



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of February 22, 2011,
the Chair of Saint Peter

Dear Friends,

“ONE can have a very thorough ‘intellectual’ knowledge of Christianity, and nevertheless not live it. What must be realized is the fullness of the interior life, the intimate faith that transforms the soul. This is the gift we must unceasingly ask of God, Who alone grants it.” These profound words by Elisabeth Leseur to a friend reveal her soul to us. They explain and illumine her own spiritual journey.

Elisabeth Leseur was born in Paris on October 16, 1866, the first child of Antoine and Marie-Laure Arrighi. Three boys and a girl would follow. Her father, of Corsican origin, was a doctor of law. Due to his hard work, he reached an enviable position in the Law Courts. His mother taught the children to pray and opened them to the love of God. Elisabeth wrote an entry in her first diary on November 14, 1877: “Yesterday I went to catechism for the third time. Oh, that’s what interests me! ... I am very happy, because this week I will go to confession. I really need it.” She established a daily schedule which included meditation, to the best of her ability at her age. She drew from this practice the desire to correct her faults, but it was not easy: “Well, no! I am not better-behaved, on the contrary,” she wrote... “When someone tells me one thing, I say the opposite, especially with Pierre (her brother)... I never want to admit that I am wrong.” In May 1879, she made her first Communion and received the sacrament of Confirmation. Her pronounced taste for all things intellectual and artistic did not make her lose sight of the seriousness of life: “The preacher spoke to us about the mission of the Christian girl and woman,” she recorded during a retreat. “He told us that this mission was divine. That we could, during our time on earth, do much good or much evil... He also told us that we must fear selfishness, thinking only of oneself.” Elisabeth was about twenty years old when she met Felix Leseur.

Born in Reims on March 22, 1861, Felix was the third child in a well-to-do family. His father, a brilliant lawyer, belonged to a variety of Catholic groups. His mother, a woman of great piety, created a home where one was loved and knew how to think of others. Felix received his education in Catholic institutions. An avid reader, he secretly devoured the libertine authors of the eighteenth century and the major novelists of the nineteenth century. His passion was geography, and he was inclined to pursue a career in the French colonies. Out of



Elisabeth and Felix Leseur

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that interest in the faraway places where he wished to be sent, he began by studying medicine in Reims, in a milieu of staunch materialists. He ended up rejecting all dogma and abandoning all religious belief. However, as long as he was living with his family, he did not openly break with the Church, for fear of causing his parents pain. He completed his training at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris. From the start he liked the atmosphere of feverish activity in the capital—he found opportunities everywhere in Paris to learn, but also to be entertained—theatres, concerts, artists’ cabarets... He wrote newspaper articles about the colonies, in which he revealed the breadth of his knowledge and the soundness of his judgment. In a few convincing and well-documented lines, he highlighted facts that were likely to be of interest to the general public.

The same tastes

Friends introduced him to Elisabeth Arrighi, whose cheerfulness, perceptive and penetrating mind, elegant manners, exquisite sensitivity, and deep culture he appreciated. In spite of a difference of opinion on religion, the two young people shared the same tastes, the same reactions to events, the same intellectual curiosities. They became engaged on May 23, 1889. Shortly thereafter, Elisabeth’s parents let Felix know that they would never accept their daughter’s going overseas with him. So he renounced his career in the colonies to marry Elisabeth. This real and deep sign of love, along with

Felix's promise to allow her complete freedom to practice her religion, gave Elisabeth hope that she could help him to return to the faith of his childhood. The wedding took place on July 31, 1889. Towards the end of the summer, Elisabeth fell ill with an abscess of the intestine. It took her several months to recover, and she would suffer aftereffects for the rest of her life.

In March 1892, Felix was hired by a daily newspaper, *La République française*, which had strong anticlerical inclinations. There he published articles on foreign policy and the colonies. In October 1894, he became an editor at *Siècle (Century)*, another very anticlerical Parisian newspaper. Shortly thereafter, he was named to the Superior Colonial Council, and given a residence in Africa. But Felix turned down this post, and joined the board of directors of a large insurance company run by Madame Arrighi's brother. Soon, he took this uncle's place.

