Conrad of Marburg

THE SUMMARY OF THE LIFE OF SAINT ELIZABETH

Summa vitae

From the Latin edited by Albert Huyskens, Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der hl. Elisabeth (Marburg, 1908)

English translation

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

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About this translation

Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–1231), also called Elizabeth of Thuringia, was the daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary. As a small child she was sent to Germany to be raised at the court of the landgraves (rulers) of Thuringia, and at fourteen she married the young Landgrave Ludwig IV. The couple were by all accounts devoted to each other and had three children. Ludwig died in 1227 on his way to the Crusade. Elizabeth, widowed at twenty, gave up her life at court and, under the strict direction of her confessor, spent her last years running a hospital for the poor and sick in the small town of Marburg in Hesse. She died there on the night of 16–17 November 1231, at the age of twenty-four.

Her confessor was Master Conrad of Marburg, a learned priest and forceful preacher whom the pope had commissioned to preach in Germany. He was famous for his severity, and he was murdered in 1233 after leading harsh investigations of suspected heretics. Yet he was also the person who knew Elizabeth's inner life best, and almost immediately after her death he began working to have her declared a saint.

The text translated here is the letter Conrad sent to Pope Gregory IX in the summer of 1232. Reports of healings at Elizabeth's tomb were spreading, and the pope had asked for reliable information. Conrad replies by describing how he gathered sworn testimony about the miracles, and then, so that the pope may know "not only about the miracles but also about her way of life," he writes out a "summary of her life" — in Latin, *summa vitae*, which became the letter's usual name. It is the earliest account of Elizabeth's life, written by an eyewitness only months after her death. It is short, but it is vivid and surprisingly personal: Conrad does not hide his own harshness toward her, and at one point he breaks off to say, "May the Lord forgive me!"

In 1233 Conrad and two church leaders, appointed by the pope as an official commission, sent a fuller report to Rome. They included the *Summa vitae* word for word, with a short covering letter of their own, which is also translated here. Elizabeth was declared a saint by Gregory IX at Perugia on Pentecost, 27 May 1235.

The text. This translation was made directly from the Latin as edited by Albert Huyskens, *Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der hl. Elisabeth, Landgräfin von Thüringen* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1908), pages 155–160. Huyskens based his text on three medieval manuscripts, which he calls A, B and C. Where the manuscripts differ in a way that matters for the meaning, the notes say so.

About this translation. The translator has tried to be faithful to the Latin while writing natural modern English. Conrad usually calls Elizabeth simply "E."; for ease of reading, her name is written out in full. The notes are the translator's.

The Covering Letter of the Papal Commission

To the most holy father and lord Gregory, supreme pontiff of the holy Roman Church: Siegfried, by God's mercy Archbishop of Mainz,[1] Raymond, Abbot of Eberbach of the Cistercian Order,[2] and Master Conrad of Marburg, preacher of the word of God,[3] offer their most ready service, with due submission and with a son's reverence and obedience.

We have received your Fatherhood's letter and command. You directed that, keeping before our eyes nothing but reverence for the divine majesty, we should inquire through suitable witnesses into the conduct and life of Elizabeth of blessed memory, the late landgravine, and into the miracles that by God's doing come forth from the holiness of her body; that we should put all this in writing with careful diligence and watchful attention and faithfully keep it; and that, once we had received an apostolic command to do so, we should send it to you under our seals by trustworthy, official messengers.

Humbly obeying your commands, as was our duty, we have examined as carefully and thoroughly as we could the conduct and life of the said landgravine and the miracles that the Lord has worked because of the holiness of her body, and we send them to your Fatherhood in this document. As for her way of life, we

questioned carefully, under a sworn oath given beforehand, both ourselves and her religious, God-fearing household. What we found is contained in the account written below. I, Conrad, a humble preacher, faithfully put it together word for word and sent it to you not long ago; and nothing we have heard since has moved the consciences of the three of us to change anything in this account, to shorten it, or to add to it.

