



MADAME ELISABETH OF FRANCE: SERVANT OF GOD

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Elisabeth, Philippe, Marie, Hélène, daughter of the Dauphin [Louis Ferdinand](#) and the Dauphine, [Marie-Josèphe of Saxony](#), was born on May 3, 1764, at the Château de Versailles, the last and eighth living child of the couple. Baptized the same day in the royal chapel of the castle, and held at the baptismal font by her brother the Duke of Berry, future Louis XVI. thus a first spiritual bond was established between the two siblings.

Orphaned when she was not yet three years old, Louis XVI took charge of her, along with all his other brothers and sisters, at the death of their father, Louis XV in May 1774. The little princess was of a difficult nature, stubborn, proud, angry, brought up by the governess of the Children of France, Madame de Marsan. But she changed under the influence of her sister [Clotilde](#), and of [Madame de Mackau](#), the royal governess and her daughter [Marie-Angelique](#), to the point where the little "Babet," as round and graceful as a pudding, became as joyful as spring-time. Clotilde and Elisabeth received an excellent education, both spiritual and intellectual, with Elisabeth showing a particular gift for mathematics (as an adult, she published a table of logarithms that became authoritative as a standard). One of the permissible pleasures was to go to Saint-Cyr to attend the Mass of the Blessed Sacrament and to share the routine of the boarders. From 1770, the two princesses also went to the Carmel of Saint-Denis, which their aunt Louise had just entered.

That same year, Marie-Antoinette married the Dauphin, Louis Auguste, and showed her affection for Elisabeth, who was a charming child with spirit, character and grace. The Court noticed that as she grew up, Elisabeth showed a deep faith. When [Monsieur d'Angiviller](#), director of the king's buildings, reported on the progress of the representation of the great national figures, Elisabeth asked him not to forget [Bossuet](#). On May 28, 1775, when the ambassador of the [Pasha of Tripoli and Barbary](#) (Lybia) came to Versailles, Elisabeth contemplated him with tenderness. Intrigued Clotilde asked her:

"What are you thinking about?"

"I am thinking of his soul."

"Let us pray for him."

"You are right, sister. It is for Christians to pray for those who are not Christians, just as it is for the rich to

give to the poor."

Elizabeth was only eleven years old!

The happiness of her confirmation and her communion was tarnished by the departure of Clotilde for Turin, on August 29, 1775 where her sister went to join her [future husband](#). Marie-Antoinette wrote, "The poor little girl is in despair. It is terrible for her..."

Faith, prayer and meditation helped Madame Elisabeth to overcome her first great sorrow. In May 1778, a House was established for her, and the teenager observed a regulated life of prayer, study, reading, horseback riding, which she loved and in which she demonstrated her fearlessness. Taking her parents as a model, she practiced the love of what is good and solicitude in charity. In November 1779, she had herself inoculated and took charge of twelve children, seven girls and five boys, so that they would also be inoculated and receive the same care as her.

She did not consider marriage any more than the cloister, knowingly, and went regularly to Saint-Cyr as well as to the Carmel of Saint-Denis, saying that one gets used to physical mortifications, but that the religious life being abdication of the will, renunciation of everything, it is necessary to prepare for it. Fulfilling her duty, staying close to her brother Louis XVI, was her way of serving God other than in a cloister. By obligation, she participated in the life of the Court, writing, *"It costs me... to be a princess, it is often a terrible burden; but it is never more unpleasant to me than when it prevents the heart from acting."*

Single, she tried to follow Christ, her life in contact with the courtiers allowed her to help people whose needs one would not have suspected. It appears that her major concern was to put in conformity her human will with the divine will. Showing prudence, wisdom, she chose her friends with sagacity, showing constancy and devotion towards them; thus, she obtained from the King the advance of a dowry of 150 000 francs for Mademoiselle de Causans, depriving herself of Christmas presents for five years to pay off her debt. She became the spiritual guide of her friends until 1792 as her letters show.

In 1781 the King offered her the estate of Montreuil, where with Doctor Lemonnier she personally treated the sick and wounded free of charge, and looked after the needs of the villagers, especially children and orphans, and distributed milk, eggs and vegetables from her farm. Her monthly budget was never sufficient, yet her reputation for kindness was noted in the almanac des Muses. At court, she

supported her brother and sister-in-law, on the death of their last daughter and the first Dauphin, and established ties with her niece, Madame Royale.

1789. Popular riots broke out in Paris, the Bastille was taken, the princess left Versailles and moved to the Tuileries, where she was called the Sainte-Geneviève of the Tuileries by the women of the market. Elisabeth encouraged the departure of her relatives and friends for exile or the provinces. The sister of Louis XVI, nourished by the [French School of Spirituality](#), devoted herself to prayer, seeking the contemplation of the Heart of Christ, and acquired a strength that allowed her to share the worries, the torments of the monarchy in danger, and to resist. In February 1790, she wrote a vow for France to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, to which several of her ladies associated themselves, and she offered two golden hearts to the cathedral of Chartres.

