

The Elizabeth of the Trinity School of Prayer

Lord teach us to Pray Series

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Part 1

To conclude these **four conferences on prayer**, I propose that we review all that we have studied by using Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity, canonized by Pope Francis, as an illustration.

Before we do, let's find out who this **young Carmelite** is, **daughter** and **granddaughter of an officer**.

The first seven years of the life of Elisabeth Cattez were characterized by great bursts of anger often impossible to control.

Her first confession, however, was a real conversion. From that moment on, she engaged in a struggle against her dominant defects: **anger and sensitivity**.

Her **spiritual combat** will continue until the age of 18. It was evident that with her temperament, Elisabeth would become either a saint or a demon. She became a saint!

A sudden and profound change took place within her one day after receiving communion. She had the impression that the word of **Carmel** was echoing in her soul. It was then, at 17 years old, that her spiritual adventure began. She tried to escape from this sad, seductive world but one does not enter into Carmel like that. Her mother was against it. She could do nothing else but wait for **God's chosen hour**.

So, she began to **socialize** going to parties and other gatherings of all kinds. She was happily mingling with the society in which she lived, but she always fled from sin. In Dijon where she lived, she devoted herself to parish life especially caring for children.

She really liked Francine's pies. Francine was the best pastry chef in Dijon. Elisabeth would laugh heartily talking about the heavy meals that would fill stomachs for three days straight! Remember, Dijon is in Burgundy is where good food and good wine is most appreciated.

But in the midst of these worldly festivities, Elisabeth's **heart** remained **nostalgic** for the Carmel. She liked being alone with Christ. The spiritual battle she led against her defects, the triumph over her nature, and simply because she had changed her focus, resulted in the first manifestation of God's **mystical graces** in her life which would gradually, overtime, transform her life. Then there was her **profession in Carmel** and finally the last six months of her life spent in the infirmary would allow her to make **giant strides**.

In January 1899, at the age of 19, Elisabeth lived her **first divine experiences** during a retreat. This is what she said:

The degree of prayer where God does everything and we do nothing, where He unites our soul so intimately to Himself that it is no longer we who live but God who lives in us.

I recognized moments of sublime ecstasy where the Master often raised me both during this retreat and afterwards. Not only ecstasies but sublime rapture during which the soul forgets everything seeing only its God.

She goes on to say: **Ordinary prayer now seems hard and painful. What an effort one has to put forth to gather together the powers. It seems so difficult.**

These few lines seem to **sum up our spiritual path**. Perhaps you have received the grace of ecstasy that Elisabeth speaks of? She told us that these moments are brief, fleeting while **ordinary prayer** consists mostly of **dryness**. This explains

why we have so much trouble persevering in prayer. If not raptures, maybe you experience union with God which is so important since we were created for it. Elisabeth followed Teresa of Avila's school of prayer and the way of perfection Teresa described. Let me invite you to slowly read Teresa's **Way of Perfection** to encourage the desire to be united with God to grow within you; to experience feeling inhabited by God.

Part 2

It was at the Carmelite monastery that Elisabeth met Father Vallée, a Dominican friar, who confirmed that her movements of **grace** were **gifts** from God.

From then on the **Holy Trinity** would be her **unique life** through all. She entered Carmel and the **watchword** of her **entire inner life** was **to bury myself in the depths of my soul to find God**. Here we find the Augustinian movement, **return to your heart**.

It took all the work of stripping away the world and the supreme grace that transformed her life and clarified its definitive vocation, Elisabeth will be a **Praise of glory to the Trinity**

For Elisabeth, as for all of us, entering into prayer is a **struggle**. Pope Francis said in his homily at the canonization of Elisabeth:

Prayer is a mystery --Crying out to God is not discouragement but if you get discouraged, ask for help to hold on. Prayer is not taking refuge in an ideal world or an escape into a false and selfish tranquility, on the contrary, to pray is to fight and to allow the Holy Spirit to pray in us.

The **first steps** of her **religious life** were full of grace and then God abandoned her to herself for a long year. She was left to her powerlessness, her lassitude, her hesitation about her vocation to Carmel. The facility in prayer disappeared. But, as

with each one of us, she went through a **period of purification and detachment**, the only way to be **freed**.

