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## THE EPISTOLARY SOUL-FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN ELISABETH LESEUR AND SOEUR MARIE GOBY<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY** — Madame Elisabeth Leseur and Soeur Marie Goby were drawn together into an epistolary spiritual friendship from 1910-1914, initially through their love for the poor, discovering in one another a depth of spirituality and a shared love for God that they expressed in their correspondence. This married Parisian woman and this nursing sister achieved a satisfying and mutually supportive relationship based on their love for God and their distinct yet complementary vocations ending different forms of spiritual and emotional isolation in their lives. They became true friends and sisters to one another primarily through their correspondence.

A contemporary of Therese of Lisieux and Charles de Foucauld, Elisabeth Leseur (1866-1914), a French married woman and mystic, is a compelling model of lay holiness. Having undergone a spiritual conversion in her early thirties, several years into her marriage to the journalist, diplomat, and unbelieving Felix, she took for granted that she was to live this new life with God precisely in her marriage and the secular social milieu within which she heard and heeded this call. Like Therese of Lisieux whose sanctity was already being promoted shortly before Elisabeth's death from generalized cancer at the age of 48, Elisabeth embraced a path of hidden union with God while radiating to those around her a loving presence. Unlike the cloistered Therese, Elisabeth's world was filled with people who were hostile to religion and incapable of appreciating or sharing the deep spiritual experience that gave meaning to her life. Her marriage was happy and loving except for the couple's inability to conceive children and to share faith with one another. In addition to these intimate sufferings, she also endured chronic

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ill-health from the early days of their marriage, and physical pain from the breast cancer that caused her death.<sup>2</sup>

In 1910, a Hospitaller Sister of St. Martha of Beaune serving in the historic Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune unexpectedly entered Elisabeth's life. Soeur Marie Cecile Leonie Goby (1865-1922), born in the nearby village of Savigny-les-Beaune, 22 November 1865, entered the Hospitallers 19 March 1888, received the veil as a novice 24 June 1890, but for unspecified reasons did not make vows until 27 June 1895.<sup>3</sup> There is little else in the written record of the community until she died from pneumonia 20 April 1922, at age 56. Her obituary indicates that she boarded in Beaune at a secondary school run by sisters before joining the community and was appreciated for her keen intelligence as a student. Goby's dedication to the sick poor she cared for in the hospital, in her village, as well as the paying patients from Beaunois high society, is clear from the community's testimony and her correspondence with Elisabeth.<sup>4</sup> Goby served at the Hôtel-Dieu her entire life as a nursing sister, except for the few months she spent taking care of her ill mother at home in 1911-12 and again in 1921.

Within her community, the superior of the community assigned the sisters to their posts within the hospital. Less experienced sisters were paired with a more seasoned sister, and their nursing training was supervised by the doctor in charge of the particular area. Sisters rotated to a new area of service every three years, unless they had specialized expertise, such as in pharmacy, where they might serve indefinitely.<sup>5</sup> Goby's correspondence with Leseur confirms that she had served in St. Hugues (women's surgical) and was moved to

<sup>2</sup> See Elisabeth Leseur, *Journal et pensées pour chaque jour*, Paris 2005. For an English edition of Elisabeth Leseur's writings, see Janet K. Ruffing, *Selected writings of Elisabeth Leseur*, Mahwah 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The writer of Goby's obituary considered the length of her novitiate to be unusually long. Apparently, Soeur Goby remained a novice for five years before she was allowed to or chose to make vows. According to Dr. Georges Chevaillier, during the period of 1871-1914, the normal length of postulancy was around three years and the novitiate was two to two and one half years. A contemporary of Goby, who was already in the novitiate when Goby entered, Soeur Anne Marguerite Marion, remained a novice for four years. Georges Chevaillier, *Du quinquina a la cortisone: L'hôtel-dieu de Beaune 1871-1971*, Beaune 1994, 14.

<sup>4</sup> 'Savigny-Les Beaune-Necrologie', in: *Le Bien Public* 309 (29 Avril 1922), 3; and Soeur Jacques' official community Necrologie, dated 15 May 1922, sent to the houses and elsewhere in the region. Private Archives of the Sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu of Beaune.

<sup>5</sup> In 1888, the year Soeur Goby entered the community, the patients were housed as follows: Men occupied 30 beds in Saint Louis, 20 beds in Saint Nicolas, and 17 in Saint Marguerite. The women occupied 28 beds in the Great Hall, 11 in St. Hugues and 13 in St. Joseph. Children were placed in different rooms as were 8 old invalids (6 women and 2 men). Chevaillier, *Quinquina*, 19.

women's medical during their correspondence and that she substituted for Sr. Lelong in surgery.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after Elisabeth Leseur's death May 3, 1914, World War I commenced. During the war, the Hôtel-Dieu played an important role in the region.<sup>7</sup> As early as 16 August, 1914, the Administrative Commission of the Hospital decided to admit the war wounded to the Hôtel-Dieu.<sup>8</sup> Because the military officers and convalescent soldiers were so evident at Goby's funeral,<sup>9</sup> and pages in a community journal describe her concern for the soldiers, she, like everyone else at the Hôtel-Dieu, was involved in nursing the war wounded during World War I.<sup>10</sup> A dedicated nursing sister, the community obituary reports extensive testimony to her goodness and care from the soldiers and patients she had nursed.

Goby was loved and admired by the sisters in her community and many who knew her came to her funeral from other houses founded from Beaune. The entire village of Savigny attended her funeral. Since her mother had died only a

<sup>6</sup> See Georges Chevallier, *Histoire des religieuses hospitalières de Beaune: Des origines au XX siècle*, Beaune 2006, 77. Although Soeur Goby's full record of rotations within the Hôtel-Dieu are not listed, Chevallier does give that information for Soeur Anne Marguerite Marion, Goby's contemporary and friend in the community. Against this background, Soeur Anne Marguerite Marion's successive three-year assignments suggest the usual rotations during this same period: 'surgical in Saint Hugues, Sainte Marguerite and Sainte Come (paying patients and isolation), in medical in Saint-Louis, in surgical in Saint-Nicolas, in the kitchen, in isolation, in the museum and laundry'. Chevallier, *Histoires des religieuses*, 80.

<sup>7</sup> The Hôtel-Dieu received the most seriously wounded soldiers. When the troop trains of the wounded arrived, only the most serious cases were unloaded first and triaged through radiology and surgery at the Hôtel-Dieu for diagnosis and removal of bullets and shrapnel. Once stabilized after surgery, these patients would be moved as rapidly as possible to other locations for recovery. To complement the care at the Hôtel-Dieu, five other auxiliary hospitals were created throughout Beaune. Chevallier, *Quinquina*, 49. At times, there were as many as 3,066 wounded being cared for in Beaune. Roland Laronze, *Hier Beaune en 1900*, s.l. (Belgium) 2006, 226.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Nicolas, Saint Hugues and Saint Joseph were designated for the wounded. Additional beds would be set up in the center of these rooms. The Great Hall would serve as a medical/surgical area for women and St. Louis for men. Sainte Marguerite continued to serve paying patients. Thus the Hôtel-Dieu became both a civil and a military hospital. Chevallier, *Quinquina*, 47. In fact, St. Louis housed many soldiers. Interview with Georges Chevallier, Bruno Francois, Soeur Jacqueline Lepas and Soeur Gabrielle Loreau, 17 July 2008.

<sup>9</sup> '[T]he convalescent soldiers from the military hospital were deeply affected and regretted her death'. *Le Bien Public* 309 (29 April 1922), 3, Paid Obituary. The military hospital was then located behind the Hôtel-Dieu.

