

ARTICLE 7

Legio Sanctae Familiae – The Legion of the Holy Family

Marriage a gift from God

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The Difficult Marriage – following St Peter's advice:

“In like manner also let wives be subject to their husbands: that if any believe not the word, they may be won without the word, by the conversation of the wives”. (1 Peter 3:1)

Blessed Elisabeth Canori Mora was beatified alongside Saint Gianna Molla and Blessed Isidore Bakanja by Pope John Paul II on 24th April 1994. At her beatification Pope John Paul II said;

“For her part Elizabeth Canori Mora, amidst a great many marital difficulties, showed total fidelity to the commitment she had made in the sacrament of marriage, and to the responsibility stemming from it. Constant in prayer and in her heroic dedication to her family, she was able to rear her children as Christians and succeeded in converting her husband” (Homily of Blessed John Paul II 1994)

Blessed Elisabeth was born in Rome on November 21st 1774 of a well to do family in good circumstances. She made an informal vow of virginity at the age of twelve and had a desire to become a religious. However her family were reduced to poverty by the failed business ambitions of two of her brothers. She presented herself alongside her sister Benedetta to the Oblate Ladies of St Philip Neri in Rome. Her sister was accepted but she was refused admission to the order.

Seeking Escape through Marriage

She wished to escape the poverty and trials of her daily family life but the only way to achieve this would be to marry and to marry well. On 10th January 1796 she married Christopher Mora, a lawyer, and moved into the Vespignani Palace in Rome to a life of luxury. She had four children two of whom died shortly after their baptism the other two, her daughters Mary Anne and Lucina, she raised herself.

Early on in her marriage her husband became consumed with jealousy and would not allow his wife to socialise with anyone except her family eventually curtailing even these visits. Elisabeth was forced to live the life of a recluse and shortly after the birth of her last child Lucina, she became very ill and was so close to death that the priest was called in to administer the last rites. However God Himself came to her assistance and she was cured. But the illness had a profound effect on her as she related to her confessor.

Illness and suffering as a gift

“This was the last gift of Grace, which rescued me from the mortal lethargy in which my poor soul had been immersed. The thought of eternity, where I believed myself to be certainly passing, occupied all my thoughts. The grief which I experienced for my sins was excessive. All my hopes were in the merits of my crucified Jesus, whose image I held clasped in my hands. I consecrated myself anew to Him in life and in death. I sought only my Jesus...”

After her recovery she renounced for ever all vanities and worldly pleasures throwing aside the magnificent dresses with which she had loved to adorn herself and instead she followed the counsel given by St Peter to wives; “Whose adorning let it not be the outward plaiting of the hair, or the wearing of gold, or the putting on of apparel: But the hidden man of the heart in the incorruptibility of a quiet and a meek spirit, which is rich in the sight of God” (1 Peter 3: 3-4)

Her Husband betrays her – She strives for holiness

Her husband Christopher went on to have a long standing affair with another woman which brought the family to financial ruin and he was forced to declare bankruptcy. He also stole a considerable sum of money from his own father. Elisabeth sold all of her possessions in an attempt to pay off her husband's debts and she and her two daughters were left in absolute poverty. Elisabeth's response to this abuse was to strive for holiness. Her situation became so intolerable that her confessor advised her to look for a legal separation.

Elisabeth responded “lay aside all thoughts of separation. I prefer the salvation of these souls to my spiritual comfort. It is more advantageous to the glory of God to co-operate in the salvation of these three souls; and this will place no obstacle in the way of my perfection”. Here we see again her willingness to put St Peter's words into practice for the salvation of her husband and children. Will God refuse to act in the face of such heroic love?

Elisabeth was very careful to teach her daughters to respect their father but she did not hide from them the fact that his behaviour was not pleasing to God and she encouraged them to pray for him and to suffer patiently.

Subjection is not absolute

St Peter, in exhorting wives to be subject to their husbands, does not expect absolute subjection, for we must serve God first. Elisabeth's husband demanded that she give him permission in writing to stay with his adulterous lover and when she refused he threatened to kill her if she did not comply. Elisabeth replied that she preferred death a thousand times rather than commit such a crime. Yet in all other matters she remained subject to her husband although for his part, he mostly left her alone.

Elisabeth's sanctity increased and she had mystical experiences and visions and a reputation for miracles although her life remained very difficult. She died on February 5th 1825 aged fifty. Shortly before she died her husband was mocking her religion saying that he preferred to say Mass in his bed. She replied “Laugh as much as you please; but after my death you will say Mass, and what is more you will hear confessions. You will then no longer pretend to hear Mass in bed”

The conversion of her husband – she had paid the price

True to her prediction, shortly after her death Christopher Mora repented and began to live a penitential life. He was heard to say with tears in his eyes “I sanctified my dear and holy wife by my bad conduct. Can I ever forgive myself”. He became a Franciscan in 1834, was ordained to the priesthood and died a priest on September 8th 1845.

Here we have an extraordinary example of the fruits of salvation obtained by a wife for her husband and family through following the advice given by St Peter in his first letter.

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