

Living Out the Pattern of Life, Death, and Resurrection

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St. Elizabeth of the Trinity

My name is Claire Dwyer, and two years ago, now, I published a book called "This Present Paradise: A Spiritual Journey with St. Elizabeth of the Trinity", and I revealed the life of a saint who was relatively unknown, but I was really surprised, when the book came out, and the conversation around her life really picked up, at least for me, that people fell into two camps. It seemed that either they had known about this relatively obscure little Carmelite saint for a long time, and were her dear friends, a lot longer than I had known her, or she was brand new to them, and they were discovering her for the first time. I don't know what camp you fall into. I would love to hear if you want to message me or leave a comment.

But there is something about this saint, in particular, that I think her life really can speak to us as we enter into the mystery of Lent and the paschal mystery. I think that she teaches us how to live and how to die. And when I say how to die, I don't just mean, like, die in a state of grace, and a physical death, but to live and die to ourselves again and again, and follow in the footsteps of Christ, which really is the Christian life.

And I think that, in particular, the Church gives us Lent as a time to reflect on the paschal mystery and meditate not only on the passion and death of Our Lord Jesus Christ, but also how that translates into our life every day. How do we live and how do we die as Christians? And how do we die to ourselves? And how do we do that over and over again in imitation of Jesus Christ?

Understanding Our Baptism

Well, you know, the first time we die, actually, comes in our baptism. A lot of things happen in our baptism, right? We are washed free from sin, we are adopted into the family of God, we become His children, we are welcomed into the church, we receive the indwelling presence of the Trinity, as St. Elizabeth of the Trinity would love to remind us, but we also die and rise again as new creations. You know, in the ancient practice of baptism, you weren't even allowed into the church until you had been submerged into the waters of baptism, symbolizing death to the old man, and then you would rise again out of the waters as a new creation, and we have lost some of that symbolism now, but the meaning of the sacrament and the reality of the sacrament is the same. There is a In a very real sense, you die in your baptism and rise again in a new creation.

And why is this, actually? Well, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in paragraph 1086, tells us that through the symbolic immersion in the waters of baptism you are grafted into the paschal mystery of Christ. Now, to be grafted onto something, if you grow plants, you know this is true, it means that you join the tissues of two plants together on the cellular level so that they literally become one plant, and so when we're baptized, that means that we are joined to the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and we're never the same again.

In Romans 6, it says, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." And while that is definitive, our baptism is definitive, it leaves an eternal mark on our soul, this pattern is going to continue again and again through our lives. And one of the wonderful things that the saints do is unveil for us what that looks like. In thousands of different life circumstances and different states in life, they show us what it looks like to live a life patterned on that of Jesus Christ, who takes on our sin and takes on our darkness in order to overcome it and transform it into everlasting life, and how God redeems and restores not only all of creation, and not only our lives as a whole, but every part of our life. Every part of your darkness, and your suffering, and your mistakes, every single one of those things can be, and it is God's will that it be, restored and redeemed to a state even greater than it was before.

Every desire of your heart, every memory, every hurt, everything you've suffered, every disappointment in your life, every hope that you carry, every prayer, every talent, every gift that you have, all of it is redeemed and restored by Jesus Christ. And so my invitation to you and my hope for you as I continue to talk about St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, today, is that you can consider how God has redeemed and restored your broken parts, the parts of your story that you're most ashamed of, or that have hurt you the most, and how He has redeemed those things. And if He hasn't yet, at least, not in a way that you can perceive, I want you to get hope that He is doing something in those places and that He has a plan, and His Word is true, and He will heal and redeem and restore those things. And so I want to learn with you from the life and the writings of St. Elizabeth in terms of death and resurrection, and the power of a God who tells us, "Behold, I make all things new," not, "I make all new things," right? God will redeem and restore every part of us.

Who was St. Elizabeth of the Trinity?

So I want to just give an overview of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, just a brief capsule of her life, and then we're going to look at certain aspects of her life and how those parts of her story reveal how God allows certain things in our life to die, and then redeems and restores them, and resurrects them in the pattern of the paschal mystery again and again.

So who was St. Elizabeth of the Trinity? Well, in brief, she was a French Carmelite nun from the turn of the century, and she was only recently canonized, in fact, in 2016, by Pope Francis, so she's relatively new to the canon of saints. She was born Elizabeth Catez, in 1880, to a devout Catholic military family, in fact, she was born in a military camp, and she had one younger sister, Marguerite, nicknamed Guite, She was very close to her family. In fact, her mother's father came to live with them, and they had a very tight-knit, devout Catholic family, but death came early into St. Elizabeth's life, and her grandfather and her father died within a few months of each other when she was a very young girl.