<sup>10</sup> Before her death on the 20 April 1922, Goby had requested a Mass be offered for the 'military patients', according to the community journal, 'to whom she had been very helpful'. This Mass was offered on 26 April, just days after she was buried. Private Archives of the Sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu.

few months previously,<sup>11</sup> she had recently lived in the village, attended church with them, and shared their lives. In her will, she left her furnished family home to the village for housing the poor and for a vacation location<sup>12</sup> for the sisters.<sup>13</sup> The vineyards and their harvest, she gave to the Hôtel-Dieu so that the income from them might cover the costs of the poor from the village who needed care at the Hôtel-Dieu. Even as she was dying, she was still trying to serve the poor of Savigny with the resources at her disposal.<sup>14</sup>

#### CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN ELISABETH LESEUR AND SOEUR MARIE GOBY<sup>15</sup>

The extant letters between Elisabeth Leseur and Soeur Marie Goby provide a more balanced view of this primarily epistolary relationship – a source of companionship and mutual spiritual support for both women – than is available from Elisabeth's letters alone.<sup>16</sup> This soul-friendship unfolded through their letters written from 1911 until shortly before Elisabeth's death in 1914. It is reasonable to assume that neither woman expected anyone else would read their letters.

<sup>11</sup> Madame Pierre Goby died 21 November 1921 in Savigny. See *Le Bien Public* 71 (November 22, 1921) no. 285, 3, Paid Obituary.

<sup>12</sup> Soeur Jacqueline Lepas and Soeur Gabrielle Loreau did not think that any of the sisters ever used the Goby home. Private Conversation, 17 July 2008.

<sup>13</sup> In 1935, the village renamed a street around the corner from this home (Petite rue Basse) Rue Soeur Marie Goby. 'In order to perpetuate the memory of benefactors of the commune, defenders of the homeland, or other persons who rendered service to the people, the Municipal Council in its meeting of 22 February 1935, decided to change street names'. Joseph Delissey, President de la Société D'Histoire et D'Archeologie de Beaune, *Monographie de la commune de Savigny-les-Beaune*, Savigny-les-Beaune 1970, 21. The village sold the home when it was no longer needed by them and it is a guest house today located at 16 Rue General Leclerc.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Georges Chevaillier notes that the Hospitallers enjoyed unusual personal freedom and retained their personal property, paid taxes and social security fees, like all citizens. Their habits were originally not actually religious garb but the style of dress of the aristocracy in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, notably similar to that worn by Guigone de Salins, wife of the founder of the hospital, Nicolas Rolin. The sisters professed simple vows for as long as they served at the Hospital so that they were free to leave the community should they wish. The founder wanted to insure that those who served the poor continued to do so freely. *Histoire des religieuses*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Throughout their correspondence Elisabeth Leseur always addressed Soeur Goby as Soeur, my dear Soeur, etc. She never refers to her by her first name, Marie. On the other hand, Soeur Goby begins the relationship by addressing Elisabeth as Dear Madame Leseur, Dear Madame, etc., but once the friendship begins to develop, she asks permission to address her as Elisabeth. I have followed this convention, referring to Elisabeth by her first name and Soeur Goby or Soeur Marie Goby or even Goby in background information. Today, we would use first names for both people.

<sup>16</sup> Editions du Cerf is planning to publish a book that includes the correspondence of both women for the first time.

Elisabeth Leseur's husband, Felix, originally published his wife's letters to Soeur Marie Goby under the title *Lettres sur la Souffrance* in 1918, one year after the amazing reception of the posthumous publication of Elisabeth Leseur's *Journal et Pensées pour Chaque Jour*.<sup>17</sup> Felix's entrance into the Dominican novitiate was imminent as he put the finishing touches on this volume. He had returned to the Catholic faith and then discerned a vocation to religious life as a result of reading Elisabeth's journal and experiencing her mysterious presence and guidance in his life after her death. France was emerging from World War I, and Elisabeth's journal awakened many readers to an accessible path of lay holiness within ordinary daily life. Religious and clergy also responded enthusiastically to her journal. This popular interest in Elisabeth's life led to a demand for more information about this saintly woman and for some kind of sequel.<sup>18</sup>

Felix organized the publication of Elisabeth's letters to Soeur Goby as well as a second group of letters his wife wrote to three correspondents among their 'unbelieving' friends under the title *Lettres à des Incroyants*.<sup>19</sup> At the time of publication of both sets of letters, Elisabeth's correspondents were still living and gave Felix his wife's letters which they had saved as well as consent to their publication. Elisabeth's correspondents were clearly well-known to her husband.

In the case of the Goby correspondence, Felix also needed Goby's permission to include excerpts from her own letters to provide a context for understanding Elisabeth's response. Felix admits he read all of Goby's letters to his wife, which he found after her death, without consulting Goby first.<sup>20</sup> Goby eventually agreed to the publication of Elisabeth's letters to her, and except for the few passages Felix used from her letters, the full set of Goby's letters remained in the Leseur Papers in the Dominican Archives until they were found in 2003. Felix pressured Goby in order to secure this consent. Not only did he get the expert opinion of clergy and religious known to him, but also met with the chaplain of Goby's community. Goby finally agreed to allow the publication of all of Elisabeth's letters she had saved despite her great reluctance to allow one of the letters Elisabeth wrote in response to Goby's vocational crisis when her mother was very ill.<sup>21</sup>

The original edition of *Lettres sur la Souffrance* included a preface by Fr. Hébert, Elisabeth Leseur's confessor and occasional spiritual director from

<sup>17</sup> *Journal et pensées pour chaque jour de Madame Elisabeth Leseur*. With an introductory letter by Father Janvier, OP, Paris 1917.

<sup>18</sup> Felix Leseur wrote a biography of his wife after his period of initial formation. *Vie d'Elisabeth Leseur*, Paris 1930.

<sup>19</sup> *Lettres à des incroyants*. With a preface by Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, Paris 1923.

<sup>20</sup> Felix Leseur, 'Introduction', in: *Lettres sur la souffrance*, Paris 1919, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Goby's letter describing her crisis was not in the archives, suggesting, perhaps, Elisabeth destroyed it because of its sensitive nature.

1903-1914, and an introduction by Felix. Both men no doubt felt some embarrassment and guilt for having known Elisabeth so well, and yet in the case of Hébert, he admitted that he had not done more to help her until close to her death and that he neglected her pastoral care out of deference to her husband. Felix, the bereaved widower, discovered how much suffering his agnosticism and hostility to faith caused his wife during their marriage. Hébert said he recognized himself in Elisabeth's description of a formal and moderately helpful experience of spiritual direction within the context of confession. He notes that Elisabeth rarely wrote him in between her personal visits, and that he was somewhat passive in response to her fragile health. Both men shared responsibility for the painful spiritual isolation Elisabeth endured until she met Soeur Goby. Both men became invested in promoting Elisabeth as a model of holiness for their times. And possibly both men were unable to recognize the significance of the mutuality and deep spiritual friendship that developed between these two women the last four years of Elisabeth's life.

Felix described the correspondence in these terms: 'I titled this volume *Letters on Suffering* because suffering is the principal theme, the interior life is the subject, and the letters form something of a series of meditations. They appear, indeed, to be truly letters of spiritual direction that will enrich our ascetical literature'.<sup>22</sup> Although Felix recognizes something of the depth and intensity of the relationship that developed between these two women, he is so intent on promoting his wife's influence as a spiritual director and spiritual writer that he portrays his wife as the dominant influence on the other and fails to appreciate sufficiently Soeur Goby's influence on his wife.

At this very early stage of Felix's return to religious faith and prior to his formation as a religious, is this bereaved widower the most reliable interpreter of his wife's spiritual legacy and her relationship with a nursing sister only a year older than she? Both women were seasoned in the spiritual life despite the unique challenges of their respective life-styles. They found in one another the perfect confidante to whom they spontaneously allowed their hearts and souls to speak to one another of their shared life in God.

Such a relationship between a married lay woman and a nursing sister is rare before the changes from Vatican II began to bring lay women and religious women together in ministry, friendship, and spiritual support.<sup>23</sup> Epistolary spiritual relationships tended to be between a male spiritual director (Frances De Sales and the women he directed), between religious women (Jane Frances De

<sup>22</sup> Leseur, 'Introduction', in: *Lettres sur la souffrance*, 53.

