

## Heritage Week at DeSales University

January 25, 2018



### The R. Wayne Kraft Memorial Lecture



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### *The Attractive Beauty of Holiness: The Influence of St. Francis de Sales' Spirituality of the Laity in the Married Life of Elizabeth Leseur*

#### **A Salesian conversion story**

A few highlights of the life of St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622)

His setting in life: in the period of implementation of the Council of Trent, in times of the "counter Reformation", amid a legion of saints

Crisis of faith that lasted 2 years 1584-86 (listening to a discourse on the subject of predestination, he feared that he was damned), until it was resolved the intercession of Mary, by which he learned to trust in the love of God - - the Way of Divine Love

Priestly ordination in 1593: zealous priestly ministry (courage in evangelizing the people of le Chablaia; distinguished by his learning, kindness and holiness)

Bishop of Geneva (at Annecy) in 1602 (at age of 35): zealous, courageous, learned episcopal ministry; lived very simply. He soon had a renewed clergy and a well instructed laity... championed the vocation of the laity to holiness 3 ½ centuries before Vatican II...

Founded with St. Jane de Chantal the Visitation sisters (1607-1610); friend of St. Vincent de Paul

Died in 1622, the day after he suffered a massive stroke (aged 56)

In 1877 named Doctor of the Church (first writer in French to be so honored)

His teachings (writings and conferences, sermons)

Complete works of St. Francis de Sales (ed. 1892-1932) 26 vol. , containing his two major treatises, minor works, 970 sermons, 2,100 letters, conferences, etc. --something on the order of 100,000 pp. of writings & oral teachings in 30 yrs. of priesthood / episcopacy!!

"It is an error, nay more, a very heresy, to seek to banish the devout life from the soldier's guardroom, the mechanic's workshop, the prince's court, or the domestic hearth. Of course a purely contemplative devotion, such

as is specially proper to the religious and monastic life, cannot be practiced in these outer vocations, but there are various other kinds of devotion well-suited to lead those whose calling is secular, along the paths of perfection. [He gives examples from OT & NT...] Be sure that whosoever our lot is cast we may and must aim at the perfect life.” [Intro to the Devout Life, Part I, chap 3]  
His character

His goodness, patience and mildness became proverbial. St. Francis de Sales has been styled "the Gentleman Saint" because of his patience and gentleness.

“Gentleness, temperance, modesty, and humility, are graces which ought to color everything we do.” [From the Treatise on the Love of God, Part I, Chap III]

“You can attract more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a barrel of vinegar”  
Lettre 773, à une dame mariée:

“Be careful to put into practice humble sweetness which you owe to your husband, and to everybody. It is the virtue of virtues, which our Savior so often recommended...”

### **Analysis of a Salesian conversion**

#### **Servant of God Elisabeth and Felix Leseur (1866-1914) (1861-1950)**

##### **A near ‘conversion’**

Elisabeth and Felix Leseur were a happily married French couple at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. After a few years of married life, Felix’s hopes of “converting” his wife were nearly accomplished. The ‘conversion’ he wanted for her was from Christianity to atheism: to his own disbelief in God, disdain of the Church and of Christianity in general. He wanted it, but she had wished to remain a Catholic. Yet, seven years into their marriage, Elisabeth stopped receiving the sacraments and abandoned church-going. Felix had been “working on her” for a long time, and she was beginning to give in to her husband’s arguments against Christianity, shared by most of the people in her husband’s social circle. At 30 years old, her childhood religious formation seemed very remote and inadequate to respond to the challenges he presented to her. And she evidently had no significant friendships with well-formed Catholics who could’ve helped her in her vulnerable situation. Felix awaited the right moment, and then gave her to read what he figured would clinch her ‘conversion’ to atheism, and sever the last threads that tied her to the Catholic faith. He gave her Ernest Renan’s book: History of the Origins of Christianity. This tendentious series claiming to be rigorous history, has a very non-Christian view of Christ, the disciples and the early Church. Felix hoped that this would usher her into a state in which, like him, she would utter a sigh of relief to find herself finally freed from the groveling subjection to Christian religious practices, beliefs and institutions.