Trying not to believe

The Leseurs led a very worldly life. Elisabeth developed a taste for staying out late, dining in fashionable restaurants, and going to shows. Carried away by this materialistic atmosphere, Felix tried to find "reasons not to believe, like a true Christian seeks reasons to believe." He built himself a library in which were found all the great masters of freethinking, modernism, and liberal Protestantism. Little by little, he became intolerant of and even aggressive towards his wife's convictions. Nevertheless, this deep disagreement did not undermine the love that the husband and wife had for one another, nor the intimacy of the household. As for Elisabeth, she developed her general knowledge, in particular by studying Latin, Russian, and Italian. But she also read authors whose thoughts had a detrimental influence on her faith, and she came to lose her ways of recollection.

From 1893 to 1897, Felix and his wife made long journeys abroad—Rome, Algeria, Tunisia, Germany, and Eastern Europe. After returning from the last long tour, Elisabeth abandoned all relationship with God. One day in 1898, she said to her husband: "I have nothing more to read. Give me something." Expecting to complete the destruction of her faith, Felix suggested the works of Renan, a brilliant but rationalist author. Elisabeth began *La Vie de JÉSUS (The Life of JESUS)*. Soon, thanks to her profound intelligence and her vast knowledge, she understood that behind the seductive style was hidden a lack of sincerity and flimsy hypotheses. She took up the Gospels again—in contact with the person and words of JESUS, the intense religiosity of her youth was reawakened. Piqued by the unexpected change in his wife, Felix redoubled his criticisms of Christianity and insisted on mocking that which Elisabeth held most dear. But she gently endured these vexations, and took pains to remain a considerate wife, solicitous and full of love for her husband.

On September 11, 1899, Elisabeth began a new diary. "I have begun to study philosophy," she wrote, "and it interests me greatly. This study makes many things clear, and creates order in the mind. I do not understand why it is not made the capstone of all education for women." She meditated on the Gospels assiduously, and read the writings of the Fathers of the Church and the saints. Her knowledge enabled her to hold up her end of closely argued discussions with her husband and atheist friends. She refuted their arguments with as much gentleness as pertinence.

Renewed by Him

From 1899 to 1901, the Leseurs traveled once again, visiting Russia, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, Spain, Morocco, Belgium, and Holland. At the end of this last journey, they hastily returned to Paris, because Elisabeth was suffering from liver problems. In 1902, they spent the summer in the house they had had built in Jougne, in the Jura Mountains. The peaceful stay in this place was very beneficial for Elisabeth. The following year, they went to Rome with a couple of friends. The Wednesday of Easter Week, at Saint Peter's Basilica, Elisabeth received an unusual grace after Communion: "I felt alive in me," she would write, "the blessed Christ, present and bringing me an unutterable love. ... I felt renewed by Him to the depths of my being." She said nothing about this to her husband, waiting for his hour of grace.

To express her affection to Felix, in 1904 Elisabeth wrote to him: "Thank you for everything, and above all else, for being you. And forgive me for being me, that is to say, someone who by herself is not worth much, and who is a bit improved only under the influence of suffering she has accepted, and accepted only through a help and a strength greater than my own. Because of this, you must be indulgent with the convictions that time and God have made deep, and thanks to which I have not become bitter and selfish." But her great affection for Felix did not stop her from sometimes taking positions that put her in conflict with him. In particular, she refused to approve of the marriage between a friend of his and a divorced woman. Felix flew into a towering rage, but Elisabeth maintained her calm and waited to explain herself. This disagreement was the only serious eruption between the Leseurs during their twenty-five years of marriage. Elisabeth loved her husband very much, and she desired before all else to see him return to God. She offered to God all the little difficulties, the annoyances, the mortifications "that our days abound with," as well as the more painful trials of illness and moral sufferings.

In the spring of 1905, Elisabeth's sister Juliette died of tuberculosis. Elisabeth was very deeply affected by this loss, and a change took place in her soul: she accepted sufferings with greater peace. The spiritual ties that remained with Juliette beyond death made her aware of

the dogma of the communion of saints. "Thanks to this blessed dogma," she wrote, "even the most isolated or poorest being, the person whom illness has nailed to a bed of pain, or whose life is made up of humble renunciations and daily sacrifices, can exert an influence on others, and attain, through divine grace, that which his activity perhaps would not have attained... Not one of our tears, not one of our prayers is lost, and they have a force that too many do not suspect." She would write elsewhere: "Every soul that raises itself raises the world."

