

The Life of St. Elizabeth



Wife, Mother, Religious, Widow



Queen Gertrude, mother of St. Elizabeth with infant Elizabeth (Marburg diptych)

1207

The Birth of Elizabeth

Elizabeth was born in Sarospatak, Hungary. Her father was King Andrew of Hungary and her mother, Queen Gertrude. Elizabeth was a descendent of St. Stephen of Hungary, the first Christian king of that country.

Just a few months before Elizabeth was born, a young man in Italy had a powerful conversion experience which changed his life. The young man was Francis of Assisi. Though they never met, they both found holiness in poverty and service of the poor.

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1211

Elizabeth Leaves Hungary

Elizabeth lived in Hungary only the first four years of her life. As was the custom of the time, Elizabeth was engaged to marry soon after she was born. She left Hungary with all of her belongings. She would live most of her life in Thuringia, Germany.

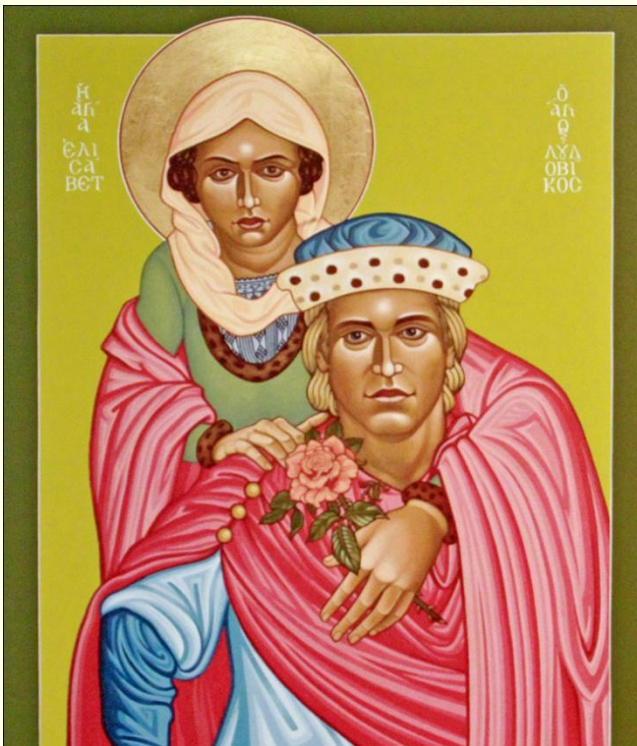
Elizabeth never saw her mother, Gertrude, again. Her mother died when Elizabeth was six years old. She would visit her father King Andrew in 1221, the year of her marriage.



Mosaic in St. Elizabeth's Room, Wartburg Castle

1211

Elizabeth meets Ludwig, her future husband



Ludwig was eleven years old and Elizabeth four years old when they met. She was sent to live with her future husband's family to learn the language and culture of her new home in Germany.

Although the marriage was arranged, they grew to love each other deeply. Throughout their childhood and even during their married life, they always called each other "brother" and "sister."

In the Middle Ages marriage was rarely seen as a way of holiness – that was for those in monasteries and the clergy. Elizabeth shows us that we can grow in holiness in marriage as a spouse and a parent.

©St. Elizabeth of Hungary and Blessed Ludwig of Thuringia,
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1211 – 1227 The Wartburg Castle

Elizabeth lived most of her life in the Wartburg Castle in Eisenach, Germany. The castle was one of the many owned by the Landgrave (Duke) of Thuringia. The great hall was used by the minstrels (Meistersingers), the troubadours of the Middle Ages.



Wartburg Castle in the Evening

When the Franciscan Friars first came to the Wartburg around 1221, they sang the songs of St. Francis, the Fioretti, and were called the “minstrels of God.”

Elizabeth realized that Francis of Assisi was living a life just as she was trying to do: one of poverty, prayer and service of the poor.

1221 – 1227 Elizabeth Cares for a Leper

Elizabeth refused to be the Duchess and live separately from her subjects – she had to be with her people, especially the poor. She believed, like St. Francis, that Jesus is present in the poorest of the poor.



