



GIVE  
*Peace*  
TO MY  
SOUL

DISCOVER  
SAINT ELIZABETH OF THE TRINITY'S  
SECRET OF PRAYER

*Jean Lafrance*



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ELIZABETH OF THE TRINITY'S  
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*By Jean LaFrance*



**Pauline**  
BOOKS & MEDIA  
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lafrance, Jean, author. | Audette, Florestine, translator.

Title: Give peace to my soul : discover Elizabeth of the Trinity's secret of prayer / by Jean Lafrance ; translated by Florestine Audette.

Other titles: Apprendre à prier avec soeur Elisabeth de la Trinité. English

Description: Boston : Pauline Books & Media, [2018] | "Originally published as Learning to pray according to Elizabeth of the Trinity, by Jean Lafrance (c) 2003, Editions MediasPaul, 3965, Henri-Bourassa Boulevard Montreal, QC, H1H 1L1 Canada." | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018022568 | ISBN 9780819831477 (pbk.) | ISBN 0819831476 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Elizabeth of the Trinity, Saint, 1880-1906. | Prayer--Catholic Church. | Contemplation.

Classification: LCC BX4705.E44 L3413 2018 | DDC 271/.97102--dc23

Originally published as *Learning to Pray According to Elizabeth of the Trinity*, by Jean Lafrance © 2003, Editions MediasPaul, 3965, Henri-Bourassa Boulevard Montreal, QC, H1H 1L1 Canada.

The original edition of this book has been edited and revised. The Preface was removed because it contained dated material that would not be relevant to a North American audience. Some adjustments to the chapter titles and subtitles have been made as well as other minor revisions to the language and content.

Éditions Médiaspaul thanks Canadian Heritage, The Canada Council for the Arts and SODEC (Société de développement des entreprises culturelles) for their support to the book publishing industry.

Translated by Florestine Audette

Cover design by Rosana Usselman

Cover credit: istockphoto.com/© VIDOK

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Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Paul's Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

[www.pauline.org](http://www.pauline.org)

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

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22 21 20 19 18

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# Foreword

**T**oday, more than ever, we need navigators of the spiritual life who can teach us to pray. The contemporary soul is not just spiritually empty—it suffers a ferocious vacuum as unremitting winds of change and undercurrents of uncertainty threaten. Here the contemporary Catholic attempts to swim, but with little confidence that Church doctrine can fill this painful emptiness.

What we face today is not very different from what Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity, a young Carmelite nun, faced in early twentieth-century France. From the cloister, she helped her religious community and close friends navigate a hurricane of anti-religious bigotry and Church scandals even as she suffered the final stages of Addison's disease. To this day, she still draws souls out of themselves to help them to find those fair winds and following seas that lead to the bosom of Infinite Love.

The Carmelite family has been a special guardian of this mystery in the heart of the Church, providing no less than

three Doctors of the Church and countless saints. Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity is perhaps the most influential of the twentieth century voices to join this chorus. The only saint born in the twentieth century whose spiritual writings are quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, she has impacted devotion to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Her writings and prayers have helped countless faithful to ponder the ultimate end of the Divine Economy: perfect unity with the Trinity. She helps us to see unity with God not as a future accomplishment but as a mystery that continually breaks into our lives in the present moment (see CCC no. 260).

By holding up Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity as a teacher of prayer, Father Jean LaFrance, a renowned priest of the diocese of Lille, France, effectively re-proposes the Catholic mystical tradition. Drawing from Saint Thomas Aquinas, Romano Guardini, Hans Urs von Balthasar, the Carmelite tradition, and many other spiritual writers, he provides the doctrinal context and practical advice in which Saint Elizabeth's clarion call to silence resounds. He draws us into her mission so that she might draw us into the shadow of the Holy Trinity.

When I was a student at the *Angelicum* in Rome, on a friend's recommendation I searched the Pauline Books and Media store near Saint Peter's for Father Jean LaFrance's classic work on Elizabeth of the Trinity. When I found it, the first few pages told me that Father LaFrance was just what I needed: a sure guide into Saint Elizabeth's wisdom and the mystery of living a contemplative life in the world. LaFrance's interpreta-



tion of Saint Elizabeth puts front and center the general loving awareness of the Lord's saving presence that our tradition calls mystical wisdom—a wisdom that animates all of the apostolic activity that the world needs today.