Her mother, who was a new widow, had to pick up and move her daughters into a smaller apartment, and really scale back their household, and so they went to Dijon, France, and they bought a home there. Elizabeth discerned a call to religious life very early, from a young age. She knew she wanted to be a Carmelite, too, but her mother strongly objected. She only had two girls, and she was really anxious for her daughters to marry well, and entering a cloistered order was definitely not part of her plan for Elizabeth. This was anguish for Elizabeth, though, because she knew she was called to it. So she had to wait. Finally, though, she was allowed to enter the convent when she was 21 years old. She lived a life of beauty, humility, and sanctity in the Carmelite convent, and we know that because we have many of her letters, which have been preserved from her short time there. She ended up, in 1906, developing Addison's disease, and after excruciating suffering, dying on November 9th, 1906. So just 26 years, old at a relatively young age, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity died.

The Pillars of St. Elizabeth's Spirituality

But she had this beautiful spirituality, and I just want to touch on a couple of things really briefly, with you. One of the pillars of her spirituality, true to her name, was the indwelling presence of the Trinity, and this reality that by virtue of our baptism, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit make their dwelling within us, and that by living a life of recollection and prayer, we can spend our life in their company, even now, which leads us to another one of her main teachings, and that is, if this is true, if we can be united with God and live in His presence, even now, then our eternity begins now, that heaven begins right here, because heaven is union with God, and so while, of course, it's going to reach its fulfillment in heaven, we start that eternal exchange of love in this life.

And that is the reality that's reflected in the title of the book, and why I chose that title, "This Present Paradise", which doesn't mean that life is some kind of perfect, blissful existence, but that the object of what we hope for isn't some far away, distant reality that maybe, if we're good enough, we might someday experience, but that actually, we expect it because it's promised, but we actually begin to experience it in this world, and so we await only its consummation, but not its commencement. We wait for its fulfillment, but it's already begun. Our life of union with God by virtue of our baptism, begins now.

And St. Elizabeth of the Trinity said, actually, when she died, she wanted to, quote, "Draw souls by helping them go out of themselves and cling to God by a holy, simple, and loving movement, and keep them in this great silence within that will allow God to communicate Himself to them and transform them into Himself." That's a mouthful, but what she was trying to say was, "I'm not going to show up in some flashy or exterior way, but I'm going to help people pray. I'm going to help them experience that union with God that they were created to experience even in this life." And so like I said, now we're going to look at her life through this lens of death and resurrection and the paschal mystery.

Death and Resurrection

So the first death that Elizabeth experienced, like I explained, was the death of those members of her family that she was so close to, her grandfather and her father, when she was a very little girl. Death always hits us hard, it was not what we were originally designed to experience, but especially for a widow with two young children, that had to uproot her life, and their whole... Like, they had to move, and their life circumstances changed dramatically. It was incredibly painful. But here's the resurrection in all of it. As her mom had to pick up her daughters and move to a new city and a small apartment, and scale back their household, God was beginning a great work.

I want you to imagine Elizabeth of the Trinity as a little girl, going to that new home, going upstairs to her bedroom, walking to the window and looking down out of the window and noticing a courtyard. It was a garden. It was an interior, cloistered Carmelite convent garden. something that the rest of the world would never have access to, Elizabeth had a bird's eye view into, and it was that room and that window that led her to begin discerning the call to the Carmelites, which would become her new spiritual family. Even after Elizabeth would die, the Carmelites took care of her mother in a very real spiritual way. And so while God had taken away her father and had caused, allowed a great suffering in their life with his death, He was bringing them into a new spiritual family in a way that they couldn't have understood at the time, so while their family life had constricted in one sense, it had expanded much larger in another sense, and I think the lesson is that, that God doesn't take anything away without giving a greater gift.

Death of Self and Temperament

So the next death in Elizabeth's life, in her story, comes from the beginnings of her death to self and her own temperament, okay? So what do I mean by that? Well, from a very young age, Elizabeth's personality kind of had a life of its own. She was, had a fiery temperament, I guess you could call her a choleric, for sure, and I would imagine, too, that her father's death like, heightened her natural tendency to kind of... Well, let's just say she was no stranger to throwing tantrums. She was a girl who knew what she wanted and knew how to get it, or at least tried.

There's a story, when she was a little girl, she had her favorite doll, and she and her mother had gone to a Christmas program at a nearby church, and they needed a baby Jesus on the altar, and so they asked her mother if they could borrow her doll, her favorite baby doll, and wrap it up like baby Jesus and put it on the altar, and her mother was a little hesitant, but she agreed. They took the baby doll, put it on the manger in the altar, and little Elizabeth, who wasn't even two years old at the time, saw that doll, knew it was hers, and screamed at the top of her voice in the middle of the service, "You wicked priest, you give me back my Jeanette," which was the name of her doll.