But precisely the opposite occurred!! What occurred was just the beginning --but a decisive one-- of an even longer and much more delicate and laborious reverse process by which Felix himself would --very slowly and ‘despite himself’-- be converted to Elisabeth’s solidly founded faith and intense relationship with God. Just when Felix thought he was about to make her a disciple of his own intellectual brand of atheism, his very efforts provoked a healthy reaction in his wife. She sought to return to the practice of her faith and form herself in Catholic doctrine, preparing herself to defend it when attacked. She began to free herself from the web of his jaundiced thinking, and soon he found himself caught as if under the influence of a powerful magnet, pulling him to where he did not want to go. He was imperceptibly drawn closer and closer to the living and invisible God in whom he no longer believed, but who acted through his attractive, pleasant and ever-loving wife. But before we see the playing out of that opposite conversion story which overtook and reversed the first that Felix sought to orchestrate, let us see how it is that a couple that loved each other so dearly and were sacramentally married in the Catholic Church could come to be so deeply divided in matters of faith. How did a couple who committed themselves in marriage to love and respect one another their entire life, and who shared so many interests and passions, get into such a predicament?

##### **Back to the beginning of their relationship**

In order to understand that we have to go back to the beginning of their relationship. Elisabeth was born in Paris in 1866 to a wealthy French family. She was educated privately into her late teens, receiving excellent training in languages, literature and the fine arts, interests that would remain with her throughout her life: Her religious formation was most likely typical of the Catholic practice of her social class. When she met her future husband at

the age of 20 (he was 25 at the time), she had



no inkling that he was not a practicing Catholic. He had had a Catholic upbringing and a formal education in prestigious Catholic institutions that she had not had. However, neither of them seemed to have been too concerned about the matter; otherwise they would have had frank conversations on the subject. Elisabeth probably just assumed that he was a Catholic like herself. It seems, too, that Felix became more ardently atheistic as time went on, so perhaps at the time of their courtship he was just agnostic or at the most, mildly atheistic, but over the years, with his ideological reading and close association with like-minded friends, he became more stubbornly and militantly atheistic.

(At that time in France, atheists were commonly called “anti-clericals” because they bitterly opposed the Church and despised her clergy.)

At the time they met, Felix was completing medical studies in Paris. He and Elisabeth shared many of the same interests: music and opera, literature, cultures and travel. After a two-year courtship, they were married in a Catholic wedding in Paris on July 31, 1889. It was just before their wedding that Elisabeth discovered that Felix was not only not a practicing Catholic, but was of an atheistic persuasion, so she asked him to promise that he would never be an obstacle to her practice of the faith; he promised her it, and kept his promise - - for the first few years of marriage! But before long, his conviction that religion made no sense got the better of him, and he began to try to tear down her faith. He teased her about her piety, gave her anti-Catholic literature to read, and created all sorts of petty objections to her practice of the faith. He began to criticize and ridicule her beliefs openly. His crusading zeal against the Catholic faith ate him up, and provoked him to attack his wife’s cherished beliefs. It was not his wife as such that he wanted to attack –at first discretely and then later, out in the open– it was her Christian faith. Yet even in the midst of acrimonious differences of religion, Elisabeth and Felix loved each other with a very tender and intense affection. It was just that Felix considered it increasingly repulsive to accept that the one he loved would be caught in the tangle of religious ‘nonsense’. He wanted to liberate her from her Catholic shackles, and he rejoiced to see the day drawing near when she, like him, would finally have no hesitation about rejecting the Catholic Church with all its superstitious rituals, its restrictive norms and its silly beliefs. And he would say, years later, --though from a totally different perspective-- “I tried to destroy her Catholic faith, and, alas! I nearly succeeded.”

So, what was the unexpected result that came out of Elisabeth’s reading of the History of the Origins of Christianity by Renan? After all, Felix had hand-picked it from his own anti-clerical library, precisely to bring about the definitive separation of his wife from Catholicism, which he so desired. This so called “historical” work had as its unspoken presuppositions the rejection of the very possibility of miracles, and even more so, of any resurrection from the dead. It subtly denied the divinity of Christ the supernatural character of the Church, and the authenticity of the apostles’ witness, all the while quoting extensively from the Gospels. Reading this triggered in Elisabeth a deep reaction. Instead of swallowing blindly the author’s interpretations of Jesus and the early Church, she realized that his arguments were inconsistent and did not ‘hold water’, and that realization provoked her to examine the foundations of Catholic beliefs from more reliable sources. God had given her a very sharp intelligence!