Outdoor bas-relief, St. Ann, Eisenach

In this picture Elizabeth is shown caring for a leper, considered untouchable and hopeless.

As the years went on, Elizabeth gave away more and more of her possessions, especially her luxurious clothing, to the poor she would meet outside the Wartburg Castle.

At the Wartburg Castle, Elizabeth also gave away food for the poor, including emptying the castle granaries during a time of famine. In addition, she built a small hospital there and cared for the sick and the dying.

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1221 – 1227

Elizabeth Places Her Crown on the Altar



Mosaic in St. Elizabeth's room, Wartburg Castle

Elizabeth was a faithful Catholic woman always devoted to prayer and the sacraments, especially the mass. In this image, Elizabeth, Duchess of Thuringia, is pictured placing her crown on the altar. She was at the celebration of mass and felt overwhelmed with the majesty of Jesus. Elizabeth could no longer be in God's presence with her crown on – she took it off as a sign of humility and poverty. Elizabeth believed that before God we are all poor. All of us depend on his mercy and love.

1227

Miracle of the Cross

Ludwig and Elizabeth were both devoted to prayer and to helping the poor. Ludwig always supported his wife in her work with the sick and the poor.

One of the legends tells how Elizabeth was worried about the health of a leper. She placed the leper in her bed to keep him warm. When Ludwig came into the room he did not see a leper. Instead, he saw the Cross of Christ, a sign that Jesus is present in the poor and the sick.



Diptych from St. Elizabeth's Cathedral, Marburg

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1227

Death of Ludwig

In 1227 Ludwig set out on the Fifth Crusade. He never reached the Holy Land, dying in Otranto. The news did not reach Elizabeth until October, just after she had given birth to her third child. Elizabeth, who was only twenty years old, cried out, “The world with all its joys is now dead to me.”



Mosaic in St. Elizabeth's room,
Wartburg Castle

1228

Elizabeth Takes Vows as a Franciscan Penitent

On Good Friday, 1228, in the Franciscan house at Eisenach near the Wartburg Castle, Elizabeth formally renounced the world. Before God she proclaimed her desire to live in poverty, chastity, and obedience. She was a Franciscan Penitent and lived in constant conversion.

At this time, women religious had to enter the cloister and live there. Elizabeth had no desire to live apart from the world. She wanted to live with the poor and to serve them. Elizabeth chose to wear a patched grey “habit of penance” and a cord around her waist.

During the Middle Ages there was no official form of religious life that enabled her to do this – so she decided to create a new way!

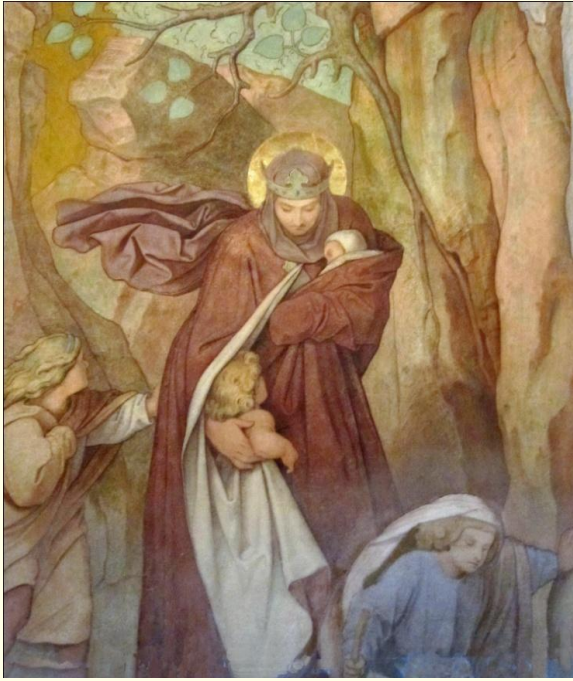


St. Elizabeth takes her vows as a Franciscan

Today we understand that Elizabeth and her four handmaids were living as “third order” Franciscans. Elizabeth is one of the patrons of the Third Order Franciscans, like the Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn and the Secular Franciscan Order.