And you know what? I mean, that was who she was. She was a fiery girl, and in fact, her mother kept a bag packed of her belongings by the front door, and she would use it to threaten Elizabeth when she would misbehave, and say, "If you don't shape up, we're going to send you to the home for troubled girls down the street." So anyway, she was definitely a handful.

But as Elizabeth got to the age where she was about to receive her First Confession and her First Holy Communion, things began to change. She really did love the Lord, and she knew that the way she was acting was incompatible to the sacramental life and the grace that she was about to enter into, and so she began to consciously overcome her personality flaws by giving way in these little things, like, the only things children have to give away, to what they would play, what they would eat. She made a conscious effort to die to her own desires. And when we crucify our desires, then we give space to Jesus Christ to begin a new life within us, and that's exactly what happened. Her old ways began to die, and a new life of grace began to live within her, and Elizabeth began to be transformed. You see, when those parts of our personalities die, they allow the life of Christ to live, and that is another example of death and resurrection in our own life.

A Death to Her Will

The third kind of death that Elizabeth experienced was an excruciating one. It was a death to her will. You see, like I said, Elizabeth had discerned early a call to the convent. She heard the Lord speak in her heart after communion one day when she was a young girl. First, she made a vow of virginity, and then she heard Him speak the word Carmel, and she knew that she was called to be a cloistered Carmelite nun, but when she was 16 and she approached her mother about entering the convent, the answer was a firm and resolute, "No!" In fact, her mother decided that not only would she not be allowed to enter the convent, but she would no longer be able to see those nuns or attend the daily mass in the convent chapel the way that she had been accustomed to.

She was obedient to her mother, but it was so painful for her, and while she wasn't throwing tantrums, like, outside, as she had been before, inside, she was dying, and she writes in her diary things like, "How long will I have to wait?" It was so hard. But like I said, what God was asking of her was total conformity of her will to His, so even more

than her vocation was her submission to the will of God. Even when that, on the surface, seemed to contradict her calling, she had to surrender her will and let it die. And what God was teaching her was this important lesson that her vocation, ultimately, wasn't Carmel, her vocation was union with God, and if that couldn't happen in the convent, then it could happen in the world, and it would. And so she learned to be what she would say is a "Carmelite in the world." So the death is that Elizabeth had to let her dreams of the convent die and leave it into His hands to resurrect in His time, and eventually, He would, and through the intercession of Our Lady, her mother would relent and allow her to enter the convent at the age of 21.

Another kind of death that that allows us to experience is the death of our own timeframes. You see, we always have it in our mind that we want things to happen on our schedule, but when we allow our plans to die, we allow God's plans to unfold in His way and in His time, and He always knows exactly what's best for us, and God redeems and restores even our periods of frustration and our seasons of waiting, and brings them to new life.

A Death to Her Old Life

So like I said, finally, at the age of 21, Elizabeth entered the convent, and then she received the name Sister Marie Elizabeth of the Trinity. And that would actually be another death. It would be a death that she had desired and that she had expected, but it was a death to the old life that she had lived. Even though Elizabeth desired to enter the convent, she had a very full life. She was an award-winning pianist, she had lots of friends, she was traveling all the time, she enjoyed beautiful clothes and hairstyles, but all of those things, she had to leave behind along with the members of her family, because in a cloistered community like the Carmelites, especially at the time, you made a clean break with those things when you entered the convent.

Your experience of visiting your family would be behind a grill from that point on, the limited times when you could see them. You were not allowed to write, even, many letters from the convent. Elizabeth would never play the piano again after she entered the convent. She would put on a coarse, brown habit, she would go to a place where there was no central heating, they wouldn't eat meat. It was a very austere kind of lifestyle, and so she had to die to the world as she knew it when she entered the convent. But here's the resurrection, right? God, when we die to ourselves, brings about this new kind of life, and by becoming the Bride of Christ and becoming a spiritual mother, the riches of grace that were not only given to Elizabeth but given to the world through her yes to God were so fruitful. Again, God brings about this immense, kind of life-giving power through our yes to Him, even when we have to let things in the worldly sense die. Again, God never takes anything away without giving back something greater.

Entering into Spiritual Aridity and Darkness

Everything was blissful for a while. Elizabeth finally was in the convent, she was so happy, she saw God around every corner. We hear from her letters how ecstatic she was to be there. And then everything changes for Elizabeth, and for so many of us. She enters a period of spiritual aridity, and what that means is that prayer, and life in general, often, are without the consolations that make the spiritual life sweet. And then after that, she enters into a period of total darkness, what is sometimes called the dark night of the soul, where there's just no, not only no consolations at all, but no sense of God.