Years before, during lectures at Franciscan University of Steubenville, Dr. Mark Miravalle had revealed that then-recently-beatified Elizabeth of the Trinity, the mystic of Dijon, was an important influence on the spirituality of Saint John Paul II. That summer, while visiting the New Camaldolese Hermitage in Big Sur, I began to read her for the first time. When I first tasted her writings, I immediately hungered for more. Salted with the Sacred Scriptures and peppered with passages from the spiritual genius of the saints, real spiritual food is offered in her every sentence. A sense of validation shook my soul. At the same time, I also felt confounded and mystified.

The words were beautiful and compelling, but difficult to chew. My mind savored only a very small morsel of the feast being offered. To benefit from her message, I needed an introduction. Elizabeth of the Trinity invites one to dive into deep waters, but I needed someone to teach me to swim. She connects into a single whole the most sublime teachings, but without someone already acquainted with these truths, I struggled to apply them to life in a practical way.

That is why a fellow student in Rome recommended Father Jean LaFrance. His work was like a key that unlocked the door of my heart to friendship with Saint Elizabeth. In each chapter,

he faithfully makes her focus his own: that of a transforming friendship with Christ, an immersion in the life of the Trinity, a fruitful union that heals, purifies, and intensifies human existence. For anyone who wants to grow in union with God and learn about this beloved saint, I highly recommend this classic work.

Originally published in 1963, *Apprendre à Prier avec Soeur Elisabeth de la Trinité* was among the first truly successful efforts to popularize Elizabeth's life and teachings beyond the Carmelite world. The work presents Saint Elizabeth within an accessible spiritual catechesis. This present edition offers a very readable and reliable translation. I truly hope that this work will continue to immerse those hungry for contemplative prayer in the spiritual mission of Elizabeth of the Trinity.

ANTHONY LILLES, S.T.D.

Saint John's Seminary, Camarillo

May 29, 2018

# Chronology

*July 18, 1880:* Elizabeth is born in a military camp of Avor in the district of Farges-en-Septaine, France. She is baptized four days later.

*October 2, 1887:* Elizabeth's father dies suddenly.

*April 19, 1891:* Elizabeth receives her First Communion and meets the prioress at the Carmel of Dijon. The prioress explains to her that her name means "House of God."

*June 8, 1891:* Elizabeth receives the sacrament of Confirmation.

*February 20, 1883:* Birth of Elizabeth's sister Marguerite.

*Summer of 1894:* After receiving Communion, Elizabeth hears the word "Carmel" in prayer. Her mother opposes the idea of her entering religious life. Elizabeth makes a private vow of virginity.

*1896:* Elizabeth visits Lourdes.

1899: Elizabeth reads *Story of a Soul* by Thérèse of Lisieux and *Way of Perfection* by Teresa of Ávila.

March 26, 1899: Elizabeth's mother agrees to allow her to enter Carmel.

August 2, 1901: Elizabeth enters the Carmel of Dijon, describing it as her "heaven on earth" (L 139).

December 8, 1901: Elizabeth is clothed as a novice.

January 11, 1903: Elizabeth's Solemn Profession.

November 9, 1906: Elizabeth dies of Addison's disease.

November 25, 1984: Elizabeth is beatified by Pope John Paul II.

October 16, 2016: Elizabeth is canonized by Pope Francis.

Her feast is celebrated on November 8.

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## INTRODUCTION

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# Elizabeth of the Trinity: A Teacher of Prayer

In an age of scientific and technological discoveries, it is encouraging to see how many Christians show great interest in the spiritual life. The heart of every person harbors a desire for God that the external din and distraction of the world cannot dispel completely. Now is the time to help people to follow this desire for God through a rediscovery of the ways of prayer.