### **Self-formation in the faith**

Elisabeth Leseur returned to the practice of the faith, determined to ground her beliefs in the Scriptures and in Church teaching. She embarked upon a daunting program of self-formation in the faith, involving study of the Bible, Fathers of the Church, Church history, the teaching of the popes, councils, and the great saints and sacred writers; she discovered the great utility of philosophy for training the mind, and in general, set about preparing herself to understand and defend the Catholic faith in all its breadth and depth. She adopted a regular program of prayer, meditation, study, and sacramental participation which she observed for the rest of her life. However, Elisabeth was careful not to give her husband grounds for jealousy; her service of God was fulfilled with utmost discretion, in moments and hours when she was alone so as not to leave Felix feeling ‘jilted’ or abandoned.

The intellectual, moral and spiritual formation that she carried out systematically is all the more extraordinary in that she could not count upon the support or guidance of any academic institution, apostolic movement or religious order in her life project. At that time there was no such thing as a philosophical or theological education accessible to women (not even for religious women, much less married women!). In the Catholic world of her time, only seminarians and priests studied theology! Consequently, Elisabeth had to design her own 'curriculum' (decide what she was to study), search for resources (procure books), and find her own mentors.

For the first years of her ambitious program of study, she had no one she could count on. She was really alone, relying on her own best judgment in her solitary pilgrimage. Her personal spiritual journal (available now in English) is an extraordinary record of Elisabeth's interior life in the years following her return to the faith. Five or six years later, she found a spiritual director/mentor, and in the last 4 years of her life, a spiritual sister. But in the meantime, Elisabeth undertook to study domains for which she had no guides... so she went about acquiring the most solid Catholic books she could find. "Soon", says one biographer, "there were two libraries in the house": the anti-clerical one amassed by Felix, and a library of distinguished sources of Catholic wisdom: treatises of philosophy, Scripture commentaries, Fathers of the Church, Church history, classics of spirituality etc. which Elisabeth was quietly collecting. She would eventually have over 200 books in her personal library! 1 She was no dilettante, but rather wanted an in-depth understanding of all that she studied! 2

Her purpose in this study was essentially apologetic at first: to defend her faith in the face of attacks or arguments against it, to learn how best to present the faith to those who doubt or do not believe, and to understand its inner logic.

Felix was frustrated to discover that his challenges to her faith had actually led her to become not only more grounded in her beliefs, but also more fervent and serious in her Christian life. In her program of studies she read assiduously the New Testament, and never passed a day without meditating upon some passage from it. "She thus acquired a reasoned and substantial faith", established it "indestructible."

Uplifting the world

In reflecting on his wife's life, Felix recalled that she once wrote in a book of her younger sister the maxim "Every soul that uplifts itself uplifts the world." Felix declared that in that short phrase his wife had "defined herself". Indeed as we have just seen, one of the most astounding things of their married life was her self-uplifting (self-formation in the faith, in the virtues and in a God-centered discipline of life). And all of this effort contributed to uplift her spouse through prayers, sacrifices, and acts of kindness and love which would eventually attract him to God in her.

She longed to spend time with Felix in an atmosphere of prayer, but his atheism did not allow that to happen. Nonetheless, she recognized that he was part of her "solitude" - - that is, of her most intimate being and aspirations. 3 The Lord gave her an ever greater love for him whom she referred to as "the one who is dear to me above all".

Felix, personally and professionally, had a very busy social life, engaging in French colonial and foreign politics, writing for several different leftist or anticlerical newspapers, mixing with a wide variety of professionals: politicians, journalists, doctors, scholars, writers, musicians and artists, who were generally not people of faith. He said that he often left the house after dinner to go to the office or to meetings from which he would return typically at 1 or 2 AM! But in all of Elisabeth's Journal we find no hint of complaint or accusation of his absence or late night arrivals; it seems she had learnt to fill her hours of solitude with intimate conversation with the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Among these were the *first 15 volumes* of the "Complete Works of St. Francis de Sales" of the 1892-1932 edition: all those published up to the time when she became very seriously ill (1908). Among those first 15 volumes she had were the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the *Treatise on the love of God*, about 270 sermons, and some 900 of his letters, many to lay women of different circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Elisabeth was a serious student in other matters before her conversion: "Although not university educated, Elisabeth [...] disciplined herself to spend time each day in intellectual pursuits. She mastered several languages including Russian, traveled extensively, and prepared for those trips by reading art and history. Not surprisingly, her conversion process included a strong intellectual component." (Janet K Ruffing RSM, "Elisabeth Leseur: A Strangely Forgotten Modern Saint", = Part II; chapter 7 in Ann W, Astell (ed.), *Lay Sanctity: Medieval and Modern. A search for models*, p. 124.)

