

## ***The Fellowship of His Sufferings': The Example of Elizabeth of the Trinity***

By Jennifer Moorcroft

*To discuss suffering is not easy; it is perhaps the thorniest issue with which we have to grapple in our lives. However, Elizabeth of the Trinity has valuable things to say to us on the subject. She died of Addison's disease, at that time incurable, and the last two years of her life were a painful and agonizing climb to her own Calvary. What she had to say was forged on the fiery anvil of her own experience.*

### **Why Me?**

We frequently ask this question: Why me? Is God punishing me in this sickness? Or if it is someone else when we know and love someone living a good life; why should the innocent suffer? How can a good God send sickness and tragedy?

Suffering is not God's will for us, but a consequence of sin. We live in a fallen world in which sickness, pain and adversity are an inevitable part. Jesus was filled with compassion for those who were suffering, and much of His ministry was taken up with healing. But at the same time, He has invested suffering with something valuable and precious. He actually took on Himself our pain and sickness, and voluntarily died an agonizing death for us. In doing so, He transformed suffering, and He asks us all to take up our own cross daily and follow Him. In this context, far from being a sign of His displeasure, the invitation to have a share in His suffering is a sign of His love for us.

During her life in Carmel, and especially after her own health began to deteriorate, Elizabeth wrote letters to Madame Angles, a close family friend, in which she explored many aspects of the mystery of suffering. This woman had been traumatized by being given insufficient anesthetic during surgery and was facing the prospect of yet another operation. Elizabeth tried to reassure Madame Angles that her suffering was a gift from God: "I see the Master is treating you like a 'bride' and sharing His Cross with you. There is something so great, so divine in suffering! It seems to me that if the blessed in Heaven could envy anything, it would be that treasure." (L 207)

### **Obedience not Sacrifice**

If the invitation to have a share in Christ's sufferings is an expression of God's love for us, then embracing whatever cross God sends us is an expression of our love for Him. However, sickness and pain remain as evil and should not be sought for their own sake. Elizabeth was taught this lesson even as a young girl. Her mother, for example, discovered that she was skipping breakfast and gave her a scolding. Elizabeth noted in her diary: 'Should I carry on?... I don't think so!' (D6) Before Elizabeth's entry into Carmel, the then prioress, Mother Mary of Jesus, had to curb her excessive penances. She forbade her to wear a hairshirt and told her to pray that her severe headaches would cease, as well as the effects of bronchitis. "I have no desire to be cured," Elizabeth wrote in a notebook, "it's so good to suffer for the 'Beloved.' so I'm making this prayer out of obedience" (IN 9). She was learning that obedience and surrender to His will are much more pleasing to God, a message that she passed on to Madame Angles: "Forgetting yourself with respect to your health does not mean neglecting to take care of

yourself, for that is your duty and the best of penances, but do it with great abandonment, saying 'thank you' to God no matter what happens" (L249).

## Opening Caverns of the Heart

There are sufferings which cannot be avoided, which God permits and which He can use to draw us, if we would, closer to Him. Suffering can make us feel helpless and not in control of our own destiny, or even abandoned by God. We might want to bear it for love of God, but feel we are not doing it very well. All this is part of the suffering; it is the process by which God is hollowing us out, humbling us, to give us a greater capacity to receive more of Himself: "Believe that at those times He is hollowing out in your soul greater capacities to receive Him, capacities that are, in a way, as infinite as He Himself" (L 249). It is often only when we look back when the time of trial has passed, that we see it really had been a time of grace and growth.

Elizabeth does not deny that it can drain our inner resources. Madame Angles was feeling the weight of her fatigue and depression, unable to rise above her physical condition. Elizabeth, too, was experiencing the utter fatigue that was a symptom of her disease, but said that this experience of our weakness should not discourage us. Rather, it should make us throw ourselves into the arms of God.