The Carmelite Order has a very special mission in our world: to teach the ways of contemplative prayer. The Carmel has always defined itself by its twofold mission in the Church. First, the invisible mission of silent mental prayer<sup>1</sup> is the very essence and center of contemplative Carmelite life; then, second, the visible mission testifies to a life hidden in God. The mission of Carmel is not to teach people methods of

apostolic action, which is outside its scope. Rather, the Carmel reminds people of their greatest need: contemplation—without which a disciple cannot discover God at work in all of life's events.

The Carmel's timeless mission has a unique role in the twenty-first century. Busy and distracted, people in the modern world often hesitate to read the great spiritual masters. Today's readers are in such a rush, they imagine they can join the saints in their spiritual ascent without any preparation or detachment. In order to counteract this serious and risky illusion, God gives us the aid of spiritual guides whose mission is to direct us in the way of contemplative prayer. Among these guides, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux had a providential mission. Her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, is truly the bedside reading of souls yearning for God. In continuity with the mission of the Carmel, Thérèse penetrated in depth the essential message of Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross. She cast her gaze on the All of God and now invites us to adopt her "Little Way" so we too may reach the summit of Mount Carmel—a feat that requires humility.

Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity had a similar mission. The little book *Souvenirs*, published in 1909,<sup>2</sup> continues to direct many persons to the decisive grace of intimacy with the Three Divine Persons. Elizabeth sensed her mission. A few days before her death, on October 28, 1906, she wrote to a friend:

It seems to me that my mission in heaven will be to draw souls to an interior recollection by helping them to come out

of themselves and adhere to God in a very simple and completely loving movement. And to help them to stay in this great inner silence enables God to cast them in his image and to transform them into himself.<sup>3</sup>

Many have studied Elizabeth of the Trinity's spirituality. Perhaps most notably, the theologian and Dominican priest Marie-Michael Philipon gave her spiritual doctrine a theological structure. The great theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar also studied the writings of Elizabeth in order to present them in relation to current demands and aspirations.

On the fiftieth anniversary of her death (November 9, 1956), Father Anastasius of the Holy Rosary, Prior General of the Carmelites, defined Elizabeth's mission in the Carmel and in contemporary spirituality:

Elizabeth is, in essence, a soul who understood and fully lived the ideal of our Order. It is impossible to consider this distinctive figure's thought in contemporary spirituality separately from her role as a Carmelite. . . . Her whole spirituality was nourished at the very heart of the Carmelite mystery. Her inner attitude was open to God; seeking God within, making a heaven interiorly, God's and her own heaven: there lies the dominant note of her whole inner life. Her quest for God, her openness, her orientation toward God and God alone is the essential attitude of the Carmel.

Since God has given us Elizabeth of the Trinity as a gifted spiritual guide in our time, we can go to her as disciples and ask her to teach us the art of prayer.

While Teresa of Ávila left us a complete teaching on prayer in her *Way of Perfection*, Elizabeth did not write long treatises on contemplative prayer. Yet in her writings we find many helpful suggestions for the necessary dispositions of a life of contemplative prayer, as Father Philipon explained:

Elizabeth's mission was not doctrinal; she was never in charge of training novices in the practice of contemplative prayer. Her mission was chiefly one of life, prayer, silence, and suffering. Looking for a strongly systematized doctrine of prayer in her writings would therefore be in vain. Without claiming to fulfill the role of a theologian or a spiritual master, she was satisfied with living the great mystery of the divine indwelling as a contemplative. Elizabeth did not realize how her writings would be used in the future and did not even suspect that her doctrine would exercise a universal influence.<sup>4</sup>

For these reasons, Elizabeth's teachings are of great interest to those who are eager to become people of prayer. Too often, we speak of prayer as an activity apart from life, as if contemplative prayer does not have a deep bond with the rest of our existence. In reality, there is only one Christian life, and all of our spiritual efforts must tend toward the unification of the whole person. To the extent that we allow ourselves to become divinized,<sup>5</sup> our lives essentially become lives of faith, hope, and charity. Life becomes a continual prayer and our thoughts are united to the truth of God himself. We substitute God's point of view for our own, and charity transforms and divinizes our natural way of loving. Thus grafted onto the heart



of God, people's hearts love God, the world, others, and themselves with a love that participates in God's love.

