ, practiced the works of mercy, and for this bore many troubles and persecutions willingly and gladly. So that other noble ladies might do the same by her example, the loving Lord was pleased to honor his handmaid with miracles after her death.

The saints who are in glory do not need the miracles they work; we do. Miracles do not make them better, but us, if only we imitate the works by which they earned their miracles. Since "a city set on a hill cannot be hidden," let us imitate the shining works of Saint Elizabeth, that is, her charity, humility, patience, poverty, and her other virtues, so that the Lord God may be pleased to set us too upon the mountain of heaven: Jesus Christ our Lord, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

[1] Matthew 25:1–13.