<sup>23</sup> The rules of most religious communities limited the contact women religious had with lay women – single or married. Associations of lay women, married and single, with female religious communities during the last thirty years has been a major post conciliar development.

Chantal and her sisters), or between a woman recognized for her holiness and the disciples who gathered around her (Catherine of Siena and her spiritual family). These models probably influenced Felix's interpretation of this correspondence. I know of only one other nineteenth century epistolary friendship between a single lay woman and a nursing sister, that of Florence Nightingale and Sr. Clare Moore, RSM, who had nursed together in the Crimean War (1854-1856) and continued their relationship through letters thereafter.<sup>24</sup>

#### FELIX LESEUR AND THE RELATIONSHIP

Ironically, Felix met Soeur Goby at the same time as his wife, and was present for both of their only face-to-face meetings except for an hour or two when he went off with his niece during their first visit, leaving the two women to talk privately for a while.

Felix describes Goby as:

A nursing sister from a provincial town, a woman of rare merit, great piety, tested Christian virtue, an example of charitable zeal, and at the same time intelligent and exceptionally charming – in short, a model religious. Her inner spirit expressed the same qualities as Elisabeth's which explains the intimacy that they so rapidly established before they had even seen one another.<sup>25</sup>

Soeur Goby was always very conscious of Felix when she wrote Elisabeth. Goby seemed to be very comfortable with him, a medical doctor turned journalist, accustomed as she was to working with doctors at the Hôtel-Dieu. Every letter exchanged by these women includes greetings to or from Felix. Goby was privy to Elisabeth's secret pact with God. When Elisabeth was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1911, she offered her suffering for her husband's conversion. Goby joined Elisabeth in praying for Felix's full conversion which became a frequent intention of her prayer. Felix appeared to soften some to religion and religious people at this time in Elisabeth's life. His fondness for Goby and efforts to bring his wife to meet her and see her again was evidence of that. Felix observed that his wife's spirits improved when Goby's letters arrived and that she kept them

<sup>24</sup> See Mary C. Sullivan (Ed.), *The friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore*, Philadelphia 1999. In this relationship, Florence addresses Mary Clare Moore as 'Dearest Reverend Mother'. Nightingale writes 47 letters to Moore, ten letters are written by Moore to Nightingale, and Nightingale writes 5 letters about Clare to other Sisters of Mercy. Interestingly enough, Moore sends Faber's *Spiritual Conferences* to Nightingale, a book also sent by Elisabeth to Soeur Goby.

<sup>25</sup> Leseur, 'Introduction', 53.

with her frequently rereading them.<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth conveyed Goby's greetings to him but apparently did not share the letters. Felix was excluded from this exchange of friendship and of spiritual intimacy because of his incapacity to enter it. However, because of the observable effect on his wife, he deeply appreciated Goby.

As Elisabeth became too ill to write, Felix kept Goby informed about Elisabeth's health, and Goby's last few preserved letters are addressed to Felix. Goby remained for Felix a living connection with his dead wife until he entered the Dominicans.<sup>27</sup> He made a few days retreat at the Hôtel-Dieu each year, sought comfort from Soeur Goby, and as present members of the community report, he openly wept without ceasing on those occasions.

The relationship Elisabeth Leseur developed with Soeur Marie Goby from 1910-1914 was one of the most important spiritual and human events in their lives. Drawn together by a shared love for and care for the poor and their deep relationship with God through prayer and Eucharist, both women experienced an immediate attraction to one another and an instant rapport upon their first meeting.

#### THE FRIENDSHIP

Their correspondence testifies to a deep friendship between an upper middle class Parisian married woman, and a nursing sister originally from the rural village of Savigny-les-Beaune who served the poor at the famous Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune with great dedication. These women met only twice face-to-face, a one-day visit in Beaune and a longer visit in Dijon when Soeur Goby was under doctor's care there. Yet they found in one another a real soul-friend and confidante.

Both women faced different kinds of personal suffering. During the correspondence, Soeur Goby, an only child, anxiously nursed her mother through a life-threatening illness in her village. In addition, this capable nurse was threatened with the loss of her eyesight. This problem with her eyes severely limited the amount of time she could read or write. This resulted in further limiting her letters to Elisabeth in the later stages of her cancer as well as her reading the spiritual books that supported her prayer life or even praying the office. Elisabeth faced multiple physical challenges that limited her activity all of her married life. She suffered from an intestinal abscess that flared up periodically, recurring bouts

<sup>26</sup> 'I often saw the joy that she showed in receiving them; she kept them with her, re-reading them often during the day and the days following, having treasured them at her side; I know that the religious did the same with Elisabeth's letters'. Leseur, 'Introduction', 77.

<sup>27</sup> Leseur, *Vie d'Elisabeth Leseur*, 192.



of hepatitis, and a host of other ills until she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1911, underwent surgery and radiation, and died three years later. She also suffered various bereavements as was common for everyone in the nineteenth century. Her sister Marie died in childhood, another sister, Juliette, died as a young woman in 1905, and a nephew died during the correspondence with Goby. They emotionally and spiritually support one another in coping with these sufferings.

Both women experienced isolation. Elisabeth repeatedly noted her isolation from other religiously minded people in her marriage<sup>28</sup> and in the religiously hostile social milieu in which she lived despite her family and friends. Soeur Goby was separated from her community for several months, nursing her mother in a tiny village. But she also seems not to have found anyone in her religious community with whom she could share deeply on a spiritual or affective level. Early in the correspondence, Goby admits she had longed for this kind of a friend.<sup>29</sup> Although Goby frequently refers to the Marion sisters (les Soeurs Marions) in the correspondence as 'friends' in her community, apparently they did not share on this level.

<sup>28</sup> In an essay analyzing Elisabeth's *Journal*, Dominique-Marie Dauzet highlights the moment in 1898 shortly before Elisabeth began writing in her journal as her new life began, a new life of vivifying faith that she could not share with her husband, and sealed off this part of her life from Felix and from their marriage. '[F]rom that moment [1898] Elisabeth entered into silence, the isolation of soul from which she suffered so much, and led a parallel life. The unbelieving Felix, the spiritually stubborn Felix, remained loved by Elisabeth, justly and tenderly until the last day of her life, but she moved on in certain matters to something of Plan B. Meanwhile, it is no longer with Felix that she is in communion of spirit, friends with God – or Christ – and her intimate confidant is no longer her husband, but her journal. A surreptitious spirit enters Elisabeth, one might say, spiritually deceiving her husband with a journal, a spiritual text, a secret text, destined to keep her confidences, discretely put away in a drawer'. *La mystique bien tempérée: Écriture féminine de l'expérience spirituelle xix-xx siècle*, Paris 2006, 248. It was this particular intimacy that found an even more satisfying expression in her correspondence with Soeur Goby.

<sup>29</sup> 'But don't you know how precious and valuable your tender and holy affection has become for me? Oh! On this point we will always agree. Have I told you that for thirty years, I have dreamed of a friend whose soul would be a true Sister to mine? And I feel that the Good Master has just given it to me, and would you not want what I want and guard it ardently? But for that prayers and sacrifices would never seem too numerous! Allow me, therefore, to say to Jesus that which I never cease to repeat: "My Jesus, make our dear Elisabeth more and more holy. This is thus what my heart asks for you from Him who has sent you to me, with such tender and profound affection for you. Yes, make her holy according to all the graces that she asks for each day and especially, leave her a long time on earth, and finally that she accomplish good for the souls you have confided to her (...) mine, and to so many others whom you have placed on her path". This is my wish and my prayer, my beloved friend. What do you want! "My mouth speaks the abundance of my heart". Soeur Marie Goby, 21 September 1911, Savigny.

*Spiritual Direction*

Goby talks about having looked for a spiritual director without success.

