

THE SPIRIT OF SAINT ELIZABETH

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We are gathered here this afternoon to honor the memory of a remarkable woman, a saint born in Hungary whose few short years on this earth have been an inspiration to thousands throughout the world. Her life was one of unselfish giving and caring, a philosophy which has been adopted by the Sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary, who seventy years ago established this hospital, choosing Saint Elizabeth of Hungary as their patroness. We, Christian Hungarians feel justifiably proud of her, and believe that that this brave and kind young woman has a message which is timely to a world which is flirting with physical destruction and moral decay. To the hedonistic "Me generation", interested only in immediate self-gratification, she proclaims a gospel of love, of caring and of unselfishness.

Saint Elizabeth's career is a clear illustration of how saints can emerge out of circumstances and an environment which are not considered really suitable to holiness. She was born in 1207, the daughter of Andrew II, king of Hungary. Royal children were often used as tools of diplomacy and princess Elizabeth shared this fate. At an early age she was betrothed to Louis, ruler of Thuringia in Germany. A few years later Elizabeth, like so many of her countrymen in later times, left Hungary forever and moved to Wartburg to be raised near her husband-to-be. Instead of developing into a vain, frivolous

and insensitive person, oblivious to the poverty and suffering around her, Elizabeth from early childhood showed an acute awareness of the miseries of the world. She chose not to be a typical princess, but instead became a concerned Christian. Although she was surrounded by worldliness, she refused to be corrupted by it, showing that it is possible to resist peer pressure and to remain decent. She subsequently married Louis and as Countess of Thuringia became renowned for her charity and kindness. She was even able to convert her reluctant husband to her deeply Christian work among the poor. We all know the lovely story of how the bundle of bread she was carrying to the poor, was miraculously transformed into red roses. Elizabeth was a loving wife and became the mother of several children. Her family and her subjects adored her, but her happiness was short lived. At the age of 20 she became a widow, was driven from her home by the greedy relatives of her deceased husband, and could take only the barest necessities of life with her into exile. With three infant children, no husband and no worldly goods, she became a refugee. She lived in great hardship, but never lost her joyous disposition, nor her desire to help others. Although her son was eventually restored to his rightful inheritance, Saint Elizabeth renounced all power, pomp and wealth, and spent the remainder of her brief life ministering to the poor and the critically ill. She died at Marburg, far from her native Hungary, seven hundred and fifty years ago, at the age of 24.

It is interesting to contemplate how much suffering and how much good is condensed into those 24 years. She, like so

many of us, had to leave her family and homeland behind, knew the loneliness and pain of separation from loved ones. Scarcely twenty years old and the mother of three babies, she was left a widow and was deprived of her home. These were tribulations which would have broken the spirit of many ordinary people. But Elizabeth was not ordinary. Instead of despair, her love for God and for humanity increased, and in the few years allotted to her on this earth she did everything to make it a more joyous place to live. It is not surprising therefore, that this young woman has been the inspiration of so many. Through the centuries she has been a source of strength to the homeless, the widowed, the poor and the sick. Many have turned to her in their hour of need to find solace in her example of steadfastness and loving devotion.

Saint Elizabeth of Hungary represents one of the most appealing aspects of the rich tradition that Christianity can draw upon, but so often ignores. She is the product of a remarkable spirituality which developed in the 13th century Church, mainly as the result of the Franciscan movement and the Christ-like personality of its founder Saint Francis of Assisi. Saint Francis and his followers, among them Saint Elizabeth, fundamentally changed the direction of our quest for God. Until then, for over half a millennium, the Christian ideal was an ascetic view in which those who wanted to serve God, withdrew from the world, with all of its miseries, temptations and distractions. By fervent prayer, fasting and labor they wanted to insure their salvation and to make themselves pleasing in the eyes of God. Religion was thus basically self centered, concerned with

individual salvation. It is this world view which was challenged by the Franciscans and by those who were caught up in their spirit, such as Saint Elizabeth. This new spirituality was based on the premise that the greatest commandment is love. It is through the expression of works of love that we praise God most perfectly. This is the motivation behind the life of Saint Elizabeth and this is the ideal which brought this hospital into being.

Today, when the Mahoning Valley is faced with so many problems, hardship and tribulation, the spirit of Saint Elizabeth can give strength to those who are in need. It is fitting that this institution named in her honor should care for the physical and spiritual needs of all people in our area.

Saint Elizabeth Hospital has grown from a 30 bed, modest institution to become a major Medical Center, one of the finest in this part of the country. This growth has been possible because of the generosity of many benefactors and above all the talents of skilled professionals, who in the spirit of Saint Elizabeth continue to give unselfishly of themselves for the benefit of our community.

To commemorate the 750th anniversary of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, we her sons and daughters, come to honor her by placing a wreath at her statue. May we all be strengthened by her spirit and by her example.