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[1] Siegfried III of Eppstein, Archbishop of Mainz from 1230 to 1249. Marburg lay in his diocese.

[2] Eberbach was a large Cistercian abbey in the Rheingau, west of Mainz. The Cistercians were a strict order of monks; their monasteries appear again at Elizabeth's death and first miracle.

[3] "Master" (*magister*) means Conrad was a university-trained scholar. "Preacher of the word of God" was his official title as a preacher commissioned by the pope. Conrad was murdered on 30 July 1233, before Elizabeth's canonization.

The Letter of Master Conrad of Marburg to the Pope on the Life of Blessed Elizabeth

May it be known to your Holiness, reverend father, that Brother R., your penitentiary,[1] has written to me several times asking me to give you sure information about the miracles that the Lord has worked through the lady Elizabeth, the late Landgravine of Thuringia, whom your Fatherhood had entrusted to my care.[2]

So, recently, on the feast of Saint Lawrence,[3] the lord Archbishop of Mainz was dedicating two altars in the church where the body of this lady is buried. He did so partly at my request and partly because he had clearly received it in a revelation. I had called a great crowd of people there, both for my preaching and for the dedication. In the middle of my sermon, without having planned it beforehand at all, it came into my mind to satisfy your Holiness's wish for sure information about these miracles. So I ordered all those present who had received any healing through the merits of the landgravine to present themselves at about the first hour of the next day[4] to the lord of Mainz and the other prelates who had come for the dedication, each with whatever witnesses he could bring, ready to prove faithfully what grace they had received when they called upon her.

No small crowd gathered, all declaring that they had received some kind of healing through her. Because the lord of Mainz was hurrying away to other pressing business, he had the clearer cases written down and confirmed with his own seal and with the seals of other prelates. The testimony of many prelates and important men who were present was left out, because they did not have their seals with them. But so that you may be more fully informed not only about the miracles but also about her way of life, I am writing out for you a summary of her life.

For two years before she was entrusted to me, while her husband was still living, I was her confessor. I found her lamenting that she had ever been joined in marriage, and that she could not end this present life in the flower of virginity.

At that same time, when her husband was setting out to join the emperor in Apulia,[5] a severe famine broke out throughout all Germany, so that many were dying of hunger. Already then Sister[6] Elizabeth began to grow strong in virtue. All her life she had been a comforter of the poor, and now she became fully a restorer of the hungry. She had a hospital built near one of her castles,[7] and there she gathered in a great many sick and weak people. To everyone who came there asking for alms she gave the help of charity generously — and not only there, but throughout all the lands and borders under her husband's rule. In this way she emptied out all her own income from her husband's four principalities,[8] so that in the end she had all her finery and all her costly clothes sold for the benefit of the poor.

It was her custom to visit all her sick in person twice a day, morning and evening. She herself took care of those who were more repulsive than the rest: some she fed, for some she made their beds, some she carried on her shoulders, and she did many other acts of kindness for them. And in all of this her husband, of blessed memory, was found to be not displeased.[9]

At last, after her husband had died and your Fatherhood had seen fit to entrust her to me, she set herself to strive for the highest perfection. She consulted me about whether she would gain more merit as a recluse, in a convent, or in some other state of life. In the end her mind settled on this: with many tears she begged me to let her go begging from door to door. When I harshly refused, she answered, "I will do something you cannot forbid me."