The hatred of the revolutionaries against Catholicism deeply affected the princess. After the promulgation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, she persisted in following the road on which Providence had led her until then. In 1789, having refused a first time to leave France, with her brother [Artois](#), she refused a second time in 1791 to follow her aunts and Abbé Madier her confessor, who left for Turin and Rome. She entrusted herself to Providence, under the direction of the abbot [Edgeworth de Firmont](#), to remain near her brother and his family.

Then came the departure for Varennes, where she showed her coolness, thinking only to protect the Queen, which she does again on June 20, 1792, during the invasion of the Tuileries – Madame Elisabeth, running to her brother, was mistaken for the Queen. She stopped the one who was going to reveal the truth:

"Ah! please God, don't mislead them: spare them from a greater crime!" She said, as she pushed aside a bayonet, and gently told the man pointing it:

"Be careful, Sir, you might hurt someone. and I am sure you would be upset afterwards."

One common woman summed it up by saying:

"There was nothing to do today. Their good Saint Genevieve was there!"

The popular uprising reached its climax on August 10, 1792, when Elisabeth fled to the Assembly, spent the night in the Foyers in prayer, kneeling on a mattress on the floor, and took care of the royal children so that Marie-Antoinette could rest a little. Then, on August 13, 1792, she crossed Paris and entered the [Temple](#), and refused a third time to leave her brother and his family.

In the Temple, Elisabeth, who had never been a court intriguer, developed a conspiratorial spirit, organizing a system of correspondence to get the news and pass it on, as well as a language to communicate with the servants and her brother when he was isolated during his trial. She deprived herself of medicine for the benefit of [Cléry](#), who was seriously ill, and educated the royal children, nursed them, conversed and amused the King, and supported the morale of the Queen. She secured the entry in the Tower of Abbé Edgeworth de Firmont, allowing her brother to confess, to attend, before his execution, the only Mass of his captivity.

Elisabeth's personality asserted itself and it was to her that the municipality turned for many decisions. She affirmed her faith, asking for holy books, and sank into prayer in a corner of her room where she had hidden a cross that had been discovered during the demolition of the Tower. In his diary, Cléry writes, *"How often have I seen Madame Elisabeth on her knees by her bed, praying fervently!"* If she did not get food during Lent, she abstained. Finally, as long as she had the possibility, that is to say until the departure of the Queen, she worried about the people who surrounded her and looked after the woman [Tison](#), who was sick, this very guard who has denounced them several times!

Arrested on May 9, while leaving her niece, whom she had always protected, she said to her:

"Have courage and firmness. Always hope in God. Rely upon the good principles of religion that your parents have given you."

Condemned to death with twenty-four other victims, she helped them to prepare for death by lavishing them with words of faith in the merciful God, and saved the life of the Countess of Sérilly by forcing her to declare her pregnancy, forgetting that she herself had given her life for her family.

As the tumbrel passed by, the people admired her and did not insult her. The condemned surrounded her, and when the cart stopped, she stood up first, saying to her companions, "We will all meet again in heaven." Each in turn, the women embraced her, the men bent the knee, while the princess recited the

De Profundis. The last victim, heroic, bareheaded, she climbed the steps of the scaffold, showed a final gesture of modesty by asking to be covered with her scarf, before being thrust under the guillotine.

All the accounts and the memoirs of the time agree that at the moment she received the fatal blow, a smell of roses spread over the whole Place de la Révolution. Her body was buried, naked, in a common grave, in the cemetery of Errancis, now vanished. Since her death, her reputation for holiness has continued to grow, with prayers, books, paintings. On November 15, 2017, the Archbishop of Paris opened by decree, the cause in canonization of Elizabeth of France.

Madame Elizabeth used to recite the following prayer:

"What will happen to me today, O God, I do not know. All I know is that nothing will happen to me unless you have foreseen it from all eternity. That is enough for me, O God, to be at peace. I adore your eternal purposes. I submit to them with all my heart. I want everything, I accept everything, I make a sacrifice of everything to You. I unite this sacrifice to that of your dear Son, my Savior, asking You, through his Sacred Heart and through His infinite Merits, for patience in my troubles and perfect submission which is due to You for all that You will and allow. So be it."

[An extract from Gabriel-François Nicollet, [*Le parfait adorateur du Sacré-Cœur de Jésus ou exercice pour les associés à la dévotion du Sacré-Cœur de Jésus*](#)].

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The [*featured image*](#) shows, "Madame Élisabeth de France," by Adélaïde Labille-Guiard; painted ca. 1787.