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Elizabeth and Her Children Expelled from the Wartburg



Mural in Wartburg Castle

After the death of Ludwig, Elizabeth continued her work with the poor, especially giving away money and food. This did not sit well with Ludwig's family and they insisted that Elizabeth leave the Wartburg Castle. She took her three children with her.

Soon Ludwig's family insisted that the children, but not their mother, come back to the Castle. Elizabeth was permitted to visit them occasionally. As was the custom of the time, each of her children was sent away for education, care, and eventually marriage.

Her oldest son, Hermann, inherited his father's kingdom and died when he was only nineteen. Sophia married Henry II, Duke of Brabant. Because of this marriage, many European royalty today are related to Elizabeth of Hungary. The youngest, Gertrude, born soon after Ludwig died, became the abbess of the convent in Altenberg and is venerated as a holy woman, like her mother.

All of Elizabeth's children were alive when their mother was canonized in 1235.

1228

Elizabeth Goes to Marburg

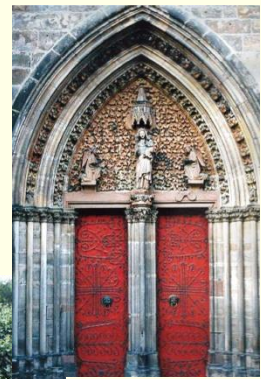
In this image, one of the doorways of the Marburg Cathedral is dedicated to St. Elizabeth. Construction began in 1235, the year she was canonized.

Ludwig had given Elizabeth control over the estate and castle in Marburg, Germany. She moved there and began to serve the poor and the sick as a Franciscan Penitent.

She realized that the sick needed a hospital, so she used the remainder of her money to build a hospital near the castle.



Ruins from St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Marburg



Main doors,
St. Elizabeth's
Cathedral,
Marburg

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Her family was not happy with this use of her money, and she was driven from the castle. She took residence with her four handmaids and served in the hospital.

Elizabeth desired, like St. Francis, to beg for her food. However, the church authorities forbade a member of royalty from doing this. Cleverly she found a way to beg by hanging a cup outside her window where people would place donations, which she used for her food. The rest she gave away to the poor.



The death of St. Elizabeth (19th century depiction)



Funeral procession of St. Elizabeth
(Wartburg mural)

November 17, 1231 The Death of Elizabeth

During the last three years of her life, Elizabeth was ill very often, but she never let her sicknesses keep her from serving the poor.

As Elizabeth lay dying, she was asked what she wanted done with her belongings. Elizabeth said that everything she owned really belonged to the poor. She wanted only to be buried in the simple grey tunic she wore, her habit of penance.

Elizabeth died shortly after midnight on November 17, 1231. She was twenty-four years old.

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2012

St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish Jubilee

St. Elizabeth was a remarkable woman of the Middle Ages who lived the gospel of Christ. She was a woman of deep prayer and unshakeable faith. She faced many sorrows in her life, especially the death of her husband. She lived a life of love for the sick and the homeless and always had a special love of children.



"St. Elizabeth and her husband Ludwig feed the poor",
Artist Unknown, ca. 1900. Restored
and donated to our parish in 2011.



Marburg: St. Elizabeth Reliquary



Marburg: St. Elizabeth's Cathedral

As we celebrate our parish's 50th Jubilee, St. Elizabeth shows us her holiness as a Wife, a Mother, a Widow, a Religious and a friend of the poor.



Prayer Card Art: Hannah McGowan
Trinity Regional Student

Jubilee Year Prayer

Father, we seek your help during our 50th Jubilee:
send forth your Spirit to make this a time of favor
when our parish grows more forgiving and reconciling,
and alive with faith, hope and charity.

Through the intercession of our parish patroness
St. Elizabeth of Hungary,
wife, mother, religious and widow,
may we follow her example of faithfulness, compassion,
humility, charity and prayerfulness
and make us a living sacrament to all.

We ask this in the name of Jesus your Son, Amen.

Faithfulness ❖ Compassion ❖ Charity ❖ Humility ❖ Prayer