

Elizabeth of the Trinity: A Saint for Our Time
by Anthony Lilles

The Church celebrates St. Elizabeth of the Trinity — canonized Oct 16 — on her feast day of Nov 8. Her spiritual mission is to help us pass through the difficulties of our time with a certain greatness of soul, a fitting reminder for Election Day 2016.

In her own words, “We must be mindful of how God is in us in the most intimate way and go about everything with him. Then life is never banal. Even in ordinary tasks, because you do not live for these things, you will go beyond them.”

On Nov. 9, 1906, at the age of 26, she succumbed to the final stages of Addison’s disease, an adrenal disorder which, at the time, was incurable. Her death came amid great social uncertainty for the Church and her Carmelite community in Dijon, France. Earlier that spring, the French government turned against the Church, by advancing a more aggressive secularism. The local Church was already racked with scandal, the local bishop having been removed from office by the Holy See. The state was taking legal action to confiscate Church property and put the Carmelites in exile. Anxiety over social concerns affected daily life for many — except for, perhaps, St. Elizabeth, her Carmel and those to whom she wrote.

When everything seemed to be falling down around her, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity witnessed to the power of the presence of God to establish deep peace in souls. In every lucid moment before her death, even if it was just for a moment, she did everything she could to encourage those she loved. Whether in whispered conversations or responding to letters she received, her messages were tender and filled with compassion. She managed to write a retreat for her sister, a young mother, a second retreat for her Carmelite community and numerous letters.

In the midst of their own questions and concerns, Elizabeth helped her friends discover the mysterious and transforming ways God discloses himself even surrounded by distress. As she explained, “Everything is a sacrament that gives us God.”

St. Elizabeth of the Trinity first discovered the transforming power of God’s presence through her parents and first holy Communion. Hailing from a military family and the elder of two sisters, she was born and baptized at a military camp in 1880. Afterward, the family moved to Dijon, where she grew up and entered a Carmelite monastery.

Joseph Catez, her father, a self-made decorated officer and former POW, died in 1887, when Elizabeth was still a child, but left her with a desire for heaven. Her mother, Marie Rolland, had a profound conversion before her marriage and deeply influenced her husband’s piety.

As a widow with two young girls, Marie moved to an affordable part of town, a few blocks from the parish church of Saint-Michel and across the street from the Carmel that Elizabeth would someday join. Together with her sister, Marguerite, piano, prayer and pilgrimages were important parts of Elizabeth’s upbringing. Also important were vacations with friends and family.

Young Elizabeth had a fiery temper. In a special way, her parent's faith helped her gain a degree of self-mastery, and this was especially true at her first Communion. Witnesses testified to a profound change after Mass. The mystery of Christ's presence drew her to prayer. In St. Elizabeth's own words, she was no longer hungry because "God has fed me."

Her deep prayerfulness impressed the nuns of her community even before she entered. As a teenager, she self-identified with Teresa of Avila's descriptions of the prayer of union. She was also among the first to read an early version of Thérèse of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul*. After reading this work, she resolved to be a Carmelite nun even over the objections of her mother. She had come to see herself as a bride of Christ.

This devotion to Christ moved her to be very involved with her parish before she entered Carmel. She catechized troubled children, first by befriending them and then by teaching them how to draw close to God in prayer. In Dijon, she is honored as much for this work as she is for her spiritual writings.

According to one of the former pastors of Saint-Michel, some of the descendants of the young people that she instructed helped to build a private school now named after her.

In her final days, Addison's disease had emaciated Elizabeth, rendering her unable to eat or drink except for a few drops of water. Difficult thoughts sometimes tormented her as her whole body burned with pain. Yet, throughout everything, she remained devoted to Christ crucified and was completely focused on others. She promised that it would increase her joy in heaven if her friends asked for her help. She was convinced that her mission would be to help souls get out of self-occupation and enter into deep silence in order to encounter the Lord in a transformative way. To this end, she advocated faith in "the all-loving God dwelling in our souls."



Elizabeth regarded the Trinity as the furnace of an *excessive* love. When her prayer evokes "My God, My Three," she invites us to take personal possession of the Trinity. The Trinity is, for her, an interpersonal and dynamic mystery: the Father beholding the Son in the fire of the Holy Spirit. She insisted that, in silent stillness before God, the loving gaze of the Father shines within our hearts until God contemplates the likeness of his Son in the soul. Through the creative action of the Holy Spirit, the more the soul accepts the Father's gaze of love, the more it is transformed into the likeness

of the Word made flesh.

Tradition calls this loving awareness and silent surrender to the gaze of the Father mental prayer or contemplation. Elizabeth roots this in adoration and recollection and advocates its fruitfulness. Through this prayer, we gain access to our true home, the dwelling place of love for which we are created — and this is not in some future moment, but already in the present moment of time, which Elizabeth calls "eternity begun and still in progress."

Such prayer not only sets the soul apart and makes it holy, but it glorifies the Father and even extends the saving work of Christ in the world. She called this "the praise of Glory" and understood this to be her great vocation.

By canonizing Elizabeth of the Trinity, the Church has not only validated her mission, but re-proposed the importance of silent prayer for our time. While she was not engaged in politics, St. Elizabeth was certainly concerned for her friends who were immersed in it. There is power in her prayer. Her community was never evicted or exiled, but moved years later only because it outgrew its original location. The Carmel remains a place of spiritual refreshment to this day.



Through the witness of St. Elizabeth, the Carmelites and her friends chose to allow God to establish them “immovable” in his presence. No political or cultural power deserves an absolute claim over our existence. If we call on St. Elizabeth, the Church affirms that the “Mystic of Dijon” can also help us become “the Praise of Glory,” a sign of hope for others even in the midst of social rancor.

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