It is important not to seek consolation in prayer. It is a **quest of pure faith** that brings about a **real conversion**. It is only by relying on faith that we grow.

Confident in the discernment of her spiritual father, she remained in Carmel and she made her profession. At this point, the struggle seemed to lessen. She, of course still had times of turmoil, but gradually a peaceful rhythm was established. A simple life basically reduced to essential moments emphasized in the first three conferences: **be silent; believe in the love deep within our soul that saves us**. Listen to Saint Elisabeth:

I feel so much love in my soul. It is like an ocean in which I immerse myself, lose myself. It is my vision on earth while waiting for the face to face in the light. He is in me, I am in him. I have only to love Him and allow myself be loved always; through it all; wake in love, move in love, go to sleep in love. My soul in His soul, my heart in His heart so that by His touch He purifies me to deliver me from my misery.

All these remarks that Elisabeth makes shows the **unification** of Elisabeth's whole being. But we too can experience the same communion with God even if we have not yet reached the **degree of mystical prayer** of the Saint. Let me encourage you to ask the Lord for such grace.

Part 3

On November 21, 1904, Elisabeth is blessed with a **surge of grace** that **elevates her to the Trinity**:

**Oh my God, Trinity that I adore
Help me to forget myself entirely
To establish myself in You,**

Immobile and peaceful as if my soul were already in eternity

It is necessary to **forget oneself** entirely in order to **purify our lives**, thus the importance of **silence**. What does death to oneself mean? What does to struggle against one's nature, that Saint John of the Cross so often speaks of, mean? Note that it is not our natures that must be crushed, but only what is **out of balance**. Seeking inner silence does not involve killing our natures but probably only lessening the passions that prevent our **inner journey**. Ascetic practices aren't meant to suffocate our natures but rather to set us free which is why it is important that they be lived out in love. Elisabeth states:

**To forget self, to become divine instruments, takes a lot of work
Penance and mortification are only means,
We must not stop at the means,
We must, through penance, find Him
and live only through Him**

It is true that **penance** can be a trap, a stopping point, but ascetic practices serve to make us **divine agents of silence** in our **souls**. This, however, doesn't prevent us from being sensitive souls. Teresa of the Little Flower said that **in giving herself to God, the heart does not lose its natural tenderness, on the contrary, this tenderness grows and becomes more pure, more divine**.

It's not about discarding our sensitivity but our emotional nature that disrupts our peace. It is not about denying our affections and human nature either. God loves us as we are. So, beware of excessive asceticism (or extreme self-discipline). God does not want to destroy us.

The more a soul enters into silence, the more it hears the voice that speaks without

words and more it must be wary because attachments become very subtle .

Saint John of the Cross tells us that **it does not matter whether a bird is tied with a thin string or a rope, if he does not break the thread he will not soar**.

If the soul is bound to something, even with all its virtues, it will never attain the **freedom of divine union**.

We are talking about **spiritual freedom**.

What hinders my freedom? What is preventing me from fully uniting with God? We need to occasionally ask ourselves why we are not able to respond to by vocation to holiness.

The source of freedom is **not free will** but a turning completely towards what I was created for. My **fundamental vocation** is this to live in the **presence of God** in order into **enter into His communion**.

Our freedom needs to be practiced in relationship to a school of prayer. Yet, strive to avoid being attached to methods or pious little habits can stifle and interfere with a life of silence of the soul. We can become so preoccupied with the method that we forget the purpose of what we are doing.

Elisabeth stated the following in a retreat she preached to herself:

The virgins, those who follow the Lamb wherever He goes, are free, stripped of all attachments, except from their love for Him, separated from all especially from themselves, available for anything be it supernatural or natural. What a real freedom from self .

The **supreme goal** of the pursuit of silence is **love**. At the end of this life, we will be judged by how we loved. The seeking of the perfection of love asks that we make sacrifices. But the success of silence does not depend on us. If we struggle to find silence without success is already silence of

the soul if the sacrifice comes from love. Silence and peace are linked.

The soul that has entered into the **mystery of silence** will find a **peaceful solution** to all of life's problems of life, a source of calm amidst the agitation and turmoil of this world. 20

Part 4

Let's examine the last two years of Elizabeth's life. She is no longer on the mount of the **Transfiguration**; she is now experiencing **Golgotha**. It is probably the most **sublime phase** of her life. She is very tired and without God's help would not have been strong enough to continue. It was at the beginning of Lent in 1906 that she read St. Paul's words to the Philippians:

It is for me to know the Christ, to experience the power of His resurrection and to commune with the sufferings of His passion by becoming like Him in his death.