<sup>3</sup> She wrote in her journal: "For several days I have longed for calm and seclusion, and felt an ardent wish to get close to nature, to be like the sweet St. Francis in the midst of flowers and birds, and there to pray, work, and meditate in solitude, or at least (for Felix belongs always to my solitude) with a few loved ones who would sometimes leave me alone with God. My God, wilt Thou give me one day the joy of this solitude for two, united in the same prayer, the same faith, and the same love?"

Elisabeth is an example of a married person who, living an active social life, fulfilled the multiple duties of her state and lived an intense Christian life in the path of conjugal holiness. In this path she found a sure guide in St. Francis de Sales, who three centuries earlier had affirmed the lay and married vocation to holiness. Although she could not share this project with her husband Felix, neither did she pursue it apart from him, but rather did it for him, and was sincerely united to him in every other way she could find. She did not “leave him behind” in her search for God; her constant prayer was rather that, either here or in heaven, he might be with her in the Lord.

### **Life as a couple, family relationships and friends**

Elisabeth carefully integrated her family life and her spirituality. Formed in a devout humanism with Francis de Sales as her guide, she embraced his teaching that a life of devotion is fully compatible with marriage. Felix & Elisabeth kept up a busy schedule of entertaining and cultural activities in Paris. She dressed beautifully and was an elegant hostess, as was expected of her “station in life.” They loved to receive guests and visit others, enrich their understanding and outlook by frequent travels to other European countries and further afield, where they appreciated the landscapes, cultures, art, languages, music and cuisine of each people. Elisabeth spoke various languages, and was beginning to master Italian when she entered the final period of her illness. She was especially



Elisabeth and Felix, 1910

Sensitive to, and appreciative of all forms of art: painting, sculpture, music and literature. They traveled widely until, when she was about 40, her illness prevented long trips. They had built a summer home in the French countryside in 1902, and participated fully in the joys and sorrows of their extended family, which included parents, siblings, a niece and several nephews. Elisabeth had a particular influence upon, and interest in, young people. She would have been a wonderful mother had they been able to have children of their own, but as it was she poured out all her love and attentions on her niece and nephews, her siblings, and most of all, on her husband.

She had a great gift of friendship, not only attested to by Felix, but also by the dozens of people with whom she maintained a correspondence, others whom she discretely counseled, still others whom she helped with her resources in a hidden way. Her capacity for enriching relationships was shown above all by her deep and intense friendship with Sr. Goby, her ‘soul friend’.<sup>4</sup>

[In 1910, Elisabeth made the acquaintance of Sr. Marie Goby, a hospital religious, who was to become her spiritual sister, friend and confidante. They only met twice in person; their relationship was carried on principally by letters. It is in her correspondence to Sr. Goby that Elisabeth speaks most frankly of her husband’s gradual opening to things of the faith toward the end of her life. Felix himself admired and loved Sr. Goby, and their friendship continued and deepened after Elisabeth’s death.]

During the times she was limited to bed or recovering, many visitors came to see her; Felix naturally worried that the visits might tire her out and negatively affect her recuperation, but he also began to see that her many friends supported and encouraged her by their affection, attentions and prayers.

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<sup>4</sup> “This friendship with Soeur Goby, enjoyed only during the last three years of Elisabeth's life, finally overcame the spiritual isolation she experienced from her conversion. It was in this relationship that Elisabeth experienced the communion of saints on earth. She was completely convinced that Soeur Goby, Felix, and she would all be reunited someday in the heart of their Divine Master. The two women prayed for one another, prayed for one another's intentions, affectively participated in one another's lives, and supported one another on their distinct yet common journeys. Long before other laywomen and nuns began to overcome the barriers to friendship and mutuality, Elisabeth and Soeur Goby had enjoyed such freedom and support. (Janet K Ruffing RSM, “Elisabeth Leseur: A Strangely Forgotten Modern Saint”, = Part II; chapter 7 in Ann W, Astell (ed.), *Lay Sanctity: Medieval and Modern. A search for models*, p. 129)

In March 1903 she met her future spiritual director, Fr. R. P. Hébert OP, when attending a baptism. He was a priest of wise counsel, who greatly helped her with his knowledge and experience, even as he was edified by her quest for holiness. (He used to say to Felix with great feeling, after her death: “She was truly a saint.”)

