

New Martyr Elizabeth

facing loss; encountering surrender; finding love



'But what things were gained to me, these I have counted loss for Christ'.

Philippians 3:7

The Orthodox theologian Fr. John Chryssavgis has said: 'Reading the texts of the early ascetics, I have come to realize that perhaps the most essential lesson learned in life is the lesson of surrender, of letting go. It is a hard lesson, and one that is only reluctantly embraced by most of us. But I am convinced that this life is given to us in order to learn how to lose. We think that the purpose of a good spiritual life is to acquire virtues, or perhaps to lead a solid, productive, dignified, admirable, and even influential lifestyle. In fact, every detail -- whether seemingly important or insignificant, whether painful or joyful -- in the life of each one of us has but a single purpose, namely to prepare us for the ultimate act of sharing and sacrifice.' 'When you know how to lose, you also know how to love! In some ways, every moment in our life is a gradual refinement so that we are prepared to encounter death, which is the ultimate loss.'

Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna's life can be seen as continually facing this spiritual truth: the early death of her mother, brother and sister; leaving her country of birth; changing the form of her christian faith; the

brutal murder of her husband; leaving 'the world' to become a nun; leaving the convent she founded through forced exile and finally her own martyr's death. Yet her life is one that continually radiates compassion and love. What is this connection between loss, surrender and love?

Elizabeth was born on November 1, 1864, the daughter of Grand Duke Louis of Hesse-Darmstadt and Princess Alice, who was daughter of Britain's Queen Victoria.



*Queen Victoria and her grandchildren
Ella is seated on the right*

She was named after St. Elizabeth of Turigen, a paternal ancestor, whose life of charity and service to others influenced young Ella, as she became known within the family. Her mother was another great influence, who through her support for members of her family became known as the 'Angel of the House'. She considered it vital that her children became aware of the needs of others and Ella joined her on visits to those benefitting from her many welfare projects.

Two of Ella's childhood letters written to her grandmother, Queen Victoria, give insight to her early compassion and realization that life on earth contains suffering and sorrow. When Ella was fourteen, her mother and sister died from diphtheria and Queen Victoria wrote to her Hesse grandchildren, that their loss would become 'only greater, and you will feel day after day more and more the irreparable dreadful loss your darling Mama is to you!' 'treasure her in your hearts as a Saint'. In contrast, Ella replied, 'It has been said that death is a dark lattice that lets in bright day - and may that comfort you as it did poor Mama in thinking of little May.' (*May was Ella's sister who also died*). Again she wrote to her grandmother, 'I feel so much for you and am grieved to hear how deeply you still feel the death of your true and faithful servant (*the Scotsman John Brown*).....but still it must be a comfort to you to know that he is free from the cares and sorrows of this world, may God comfort you'. Many years later, arrested by the Bolsheviks and traveling to forced exile in Perm, she was able to write to her nuns in Moscow, 'We are all going through the same experience and find consolation only in Him as we bear the cross of our separation. The Lord has found that it is time for us to bear His cross. Let us try to be worthy of it. I thought we would be so weak, that we would not measure up to bearing such

a heavy cross but the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. As it was pleasing to the Lord, so it happened. Blessed be the name of the Lord for evermore.' Although the circumstances differ, these letters convey a strong belief that our life belongs to God, and it is only in surrender to God that we can find true peace and love.

At the age of nineteen, deeply in love, she married Grand Duke Sergei, son of Tzar Alexander II of Russia. She began to study Russian language, culture and Orthodox faith but hesitated about leaving the Lutheran faith for fear of upsetting her family, until finally she let go, and was received into the church by chrismation. After fourteen years of happy marriage her world was suddenly shattered by the horrific, terrorist murder of her husband. She was at home in the Nicholas Palace, Moscow, when she heard an explosion. Fearing the worst, she rushed outside to find the body of her husband blown to pieces. Her first shocked reaction was to gather together the blood soaked parts of his body in a cloth...'He never liked mess', so that they could be taken to the chapel of the Chudov Monastery. There, still in blood stained clothing, she attended prayers for the dead and comforted their two foster children saying, 'He loved you so, he loved you.'