She is taken by these words and discovers that she has a **serious stomach condition** that she called a **mysterious disease**, the **disease of love**. This experience was her definitive entry into a **Transforming Union** with God. Her only desire was to give herself to the **service of souls**. She dreamed of **dying transformed** into the **crucified Christ**.

The fathers of the Church, liked to remind us, that there are **three mountains** (or phases) in the Gospels that we must face in our lives: the **beatitudes** to remember that we are called to happiness; the **Mount Tabor** to permit us to taste life in God; and, **Golgotha** to unite us to the **sufferings of Christ** who loved us so much.

Calvary is the way of the Trinity and so the way of Elizabeth's spiritual life. At the end, her life had been reduced to the **essential**, in other words, the **transformation into Christ for Love**; a **filial intimacy** of every

moment with **Our Lady** and the **Trinitarian** meaning of her Baptism.

She had never seemed so **divine** and so **human**. In the heart of her sufferings, she never stopped **smiling**. In her last words to her Sisters before joining the good Lord she said: **Go towards the light, towards love and towards life.**

Elizabeth's entire spiritual life was established based on the light of so much love. Let's listen again:

It's love that I wish for you. It seems to me that this word contains all holiness; love Him with a love that is not full of passion but of a deep calm. Remain recollected near Him who never changes and whose charity is constant. We go to Him who wants us to belong to Him and who enfolds us. It is good that we no longer live but that He lives in us. That God be our one and all.

Elizabeth found that love was her **vocation**. She exclaimed that she wanted to be a saint to make Him happy. I ask of Him only that I may live exclusively on love. It is my vocation.

When all has died within her, explodes more than ever, the primary place of love, a wellspring of love. It is all that remains writes Elizabeth. This is her last thought as she speaks to her sisters who all around her were praying the prayer of the dying.

In the twilight of life, when all passes, love alone remains. All must be done with love.

Her whole **doctrine** of the **divine residing within** is **summed** up in this continual **exchange of love**. This Being called Love wants to live in company with us.

When Elizabeth devotes herself to the praise of the Trinity, she is consecrating herself, after all, to the praise of love. She wanted to suffer the **martyrdom of love**. To be more exact she wanted to offer herself as a **victim of God's love**.

Elizabeth knows that the origin of all love is found within her intimate being. It is nothing more than the spirit of love and strength that transforms the soul she says. It was given to her to make up for what was lacking within her and the result was a **glorious transformation**.

St. John of the Cross affirms that little is needed for the soul, that is surrendered to love by the virtue of the Holy Spirit, to rise to the **high degree of prayer** discussed here. While still here on earth, we must not wait to experience a face-to-face.

This is what I call a perfect praise of glory says Elizabeth. She knows that only love can come to God. She repeats in her own way the words of Jesus :

It is I who come to bring you unknown joy, to enter into your depths, O my Spouse, I have stopped to rest in You. Now, You stop and rest in me. Love me, your whole life will be pleasing to me as long as you love me. I will do great things in you, I will be known in you, glorified and clarified in you!

Ah, if we could live this out in our lives! Elizabeth's love of God draws her to Him. This love which is God, and by His mere presence, He dispenses a redemptive power that purifies us. Nothing but His presence and a contact is necessary to sanctify what is not yet sanctified. It is only by participating in this loving Presence that the purified soul is filled with the same power. In any case, Elizabeth is convinced that the roles of Martha and Mary are not mutually exclusive. The contemplative life contains as many actions as the active life. This is especially true if the soul gives itself exclusively to God in service. Love in the service to God is always a service in God's work, in other words, souls. This is why Elizabeth wants to wish us love. Let me then conclude with this beautiful quote:

Love takes us by ways that only He knows and He never leads us to retrace on our steps

In the spiritual life, we are either advancing or going backwards, we are never at a standstill. Elisabeth was continually advancing. We too can make continual progress.

In any case, I hope that these Conferences on prayer will revive in all of us a desire for **spiritual openness** leading to **holiness**. Amen