

St. Elizabeth of Hungary

BORN 1207;
DIED 1231
WIDOW
FEAST DAY:
NOVEMBER 17

IN A WEALTHY AND WORLDLY CULTURE, many people may feel that it is too difficult to seek holiness, that there are too many obstacles in the way and, perhaps, it might mean not “fitting in.” St. Elizabeth of Hun-

gary, a royal princess for whom a noble marriage was planned, found support for her desire to love and serve God for all too few years of her life, but still never succumbed to the snares of the world.

Elizabeth was the daughter of the Hungarian King Andrew II and his wife Gertrude, a member of the family of the Andech-Meran counts. Elizabeth was probably born at Pressburg (modern Bratislava, Slovakia). She was born into a holy family; her mother’s sister was St. Hedwig, and one of her great-nieces was St. Elizabeth of Portugal.

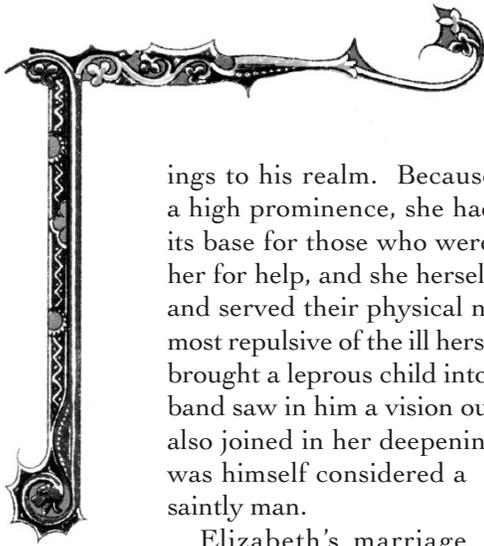
At four, Elizabeth was sent to the court of the landgrave (count) Hermann I of Thuringia (the modern state of Thüringen in north-central Germany) at the castle of Wartburg west of Erfurt to be raised with her future husband, the landgrave’s



son Hermann. Two years after her departure, she was left motherless by Gertrude’s murder in Hungary, but she was cared for with tender love by her future mother-in-law Sophia. When Elizabeth was nine, the younger Hermann died. However, the same political considerations that had prompted

her proposed marriage to Hermann prevailed, and she remained at Wartburg with the understanding that she would be married to the second son, Ludwig, seven years her elder. She showed early a desire for prayer, devotion, and self-mortification so that, despite her exalted future status, her exemplary behavior resulted in hostility from many members of Wartburg’s splendid and worldly culture.

Hermann I died when Elizabeth was fourteen, and in the same year she was married to Ludwig, who had succeeded his father as landgrave. From the beginning, she devoted her life to charity, even when her husband’s officials objected to the expense. Ludwig’s attitude, however, was that of the Gospel: “[S]eek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Mt 6:33); he felt that Elizabeth’s care of the poor would bring only bless-



ings to his realm. Because the castle was on a high prominence, she had a hospital built at its base for those who were unable to come to her for help, and she herself often nursed them and served their physical needs, caring for the most repulsive of the ill herself. Once, when she brought a leprous child into the castle, her husband saw in him a vision our Lord himself. He also joined in her deepening life of prayer and was himself considered a saintly man.

Elizabeth's marriage was exceedingly happy, blessed by a son and two daughters, but when she was barely twenty and heavily pregnant with her second daughter, Ludwig died of an epidemic while part of an army of Crusaders. She was heart-broken, crying out, "The world with all its joys is now dead to me." She and her children, the oldest only five, were exiled by her husband's brother, who did not support her charitable works. This exile evidently was sudden — she was still nursing her infant and it was winter — and she even had to live for a while in a pigsty because her brother-in-law forbade his subjects to shelter her. There is even a story of a woman who shoved her into the water when she was crossing a stream, exclaiming that she wouldn't

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help Elizabeth since she had not, in effect, lived "up to her station in life" as a princess.

Elizabeth eventually found refuge with her uncle, a bishop. Having vowed not to remarry should her husband die, she refused her uncle's efforts to arrange another match, and instead this royal princess entered into the radical poverty of St. Francis of Assisi, who had died only the year before she was widowed. Her children

safely in the hands of relatives, she became a Franciscan tertiary (lay Franciscan), resumed her care of the poor, and founded a hospital named for St. Francis in the city of Marburg (in the modern German state of Hessen north of Frankfurt),

in which she herself worked. Her spiritual life was, for the short time remaining of her life, in the hands of a man whose methods were eventually judged to be too harsh — he forbade her to see her children or friends — but this did not break her. She called herself "grass bent by heavy rain."

Elizabeth did not believe that her high birth excused her from following the call of Jesus to serve the poor, and, unlike the rich young man of the Gospel, she gave up everything to seek perfection.