A month after meeting Fr. Hébert, on a trip to Rome she had an unforgettable audience with Pope Leo XIII, and formally consecrated her life to God in St. Peter’s. But Elisabeth’s dedication to the Lord was not a celibate one: in nearly every entry in her spiritual journal she turns her thoughts and prayers to Felix, ardently praying to God that he might, one day soon, experience the tremendous blessings and discoveries of the inner life that she wanted so much to share with him.

### **The attractive beauty of holiness**



Mme. Leseur was a charming and intelligent woman, never making a show of her intellectual gifts, but interesting, attractive and spirited in conversation, always delightful and pleasant in her relationships, with a characteristic laughter that rang through the house.

Felix wrote that “she was very attractive”, kind, amiable and affectionate. Rather than trying to change her husband’s character, she focused on making herself “more Christian... to the marrow”. Thus Elisabeth sought to reach his heart through her joyous and affectionate relationship with him and her hidden life of prayer and sacrifices for his sake.

She came to a vivid and profound conviction that only God’s grace could touch and change (bring about a conversion in) the depths of Felix’s soul –or anyone else’s, for that matter. For years her prayer for Felix was “Come, Lord, to this soul, that it may live.” But at a certain point she asked herself: can we not prepare the way for the action of God’s grace? Can we not contribute something, however small, which, touched by grace, may serve the divine plan?

With humility, then, she sought to “prepare the ground” for God’s action in whatever way she could, and rejoiced to see the tiniest signs of nobility in his behavior, openness to spiritual values or chinks in the armour of his atheistic reasoning. Along with these thoughts, she grew in her conviction that God’s mysterious action in each person’s life can only fully be understood when it is finished - - in retrospect. All of this meant entrusting her husband’s salvation to the Lord, whether or not she was able to discern signs of his gradual approach to the Kingdom of God.

### **Avoiding intellectual arguments about the faith as “counter-productive”**

After a few years of forming herself by both study and discipline of life, Elisabeth probably could have rebutted any arguments that Felix could put forward. He himself said that she “was soon able to respond convincingly to anyone who would try to attack [her faith].” (It sounds like he had some direct experience of that energetic and convincing response to attacks!) But Elisabeth understood that one who “wins a battle” may still “lose the war” in the process, i.e. by being too strident in her relationship with Felix, by wanting to win arguments against him, she might harm (or cause him to reject) the quiet work of grace going on in his life which only she perceived by her close attention to him. She was careful not to interfere with God’s master work in the deepest recesses of his being. If she spoke openly about God too soon, she might interrupt the Spirit’s gradual transformation of his heart (as of yet unknown to him) and the hearts of people like him, who were distrustful of anything connected with ‘religion’. She assumed a discipline of silence with her husband in regard to matters of faith (-- the most important things in her life, which she yearned to share with Felix), lest she provoke in him the “spirit of obstinacy”.

Elisabeth became increasingly convinced that arguments and discussions about religion with unbelievers would

be of no profit to them, unaware as they were of the most profound, spiritual dimension of the human being. She perceived that she could win no ground in her husband's soul by arguing against his disbelief --not because of any intellectual inferiority or inability to reason or argue on her part, but because of his closed mind. So she undertook a quiet and hidden apostolate of attractive love and tender affection towards her husband --the way marked out by St. Francis de Sales--, together with sacrifices & prayers for his conversion. 5

But that didn't mean her study was useless. What began in her as a defensive reaction in a hostile context, later became an "intellectual apostolate" for which she recognized that God had gifted her, and that is why she committed herself to serious study as the "cultivation of the mind." She sought to develop a real competence in each field she studied, not so she could boast, impress her friends, or pride herself on her achievements, but rather for the sake of others to whom she could do some good by her understanding of the faith, the world, and the ways of God.<sup>6</sup> Her object was to "make Christian truth loved" through her as a well formed, articulate and intelligent believer... And first of all to make it loved by her beloved Felix.

And what she willed for Felix with all her heart, she also desired for his like-minded colleagues. She wanted to be a "good Samaritan" to them in their state of spiritual prostration, to approach them humbly, to enlighten their darkness, showing them God only "indirectly", by letting his merciful love anonymously shine forth from her heart. As her Christian faith her sense of lay apostolate matured, she sought to make their home a place where people of diverse persuasions could congregate and where she would make "every effort to raise and enlighten" her husband's and his friends' viewpoints. She wanted to allow others to "see God" in her "without hearing his name" (which might provoke conscious rejection): a silent witness to God's love and truth.