At this moment, I am experiencing great spiritual impoverishment and I have a great need for Divine comfort! There has never been anyone besides God and me! The more I matured in my life, the more I notice and sense my powerlessness, my lack and my ignorance! You speak to me of a spiritual father who helps you? I am happy for you and I praise God for it! I have often wanted to meet a priest to whom I could totally share my interiority and totally trust him. I have always looked for such spiritual direction, but it has always eluded me! The good Jesus alone has wanted to be sufficient. Perhaps, I might have stopped at the merely human and developed a natural attachment? Thus it is to live the good pleasure of God always and in everything!<sup>30</sup>

Elisabeth mentions what help a spiritual director can be,<sup>31</sup> but in fact describes a rather formal and limited relationship she experienced with her confessor and spiritual director – support during difficult times, moral guidance, assurance one is on the right path,<sup>32</sup> the content of which is quite different from the interior movements of her heart she shares so readily with Goby and Goby with her. Both women share rather nakedly with one another their aridity, depressions, and their struggles without fear of being misunderstood or cherished less as a result

<sup>30</sup> Goby, 1 February 1912.

<sup>31</sup> Elisabeth herself only met Père Hébert in 1903, after a three year period of deepening spiritual life. Elisabeth's primary spiritual guidance came through her constant and extensive reading of spiritual books. She writes: 'I am convinced, my friend, that in some people God takes over completely. True spiritual direction is a precious but rare thing. One can be comforted and strengthened by the guidance of a holy priest and yet never achieve that fullness of direction God sometimes reserves to himself. We have depths reserved to God who alone fully knows our hidden weaknesses, our secret desires and needs. In simplicity and docility we should simply ask our spiritual guide for more insights into our weaknesses, some general direction for our spiritual life, comfort when we are suffering or depressed. However, it's only in the heart of Jesus that we will find the ultimate support, profound strength, and complete understanding of what we need in order to grow closer to him. One thing is sure, namely, the Divine will always want what is good for us, whether in giving, refusing, or measuring out for us whatever we truly need. We are so fragile that we need to be guided and sustained either by those sent to us by God or by God himself when his representatives are lacking or have not yet come our way'. February 1912.

<sup>32</sup> Claude Menesguen makes a similar assessment, 'It is certainly without doubt that it is not what one would call a spiritual director, but rather, a regular confessor and conversation partner who helped relieve her isolation which was difficult to endure'. 'Elisabeth Leseur (1866-1914): Une femme singulière sous la III République', in: *La Vie Spirituelle* 87 (2007), 317-332: 325. In Elisabeth's own words, 'My whole spiritual life has been spent alone with God, supported for some years by the priest that Providence sent me at a precise moment of need'. 24 January 1912.

of doing so. Elisabeth also describes how God sometimes directs some people himself, namely, herself before she met Hébert and to whom she had limited access. Both women had not really found anyone with whom to share the fullness of their spiritual lives. Elisabeth does respond to Goby's emotional and spiritual transparency and does offer her sound spiritual advice on several occasions.

Both women discovered they were no longer alone on their respective spiritual journeys, but were drawn to share more fully with one another than with anyone else in their lives the central reality of their lives – their spiritual journey and their love for God shaped by their respective vocations. They console one another, accompany one another, pray for one another, and offer one another spiritual counsel as each situation presents itself. For both women, their meeting and correspondence effectively ended their isolation.<sup>33</sup>

#### FACE TO FACE MEETINGS AND SPIRITUAL CHEMISTRY

##### *The Beginning of the Relationship – Mutual Concern for the Poor*

The Leseurs traveled by car with a friend from Paris to their summer home in Jougne, 10 July of 1910. They stopped for lunch in Beaune, and toured the Hôtel-Dieu which even at the turn of the century had a museum. Emerging from one of the rooms, they met Marie Ballard, an eight year old girl, whose bed had been set up in the courtyard under a balcony. Elisabeth spoke with her, sensing her suffering, and asked if there was anything she could do for her. Marie asked for picture postcards. Elisabeth told her she would not forget her little friend from the Hôtel-Dieu. Soeur Goby was elsewhere at the time, and when she returned, Marie excitedly told her about meeting a beautiful lady who was going to send her postcards. Goby was skeptical and warned Marie that sometimes people make promises but forget to keep them. Elisabeth sent the first postcard that evening from Besançon, and kept on sending cards. Goby later confided to Felix that Elisabeth's response to Marie '...was the first time that I have seen anyone with such constancy and generosity of heart'.<sup>34</sup> Marie asked Soeur Goby to help her write a thank you note to Elisabeth, which she did enclosing a note of her own.

<sup>33</sup> Felix acknowledges the significance for Elisabeth but fails to notice that it also fulfilled Goby's deep need for a friend, *a true sister*, with whom she could share both her ministry and her interior life. 'For Elisabeth, in effect, that was the end of her spiritual isolation which was so cruel for her and about which she complained with so much resignation in her *Journal*. (...) finally the walls of her prison quickly collapsed, and she was able to abandon herself to her need for expression. The letters became more and more frequent and intimate. And what good those of Soeur [Goby] did for her!' 'Introduction', 77.

<sup>34</sup> F. Leseur, 'Introduction', 64.

When the Leseurs returned to Paris the end of July, Elisabeth wrote Goby asking what she could send Marie that might give her a little joy. Goby talked with Marie who asked for a doll with changeable clothes. Goby also mentioned that Marie was learning her prayers and the catechism and that she would pray for Elisabeth.

In thanking Elisabeth for the doll which thrilled little Marie, Goby tells her that Marie named the doll Juliette, without knowing that was the name of Elisabeth's younger sister. Only after little Marie's death in November right after her first Communion, when Elisabeth expresses the hope that 'these totally spiritual bonds created between us by this encounter will remain and that our souls will never be separated again' and sends her the book she wrote about Juliette's death, together with a picture of herself, does Goby share with Elisabeth the 'uncanny' way little Marie had brought these two women together in their mutual concern for the child.<sup>35</sup> Elisabeth's book further attracts Soeur Goby who confides immediately upon receiving it 'your soul is never far from me and before God, your memory is mixed together with those whom I love'.<sup>36</sup> Goby's next letter, 28 December 1910, is more extensive when she states: 'I simply say to you that I felt and understood your soul, and from the depth of my own, I thank God for having given you such lively faith!' She has begun to pray for Elisabeth when she thinks about her and feels close to her. In this letter she shares her understanding of the mystery of death. In this same letter she encourages Elisabeth to visit the Hôtel-Dieu again and sends her own most recent photo.

By the next letter, 21 February 1911, Goby addresses Elisabeth as 'My very dear Madame'. Goby takes yet another step further, sharing her spiritual reading, commenting on Elisabeth's family news and affirming that they 'belong to the same spiritual family (...) yes, what does the difference in our paths matter'. They are both aware of their different states in life but see it as inconsequential. Elisabeth takes an interest in Goby's patients and follows the ones Goby mentions to her. Goby wonders if she is being indiscreet in speaking this way to Elisabeth, but even dares to offer her advice.

Even before their first meeting in person, they had begun to glimpse each other's interiority and were attracted to each other on that level. In April, Elisabeth is diagnosed with breast cancer and has surgery. She recovers enough to travel by car to Beaune in August. Thus, a full year has transpired since the two women became aware of one another through Goby's patient, Marie Ballard, and their letters display increasing intimacy and freedom to share on almost any level.

<sup>35</sup> Goby, 28 December 1910.

<sup>36</sup> Goby, 17 November 1910.

## FIRST MEETING, BEAUNE, 13 AUGUST 1911

Elisabeth describes her first meeting with Soeur Goby to Madame Peyrol, 21 August, 1911.

