



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"The aim of the celebration of the Great Jubilee will be to give glory to the Trinity, from whom everything in the world and in history comes, and to whom everything returns. Thus the Jubilee celebration makes present in an anticipatory way the goal and fulfilment of the life of each Christian and of the whole Church in the Triune God". (Pope John Paul II: TMA n. 55)

"After the third lesson, the reader should chant "Glory be to the Father..." As soon as he has begun, all are to rise from their seats out of honour and reverence for the Blessed Trinity" (HR 9:6-7).

"The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the hierarchy of the truths of the faith" (Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 234).

Monastic Voices

"O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me to forget myself entirely, that I may be established in You, as still and peaceful as if my soul were already in eternity. May nothing disturb my peace or make me leave You, O my Unchanging One, but may each minute carry me further into the depths of Your Mystery.

Give peace to my soul; make it Your heaven, Your beloved dwelling and Your resting place. May I never leave You there alone, but be wholly present, my faith wholly vigilant, wholly adoring, and wholly surrendered to Your creative Action.

O my beloved Christ, crucified by love: I wish to be a bride for Your Heart. I wish to cover You with glory; I wish to love You... even to dying of it! But I feel my weakness, and I ask You to "clothe me with Yourself"; to identify my soul with all the movements of Your Soul; to overwhelm me, to possess me, to substitute Yourself for me, that my life may be but a radiance of Your Life. Come into me as Adorer, as Restorer, as Saviour.

O Eternal Word, Word of my God: I want to spend my life in listening to You; to become wholly teachable that I may learn all from You. Then, through all nights, all voids, all helplessness, I want to gaze on You always and remain in Your great light. O my beloved Star, so fascinate me that I may not withdraw from your radiance.

O consuming Fire, Spirit of Love: "come upon me", and create in my soul a kind of incarnation of the Word: that I may be another humanity for Him, in which He can renew His whole Mystery. And You, O Father: bend lovingly over Your poor little creature; "cover her with Your shadaow", seeing in her only the "Beloved in whom You are well pleased."

O my Three, my All, my Beatitude; infinite Solitude, Immensity in which I lose myself: I surrender myself to You as Your prey. Bury Yourself in me, that I may bury myself in You, until I depart to contemplate in Your light the abyss of Your greatness.

(November 21, 1904.)

Elisabeth of the Trinity ODC, 1880 - 1906; Beatified by Pope John Paul II 25 November 1984

Dear Oblates and friends,

The impression has unfortunately been sometimes given that the mystery of the Holy Trinity is of little relevance to ordinary Christians. It has sometimes been presented as a mathematical conundrum beyond our comprehension: almost impossible to speak about without falling into heresy, and therefore best left to the dry and dusty tomes of the professional theologians.

If such an attitude exists in the Church, then there is an urgent need for it to be corrected. For the Holy Trinity is the central mystery of our faith and life: the source of all the other mysteries of faith, It is the meaning of our belief that God is love. For the 3 Persons are a communion of love, an outpouring and receiving of participated life, a perfect unity which does not smother, but enhances distinction. They are also the ultimate reality, and the source of everything that exists. And through the sending of the Son and the Spirit into the world, God has invited us to participate in His own Trinitarian Life.

I want to introduce you in this letter to someone who understood and entered into the mystery of the Holy Trinity in a way that can be an inspiration and model for all of us. She is a French nun of the Discalced Carmelite monastery of Dijon: Blessed Elisabeth of the Trinity. The desert father Evagrius Ponticus (346-399) has a famous saying which very much applies to her. "If you are a theologian you truly pray. And if you truly pray you are a theologian". Blessed Elisabeth was a great contemplative, whom Hans Urs Von Balthasar has acknowledged also as one of the most important theologians of modern times. Yet she entirely lacked a formal training in academic theology. Perhaps it is precisely because of this that her insights are conveyed with such freshness and immediacy to us today.

As with St. Thérèse, the central message of Elisabeth is easily stated. Thérèse taught, and lived, her "little way" of spiritual childhood. Elisabeth, whose name, very appropriately, means "house of God", taught that the Blessed Trinity dwells in the souls of the baptized. "I have found Heaven on earth", she cried, "because where God is, there is Heaven, and God is in my soul."

The foundation for this doctrine is to be found above all in the discourse of Jesus at the Last Supper, as recorded for us in St. John's Gospel. "If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our dwelling in him" (Jn 14:23). And again: "I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth... You know him, because he is with you, he is in you" (14:16-17). "Abide in me, as I abide in you..." (15:4). "Father, I have given them the glory you gave to me... I have made your name known to them, and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them" (17:22, 26). St. Paul of course teaches the same thing in his own words. For example: "Do you not realise that you are a Temple of God, with the Spirit of God living in you?" (1 Cor 3:16). "All of us, with our unveiled faces like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the image that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory; this is the working of the Lord who is Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). "No longer I, but Christ living in me" (Gal 2:20). "Knowing the love of Christ...may you be filled with the utter fullness of God" (Eph 3:19).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church briefly states the doctrine in number 260. For illustration, it then sets out the wonderful Prayer of Blessed Elisabeth which I have written out on page one.

In many ways, Elisabeth resembles St. Thérèse, whom she already regarded as a Saint, and whose writings she knew well. Thérèse was born in 1873; Elisabeth in 1880. Both lost a beloved parent at an early age. Both wanted to enter Carmel very young: Thérèse succeeded; Elisabeth had to wait until she was 21. Both contracted a horrible, wasting disease and died after terrible suffering: Thérèse aged 24, Elisabeth aged 26. The main works of both were written, under obedience, in the convent infirmary.