Sergei and Ella on left with their neice and nephew who later became their foster children

Later she removed all unnecessary furniture in her bedroom and had the walls painted white to display icons. She never ate meat or fish again. It may seem that her withdrawal from the opulence of court life suggests deep emotional scarring; certainly her family were concerned, and some disapproved of her increasingly monastic lifestyle. But this change was no withdrawal from life or fall into self-pity, but rather a cathartic opening to a long held desire to help those who suffer. She explained this in a letter to her brother-in-law, Tzar Nicholas, 'I took it up not as a cross - but as a road full of light. God showed me after Serge's death and which years and years before had begun in my soul. I can't tell you when - it seems to me often that already as (a) child there was a longing to help those that suffer.' Even on the day of Serge's assassination, after drafting telegrams to family in Russia and abroad, she made two hospital visits; the first to Serge's coachman who was dying of injuries, and the second to the bedside of Countess Mengden who was recovering from an operation. She decided that it was best to keep silent about her husband's death.



Ella soon after Serge's death

As her sister Victoria recalled, 'It was very difficult for her to keep from showing any emotion and talk in a natural manner (so) she

took refuge in reading a book aloud to the patient.' Later, in strictest secrecy, she visited the assassin Kalayev in prison and spoke with him alone. Their conversation remains private but it seems it was to try to reconcile her husband's killer with God. 'I have nothing to do with earthly justice,' she told her sister, 'It was his soul and not his body that I was thinking of.' She found light in the deep darkness of mourning through focussing on God and the needs of others.

Four years after Serge's death, with guidance from bishops and the Holy Synod of the Russian Church, Grand Duchess Elizabeth founded the Convent of Mercy of St Martha and Mary. Her vision was that she and her sisters would devote their lives to prayer, tending the sick, helping the poor and taking care of the many street children. She established a rent-free hostel, hospital, clinic, school for nurses and a soup kitchen. She took part in all the work and visited even the most dangerous parts of Moscow. She was loved by all those who met her, some of whom never knew she was a member of the royal family. On becoming Abbess she wrote to Tzar Nicholas, 'I am espousing Christ and His cause, I am giving all I can to Him and our neighbours, I am going deeper into our Orthodox Church'. When the Revolution came in 1917, at first the Bolsheviks did not interfere with the Convent although churches everywhere were being desecrated. She wrote to her sister, the Tzarina, 'We labour, pray, hope, and every day we feel Divine Mercy. In fact, it is a constant miracle that we experience; others begin to feel it too, and come to our Church to seek rest for their souls. Pray for us, dear soul.' Finally the Bolsheviks arrived to arrest her, allowing two sisters to accompany their Abbess into exile where they were joined by other royal family. Accounts and facts concerning their martyr's

death are contradictory, but we do know that the victims were severely beaten before being thrown down a disused mine shaft in the early hours of July 18th. None of them drowned in the water and after hearing their voices it is claimed that two grenades were then thrown in. Sounds continued so the mine shaft was filled with brushwood and set alight. It was also claimed that hymn singing was heard, but the post-mortem of the bodies revealed severe chest injuries which would probably have made singing impossible, but not more silent prayer.



*Abbess Elizabeth
with her godson and nephew*

What form of prayer supported Abbess Elizabeth throughout her life? We know that she practiced the Jesus Prayer and joined the daily prayer in the Convent church. If a hospital patient died, prayers were read until their burial, with Abbess Elizabeth reading the Psalter through the night. During her exile the other captives would join her to celebrate Vespers. However, one of the most moving accounts of her compassionate prayer for others is of her silent prayer.

In 1915 Abbess Elizabeth and three relatives, all recently widowed, gathered for a meal. After the meal, while the others were resting, Abbess Elizabeth and Duchess Tatiana sat together. Tatiana wrote, 'I kneeled down before her, and put my hands on her knees. I looked straight into her eyes and she gazed into the depths of mine. Silently. For half an hour. Without uttering a single word.....Impetuously, a torrent from my anguished soul passed from my being to hers.....I felt she understood everything.....She consoled me, gave me strength.....Silently. Without a single movement. After half an hour I rose, kissed her hand, and said, "Thank you." Glory to God for everything.'

In a book on prayer, Metropolitan Anthony writes about our relationship between loss and love: 'The life and health that we possess we cannot keep, and not only health but so many of our psychosomatic qualities:.....If we realise that we have no being in ourselves, and yet we exist, we can say that there is a sustained unceasing act of divine love. If we see that whatever we have, we can no wise compel to be ours, then everything is divine love, concretely expressed at every single moment; and then poverty is the root of perfect joy because all we have proves love....Then we come to the joyful thought: 'Thanks be to God, it is not mine; if it were mine, it would mean possession, but alas without love.' The relationship to which this thought brings us is what the gospel calls the kingdom of God. The moment when we discover God within the situation and that all things are God's and everything is of God, then we begin to enter this divine kingdom and acquire freedom.'

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