After joining the community for Communion followed by Mass,

Soeur Goby came to find me at my place, right in front of the tabernacle when we saw each other for the first time. She had saved her morning for me except for an hour which I spent alone in the peaceful and delightful garden, and we shared from our depths. How I needed to tell you what joy I found there and what good it did me to meet this beautiful spirit. I found in her even more than I had expected. Since then I saw in the provisions she made for me, in the expansion of this soul who loves God uniquely, and the poor for Him, and who has given me such a totally Christian affection, by which I mean deep and lasting. Providence has granted us, as you put it, a sweet treat, and it is necessary to enjoy it immensely, to say thank you, and to be transformed by the gift of self, devotion, generosity, and experienced joys. And it is also necessary when these joys are replaced by pain, to accept them with the same smile in one's heart and be just as generous in serving another.<sup>37</sup>

When the Leseurs left, Elisabeth admits, 'I then left this friend full of emotion, but with a very sweet feeling of total union of heart...'. After an extended reflection on the virtue of simplicity addressed to Madame Peyrol, she comments, 'Soeur Goby charmed me by her exquisite simplicity, like all those I have known who have a magnanimous heart...'.<sup>38</sup>

Elisabeth also writes Goby and describes how this visit consoled her and how her thoughts keep returning to their visit. She comments not only on Goby's personal qualities but on the atmosphere at the Hôtel-Dieu, 'How can I describe my thoughts about last Sunday, and the good that it did me and which now gives me the strength to go on. Getting to know you a little better, having the experience of your deep love, and spending a few hours in the warm, peaceful atmosphere of your dear hospital, this is for me a treasury of graces for which I thank God'.<sup>39</sup>

Goby replies immediately to this letter:

You are too good to tell me that your stay at the Hôtel-Dieu brought you a smile of happiness. It seemed to me that all the joy was mine because I sensed in myself all that you were able to give me, and I discovered in that so much of you! I often remember having read when I was about the age of your niece, Marie, in Madame

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Madame Peyrol, 21 August 1911, cited by F. Leseur, 'Introduction', 79-81.

<sup>38</sup> F. Leseur, 'Introduction'.

<sup>39</sup> Elisabeth Leseur, Jougne, 15 August 1911.

Swetchine of whom I was in great admiration, this stunning thought: 'There are some people one has never seen before, but recognizes them the first time one sees them'. In seeing you, dear Madame, I understood that what Madame Swetchine said, was true!

I had already come to know your soul in your letters and in the intimate pages of the little book you sent me. I had seen the radiance of this same spirit on your face when I saw it near the tabernacle of our little chapel, when I approached you for the first time!

I found it again shining through the features of your face, and expressing itself in our conversation in our intimate hour in the morning!... And then, oh! Instantly, I loved you and I felt so attracted to you! Yes, I want my soul to become a true Sister to yours. As I have already said to you, dear madame, you will only find from me a heart that will love you tenderly and that will know how to speak about you to our good God, and nothing else.<sup>40</sup>

In her response to Leseur, and the expansiveness of her self-disclosure, Goby affirms the mutual spiritual attraction both women had toward one another. Goby wants to be a soul sister to Leseur, and her citation of Madame Swetchine suggests Goby already had some spiritual depth prior to entrance into the Hospitaller Sisters.

#### SECOND VISIT, 24-25 JULY 1912

The second time the Leseurs see Soeur Goby, occurs about one year later in Dijon. Elisabeth has already been diagnosed with cancer and recovered from the surgery. Soeur Goby is being treated for her eye problem, and after the leisure of having spent a couple of days together, Goby returns abruptly to Beaune upon receiving news of the death of Soeur Bigot, the only superior Goby has known in her life as a hospitaller sister. Impending loss hovers over the relationship. Felix described this visit: 'Elisabeth and her friend never stopped talking. Soeur Goby took her meals with us, and each afternoon we toured the Dijon area by car'.<sup>41</sup>

As the Leseurs see Goby off at the train station, they promise to make this an annual event. This visit proved to be their last.

<sup>40</sup> Goby, 16 August 1911.

<sup>41</sup> Felix Leseur, *Vie d'Elisabeth*, 204. 'In the course of touring, Elisabeth revealed to her friend, who was totally astonished, the prediction about what I have already done, several years beforehand, about her premature death, and my conversion, and of my entrance into religious life, which would be its result'.

## THEMES IN THE LETTERS

The letters not only provide a glimpse into Elisabeth's theology of the communion of saints and its corollary: the value of suffering for accomplishing spiritual good, but they also give privileged access to an intense, epistolary friendship. For Elisabeth, this was her first and only soul-friend to whom she pours out her heart and to which Soeur Goby responds with equal transparency and enthusiasm, only to lose Elisabeth to death within four years. The silence of unspoken experiences, understandings, and affection is broken for both women. Elisabeth writes eloquently about her interior and relational life, her spiritual theology, and displays her consummate tact. Elisabeth writes as often as every ten days or as infrequently as once a month while Goby writes about half as frequently and is more economical in length because of her nursing duties and the eye problem she developed. It is clear from these letters that both women feel loved and understood. Within the letters, there is frequent reflection on their friendship itself, the inclusion of their significant others, their affection for one another, their deep mutual appreciation for their distinct vocations, mutual advice and spiritual direction, the communion of saints, their response to suffering, and the subtle differences in their spiritualities.

*The Friendship Itself*

Throughout the correspondence, there are frequent references to the friendship itself. In some of Elisabeth's letters to Soeur Goby, she reassures her friend of the fully 'Christian' quality of their mutual love and respect. Goby describes an affective and spiritual preoccupation with Elisabeth and appears to question the relationship. Is it Ok? What is this intense affective bond that is developing so rapidly?

As Goby adjusts to the relationship, by December of 1911, in a brief note of gratitude for a donation Elisabeth had sent, she comments:

They [Elisabeth's letters], you know, have touched my heart and strengthened my soul! One must be in pain to feel better – all that a Christian friendship brings of strength, tenderness, and consolation. May Jesus return to you all the good you have done for me, my dear Elisabeth! This is a bond that unites me to you even more and makes me always yours!<sup>42</sup>

As a theme, both women continue to express directly to one another what their relationship means to them.

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<sup>42</sup> Goby, Lettre, Hôtel-Dieu, 20 December 1911.

*Inclusion of Significant Others*

From the beginning, the relationship includes the 'beloveds' in both women's familial and social worlds. Elisabeth's mother was aging, and as her arthritis advanced, she somewhat disappointed her daughter's expectations of a more spiritual response to this suffering. Elisabeth hopes that her mother will experience a deeper more fervent faith. Goby's mother, on the other hand, is apparently as religious as her daughter. Goby spends her annual two weeks vacation with her mother in the small grape growing village. Every year, they make an annual three day pilgrimage to a shrine – Paray-le-Moniale, Lourdes, or Ars. Goby describes how these relatively short trips provide her with deep religious experience and extended time for prayer which she does in the company of her mother. When Goby returns to the Hôtel-Dieu after her mother's health crisis, her mother appears to accept the separation from her daughter with great faith and courage.

There is constant concern about each other's close companions. Both always acknowledge Felix. Likewise, Elisabeth frequently sends a greeting to Soeur Goby's religious superior,<sup>43</sup> and to the Marion Sisters whom she had met. Both women pray for each other's mothers. And both mothers are aware of the relationship. Goby includes Elisabeth's niece and nephews in her intercessory prayer. Elisabeth inquires about and prays for patients Soeur Goby is nursing, or concerned about. Death anniversaries are remembered – Juliette's (Elisabeth's sister) and Marie Ballard (the tubercular child) whom God providentially used to bring these two friends together. As their relationship develops, both women include one another among their beloveds.