And on Good Friday itself, when the altars had been stripped,[10] she laid her hands on the altar in a chapel in her town, where she had settled the Friars Minor.[11] There, in the presence of some of the friars, she renounced her relatives and her children, her own will, all the pomp of the world, and all those things that the Savior of the world counsels us in the Gospel to leave behind. She wanted to renounce her property as well, but I held her back, partly because her husband's debts still had to be paid, and partly because of the poor, whom I wanted to be helped from what belonged to her as her dower.[12]

After this, seeing that she might be swallowed up by the noise of the world and the worldly glory of that land where she had lived in splendor while her husband was alive, she followed me — against my wishes — to Marburg, which lay at the very edge of her husband's lands.[13] There in the town she built a hospital, gathering in the sick and the weak. She seated the most wretched and the most despised at her own table. When I scolded her for this, she replied that she received from them a special grace and humility. And like a woman who was, beyond any doubt, most wise, she reminded me of her former life and said that she needed to cure opposites with opposites in this way.[14]

Seeing that she truly wanted to make progress, I cut away all the household she did not need and ordered her to be content with three persons: a lay brother,[15] who looked after her business; a religious young woman of very low standing; and a noble widow who was deaf and very stern. My purpose was that through the maid her humility might grow, and through the stern widow she might be trained in patience. So while the maid cooked the vegetables, the lady washed the dishes, and then the other way around.

Among others, she took in a paralyzed boy, an orphan with neither father nor mother, who suffered from constant bleeding. At night she put him in her own bed, for the sake of greater spiritual discipline,[16] and she endured many hardships because of him: some nights she carried him in her own arms six times, sometimes more, so that he could relieve himself, and she washed his soiled cloths with her own hands, as is necessary with such patients.

When he died, she took in, without my knowledge, a young woman with leprosy, to care for her, and she hid her in her house. She did every act of kindness for her: she humbled herself not only to feed her, make her bed and wash her, but even to take off her shoes, and she especially begged her household not to be offended by this. When I found out — may the Lord forgive me! — because I was afraid she would catch the disease, I punished her very severely.

Finally, after I had sent the leper away and had gone off to distant parts for the work of preaching, she took in a poor little boy who was completely covered with scabs, so that he had not one hair on his head, intending to cure him of the scabs.[17] She cared for him both by washing him and by treating him with medicines — where she learned this, I do not know — and that boy sat by her bed when she was dying.

Besides these works of the active life, I say before God that I have rarely seen a more contemplative woman.[18] For several religious women and men often saw, when she came from her private prayer, that her face shone wonderfully and that something like rays of the sun came from her eyes. And when — as happened rather often — she was carried away in ecstasy for several hours, she afterward went a very long time taking little or no food.

At last, when the time of her death was approaching, though she was still in good health and I was suffering from a rather serious illness, I asked her how she would wish to arrange her way of life if I should die. Then,

prompted by this question, she foretold her own death to me with certainty. On the fourth day after this conversation she fell ill.

She was sick for more than twelve days. Three days before her death she had all worldly people kept away from her, and she would not let even the nobles in, though they had often come to visit her. When those sitting around her bed asked why the visitors were being kept out, she said that she wished to meditate on the Last Judgment, on its strict examination, and on her almighty Judge.

Then, on the Sunday just before the octave of Saint Martin,[19] after Matins had been sung, I heard her confession. But she could remember nothing at all that she had not already confessed to me many times. When I asked what should be done with her property and belongings, she answered that everything she had seemed to own had long since belonged to the poor. She asked me to give everything away to them, except the plain, worn tunic she was wearing, in which she wished to be buried.

When this was done, at about the first hour[20] she received the Body of the Lord. Afterward, until evening, she spoke often about the best things she had heard in sermons, and especially about the raising of Lazarus and how the Lord wept when he raised him.[21] When some of the religious men and women were moved to tears by her words, she said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves."[22]

After saying this she fell silent, and very sweet voices were heard in her throat, though her lips did not move at all. When those sitting around her asked what this was, she asked them whether they had not heard some people singing with her.

After this, from dusk until the first cockcrow, she lay as if rejoicing, showing signs of extraordinary devotion. Then she said, "Look, the hour is near when the Virgin gave birth."[23] Then, very devoutly commending to God all who were sitting with her, she breathed her last, as if gently falling asleep.