It's kind of like St. Mary Magdalene at the tomb, and we're going to talk about this in another talk in this retreat, but you know that moment of, "They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they have put him." Don't we sometimes feel like that in our spiritual life, like we're kind of groping for God? We believe that He's there, but we don't feel Him, and it's excruciating, and that's what Elizabeth began to experience.

The thing is, though, that even though this kind of spiritual dryness and darkness feels like a death, and it is often some of the most painful kinds of suffering, it also is meant to bring about a kind of renewal in our spiritual life. You see, to become mature Christians, we actually have to seek God for God alone, and not the feelings that we get in prayer or the sense of Him, that kind of give us that spiritual high. God is not a vending machine that we can put our prayers into and then get something sweet from. Sometimes that happens, but sometimes it doesn't, and when it doesn't, it allows us to walk by faith, which is one of the greatest gifts that God has given us.

And so what Elizabeth gained by going through that darkness was reaching another level on her spiritual life that she wouldn't have gotten to otherwise. The great masters of prayer, St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila, talk about union with God as kind of a progression, but we have to go through those dips and those dark places to get to the higher levels of prayer that Elizabeth began to experience, and the kind of prayer that you were created to experience, too. So take hope in your spiritual life, when you feel like you're going through those dark places, that it's for a reason, and the reason is a kind of intimacy in prayer with God that you might not have experienced yet.

Elizabeth's Final Suffering

Finally, the last echo of death and resurrection in the life of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, her sickness and her final suffering, which was nothing less than a total immolation. In 1906, on New Year's Day, Elizabeth drew a patron saint for the year, which was the practice of the Carmelites, and it was St. Joseph, and no one could tell it yet, except Elizabeth, but she knew that drawing the name of St. Joseph, who, among other things, is patron of a happy death, was a very fitting patron for the year.

You see, she had already begun suffering the beginning symptoms of Addison's disease, and Addison's disease is a disease of the adrenal glands which is now actually treatable, not curable, but treatable, but at the time, it wasn't even understood, much less have any treatment for it, so slowly, over the next 10 months, Elizabeth would lose the ability to process food and drink, and so she would basically starve to death. She could eat minuscule amounts of cheese and chocolate, or bits of ice, but literally, she would be consumed from the inside out, and near the end of her life, she was so tortured by thirst that she told her Mother Superior, "Mother, I know that it's very bad, but I believe the first thing I will do when I get to heaven is drink."

And her suffering was so great that she motioned to her second-story window one night, while she was being tucked in bed, basically, by the Mother Superior, and the window was open. She motioned over to that window, and she said, "Are you sure you want to leave that window open? Because I now understand suicide." Now, she would never have done that, but she was expressing the temptation that happens when your suffering is so great and you want to end it all now. That's how much Elizabeth was suffering.

But here's the great story of redemption. This is the great triumph of the Christian life, and this is the great mystery that the world will never quite be able to understand, and it's the mystery of suffering. The world would have us run from suffering at any cost, even to the point of sin, often, which is often, you know, the reason for sin is avoidance of suffering, but what Elizabeth knew, and what we, as Christians, know, is that suffering and death actually takes on an incredible kind of power when it's joined to Christ's own. And that's exactly what happens in our baptism. We are grafted onto the paschal mystery, we are grafted into the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That means our suffering is, too.

And when we especially, in our heart, unite our suffering to Jesus Christ, it takes on an incredible kind of redemptive power. It's a participation in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and so it rains down graces upon us, and upon our families, and our circles, and our communities, and on the church. It converts sinners, it restores our culture, it reconciles all things back to the world. It's a miracle, and it's amazing that Jesus allows us to enter into that kind of redemptive communion with Him, but that's exactly what happens.

A Reflection for the Lenten Season

And so I just want to encourage you to, this Lent, meditate on the paschal mystery, but also meditate on the lives of the saints, maybe St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, in particular, and how they manifest for us what it looks like to live out the pattern of death and resurrection in our lives in imitation and in union with Jesus Christ.

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I have heard it said that you can look at the Shroud of Turin and you can either see the signs of the passion or the definitive proof of the resurrection, and as Christians, our lives should be like the Shroud of Turin, where people look at us and they see trials, and they see wounds, and they see sufferings and hardships, but they also, at the same time, see that God is working and using it all for good and has triumphed over all of it.

So my prayer is that we will live our lives as signs of both, and that Lent will be an opportunity for us to enter more fully into the passion so that we can more fully experience the joy of resurrection, and I pray that St. Elizabeth of the Trinity will pray for all of us in that. Thank you.