*Affection and Mutual Respect for Differing Vocations*

The letters reveal a deep spiritual and affective bond and an extraordinary respect for their different vocations. Elisabeth frequently wishes she could care for the poor as her friend does, yet always affirms her own vocation to 'pray and to suffer', recognizing that such activity is simply not God's will for her. Elisabeth also describes her increasing abandonment to God, a growing union, yet without glossing over the periods of aridity, darkness, and suffering, normal for someone as ill as she is. When Soeur Goby is unable to write, Elisabeth feels the lack of

<sup>43</sup> Goby entered the community during the administration of Soeur Bigot who was elected superior in 1880 and served in that capacity until 1912. There were usually about 26 sisters in the community at that time, two thirds of whom were from the surrounding area. This is the superior whose death Goby mourns in the course of her correspondence with Elisabeth Leseur. At the time of the election to replace Bigot, twenty-one sisters were voting members of the chapter. She was succeeded by Soeur Anne Marie Therese Jacques who served until her own death in 1938 and who was the superior during World War I.



the emotional support she receives from her friend's letters and yet she advises Goby not to risk straining her eyes by trying to write.<sup>44</sup>

### *Mutual Advice and Spiritual Direction*

Occasionally, there is a letter of spiritual direction when Soeur Goby asks Elisabeth's advice on a particular issue. To such invitations, Elisabeth is discerning and accurate in her assessment of the issues, yet she offers such advice as if it were meant for herself. There is such mutual understanding and respect that neither thinks it unusual that a religious should seek such advice and support from a married woman. And, indeed, Elisabeth helped her friend resolve her most serious conflict whether or not to stay with her fragile mother instead of returning to the Hôtel-Dieu. Elisabeth encouraged Goby to return, explored arrangements that might be made for her mother, and delicately responded to the intense confusion of emotions felt by an only child for her ill mother. Elisabeth also supported Goby emotionally and spiritually as she chooses to return to her community and entrust her mother to God.

At the same time, Soeur Goby gives Elisabeth advice about taking care of herself, 'let me be a nurse for you', giving her advice about her health, and she, too, shares her own spiritual wisdom and experience in response to Elisabeth's, consoling and supporting her. This is often related to sharing spiritual books, reflections on the liturgical season, and a shared view of the spiritual life.

### *The Communion of Saints*

Elisabeth experienced the communion of saints this side of death in her relationship with Goby and her other relationships. Both correspondents describe a union of hearts and souls especially at Eucharist. They are intensely aware of one another spiritually despite their geographic separation. Elisabeth is utterly convinced that Soeur Goby, Felix and herself will someday all be reunited in the heart of their Divine Master with all who have gone before them in death. This theology of the communion of saints was shared by both women. The conviction that today's sufferings could benefit another – bring about conversion (especially Felix'), contribute to another's physical healing – and the deep trust in God's will and God's providence renders physical and emotional suffering full of meaning and purpose. The frequent deaths within her family, and in Soeur Goby's case, those of her impoverished patients become bearable when those left on earth can project continuity of relationship with loved ones beyond the grave.

In addition, Goby's community's prayer practices included praying for the dead which led her to share with Elisabeth a similarly robust belief in the

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<sup>44</sup> E. Leseur, 30 March 1912.

communion of saints. Not only did the 'saints' still on earth pray for those in purgatory, offering their sufferings and sacrifices as well, they also believed that all who died a holy death, became heavenly intercessors who prayed for them and aided them. These themes are mutual in the correspondence, and both women reflect on this creedal mystery.

### *Suffering*

As Elisabeth's physical and emotional sufferings began to accumulate, she realized that her vocation was essentially a contemplative one since God had deprived her of activity. She became an intercessor through her prayer and suffering. Elisabeth believed that suffering accepted and offered to God accomplished greater good for others than intercessory prayer or charitable actions. She believed that God's hidden action worked more effectively through suffering, both in transforming the one who suffered in this way and in gracing others through the great exchange in the communion of saints.

In her letters to Soeur Goby she comments many times on these assumptions. She describes the suffering people experience when they witness the suffering of those they love and seem powerless to help them. 'Suffering is so powerful and obtains so much; an hour spent in pain united to the Cross can do more than hours consecrated to the poor, to action, and according to this very beautiful saying: "Suffering is also a sacrament"'.<sup>45</sup> Although she valued suffering, nevertheless, she prays for the complete healing of Soeur Goby's mother. She supports her friend by empathetically witnessing her distress over her mother's suffering. She asserts a positive value to this suffering, but she does not encourage Goby to relinquish the desire for her mother's recovery.

Elisabeth reflects further on this same kind of suffering in a letter. There is an educative aspect when those we love suffer. Experiencing only our own sufferings does not allow us to fully know suffering. She draws on the example of Jesus in the Gospels who shares in the sufferings of those he loves. She advises:

Let us raise our eyes toward him, when sorrow or anxiety overwhelms us: and let us place our burden gently in his blessed hands and it will seem less heavy to us. Then let us take our miseries, our anxieties, our private heartbreaks and put them in his heart, so that from that heart they may go to God, then shower down on souls by that same royal road of love and become for others spiritual graces and joys.

She continues:

The stoics used to say: 'Suffering is nothing', and they were not telling the truth. But, more enlightened, we Christians say: 'Suffering is everything'. Suffering asks

<sup>45</sup> E. Leseur, *Journal*, September 8, 1912.

for and gets everything; because of suffering God consents to accomplishing all things; suffering helps the gentle Jesus to save the world. At times, when I feel overwhelmed by the immensity of my desires for those I love, by the importance of what I have to obtain for them, I turn toward suffering. I ask suffering to serve as the intermediary between God and them. (...) Suffering is the complete form of prayer, the only infallible form of action. So, my beloved sister, may suffering accomplish what we desire, may it obtain the realization of our desires, may it benefit these dear people and praise God!<sup>46</sup>

This passage suggests several important strategies Elisabeth adopted to infuse suffering with value and meaning. Most important is the relationship with God she discovers in suffering. She turns her suffering over to God; she places it in the Heart of Jesus who places it in God's heart. She does not bear suffering alone.

Second, she is aware of a long-standing spiritual teaching that there is something to be learned from suffering. At one stage of the spiritual life, suffering creates a condition that opens a person radically to grace. The inability to bear suffering stoutly alone as the stoics might encourage, drives one toward God and opens one to God's grace as it manifests itself within this experience.

Third, by this time in her life, she has already discovered a fundamental spiritual truth that facing various forms of suffering results in a gradual increase in one's capacity to suffer. Surviving frustration, lack of gratification, or physical pain, one is weaned from self-centeredness and becomes less dependent on immediate gratification. A certain amount of suffering strengthens the self, or at least enables it to discover one is stronger than first imagined.

Fourth, she understands that along the spiritual path, certain forms of unrelieved suffering accomplish the profound spiritual transformations called the 'dark nights' by John of the Cross. Elisabeth refers to this kind of dark night in her letters to Goby. She suffers an eclipse of God and of consolation in her struggle with breast cancer. Physical pain overwhelms her, weakens her physically and morally, and deprives her of joy. Yet she resists feeling abandoned by God. She rallies her hope and she infuses her suffering with potential meaning for the future. She says:

[F]or several weeks God has seen fit not to treat me too gently physically and morally. After having been treated by God like a spoiled child, it's only fair that I be led along a rougher road, and for almost two years that's the way it has been (...): I'm catching quite a glimpse of the 'dark night' of St. John of the Cross! When God drew me to himself by some wonderful means without any human intermediary, he lavished me with such graces and flooded me with such ineffable joys that I have been completely conquered forever. (...) I had already suffered

<sup>46</sup> E. Leseur, *Lettres sur la souffrance*, October 7, 1912.

when my sister died and because of my health; but to suffer in the joy of the spirit is nothing. That's why the trials of the soul, the most intimate and subtle heartaches have to come to purify, and transform. This divine work continues, and I daily offer my sorrows or my efforts to my unique Friend, to the one who alone knows me in my depths.<sup>47</sup>

One of the ways she copes with this suffering is through her correspondence with Soeur Goby. She says, 'How open I can be with you my friend, so easily and simply! The atmosphere in which I live is hardly favorable, from a religious point of view, to this kind of self-disclosure'.<sup>48</sup> In these letters, Elisabeth reveals the depth of her compassion – one of the fruits of her various forms of suffering. Just as she encourages Goby to embrace the suffering of witnessing the pain of someone she loves deeply, it is clear Elisabeth has had similar experiences of her own helplessness in the face of the death of family members. The intensity of Elisabeth's emotional responses has not been numbed by her own suffering and illnesses. She continues to feel deeply and to suffer emotionally as a result. She suffers with her friend; she is also aware of Felix' suffering when he witnesses her particularly acute periods of physical suffering.