"When your soul is burdened and fatigued by the weight of your body, do not be discouraged, rather go by faith and love to Him who said: 'Come to me and I will refresh you.' As for your spirit, never let yourself be depressed by the thought of your sufferings. The great Saint Paul says, 'Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.' It seems to me the weakest, even the guiltiest, soul is the one that has the most reason for hope; and the act of forgetting self and throwing oneself into the arms of God glorifies Him and gives Him more joy than all the turning inward and all the self-examinations that make one live with one's own infirmities, through the soul possesses at its very center a Savior who wants at every moment to purify it." (L 249)

## Strength in Silence

These words give us an insight into how Elizabeth approached suffering. It was by the way of silence. From the beginning of her religious life it was her watchword, and she followed the Carmelite observance of silence with great fidelity. But it was more than external silence: it was a silence that went to the very heart of her being. To be silent is to refuse a listening ear to the clamoring of self, in order to attend to the word of God within. At every moment, with great gentleness, Elizabeth taught herself to turn away from preoccupation with self, so as to listen to her Savior who dwelt in the center of her being and who at every moment wanted to purify her. This unremitting effort in bearing smaller things-like the cold of the unheated Carmel of those days, the fatigue of daily work, forgetfulness of self-schooled her for the greater Calvary which lay ahead.

"My Rule tells me" 'In silence will your strength be.' It seems to me, therefore; that to keep one's strength for the Lord is to unify one's whole being by means of interior silence, to collect all one's powers in order to employ them in 'the one work of love,' to have this 'single eye' which allows the light of God to enlighten us. A soul that debates with its self, that is taken up with its feelings, and pursues useless thoughts and desires, scatters its forces, for it is not wholly directed toward God" (LR 3).

This gathering up of her whole being into one act of love gave her immense self-control as her illness took hold. She herself saw it as a part of her priesthood of Christ, offering to Him ourselves, our daily lives, our praise; uniting ourselves and all that we are with, above all, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. That also includes whatever sufferings come our way. As she began to realize the seriousness of her illness, Elizabeth turned to the writings of St. Paul, which meant so much to her, to find out from him what her role should now be. She came across the passage: 'That I may know him ... and the fellowship of his suffering, being made conformable to his death' (Phil 3:10). Jesus did indeed ask her to follow Him on her way to Calvary, a path she trod with immense dignity. In her Last Retreat, Elizabeth unconsciously painted her own self-portrait:

“The queen stood at your right hand’: such is the attitude of this soul; she walks the way of Calvary at the right of her Crucified, annihilated, humiliated King, yet always so strong, so calm, so full of majesty as He goes to His passion ‘to make the glory of His grace blaze forth’ according to that so strong expression of St. Paul. He wants to associate His Bride in His work of redemption and this sorrowful way which she follows seems like the path of Beatitude to her, not only because it leads there but also because her holy Master makes her realize that she must go beyond the bitterness in suffering to find in it, as He did, her rest.” (LR13)

### **Breaking-Point and Beyond**

For all Elizabeth’s calm and self-control, the severity of her sufferings would sometimes overwhelm her. One day, she pointed to the window and said to Mother Germaine, “Mother, are you happy to leave me alone like this?” When the prioress did not understand what she meant, Elizabeth continued, “I’m suffering so much that I understand now how people can commit suicide.” Yet her faith gave her the strength she needed, and she continued: “But don’t worry, God is looking after me.”

Without faith, it is easy to think of death as an acceptable solution to suffering. Some months ago, a young man dying of AIDS stated categorically, in support of euthanasia, that there was no value in suffering. This is not something to which a Christian could subscribe. With the pressure to legalize ‘mercy killing’ as a continuing issue, Elizabeth of the Trinity can teach us the value and dignity of uniting our suffering with that of Jesus. It will not only make us more like Him, but also give us a privileged sharing in His redeeming work.

L = Letters of Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity

D = Diary

IN = Intimate Notes

LR = Last Retreat