Perceiving hidden suffering

God did not grant Elisabeth the joys of motherhood, but He gave her a unique tact with children, whom she was very good at keeping busy, entertaining, and putting to work. She worked with "Union Familiale", a group of institutions established to assist the families of workers. A while later, she offered her services to the "Union Populaire Catholique", an organization that was based on two principles—doing charitable works to the utmost of one's capacity, and constantly seeking to uplift souls and gain their eternal salvation, no matter the type of charity performed. Thanks to these efforts, Elisabeth grew to know human suffering more intimately. "How often does a word, a gesture that goes unnoticed, reveal a suffering that others are unaware of," she wrote. "And if we knew how to observe these as we observe many things that are not worth the effort, we would discover many things and spare ourselves many tactless words." She herself greeted with a smile the people who came to see her, even when their visit came at an inopportune time.

In July 1910, the Leseurs went to Beaune to visit the famous hospice run by nuns—l'Hôtel-Dieu. A deep relationship formed between Elisabeth and Sister Marie Goby. "This sister's friendship," she wrote to her mother, "has brought a great sweetness into my life, even alongside some illnesses and operations!" In fact, during these years, Elisabeth suffered from a chronic liver disease that on several occasions demanded complete rest. When she underwent an operation for breast cancer at the beginning of March 1911, she offered her life to God. Sometimes the suffering overwhelmed her to the point that she was unable to do anything: "You know that I have just gone through a great trial," she wrote to Sister Goby. "It was truly an annihilation, and the suffering left no room for a thought, a prayer, everything was stripped away. That is how I received Communion—He then bore everything, for I offered only my suffering." Her own sufferings made her understanding of the sufferings of others. She wrote to a friend who had complained to her: "May he who has never complained, either overtly or only in his inner depths, throw the first stone at you. That will not be me... There are hours when our poor overwhelmed nature lets out the cry that Calvary itself has heard, believing itself abandoned... I believe that suffering has chiseled you and placed in you a compassion and human sympathy that

happiness perhaps would not have given you to the same degree."

In 1912, the Leseurs went to Lourdes. The sight of the sick men and women made an impression on Felix: "I was beside a young Spanish priest, stretched out in a car, immobilized by paralysis," he would later recount. "I said to myself, 'It's criminal to bring a patient as sick as this here... Here is a man who is obviously not going to be cured. He is going to go home disappointed...' But, to my great surprise, although the sick man was not cured, his face reflected a profound joy and peace. I then thought, Could there be something there? It's truly strange! If this were me, I would have been indignant!" Shortly thereafter, Felix spotted his wife in prayer before the Grotto: "I had before my eyes," he wrote, "the spectacle of an event that escaped me, that I did not understand, but which appeared to me to clearly be 'the supernatural'... I returned to Paris very disturbed... but all this quickly faded away in my mind, on the surface, at least..." In fact, at that moment, Elisabeth had asked MARY for her husband's conversion. A short while before, she had written to Sister Goby: "I am following with respect and emotion the work that God is doing in my dear husband's soul. One might say that He is preparing ... the ground for faith. But for this to happen, we must unite our prayers and sacrifices more than ever." The following summer, during a walk with Sister Goby, Elisabeth predicted her untimely death, Felix's conversion, and his entrance into religious life.

A bath of serenity

In 1913, Elisabeth's cancer spread. After a novena to Sister Therese of the Child JESUS, there was a respite. Elisabeth professed a great devotion to the Carmelite saint, which her husband mocked. "But that's childish, your little sister, it's nonsense."—"On the contrary, it's something quite great," she replied, "but you are unable to understand." The respite, however, was short-lived, and the disease continued its ravages. Felix was amazed at his wife's radiance: "When I returned home," he would later write, "and was beside her again. ... I immediately recovered my peace and regained a sort of confidence that I could not understand. ... It was definitely the radiance of this interior peace, this serenity, that God grants to souls that have become entirely His." Others who came near Elisabeth experienced, to their surprise, a similar impression. One of their friends advised his wife, when she was anxious: "Go see Elisabeth, go take your bath of serenity."