Elisabeth believes that entering into suffering with God can be used to obtain the specific graces sought for others through conscious suffering. She thinks that suffering is the most efficacious way to achieve them. Yet there is paradox in her approach. She believes and trusts that this is, indeed, the case. But she also knows that she can only accept and offer her suffering and hope that God will do what she wishes. In other passages, she places all into God's hands. In fact, she does not see her husband converted before her death. Despite this disappointment, she trusts who God is: 'Only God can pull back the veil'. Elisabeth seems to suggest that suffering is more efficacious than the active life of the works of mercy. While at times, she idealizes Soeur Goby's spiritual and physical care of the ill and dying, she also recognizes there is often some escape from emotional and spiritual pain through such kind accompaniment. Elisabeth thinks suffering embraced and accepted (not sought or increased) is potentially less self-centered, more open to God for God's own sake.

Finally, Elisabeth consistently focuses on loving intention, trust in God, and co-laboring with God in the salvation of others, rather than on the suffering itself. However, as her breast cancer progresses, she does endure some terrible periods of exhausting and overwhelming physical pain. It is only toward the end of her life that she begins to see suffering as the primary focus of her spirituality. Until then, she engaged in many practices that successfully enabled her to live a relatively normal life rather than identify with the role of invalid.

<sup>47</sup> E. Leseur, *Lettres sur la souffrance*, April 20, 1912.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

Few even in her inner circle knew how seriously ill she was from 1911 until her death except her husband and Soeur Goby. Her physical and emotional sufferings led her to live from the deeper level of God's reality in her whether or not she could actually experience it. Those around her, experienced this peacefulness and radiance, commenting on her serenity, liveliness, and lovingness. Soeur Goby constantly supported Elisabeth in spiritual solidarity throughout her illness and received Elisabeth's mature insights on suffering.

#### DIFFERENCES IN THEIR SPIRITUALITIES

##### *Influence of Soeur Goby's Community on her Spirituality*

Although the communion of saints is an important theme in Elisabeth's spirituality and was shared by Goby, this doctrine and its corollary, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, was expressed in quite concrete and practical ways by the Hospitaller Sisters. In examining the correspondence between Leseur and Goby, there are obvious differences in their spirituality as well many similarities. Goby's spirituality was naturally profoundly shaped by that of her community as Leseur's was shaped by her liturgical sensibilities and leisure for reading a wide range of literature.

Nicolas Rolin, the founder, envisaged an apostolic spirituality for the women he recruited to serve the poor – the Hospitaller Sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu which he founded and Pope Pius II approved in 1459. This fifteenth century community of sisters was a precursor of female apostolic religious life that became much more prominent in the seventeenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

##### *Service of the Poor for the Love of God*

The spirituality of the sisters was not monastic but centered equally on the community prayer and the service they rendered to the poor. Rolin called these women 'sisters' rather than 'religious' because he eliminated many common practices of religious life: no solemn vows, no chapter of faults, no reading at meals, no seeking of permission for the ordinary details of life.<sup>49</sup> 'Strengthened by the Eucharist, they were to dedicate themselves completely to the service of the poor for the love of God'.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Soeur Verene Uwihaye, *Les Soeurs Hospitalières issues de Beaune fondées par Nicolas Rolin et Guigone De Salins: 'Pour une spiritualité d'hospitalité et de compassion'*. Memoire presente en vue de l'obtention du grade de licencie en sciences religieuses, Butare 2005, 48.

<sup>50</sup> Uwihaye, *Spiritualité d'hospitalité*, 48.

Thus, their prayer life had an elegant simplicity: daily Eucharist, the recitation of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Office of the Dead (distributed in three periods of communal prayer during the day), and Confession every two weeks. Beyond this minimum, Rolin left the sisters free to follow their own spiritual attractions. They were free to receive Communion as often as they wished, and practice other devotions without seeking permission. Goby's letters indicate her practice of daily spiritual reading and meditation, prayer before devotional images, the use of relics, and the practice of pilgrimage to popular shrines, etc. It is significant that the Hôtel-Dieu from its origins was itself a place of pilgrimage.<sup>51</sup> It is clear in the correspondence that Goby's spirituality included many of these concrete practices of popular Catholic life that were not as significant for Elisabeth. Although she acquiesces to Goby's request that she pin a relic on her bed jacket, Leseur admits she is more attracted to the liturgy in its universal prayers than relics and the devotional prayers accompanying them. Goby, however, also had developed an appreciation for silent meditation as had Leseur. And Goby's letters reveal that her pilgrimages with her mother gave her extended time for silent prayer.

Of greater significance even than these specific practices, was the expression of Rolin's spiritual vision in the art and architecture of the Hôtel-Dieu itself. Uwhaye points out a distinctive Flemish influence in the building and the Van der Weyden, 'Last Judgment', as well as perhaps some Beguine influence in the spirituality of the sisters themselves. The hospital was built to be

a house of mercy and refuge of the poor and the abandoned, a hospital for the sick and a sacrament of charity. The founder wanted the spirit of the house to be the consecrated life of those who by their love for God were always at the service of the poor, so that the compassionate Christ might be their strength, Eucharist, the center of their life, their care of and compassion for the poor, their worship of God, the beauty of the place, a symbol of God's glory.<sup>52</sup>

The building itself demonstrates Rolin's attitude toward the poor, 'nothing is too beautiful for the poor'. In his medieval vision, the poor represent Christ on earth, so he built a palace for the sick poor so that they might share a palace and live in and with the Eucharistic Christ in the house of God. Thus, they become the honored guests in God's hotel, receiving hospitality from the sisters and the

<sup>51</sup> Those who contributed labor or donations to build this 'Guest House of God' were granted a plenary indulgence. So too, were visitors to the chapel who fulfilled minimum conditions. The Hôtel-Dieu also possessed a number of relics, a gift of Pope Nicholas V: a piece of the true Cross, a thorn from the crown of thorns, a piece of the purple cloak, something from the Three Kings, bones of St. Paul, Andrew, and Philip. Uwhaye, *Spiritualité d'hospitalité*, 80.

<sup>52</sup> *Constitutions des Soeurs Hospitalières de Beaune*, 1984. (Unpublished document) Cited by Uwhaye, *Spiritualité d'hospitalité*, 56-57.

staff and the compassion of God through the works of mercy performed in this house of refuge.

The Eucharistic Christ is so much the center of this house, that 'the sisters, strengthened by Eucharist each morning, serve the sick and the poor according to the Gospel, 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, a prisoner and you came to see me' (Mt 25:35).<sup>53</sup> The sick themselves in the Great Hall for the Poor are included in this Eucharistic hospitality since they share in the same Eucharistic service with the Sisters, able to participate from their beds. The Great Hall is thus, both a church and an elegant hospital room. Thus, Jesus is present both 'under the veil of the Sacrament and in the faces of the poor'.<sup>54</sup>

The suffering Christ (*Christ aux liens*) welcomed the poor and the sick on their arrival at the Hôtel-Dieu, placed as it was over the doorway of the Hall of the Poor. This is a famous image in Flanders, especially in Beguine churches, sometimes called 'Christ on the Cold Stone', or '*Christ de pitié*', his hands tied, his head crowned with thorns. This is an image of the nearly naked, suffering, abandoned, lonely, seemingly helpless Christ. It stands as a symbol of Christ waiting to welcome the poor on their arrival and offering to them his love and welcome. This image of Christ has welcomed the poor since the founding of the hospital. This *Christ aux liens* is identified with the suffering sick poor who are invited to identify their own suffering with the redemptive suffering of Christ as a way of being comforted in their illness and often abandonment and isolation.

The Retable<sup>55</sup> of the Last Judgment was placed behind the altar table in the sisters' Chapel at the end of the Great hall and opened during Sunday Mass. It was intended to help the sick prepare for death and reassure them of the promise of Resurrection and hope for eternal life. For the sisters, this painting would have reassured them every Sunday of the value of their service to Christ through their countless works of mercy.