But in many ways also the two are like chalk and cheese. Rather like St. John and St. Paul in the New Testament, they remain quite different from each other, but in a complementary way, without conflict. Each unfolds for us his own penetrating understanding of the mystery of Christ. We cannot dispense with either of them. It is no accident that the doctrine of St. Thérèse comes to us chiefly in the form of autobiography. St. Paul, also, can scarcely preach his Gospel without reference to his own story. The spirituality of Elisabeth, on the other hand, is marked by a sublime serenity, rather like that of St. John, who lay close enough to the Lord to hear his heart beat. Like John her tendency is always to efface herself; to disappear: dazzled, taken over, absorbed, by the mystery she contemplates.

The unshakeable peace for which Elisabeth prayed, and which she truly came to possess, was not hers by nature. Born and brought up in a barracks, in childhood she had a fiery temper, and would throw violent tantrums if ever she failed to get her own way. But from the moment of her first Holy Communion, aged 10, she set herself to change. Although always impulsive by temperament, she was deeply attracted to the prayer of loving regard taught by the great Carmelite mystics. An extremely talented musician, she learned the value of exterior and interior silence. Rooting out all the inordinate passions, affections and attachments which disturb interior peace, she became ever more free to give her undivided attention to the God she carried "within".

"I so love this mystery of the Holy Trinity", she wrote; "it is an abyss in which I lose myself!" Elisabeth had a very keen sense of the awesome greatness of God. She often used images of vast oceans, or panoramas, to convey her sense of God's limitlessness. She interpreted the verse of Ps 41, "abyss calls to abyss" as His invitation to us, in our nothingness, to allow ourselves to be filled by Him.

Her favourite book in Scripture was St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The magnificent hymn of blessing, with which it starts, sets out God's fore-ordained plan of salvation in Christ. The words, "Praise of Glory" - in Latin "Laudem Gloriam" - are repeated as a sort of refrain. As St. Paul's words about love in 1 Corinthians 13 had opened for Thérèse the meaning of her vocation, so this phrase did the same for Elisabeth. She even adopted it as a new name for herself. She understood that she was to be a "Praise of Glory", not only in eternity but even now. In this way her life would be an anticipation of Heaven. This was the secret of her continuous prayer. She was once asked to say in what her prayer consisted: "I am silent", she said; "I listen to Him; I love Him".

Elisabeth's famous Prayer to the Trinity makes clear that she related to each of the divine Persons separately, as well as to the One God. She was intensely aware of her adoption into Christ's own Sonship through her baptism. And she understood that the business of her life was to allow herself to be ever more fully transformed, by the Holy Spirit, into the likeness of Him who is the perfect image of the Father. Conformity to Jesus Christ, of course, means sharing in His self-giving love. And so she described her vocation: "A Carmelite is a soul who has gazed on the Crucified one; who has seen Him offering Himself as a Victim to His Father for souls and, recollecting herself in this great vision of the charity of Christ, has understood the passionate love of His Soul, and has wanted to do as He did!" As she felt her life slip away, then, she prayed "O Love, Love! Consume my whole being for your glory, that it may be poured out, drop by drop, for Your Church."

A friend once wrote to ask her what she did all day in her monastery. Was it not all rather dull? "If only you knew", she replied, "how quickly time passes in Carmel! Here, there is no longer anything but Him. He is All, He suffices and we live by Him alone. I find Him everywhere, while doing the wash as well as by praying.... The life of a Carmelite is a communion with God from morning to evening, and from evening to morning. If He did not fill our cells and our cloisters, how empty they would be! But through everything we see Him, for we bear Him within us, and our life is an anticipated Heaven.... He dwells in me, and I in Him. I have only to love Him and let myself be loved - at all times and under all circumstances; to wake in love, to act in love, to sleep in love, my soul in His Soul, my heart in His Heart". Obviously none of this has anything to do with subjective feelings, or imagination. It is rather the exercise, to a heroic degree, of the virtue of faith. Its validity was tested, and strengthened, for Elisabeth, during her protracted final illness, which was accompanied also by a sense of spiritual desolation: what St. John of the Cross called the "dark night of the soul". Her attitude in face of this is manifested in a reply she sent to someone who thought their own sufferings unbearable: "We must not stop before the cross and regard it in itself, but recollecting ourselves in the light of faith, we must rise higher and think that it is the instrument which is obeying divine Love... Believe always in His love. If you have something to suffer it is because you are more loved. Love Him and sing 'Deo gratias!' Whether a great suffering or quite a little sacrifice is offered you, think immediately that this is 'your Hour': the Hour when you are going to prove your love for Him who loved you unto folly."

It is worth stressing that Elisabeth's message applies to all Christians, not just to enclosed nuns. Indeed almost all of her writings, in letters and retreat notes, are addressed to lay people: her family and friends, living ordinary lives in the world. Like Thérèse, she wanted others to follow the way she had discovered. And like Thérèse, she felt that she had an enduring mission for the whole Church. "I should like to be all silence and adoration, in order to penetrate ever more deeply into Him: to become so filled with Him so as to be able to give Him - by prayer - to those poor souls who do not know the gift of God. I think that in Heaven my mission will be to draw souls by helping them to go out of themselves, in order to cling to God by a wholly simple and loving movement; to keep them in this great silence within, which will allow God to communicate Himself to them, and to transform them into Himself."

This Benedictine monk, at least, finds Blessed Elisabeth's message enormously attractive. I think it is also very important, when so much these days tempts us to live superficially. Above all she reminds us of the greatness of our vocation, and our destiny, as Christians. God has given us as share in His own glory! Let her dying words then speak for all of us: "I am going to Light, to Love, to Life!"