According to Elizabeth, it is necessary to cast our gaze on Christ, our divine model, in order to understand clearly the ideal unity between prayer and life. Jesus' attitude of complete dependence on the Father is the foundation of our prayer. Because Christ always fulfilled his Father's will, he lived in a perpetual state of offering and prayer. As Father Victor de la Vierge wrote:

Jesus' perfectly unified life was entirely a prayer. His prayer was the expression of the bond that united Christ with his Father. The basic attitude of his being was to receive himself totally and constantly from the Father. The determining reason for the whole earthly, human, and divine existence of the Savior was the will to do and fulfill all that his Father wished and expected from him at every moment. Two living and praying were but one for him.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar but distant way, the same thing can be said about the prayer of Elizabeth of the Trinity. She was aware that her prayer was part of Christ's prayer, and this expressed her whole life in depth. In 1904, she wrote:

Since Our Lord dwells in our souls, his prayer is ours. I want to be in constant communion with his prayer, taking my place like a small vessel at its source, at the fountain of life, so that I can then communicate it to souls, letting these torrents of infinite charity overflow.<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, we can go to Elizabeth of the Trinity—as we would to an older sister—so that she might teach us her

spirit of prayer. But we cannot merely passively listen to her lesson, because prayer is a grace to ask for in humility and with perseverance. We do not read writings on the mystical life and contemplation simply to entertain ourselves with the discovery of a new world, and still less to form intellectual theories on prayer. Imagining we are praying is not praying.

The purpose of this book is to outline a useful teaching on prayer in the school of Elizabeth of the Trinity. All of the practical conclusions herein are not necessarily taken directly from Elizabeth's writings, but they are derived from reflections on them. The reflections will bear fruit inasmuch as they bring readers into true dialogue with the Lord. Without resolving to devote at least fifteen minutes each day to contemplative prayer, one's desire to pray is just a dream that won't have any real impact on life. Rather, prayer requires long and patient perseverance. Teresa of Ávila spent the first twenty years of her religious life in painful and arid contemplative prayer. Still, God never refuses the grace of prayer to the lowly and humble. One must never cease asking for this grace, even if one has to storm heaven to obtain it.

We need to understand Elizabeth's beautiful definitions of prayer in their vital context. Eight days after she entered the Carmel of Dijon, she defined contemplative prayer as follows: "The union of the one who is not with the One who is."<sup>8</sup>

But rather than focusing on how she defined prayer, it seems better to study her actions as a whole to help us to discover the deep source of her prayer in real life. Beyond her

practical techniques and habits, we also will try to discuss what constituted her fundamental spiritual attitude in daily life. We will see that, like Christ, her prayer arose from a life of intimacy with the Father. Because her whole being was divinized, she made her life a continual contemplative prayer. During her last retreat before entering the Carmel, on January 23, 1900, she was already offering this prayer:

Divine Master, may my life be a continual contemplative prayer; may nothing, nothing at all, distract me from you; neither my occupations, nor pleasures, nor suffering; may I be engulfed in you. Take my whole being, may Elizabeth disappear; may there remain only Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

We will attempt to enter this movement of contemplative prayer that was the theme of Elizabeth's entire life as a Carmelite. Elizabeth wrote that this movement was always united to an awareness of the Divine indwelling: "My whole exercise is to enter 'within' and to lose myself in those who are there. I feel God so alive in my soul; I only have to recollect myself to find him within me. This is what constitutes all my happiness."<sup>10</sup>

After looking at the heart of her fundamental attitude of prayer, we will then attempt to uncover the nature of Elizabeth's intimate dialogue with God. We will see that her life, hidden in God, required a radical death to every created thing. She came to full spiritual maturity only after a purifying night of trials. Then her soul was completely purified and she was prepared for transforming union with God. Having reached this

summit, her prayer became an extension of Jesus' prayer. Elizabeth of the Trinity is, therefore, a model of prayer that every Christian may imitate.