On April 24, 1914, Elisabeth became delirious. During a moment of full consciousness, she reached out her arms to her husband with an expression of immense tenderness. Shortly thereafter, she fell into a coma. Felix had Extreme Unction administered. She breathed her last on Sunday, May 3, in Felix's arms. When he looked at Elisabeth's slack face, he felt that all the beauty of this life could not be at an end. When he opened the will and

testament she had written for him, he felt her presence close to him again: "Love souls," she had written, "pray, suffer, and work for them. They deserve all our sufferings, all our efforts, all our sacrifices." He then found Elisabeth's diary and became aware of the sufferings he had unintentionally caused her, as well as the sacrifices she had made to obtain his return to God. Elisabeth had only achieved such serenity and such elevation of thought through her fervent piety. This moved him deeply...

"There, close to me..."

In June 1914, Felix left for a journey with a friend. In the car, he suddenly became aware of Elisabeth's presence. "I had a very clear impression," he would write, "that she was there, close to me. I immediately thought to myself: 'but she's alive, her soul is beside me. I just had an almost physical impression of her presence.' The emotion was so intense that it was impossible for me to master myself. ... But then, I repeated to myself, if Elisabeth is alive, as I just had the irresistible feeling she is, it means the soul is immortal; therefore God exists, and the supernatural world is the truth." A few days later, in the basilica of Paray-le-Monial, a new call was heard: "I had an even more exact perception of her dear presence. I irresistibly fell to my knees on a kneeler.. I spoke to Our Lord... I truly had the feeling that He was there, in the tabernacle, and that His infinite goodness was reaching out to me." However, when he returned to Paris, he convinced himself that he had been fooled by an illusion caused by the emotional shock of Elisabeth's death.

The Great War broke out, and Felix left for Bordeaux. During the trip, Elisabeth inspired him to go to Lourdes. There, he went to the Grotto and asked the Blessed Virgin to obtain the forgiveness of his sins. God then seized his soul, enveloped it with His Goodness, and

communicated a peace and serenity that he had never felt before. A revolution took place in him, without any particular effort on his part. "I was conquered! The light was lit." When he returned to Paris, he studied the Catholic faith and drew abundantly from the library Elisabeth had left, where he found all sorts of works in which she had left notes written in her own hand. Soon, he was put in contact with Father Janvier, a well-known Dominican, who listened to him at length, and he then received the sacrament of Confession. The next day at Mass, he received Communion, imagining that he was going to feel a grace similar to the one he had received at Lourdes. But he did not feel anything. He went home disillusioned and discouraged. He then heard Elisabeth's voice internally: "But that would be too convenient! If after having spent all your life denying God, fighting God and JESUS CHRIST, you were to now, because you had confessed and received Communion, right away possess all the knowledge and all the consolations—that would be almost immoral. It is no longer about your feelings, but about your will, which you must place from now on in the service of Christ." Astounded, Felix decided to receive Communion again the next day.

Encouraged by many friends, he published Elisabeth's Diary in the spring of 1917. At a time when France was experiencing a tragic period in its history, he thought that souls had need of the interior life, and especially the need to understand the infinite value that suffering can have. The publication was a tremendous success. But soon, Felix felt called to total consecration to God in religious life. In 1919, he entered the novitiate of the Dominicans in Paris; on July 8, 1923, he was ordained a priest. The apostolate entrusted to him consisted primarily in making known the life and works of Elisabeth. After having worked at this task with great success until old age, he rendered his soul to God at the end of February 1950. Thanks to his efforts, the cause for Elisabeth's beatification would be opened in 1955.

In his general audience of August 18, 2010, Pope Benedict declared, "At the root of our apostolic action in the various fields in which we work, there must always be close personal union with Christ, to cultivate and to develop, day after day. ... Only if we are in love with the Lord shall we be able to bring people to God and open them to His merciful love and thereby open the world to God's mercy." May Elisabeth Leseur's example encourage us in our life of union with the Lord.

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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ABBAYE SAINT-JOSEPH DE CLAIRVAL – 21150 FLAVIGNY-SUR-OZERAIN – FRANCE

Fax : + 33 3 80 96 25 29 – email : abbey@clairval.com – website : <http://www.clairval.com/>