

St Elizabeth of Hungary

Elizabeth was born in the Kingdom of Hungary to King Andrew II of Hungary and Gertrude of Merania on July 7, 1207; St. Francis lived around the same time (1182-1226).

Princess Elizabeth was promised in marriage to the young landgrave of Thuringia at the age of four, and was raised with him in the magnificent Wartburg Castle. The two were married when Elizabeth was fourteen and Louis was twenty-one. For the most part, the people of the court welcomed the Hungarian princess, but Elizabeth's growing devotion to God, plus her desire to follow the way of St. Francis, caused some in the court to grumble and gossip. They said she prayed too much. They fretted when she wore plain clothes and went to Mass barefoot. (She caused a minor uproar when she removed her gold crown before the crucifix at Mass.) And they especially didn't like her generosity to the poor, whom she fed from her table and washed with her own hands. In response to all these complaints, Elizabeth only laughed.

The common people adored her, and with good reason. In the spring of 1226, crop failures and plague left them sick and starving. Louis was away on royal business, so Elizabeth took charge. First she emptied the castle of its stores of grain, and when that was gone, she began selling her own clothes to support the people. She even built a little hospital below Wartburg Castle and personally cared for the sick there several times a day. And that Autumn, she bought them shoes and shirts and sickles so they could harvest their fields more easily.

Another time she distributed a huge amount of money to hundreds of poor people at once. That evening, a few dozen of the weakest ones remained in the courtyard, unable to travel home. "Let us give them a little more," Elizabeth said. "I want to fill them with joy—let's build a fire for them and wash their feet!"

Elizabeth made many private vows to God and became a Third Order Secular Franciscan. She strove to serve God by serving her people well. Following the death of her husband, (Louis) Ludwig IV of Thuringia, in 1227, Elizabeth renounced her wealth, joined the Third Order of Saint Francis, and dedicated her life to nursing the poor and sick in a hospital she built herself. Her physical toll from continuous fasting, gruelling labour, and emotional distress led to a rapid decline in her health. She died on November 17, 1231 at the age of 24.