

# Eve of the Feast of Saint Elizabeth

November 16, 2005

Readings and Gospel from Franciscan Lectionary, Franciscan Monastery, Oakland

Homilist: *Sister Donna Maria Moses*

The story of the life of Saint Elizabeth, like the story of many saints' lives, can easily come across as a kind of fairytale. A beautiful princess who is loving and kind to everyone falls into grief and distress. After a few years of ridicule and other trials, she finally achieves her rightful place in the kingdom of God. The End.

Today we think of her as a special example of the way of discipleship. She was a model of the good and worthy wife in the book of Sirach—generous, modest, chaste, beautiful of face, graceful and shapely of figure—a source of happiness and joy to her husband. She was a model of the bereft widow in the letter to Timothy—a model of piety, a mother of three children, a woman of hospitality, a friend of the poor—eager to do every possible good work out of love for Jesus Christ. She is certainly among those lambs recognized by the Lord as one who gave food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, comfort to the ill, and company to the imprisoned. We see in her a reflection of Christ himself, and of St. Francis, who encouraged her and sent her his mantel as a sign of comfort and friendship.

In our times there are many living saints who exemplify the Christian virtues Elizabeth of Hungary modeled so well. But what stands out for me in her story is how very young she was. Married at age 13, she had 3 children in 5 years and was widowed before reaching 19. She was canonized just 4 years after her death at age 24. This young woman practically a child was filled with zeal for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Her passion and her compassion both were fueled by the fires of the vigor of youth. Throughout her life she put the poor first, to the point of emptying the treasury and being cast out on the street with her children to beg from those she had previously helped. Her story calls us to consider where we find the kind of holy madness that drove her to mismanage an earthly fortune and outrage the establishment today? When we do find it, what do we do?

Some young people have exuberance about their faith, fervor to their piety, and righteousness to their speech that can put off mature Christians living simple lives within the norms set down by religious institutions. For very good and unselfish reasons well-meaning Christians caution against zeal, recommend personal restraint and counsel modest speech. The energy of youth is a powerful and beautiful force. Global industries, some of them quite nefarious, are being made rich by capitalizing on that force. At the same time that religious are leaving the field because of shame over Church abuse of the young and a broadening generational gap between religious and the young, the secular world is mustering to capitalize on their passions and zeal. Sometimes in ways we abhor.

As we remember the goodness of this young woman, young mother, young widow, young servant of Christ, may we open our hearts to recognize and reach out to the zealous young. May we find joy in their exuberance and help them to channel their energies in the service of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen