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13. One should perhaps mention in this context the controversy that surrounded Ibn al-'Arabi's short collection of poetry called *Tarjuman al-ashwaq*, which he dedicated to a beautiful Persian maiden called Nizam whom he met at the Kaaba in Mecca. After writing the poems he was accused of having been overcome by profane love. In reply, he wrote a long commentary on the collection, explaining its imagery. Of course, those who saw with the eye of insight did not need the commentary, and those who were predisposed to accuse the mystically inclined of evil intentions were not impressed. Cf. R. A. Nicholson, *The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (London: Luzac, 1911); H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, pp. 136ff.; Chittick, "The World of Imagination and Poetic Imagery according to Ibn al-'Arabi," *Temenos* 10 (1989), pp. 99-119.

Elizabeth Leseur: Wife and Mystic in a Worldly Milieu

Elizabeth Leseur (1866-1914), a French mystic, offers a remarkable example of living "the mixed life" within the context of marriage and an active social life. "The mixed life" as a technical term in spirituality originated with Gregory the Great, who first applied it to the lives of bishops and preachers who, like Jesus, combine the active and contemplative lives:

Christ set forth in himself patterns of both lives, that is the active and the contemplative, united together. . . . For when he wrought miracles in the city, and yet continued all night in prayer on the mountain, he gave his faithful ones an example not to neglect, through love of contemplation, the care of their neighbors; nor again to abandon contemplative pursuits through being too immoderately engaged in the care of their neighbors. . . . (*Moralia* xxviii.33 in Butler, 1922, 176)

For centuries, this ideal was promoted only for those with explicitly "religious" vocations while lay people were perceived to be limited to the active life of Christian virtue, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, the mundane tasks of earning a living and family life which were thought to preclude the development of interior prayer and contemplation.

Although a clerical and sometimes monastic bias theoretically excluded laity as a class from this lifestyle, eventually several factors conspired to attract lay people to the mixed life. Gregory himself taught that contemplation was open to all (Hom. Ezech. II.iv, 6). The rise of mendicancy as a new religious role in the thirteenth century combined active ministry with contemplation in new ways and promoted a lay piety. Women tertiaries such as Catherine of Siena exemplified an intense mystical life united with active works of charity living in an extended family.

In the fourteenth century Walter Hilton presented the mixed life as an ideal for the lay person in his *Epistle on the Mixed Life*. To active clergy, Hilton added men of wealth and temporal authority who had also received gifts of devotion. He taught that for these to leave the active life was contrary to charity (*Mixed Life*, I.5. In I.10). Finally, he described an alternation of

works of charity or duty with contemplative desire, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between the two.

More to the point of Elizabeth Leseur's immediate model, Francis de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life* encouraged lay people to aspire to the life of devotion, a regular pattern of meditation and interior prayer, within the context of ordinary life. According to one commentator on the development of lay contemplative life, "books provided the key to establishing this domestic and accessible path of devotion for laywomen" (Carey 379). Thus, literate, educated, upper-class laity began to pursue "the mixed life" largely through a book culture. Elizabeth Leseur, a nineteenth-century example, fits this pattern. She read extensively, consciously developing her intellectual grasp of her faith and the contemplative life. Elizabeth's husband wrote that *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena* and Teresa of Avila's works were among the books his wife kept at her bedside. He also listed *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Thomas Aquinas, Jerome, and other serious writers as important in her reading.

What was Elizabeth's context? Elizabeth, the eldest of five children, was born into a practicing Catholic, upper-class family in 1866. She received the best education available to French girls of her social class, attending a day school where she was instructed in languages, art, music, math, botany, literature, and other subjects. She kept a childhood journal in which she recorded her preparation for and experience of her First Communion at about the age of twelve. Although she expresses dismay at not having eradicated her faults during her two-year preparation for this sacrament, her sense of God's presence to her was not disturbed by this lack of self-mastery. She wrote: ". . . I listened to the good God who spoke to my soul, who said to me all the time: I belong to you: you possess me. And I said to Him: Thank you, my God, for I am very Happy" (Graef 110).

She continued her education until she was nineteen without appearing to be more than conventionally pious, and then lived the social life of well-to-do girls awaiting marriage: theater, opera, balls, and holidays by the sea. At the age of twenty-one, she met the man who was to become her husband, Felix, and they courted for two years. Attracted by her culture and intelligence as well as her beauty and liveliness, Felix asked for her hand in marriage and they were married in July of 1889. There was one fundamental difference between them. During his medical studies Felix had become agnostic but promised not to interfere with Elizabeth's religion. However, Felix eventually preferred Elizabeth to share his later atheistic convictions since their social milieu was largely hostile to religion.

Elizabeth became critically ill shortly after their honeymoon and was bed-

ridden for many months. Once she recovered she fully entered into the swirl of social activities her husband's position required of her, evenings of parties, concerts, plays, and dinners. They socialized with politicians, writers, musicians, and artists. Elizabeth managed an elegant household while Felix worked long hours, frequently returning to his journalist's office late in the evening. Elizabeth spent her days improving her intellectual life, learning Latin, Italian and Russian, and gradually gave up her devotional life. The couple traveled extensively, and Elizabeth enjoyed contact with both nature and the arts.

Elizabeth was no longer attending church by the summer of 1898. When she was beginning to have serious doubts about her faith, Felix gave her Renan's *Life of Jesus*, an atheistic attack on Christianity, to feed her growing doubt. Ironically, the book had the opposite effect. She found it so poorly argued that it spurred her to begin a serious study of her religion beginning with the Gospels. Differing from the non-scriptural, popular piety of the time, Elizabeth continued to read and meditate on the New Testament throughout her life. She wrote two years after her conversion,

I do not forsake the New Testament, and the farther I go into the Gospels and Epistles, the more do I find a charm, a strength, a life incomparable. God is indeed there; from this reading I come each day more satisfied and strengthened; my will is reinforced there and my heart warmed. God . . . through this book of books, educates my inmost being." (*Wife's Story* 52; Sept. 12, 1900)

By the end of 1898 she was again firmly established in her faith and deepening it through prayer and study. Her husband actively tried to discourage this development but was unable to weaken her faith. For the rest of her life she suffered from their inability to share a common faith.

She continued to pray and read for some time before she began to record her experiences in her journal more than a year later. She profoundly respected women's intellectual life; she embraced a scholarly discipline including philosophical study. Her piety was based on a deeply felt relationship with God, fed by an intellectual grasp of Christian doctrine and the liturgical life of the church.

Almost immediately she recognized a special call to influence unbelievers spiritually. She wrote, "I want to love with a special love those whose birth or religion or ideas separate them from me; it is they whom I want to understand and who need that I should give them a little of what God has given me" (*Wife's Story* 43; Sept. 19, 1899).

She came to understand, perhaps because of her own period of agnosticism, that loss of belief was the great religious crisis of her time. Recog-

nizing that argument availed little, she discovered in her heart a great love for those who did not believe and desired to be so transformed that God might touch them through her loving presence. To this end she worked on her own moral transformation and offered her considerable physical and emotional suffering for the conversion of unbelievers, especially her husband and those she knew:

More than others I love these beings whom divine knowledge does not enlighten, or rather whom it enlightens in a manner unknown to us with our restricted minds. There is a veil between such souls and God, through which only a few rays of love and beauty may pass. Only God, with a divine gesture, may throw aside this veil, when the true life of these souls shall begin. And . . . I believe in the power of the prayers that I never cease to say for these . . . I believe in them because God is, and because He is the Father. I believe in them because I believe in that divine mysterious law which we call the Communion of Saints. (*Wife's Story* 53; Nov. 28, 1900)

Four years later she was even more convinced of the efficacy of being such a presence to others. She resolved

To go more and more to souls, approaching them with respect and delicacy, touching them with love. To try always to understand everyone and everything. Not to argue, to work through contact and example; to dissipate prejudice, to show God and make Him felt without speaking of Him; to strengthen one's intelligence, enlarge one's soul; to love without tiring, in spite of disappointment and indifference. . . . Deep unalterable respect for souls; never to do them violence if they are sensitive, but to open wide one's soul to show the light in it and the truth that lives there, and let that truth create and transform, without merit of ours but simply by the fact of its presence in us. (*Wife's Story* 78; March 9, 1904)

This hidden ministry to unbelievers continued the rest of her life, in spite of declining health from 1908 until her death in 1914.

The spiritual transformation begun, ironically, by reading Renan, reached a climax during a trip to Rome in April, 1903. Elizabeth pursued her reading, daily meditation, journal writing, and ascetical practice without the benefit of spiritual direction or other guidance. In the spring of 1903 she described a "new life" beginning and recorded a series of interior events from March to April which culminated in a solemn consecration of her life to God:

I set out alone for St. Peter's, and after going to confession to a French-speaking priest, I went to communion in the chapel of the Holy Sacrament. Those moments were fully and supernaturally happy. I felt in myself the living presence of the blessed Christ, of God Himself, bringing me an ineffable love; that incomparable Spirit spoke to mine, and all the infinite tenderness of the Savior

passed for an instant into me. Never will this divine trace be effaced. The triumphant Christ, the eternal Word, He Who as man has suffered and loved, the one living God, took possession of my soul for all eternity in that unforgettable minute; I felt myself renewed to my very depths by him, ready for a new life, for duty, for the work intended by His providence. I gave myself without reserve, and I gave Him the future. . . . On my return I found myself in an atmosphere of irony, criticism and indifference. But nothing mattered; the flame of Christ was still burning within me" (*Wife's Story* 72-3; July 23, 1903)

Of all of her writings, this passage offers the most explicit glimpse of her religious experience and her developing union with God. In the summer of 1909, she makes a resolution of silence. "To be gentle and smiling outside, keeping for God alone the inner life. In what concerns God: To suffer and offer. In what concerns others: to give myself, to pour out myself. In what concerns me: To be silent and forget myself" (*Wife's Story* 136; July-Aug, 1909).

She maintained this silence until her correspondence with her first spiritual friend, Soeur Gaby, a nun at l'Hôtel Dieu, Beaune. These letters, published under the title *Lettres sur la souffrance*, written from 1911 to 1914, when she was ill with cancer, most clearly reveal Elizabeth's union with God (most frequently experienced during Communion) and sense of God's presence at other times. There are no descriptions of extraordinary mystical experiences; rather one glimpses her deepening faith, her growing conviction of the doctrine of the communion of saints, her acceptance of a vocation of suffering because of her chronic ill health and Felix's lack of faith, and her serenity and love flowing from her union with God.

Elizabeth is a remarkable exemplar of a lay "mixed life" of contemplation and action. She fully embraced her married life and all its social responsibilities. She worked out a rule of life governed by principles of flexibility and charity. She embraced her milieu as the primary means of growing in virtue and of influencing others. She adopted an asceticism which respected her fragile health and the need to husband her limited physical resources. Moreover, she became acutely aware of the "social question" of post-Enlightenment, newly industrialized France, the poverty and religious rootlessness of the lower classes.

Despite the pain she suffered from Felix's unbelief, every reference to her husband suggests a loving and mutually respectful relationship. There is no sense of living as if not married, no pining for another lifestyle, only the longing that someday Felix might share in her life with God. She felt herself to be deeply loved by Felix, supported by his presence, companionship, and tenderness. For example, she wrote: "Some joyful days, because of a present from Felix, and more because of the words that accompanied it, words so full

of love that I am moved to great happiness. I do not deserve this, but I rejoice fully in it" (*Wife's Story* 55; March 11, 1901). When her younger sister Juliette died from tuberculosis, she reported how Felix's love helped her bear this grief. Her letters and journals record that Felix accompanied her to Lourdes, occasionally to Mass, to visit her friend Soeur Gaby (whom he liked), and that they enjoyed many other shared activities. She described a basically healthy, although childless, marriage. Conversely, Felix showed himself to be so devoted to her that he adjusted to her fragile health throughout their marriage and remained constant in his love and affection for her. The mutuality of their love is evident in Felix's description of his grief and despair after her death. His love for her became the catalyst for his own religious conversion as he read her journals, her last testament to him, and her letters, and as he began to realize more clearly the source of her goodness and love. Eventually, as a result of a sense of her presence during this time of grief and the effect of her writings on him, he underwent a profound religious conversion, became a Dominican priest and prepared his wife's writing for publication.

Elizabeth took for granted her marriage, her involvement with her extended family, and the active social life it entailed as the context of her spiritual life. One could easily use her writings to exemplify Francis De Sales's instructions in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which she used as a guide for organizing her spiritual life. In 1906 she wrote a "Rule of Life" in order to support her developing spiritual life. The lack of rigidity is remarkable throughout this document. The preamble to her "Rule" includes a reminder to maintain flexibility:

This rule . . . should not be too rigidly interpreted. The milieu in which I live, certain people's hostility, the variety and sometimes the complication of my duties, the influence I can have on those who love me and those who come to me with confidence, all demand great circumspection from me. Though I should be so exact as not to neglect the least detail of my rule when I alone am concerned, it is different when a neighbor is in question. My resolutions should therefore be adaptable to circumstances. The precept of charity should come before any measure for my own spiritual advancement. (*Wife's Story* 111; Oct-Nov, 1906)

Nevertheless, Elizabeth is specific about the order she gave her day:

Each Day: Morning and Evening Prayer. Meditation. . . .

To go to Confession and Communion every fortnight if possible. To communicate more frequently whenever it can be done without troubling or displeasing anyone. . . .

Each Month: Give one day to a little spiritual retreat;

Go to Mass and if possible to Communion. Abstain as far as possible from

going out and from worldly contacts. More complete meditation. Examine my conscience and my life. Make on that day my preparation for death. Each Year: Make a few day's spiritual retreat or at least be in a state of great recollectedness. (112-113)

She described the importance of Eucharist to her despite her inability to participate more frequently. She would like more frequent communion since she feels such strength and infusion of love from this sacrament. Yet she deprived herself from an unwillingness to inconvenience the household. By 1911 she considered herself fortunate to communicate as often as three times per week.

Her rule also specified how she intended to order her outer life. There are resolutions concerning Felix, her family, and her other duties. Felix was always her first concern, and she resolved to show him every consideration but to say as little as possible about matters of faith. She hoped for his conversion once he experienced the fruit of her life of faith. She spelled out her responsibilities to her extended family. She chose work she was able to do, and in her contact with the poor sought to avoid either familiarity or hauteur. She made three resolutions regarding herself: silence, self-giving, and personal austerity. By silence she meant not to trouble others with her illness. She concealed her suffering and sought to avoid all self-absorption, no small thing for a woman in constant physical pain. She resolved to speak about interior things only when it could help another. At this time, she was much sought out for spiritual guidance or ordinary advice by her many acquaintances. She tried to infuse all of her activities, charitable works or family duty, with an active charity. For her personal austerity she sought to avoid anything harmful to herself:

I must . . . watch and improve my health since it may be an instrument in the service of God and of souls. But in this illness that I am afflicted with, the precautions I am obliged to take, the discomforts it brings and the privations it imposes, there is a plentiful source of mortification. (*Wife's Story* 116)

She further insisted that other acts of self-denial "will generally be of actual benefit to others" (116). In other entries she described continual efforts to be gracious, lively, and joyful in all social situations. She often denied her desire for more solitude and introversion. She suffered silently the pain of being in a social milieu which denigrated everything religious or spiritual. This, too, she embraced as a challenge to her charity, to show no displeasure or irritation in these situations. This social asceticism was often so taxing that she loved to travel alone with Felix or summer in the mountains with her mother and relatives, an environment free from religious oppression.

Such was the general pattern of interior life and of the attitudes and behavior she tried to cultivate.

Until 1908, Elizabeth was able to carry on an active social life, to become deeply involved with her sister Juliette's family and to extend herself to address social and religious issues among the working poor. She treated her own servants, who found her both demanding and kind, with great respect. She founded a boarding house for working girls in 1903 in order to provide them a family environment, sexual protection, and religious encouragement. Elizabeth also taught catechism to the children of workers through participation in the Catholic Union. She responded to the material needs of the poor families whom she knew or who asked her for help, telling Felix money for the poor would please her more than jewelry. She continued, moreover, to exert the ministry of her presence among the unbelievers of her immediate group.

By 1911, when her health was in serious decline, she largely relinquished this external activity, fully embracing suffering and prayer as her primary means of action. She wrote to Soeur Gaby,

I believe for some time now that action will only be fragmenting for me and will prevent me from accomplishing well the humble duties of my state and some charitable works; but what is possible and seems to be the divine will for me is action by means of suffering and prayer. There is in this vocation such a mark of love on the part of the blessed master, that I must thank him and give my most joyful acquiescence. This acceptance is only joyful in the deepest part of the soul because on the surface there are a number of distasteful things, weaknesses, and miseries. (*Souffrance* Sept. 1, 1911)

Sometime during that same year, Elizabeth offered her remaining sufferings for the conversion of her husband. After surgery and radiation for a tumor in 1911, she died of generalized cancer in May of 1914.

The latter parts of her journal and especially her letters to Soeur Gaby reveal that she was increasingly filled with God. Because she felt entirely understood by this nun, they shared a deep spiritual friendship. Themes of abandonment to God, desire to accomplish the divine will, a sense of the communion of saints, and a conviction that in the next life all of their loves would be fulfilled pervade their correspondence.

Elizabeth continued to struggle with herself. She described her considerable outer misery, but she maintained within herself contact with an utterly sustaining reality. The journal reveals her constant struggle against depression and with the occasional spiritual aridity not uncommon in the seriously ill. The letters are numinous with the deeper conviction and loving presence which sustained her. A true exemplar of the mixed life, Elizabeth Leseur,

wife and mystic, offered a serene and joyful presence to those who knew and loved her. She, like her contemporaries, Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles de Foucauld, innovated and practiced a deeply hidden interior life of union with God and engaged in a ministry of simple Christian presence, confident that the life radiating from within her would have a positive effect on her beloved unbelievers, making Christian life credible again in the modern world.

Janet K. Ruffing
Fordham University

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