### **Love and suffering**

Precisely because of the great love they shared, the couple's opposing religious 'projects' were a factor of tension and pain in their relationship, especially for Elisabeth, who wrote in her journal of the "bitter suffering" she experienced at "hearing my faith and spiritual things mocked, attacked and criticized" by her husband and his friends during their social gatherings. In addition to this tension, and the inability to have children, Elisabeth was plagued with a series of physical illnesses.

As made explicit in her diaries, Elisabeth endured all these crosses and became convinced that "suffering is the highest form of action, the highest expression of the wonderful Communion of Saints, and that in suffering one is sure... to be useful to others and to the great causes that one longs to serve." She considered it her "great task", her "mission" before God to work, to pray and to suffer for Felix's conversion. She opened her horizons, too, to pray for the conversion of all those who did not have the gift of faith and those who struggled to believe.

This went on for many years – approximately ten – until it dawned on her that perhaps Felix would only receive the faith upon the sacrifice of her life, but if then she could be together with him in Christ for all eternity, she would accept in peace the renunciation of sharing the faith with him in this life, which she so desired. She would offer her life for him, for his life in the Lord. And in fact, though he came to admire her inner strength in her last years as she suffered from cancer, and he intuited that it had something to do with her spiritual life (of which he knew very little), he never 'came around' to the faith until after her death.

A great loss experienced by Elisabeth during those years was the death of her younger sister, Juliette, who was very close to her. She died of TB at the age of 32; Felix was very supportive of her at this time. Sometime after this blow, Elisabeth wrote in her journal a short essay on suffering, that is, her reflected, well-thought-out convictions concerning the role of suffering in the Christian life. She viewed suffering in the light of Jesus' passion, considering it a "great instrument" of transformation of the believer in grace, sometimes more powerful

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<sup>5</sup> She wrote in her journal a sort of rule of life: "To go more and more to souls, approaching them with respect and delicacy, touching them with love. To try always to understand everything and everyone. Not to argue; to work instead through contact and example; to dissipate prejudice, to reveal God and make Him felt without speaking of Him; to strengthen one's intelligence, to enlarge one's soul...; to love without tiring, in spite of disappointment and indifference... Never to show the wounds that are caused by certain hostilities, declarations, or misunderstandings; to offer them for those who cause this suffering."

<sup>6</sup> "It is a duty to develop unceasingly one's intelligence, to strengthen one's character, to become a creature of thought and will; [...] to view life with joy and to face it with energy, [...] to be able to understand one's time and not despair of the future. All this a woman can do. As much as man she is a thinking being, acting and loving". Cf. Astell, 123)

than words or actions. She expressed in this way her conviction that suffering offered to the Lord could by God's action touch other people interiorly, bringing them light, peace and holiness.

### **The consummation**

Between 1907 and 1908, Elisabeth's own health began to decline. Liver trouble plagued her more and more, requiring her to give up travel and spend long hours resting in bed. Nevertheless, she continued to write short treatises and letters on the interior life, and to give counsel to different sorts of people who sought her out - - but always discretely, so as not to call the attention of, nor bother, Felix.

In 1911, Elisabeth was operated on to remove a malignant growth on one of her breasts. After surgery and radiation treatment, she was well for a couple of years, and made a pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1912, accompanied by Felix, but the cancer recurred in early 1913, and spread throughout her body. Ten months before she died, prostrate in bed, in the midst of great suffering, she wrote:

Lord, be Thou blessed for my present suffering, because I dare to hope that it is the gentle answer of Thy Heart. I offer it all to Thee, all of it: sufferings of body, heart, and soul, all my privations, my interior desolation, my great spiritual solitude. [...]

She offered everything for her special intentions, first and foremost of which was her prayer for Felix's conversion. About a half year later, after months of acute suffering, she made the very last entry in her journal, four months before her death, praying that her suffering secure the "divine response" to her most ardent desire: "Stronger than my poor action, stronger than my imperfect prayer, may it reach Thy Heart and become the most efficacious form of supplication." --Elisabeth Leseur died in the arms of her beloved (but still unbelieving) husband Felix on May 3, 1914.

### **In God's own time**

Two years before her death, Elisabeth and Felix had been conversing about what each would do in the case that the other died first, and at one point she insisted: "I am absolutely certain that when you return to God, you will not stop on the way because you never do things by halves.... You will someday become a priest." To this he responded: "Elisabeth, you know my sentiments. I've sworn hatred of God, I shall live in that hatred and I shall die in it."

