

Elizabeth of the Trinity: a Carmelite mystic who speaks to us today.

This document is Part One of the summary of an evening session given at Kensington Priory in November 2017 by Roderick Campbell Guion OCDS.

In this session I gave a personal reading of the mystical thought of the French Carmelite Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880-1906). The talk was loosely based on my then recently completed doctoral research at the University of London, where I had been privileged to spend six years becoming familiar with the witness of this truly inspirational woman.

The summary is presented in three parts where each part addresses one of the three main questions that provided the heading for the evening's presentation. They were:

1. Who was Elizabeth of the Trinity?
2. A Carmelite Mystic: what on earth is that?
3. How can Elizabeth speak to us today?

This first paper is primarily addressed to those who are not yet familiar with Elizabeth. If you already fairly familiar Elizabeth's life story you may wish to consider proceeding direct to Part Two, which discusses how we nowadays might understand the term 'mystic' in a Christian context.

Part One: Who was Elizabeth of the Trinity?



Over the last hundred years in the popular mind Elizabeth of the Trinity has often been confused with another great Carmelite saint, Thérèse of Lisieux, as they both lived at the same time, both of them were Carmelite, both were French and both endured painful deaths at a tragically young age. Thérèse is now recognised as a Doctor of the Church having received international attention almost from the time of her death. It is perhaps not surprising that Elizabeth in the meantime should have remained somewhat in her shadow.

My personal suggestion is that after Elizabeth's canonisation on October 16th 2016 it is now time for a gentle correction of this historical imbalance. By this I intend no disrespect to our great saint of Lisieux but seek rather to bring forward what is unique in Elizabeth's own witness. Compared with Thérèse, Elizabeth wrote comparatively little, so the three documents I have prepared are based on my own reading of her life story, which has been interpreted through the diaries and letters that have survived. As a prelude, in Part One of this series of three summaries I set out the main features of her life.

Elizabeth's Family

Elizabeth's mother Marie Rolland came from a military family, the only daughter of a Commandant Rolland and Josephine Klein. Engaged originally to a young cavalry officer in the 3rd Dragoons, her first fiancée was killed during the Franco Prussian war when Marie was 24 years old. On 3rd September 1879 aged 33 she married Joseph Catez, an Army captain who was fifteen years her senior. Elizabeth, their first child, was born on July 18th 1880.

A Difficult Birth

Grace seemed to enter Elizabeth's life from her very birth. Marie experienced a difficult labour for some thirty-six hours and the doctors had already warned her husband that they should not now expect the child to be born alive. Fearing the loss of his wife as well, Joseph asked the camp chaplain to offer a mass for both mother and child. At the very moment that the blessing was offered Elizabeth was safely delivered: 'un cadeau du Ciel' they said, a gift from Heaven.

Elizabeth the Child



Unfortunately for the family, Elizabeth was not born a saint. Indeed as a child she was very strong willed, with a reputation for a tyrannous temper. Neighbours witnessed frequent tantrums as one family friend would later testify:

She was often violent, I recall that one day she had to be locked in the WC, but when inside, Elizabeth just kept kicking at the door.

Another neighbour recalls that they could hear Elizabeth's tirades from across the street. Her mother once even resorted to packing Elizabeth's bags in the hallway and threatening to hand her over to the care of the nuns of Le Bon Pasteur.

Early Tragedy

In 1887 all looked well: Joseph was retired from the Army and Elizabeth now had an adored sister Guite. Tragedy was however to strike twice in one year. In January her much loved grandfather died but worse came in October when Elizabeth's father died without warning and in her presence from a heart attack.

Dijon

The family now moved to Dijon where Marie would have to bring up the children on her own. Despite their reduced circumstances Elizabeth's copious correspondence witnesses to the family being welcomed in the houses of the well connected in both Dijon and the south of France where the family would spend many holidays.

At eight years old Elizabeth resolved to adopt a new sense of responsibility in the family. Here is the resolution she made to her mother on January 1st 1889:

My Dear Little Mother

In wishing you a happy new year I wish to promise you that I will be wise, very obedient, I am not going to make you angry, I am not going to cry anymore and I will be a model child in order to be a pleasure for you....ADDING....I know that you are not going to believe me!¹

Exactly a year later on New Year's Eve we have this:

Here I am again to renew my vows for the New Year. I am going to be a sweet little girl, patient, obedient, hard working and never losing my temper again. Moreover, since I am the oldest I absolutely must show a good example to my little sister; I will never annoy her again.²

But Elizabeth had coded an important bargaining chip to be added to these wonderful words. She continued:

At last you will be the happiest of mothers and because I hope that I will soon have the good fortune to make my first communion.

¹ Letter 4

² Letter 5

First Communion



Elizabeth had longed to make her first communion and in April 1891 just before her eleventh birthday her wish became reality in a day that was to be a rite of passage for her.

She was so overcome by the experience of receiving the host that she was unable to eat anything at the subsequent celebration. Later she told us in a poem that there had been a mysterious exchange: 'where Jesus made his dwelling in me'.³

On the same afternoon she visited Carmel where the nuns gave her a small prayer card with sayings by Teresa of Avila. In the margin the Prioress had penned a note explaining that the meaning of the name Elizabeth in Hebrew signified the 'House of the God of Love'.

It was a day of momentous change:

She had received her Lord

She had visited Carmel

And she now believed herself to be a house within which the Lord might dwell.

With 20/20 hindsight we might say that the rest of her life would be spent in the discovery of the real significance of these simple words that had been sketched onto her prayer card on this momentous day.

Was this the real start of her vocation?

The matter of Elizabeth's vocation was far from simple. In fact we might call it a real problem.