Monks of the Cistercian Order and many other religious, hearing of her death, came from all the surrounding country to the hospital where she was to be buried. Because the people in their devotion asked for it, she remained unburied until the following Wednesday.[24] Yet she showed no sign of death at all, except that she was pale; her body stayed as soft as if she were alive, and it gave off a very sweet fragrance.

On the very next day after her burial, the Lord at once began to work through his handmaid. For a certain monk of the Cistercian Order was cured at her tomb of a mental illness[25] that he had suffered for more than forty years, and he swore to this in my presence and in the presence of the parish priest of Marburg.

[She died on the sixteenth day before the Kalends of December, in the twenty-fifth year of her life.][26]

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[1] A penitentiary was a papal official who dealt with matters of conscience and confession. "Brother R." is not named further; he is often identified with the Dominican Raymond of Peñafort, who held this office under Gregory IX, but that is an inference.

[2] After Elizabeth was widowed, Gregory IX placed her under Conrad's protection and spiritual direction.

[3] 10 August 1232. The church was the chapel of Elizabeth's hospital in Marburg, dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi, where she was buried.

[4] 11 August 1232. "The first hour" (Prime) was the first of the daytime hours of prayer, around six or seven in the morning.

[5] Landgrave Ludwig IV went to southern Italy to serve Emperor Frederick II in 1226; the famine of that year is meant. Ludwig died on 11 September 1227 at Otranto, after setting out on the emperor's Crusade.

[6] "Sister" (*soror*): Conrad uses the title of a woman living a religious life, looking ahead to the life she later took up.

[7] This was the hospital below the Wartburg castle, near Eisenach in Thuringia.

[8] The various territories ruled by Ludwig, chiefly Thuringia and Hesse.

[9] Literally "his will was found not displeased." Two of the manuscripts read instead: "and her husband's will did not oppose this."

[10] Good Friday, 24 March 1228. In the liturgy of Holy Week the altars are stripped bare on Maundy Thursday and stay bare on Good Friday.

[11] The Friars Minor are the Franciscans. The chapel was in Eisenach. Elizabeth was strongly drawn to the ideals of St. Francis of Assisi (died 1226).

[12] Her dower was the property set aside for her as a widow under her marriage agreement.

[13] Marburg in Hesse, on the river Lahn. Elizabeth founded her hospital there in 1228.

[14] "Opposites are cured by opposites" was a well-known principle of medieval medicine: having lived in pride and luxury, she wished to heal herself with humility and poverty.

[15] A lay brother (*conversus*) was a man who lived under religious vows but was not a priest or choir monk, and who did practical work.

[16] The Latin word *exercitatio* means training or exercise, here in the spiritual sense of disciplining herself.

[17] "Scabs" (*scabies*) in medieval Latin covered several skin diseases, especially of the scalp.

[18] The "active life" (works of charity) and the "contemplative life" (prayer) were the two classic forms of Christian life. Conrad stresses that Elizabeth excelled in both.

[19] Sunday, 16 November 1231. The feast of St. Martin is 11 November, so its octave (the eighth day) is 18 November. Matins is the night office of prayer, sung before dawn.

[20] About six or seven in the morning, the hour of Prime.

[21] The Gospel of John, chapter 11. "Jesus wept" is John 11:35.

[22] The words of Jesus on the way to the cross, in the Gospel of Luke 23:28.

[23] Midnight, the hour at which, by Christian tradition, Christ was born. She died in the night between 16 and 17 November 1231.

[24] Wednesday, 19 November 1231. The healing of the monk therefore took place on 20 November.

[25] So most manuscripts. Manuscript A reads "a deadly illness."

[26] That is, 16 November; she was twenty-four years old. This closing sentence is found in only one manuscript (C). Huyskens prints it in brackets and thought it most likely did not belong to the original letter. Other sources date her death to the night of 16–17 November or to 17 November, which is her feast day.