However, during the last two years of her life, as she was dying of metastasized cancer, Felix could not help but be impressed by the depth of strength she drew from her spirituality: "When I saw how ill she was," he wrote some years later, "and how she endured with equanimity of temper a complaint that generally provokes much [...] impatience and ill-humor, I was struck to see how her soul had so great a command of itself and of her body; and knowing that she drew this tremendous strength from her convictions, I ceased to attack them." Later he passed from neutrality to respect and admiration.

But it was not until after her death in 1914, that Felix discovered the truly heroic degree of her love and prayers for him; among her papers he found a note directed to him: "In 1905, I asked almighty God to send me sufficient sufferings to purchase your soul. On the day that I die, the price will have been paid. Greater love than this no woman has than she who lays down her life for her husband."

At first, Felix was tempted to dismiss this as the delusion of a woman whose mind was distorted by 'religious nonsense'. But he was surprised to discover that Elisabeth's spiritual influence had included a very extensive correspondence with people from all walks of life, of which he had previously been unaware. During her last days, many of these unknown people had come to visit and a much larger throng had attended her viewing prior to the funeral... so many that Felix was asked by one priest "Who was this woman? We have never seen such a funeral before."

Following the funeral, Felix reflected upon the "celestial beauty" of his wife's soul that he had glimpsed at Lourdes while she was praying. In his grief he was given Elisabeth's journals by her sister, and he discovered posthumously a whole new and stunning side of his wife that he had been ignorant of. He realized that "she had accepted her suffering and offered it... chiefly for my conversion." As he began to see her life modeled upon Christ, who suffered in order to bring him life, Felix's resistance to grace weakened.

Poring over his wife's spiritual writings, especially her journal,<sup>7</sup> which she had begun in 1899 and continued until shortly before her death, he found himself in the throes of a conversion. In 1915, the year after Elisabeth died, he was moved to return to the Catholic faith in which he had been brought up.

Encouraged by all to whom he showed it, Felix published his wife's journal (spiritual diary) in 1917, which would become a bestseller: by 1930 it had sold 100,000 copies, and had been translated into every major European language.

### **“You will be a priest someday...”**

Felix began attending Mass daily, and became a member of the Dominican Laity. He expressed his desire to dedicate his life to God as a priest, but was initially advised against it by his Dominican confessor, who thought it a sign of the inordinate zeal of a recent convert. But he persisted, and in the fall of 1919 he was admitted to the Dominican Order, and was ordained a priest in 1923. He was then 62 years old! He had been married for 25 years; he spent much of his 27 years of priestly ministry traveling all over Europe, speaking to audiences eager to learn more about Elisabeth's apostolate of prayer and sufferings offered to God for the benefit of one's loved ones.

He went on to publish various volumes of Elisabeth's other writings (correspondence, meditations, etc.) as well as a full-length biography of his wife. The many, many people convinced of Elisabeth's sanctity and intercessory power persuaded Felix to work for Elisabeth's beatification (a step on the way to her being declared a saint).

All of this led eventually to the opening of the cause of beatification of Elisabeth in 1934. This process occupied him until his health began to fail in 1942; Fr. Felix Leseur OP died in February 1950. The Church process of discernment on that petition, halted by Felix's poor health and the disruption of World War II, was reopened in Rome in 1990.



Fr. Felix Leseur, O.P.

***Elisabeth's current status in the process of canonization is that of a “Servant of God”.***

### **Felix's analysis of his own conversion**

Felix presented himself in a very humble and self-critical way in the prologue to his deceased wife's journal. He wrote from the perspective of a Christian who repents of his disbelieving past, and in particular his anti-clerical ridiculing of, and trying to undermine, his wife's faith. It is a subject, he says, “full of pain and remorse.”

He goes through the steps that led him to fall away from, and later despise the religion in which he had been raised. Not only did he not keep his promise to respect his wife's faith and religious practice, but (he writes :) “I made Elisabeth the object of my retrogressive proselytizing. I set myself to attack her faith, to deprive her of it, and – may God pardon me! – I nearly succeeded.” But happily Elisabeth saw through the ideologically slanted arguments he was peddling, and she decided to do her own research. She embarked upon an ambitious program of formation in the faith. Felix perceived the change in his wife, which initially provoked him to greater criticism of the faith, but had she confronted him and attacked his arguments, it might only have hardened him in his rejection of Christianity. She counted more on deeds than on words.