At the age of seven she had confided to Canon Angles a family friend, that she wished to be a nun. Her mother was far from delighted and initially dismissed the idea as a childish fantasy, however it was an idea that would not go away. For the next twelve years this would become the source of ongoing friction between mother and daughter.

³ Poem 47, 19th April 1898.

During this time Elizabeth was a regular visitor to Carmel de Dijon, which was literally on the opposite side of the street from the house where they had now settled. It is surely a mark of her mother's desperation that she should end by forbidding Elizabeth to visit the convent's parlour or even to attend mass in the chapel.

The record may show Marie Rolland as a stern restriction on Elizabeth's young life; indeed after Marie's death Elizabeth's Prioress would describe Mme Catez as both 'quick tempered and very firm'. Her sister Guite would go further - describing their mother as 'temper itself'. We must however have no doubt that whatever the circumstances Elizabeth loved her mother unreservedly.

We must also note that the teenage Elizabeth was far from a recluse. The evidence of the gay chatter of Elizabeth's letters to her many friends and stories from happy family holidays suggest that she would have much to give up if she were to answer her Master's call.

The Musician

Not least of the things to be given up was her precocious talent for the piano. Enrolled at the Dijon Conservatoire from the age of eight Elizabeth had won a series of awards in public competition and at age thirteen a press report would describe her as 'already a distinguished pianist, with excellent fingers, a beautiful tone and a truly musical feeling'.

Her mother clearly nursed hopes of a career in music for Elizabeth – but as her biographer Conrad de Meester notes 'the real problem for Elizabeth was that her music lay elsewhere'.

Carmel de Dijon



On August 2nd 1901, Elizabeth finally entered Carmel as a postulant. Here we see her on the left in her postulants brown gown, sitting next to Mere Germaine in whose

hand is a copy of St Thérèse of Lisieux *Histoire d'une âme*. This was to be a period of great joy for Elizabeth.



For her mother still at home, the above view of Carmel shows what must have seemed a particularly forbidding reminder of their separation when viewed from the family home, which was virtually on the other side of the street.

Life in Carmel was rigorous. Rising at 4.45 for a full day of prayer, work and choir, ending only at 11 pm (and even later on feast days) this allowed the nuns less than 6 hours sleep. There was no heating in the monastery except a small stove in the recreation room.

The sisters were cloistered, permitted only one 30-minute parlour visit and one letter per month from family members. We might ask: 'Why on earth did she do it?'

For Elizabeth there were no such doubts. She adapted to the regime almost immediately. Indeed, so exceptional was her demeanour that the sisters voted to allow her to enter the novitiate after only three months rather than the customary six. On December 8th 1901 Elizabeth took the white veil of a Carmelite novice.

The Novitiate

This early joy was however to be short lived. During her novitiate Elizabeth underwent intense difficulties when her initial high ideals gave way to being plagued by scruples. Her prayer, previously so natural, had now become dry and everything that she had dreamed of for so long now seemed to be darkness.



With hindsight we can see the tension plainly in the above photo taken just before her first profession. Elizabeth with her scruples, her mother convinced that Elizabeth was making a catastrophic error, and her sister Guite somewhat uncomfortably holding the middle ground between them.

Her deepest crisis would finally come on the very eve of her profession when she suddenly felt unable to make her vows. At this critical moment she had a lengthy meeting with her confessor, Père Vergne, who concluded by telling her that he would advise Mère Germaine that she was not yet ready to make her profession the next day.

How are we to understand it when fate intervenes? Is this mere coincidence -or is this what Christians call Grace?

Somehow during this fateful night Elizabeth not only surrendered her scruples but also came to an inner peace that allowed her to make the decision to proceed. At the same time there was a further 'coincidence': Père Vergne somehow forgot to advise Mère Germaine that the ceremony should be delayed or cancelled.

So on 21st January 1903 Elizabeth was formally professed with her first vows.

A Nun at Last

The extraordinary thing is that during this taxing novitiate year Elizabeth had completely internalised her trial by fire, which went unremarked by any other than the novice mistresses and the confessors in whom she confided. What is more remarkable is that the cloud lifted immediately that she was professed and would never return.

The next three years would pass with a rapidly deepening spiritual insight. We might speculate that during this fruitful period of spiritual growth Elizabeth was being conformed to be ready for what would be her personal Calvary: her final illness.

Elizabeth ill

Sometime during 1905 Elizabeth was diagnosed with Addison's disease. Although nowadays this is routinely managed with drugs, in Elizabeth's time it was a slow sentence of death. A failure of the adrenal glands leads to a slow deterioration, culminating in violent sickness, an inability to eat, and raging thirst. Elizabeth would at this time describe herself as being consumed by fire. Initially she refused to compromise, insisting on maintaining the disciplines of monastic life despite the

pain. Finally in March 1906 she was admitted to the convent's sanatorium, where she would remain until her death nine months later.

Crippled by her illness, the paradox was that her spiritual insights would now come to deepen in direct proportion to the acuteness of the pain she suffered.

Three months before she died and now very ill, Elizabeth felt the need to write the four short treatises that record for us the heart of her spiritual doctrine. As a contribution to Christian Mystical Theology these pieces are a gift beyond measure.

Elizabeth dies



Elizabeth finally died on 9th November 1906.

Elizabeth of the Trinity was beatified on November 25th 1984 and canonised on October 16th 2016.

Briefly then, this is the story of Elizabeth's life. It is without doubt an exemplary life but her importance as a teacher must be evaluated in terms of what she is able to say to us today. My own personal reading of Elizabeth is that she makes an important contribution to the ongoing Christian mystical tradition, a tradition that arguably speaks to all Christians at all times.

Before we can evaluate her contribution to this tradition we must first be clear about what we really mean when we use the word 'mystic' in a Christian context.

This question is the subject of Part Two of these notes to which you are now invited to turn.