Also, within the design of the Chapel is a focus on Martha, her sister Mary and their brother Lazarus the family from Bethany, who according to legend arrived in Southern France. 'To the right was a Martha altar, decorated with a painted statue of Our Lady of Sorrows, a *pieta*, and the Resurrection of Lazarus, as well as statues of Mary Magdalene and St. Martha'.<sup>56</sup> These representations

<sup>53</sup> Uwhaye, *Spiritualité d'hospitalité*, 57.

<sup>54</sup> *Constitutions* (1984), cited by Uwhaye.

<sup>55</sup> Rogier van der Weyden, *The Last Judgment*, 1446-1452, oil on panel (partially transferred on canvas), 215×560 cm, Musée de l'Hôtel-Dieu Beaune. This large polyptych painting by Rogier Van der Weyden was originally placed directly above the Altar of the chapel and opened only on Sundays and solemn feast days.

<sup>56</sup> M.T. Berthier & J.T. Sweeney, cited by Uwhaye, *Spiritualité d'hospitalité*, 87.

further emphasize resurrection faith, which Martha proclaims in John's Gospel together with hospitality and friendship shared with Jesus. The house at Bethany was a place of refreshment and hospitality for Jesus, and these women accompanied him to his death on the cross.

There was a strong tradition in parts of France and Italy that emphasized the integration of contemplation and action in Houses of Martha.<sup>57</sup> In France, Mary Magdalene is almost never separated from her famous siblings due to the popularity of the *Golden Legend* which describes their miraculous arrival in Southern France at Marseilles. Within the context of the Hospitallers of St. Martha, it would seem that there is iconographical evidence of a positive and strong patron in Martha for their works of mercy and hospitality as well as ascription to Rolin's devotion to Martha.<sup>58</sup>

Mary under the title of Our Lady of Compassion or Our Lady of Sorrows provided a strong feminine model for the Sisters in their service of the poor. Quite early in their history, a statue of Our Lady of Compassion was placed in the Sisters Refectory. In this space reserved to the sisters, they were reinforced in their basic disposition of compassion. Some Sisters prayed the Rosary daily in her honor, and some added the recitation of the *Stabat Mater* weekly. The Sorrowful Mother standing at the foot of the cross, with the three Mary's, inspired their compassionate accompaniment of the suffering and of the dying. If the judgment of God was feared, Mary, under the title of Compassion or Sorrow, offered mercy and hope.

Two other devotions were particularly significant for this community. Their principal feast and patron (supernatural protector) was the Holy Spirit, celebrated on Pentecost Sunday. Pope Eugene gave them the Holy Spirit as their primary protector in the same papal Bull that accompanied the gift of the relics described above in 1441. Since its founding, Pentecost was celebrated with great solemnity. The entire Octave was celebrated, with a sermon preached daily in Latin in the courtyard. The medical staff gave their annual report on Pentecost and their rotations commenced on Pentecost. In addition, there were processions through the town, and young girls were dressed up as 'little' hospitaller sisters. This celebration was a major event for the entire region.

<sup>57</sup> See Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The women around Jesus*, New York 1982, 15-48, for a description of Meister Eckhart's Martha Sermons that emphasize her maturity and the integration of contemplation and action and for iconographical themes such as taming a dragon and symbols of the Great Mother. There is such a stone sculpture of Martha in the Cathedral at Bourge, about an hour from Beaune. The statue of St. Martha at the Hôtel-Dieu depicts her calming the devil at her feet by sprinkling him with holy water, the holy water bucket in one hand and the sprinkler in the other. Anne LeFlaive, *L'hôtel-Dieu de Beaune et les hospitalières*, Paris 1959, Black and White Plate #8.

<sup>58</sup> The sisters added Martha to their name when they founded other houses from Beaune and it was retained when they united these houses into a single congregation in 1935.



The last particular devotional focus of the community concerned the dying and the dead. The sisters not only promoted a peaceful and grace filled death for terminal patients but also prayed for those who died during their stay at the Hôtel-Dieu. This prayer was institutionalized in the daily recitation of the office of the dead. Burying the dead is the seventh corporal work of mercy, so this was a natural expression of their practice of the works of mercy. Even as late as Goby's era, antiseptics and anesthesia were the latest nineteenth century developments together with radiology. These medical advances made surgeries more successful. But they were still without antibiotics, and many in their care died. The sisters also recited the *De Profundis* daily for their patients who had died, and a different prayer for their own deceased sisters. The sisters were also obliged to pray for their deceased benefactors and founders. In 1858, Pope Pius IX extended a plenary indulgence to all of the sick poor who died in the Hospital at Beaune provided the sisters heard mass for them. Consequently, the sisters heard Mass monthly for this intention, received Communion and prayed for the intentions of the Pope.

Further, theologically if one is destined for heaven, one becomes more willing to die, preferably a peaceful death, because dying means life with God. Goby's community reports that she had a dream/vision of her deceased mother, whom, she said, came looking for her the day after her own name day (Feast of St. Leo).<sup>59</sup> Goby understood that she was going to die from her illness, called for a lawyer, put her affairs in order, and died soon after, becoming an example for the community of a particularly peaceful and holy death.

### *Elisabeth's Spirituality*

As noted above, Elisabeth shared with Goby the common theological and devotional streams of French spirituality. However, Elisabeth astutely adopted and adapted devotional practices to her particular vocation – that of an upper class married woman, whose primary field of action was within her family and the various lay movements in which she participated. In addition, Elisabeth felt a unique call to reach out to those who were different from her – the agnostic and the unbelieving. In addition, because so much physical and emotional suffering was an unsought 'given' in her life, she embraced this suffering and these circum-

<sup>59</sup> 'Coming down with pneumonia on Wednesday the 12<sup>th</sup>, she felt herself mortally stricken. "It is my good mother whose feast was yesterday who is coming to look for me". She said this the first day of the pneumonia, defeating our attempts to help her recover. "Oh well, my God, may your holy will be done; I am ready to answer your call". With these sentiments she surrendered to the Divine will, confident in the infinite mercy of God, and prepared herself to appear before the Sovereign Judge'. Account of the death of Soeur Goby from a community notebook, Private Archives of the Hospitaller Sisters.

stances in ways that were redemptive for others and transformative for her.<sup>60</sup> She was a woman of letters, tutored at home before women had access to university. She continued to read extensively all of her life in several languages and participated in European artistic and cultural life. These were experiences and resources quite unknown to Soeur Goby. Elisabeth's periodic illnesses and relatively leisurely life-style provided her with time to meditate, to read, and to write. She thus considered her letter-writing and essays on the spiritual life and on lay vocation as a form of apostolic activity. Her consciousness of herself as a writer, thus, expanded beyond the normal social responsibility of a woman of her class to maintain relationships with family and friends through correspondence. Elisabeth had an avid interest in the incipient liturgical and theological trends that eventually led to Vatican II. The New Testament was her constant companion. She read *Revue Biblique* from its origins and she read liturgical reflection from Solesmes. Finally, she was keenly aware of the social teaching of the church through Leo XIII's encyclical and movements specific to France.<sup>61</sup>

## CONCLUSION

These two wise and intelligent women recognized the spiritual depth in one another and their bond of love and affection was cemented in the mutual recognition of their common contemplative lives. They found in one another's hearts a resonating echo of deep desires for God, a thirst for holiness, concern for the poor, generosity of spirit, and a deep concern for others. Goby lived this consecration to God in apostolic religious life, devoting her self to nursing the sick poor and whoever arrived at her hospital. Leseur lived a life deeply hidden in God and embraced her suffering for the sake of her beloved husband and as well as for others. They prayed for one another and for one another's intentions. They affectively participated in one another's lives and supported one another on their distinct yet common journeys. Long before other lay women and religious women began to overcome the barriers to friendship and mutuality, Elisabeth Leseur and Soeur Goby enjoyed such freedom and support.

<sup>60</sup> See Janet K. Ruffing, 'Physical illness: A mystically transformative element in the life of Elisabeth Leseur', in: *Spiritual Life* (Winter 1994), 1-10 for more detail on this theme.

<sup>61</sup> See my 'Introduction' to *Elisabeth Leseur: Selected writings*, Mahwah 2005, 1-49.