Felix then speaks of the steps that led him back to the faith: from obstinate mockery and belittling of her faith, to ceasing to attack it, to respect, and finally to admiration of her equanimity and inner strength in her final illness. In 1912 he accompanied her on pilgrimage to Lourdes (he went with her because of her general weakness, out of

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<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth had wanted her journals destroyed after her death, but her sister convinced her to keep them, as they might help Felix in his groping for the light of Christ

love for her, -- as her spouse, not out of faith!)... Yet he was struck by the beauty of his wife at prayer. He still did not have a living faith, and Elisabeth knew that he did not, as she commented in a letter to her intimate friend Sr. Goby, but she saw it as a prelude to faith, which indeed it was. Looking back upon this period Felix wrote that Elisabeth “acted” upon him (without him perceiving it at the time), and that this influence upon him “grew stronger” during her final illness. He was aware of the contrast between her patient and tranquil acceptance of suffering and what would have been his behavior if he were to suffer what she was going through. He recognized that he would be an intolerable, self-centered and depressed patient if he were to experience the half of her sufferings.

He then describes his conversion the year after her death, as he read and re-read her intimate writings: he calls it a “revolution” of his whole moral being. At this point he began to be aware of her continued presence with him and influence upon him: “I felt her come to me, to direct me.” The books she had collected to nourish her own faith and resolve her doubts now served to cure him of his unbelief, and he felt God calling him. Freed at last from his interior bondage, with his intellect illumined by the grace of God, he turned toward God, and became a believer.

In the process of his conversion, he came to realize how much he had contributed to his wife’s spiritual and intellectual isolation, which had caused her much suffering. Of this he wrote: “this is now the great regret of my existence... my constant grief.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Felix did not remain frozen in his remorse, nor was it a sterile self-criticism; he prayed to his beloved Elisabeth to forgive him and to intercede for him that even then, after her death, as she shared in the glory of the Lord, he might be led in the way of her faith, virtues and self-offering to God.

In the measure in which Felix made known his wife’s inner life (principally by publishing her writings, but also by his own spoken testimony), he began to receive reports of other people who had experienced special graces thanks to her intercession, and this convinced him all the more of her holiness. He also saw his own spiritual transformation as a fruit of her example, love and prayers, and as a testimony to her sanctity.

Felix wrote in 1919, as he published her journals for the first time, that he continued to experience her guidance in his life, leading him toward a more perfect union with God. Such would be his experience throughout his priestly life.

#### Reflections for our situation

The Leseurs’ experience highlights the importance of a serious, well-rounded formation for Christian married life. We’ve seen the striking characteristic of Elisabeth’s initiative of self-formation in the faith: guided by God, she undertook all by herself a challenging program of serious study, sacramental life and practice of the virtues, laying the groundwork for a mature Christian married life. She continued to grow in the intellectual, spiritual and moral areas of the faith until her death. The spirituality of St. Francis de Sales was evidently an essential element of this formation.

-- How many parishes, dioceses and Catholic universities offer programs of ongoing formation in the faith in support of married couples? In today’s world, very much aware of the call of laity to full participation in the Church and to holiness, we should not expect lay women or men to have to prepare and carry out their religious and conjugal formation totally on their own, as Elisabeth did at the turn of the 20th century. There should be opportunities for married couples to receive a well-rounded formation in the faith --not in the academic style of seminaries or universities--, but at a time, with a rhythm, format and focus adequate to couples with the commitment of secular jobs and family life. (De Sales ACCESS; Alvernia; ILC, Teams of our Lady / WWME)

Felix and Elisabeth both understood the importance of acquiring books for one’s formation; for this there were

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<sup>8</sup> By way of contrast, I present the testimony of my mother about her relationship with my father. Six months after the death of my father, my mother wrote to me the following:

“Dad + I had a remarkable marriage – sharing not only love and affection and our children and the ordinary things husbands and wives share – but an intellectual and spiritual camaraderie – we could talk ‘in depth’ about many things, often sounding each other out – sometimes disagreeing – but that was because we were completely open with one another. I sometimes thought we were ‘spiritual directors’ for one another – in the sense that we helped one another to see where God was leading us.” [JAK – TKK / April 5, 1995 / pp. 1a-b]

two libraries in their home: over 200 volumes in Elizabeth's collection! These books later served her husband in his journey of faith

- Many families have extensive video or DVD/CD libraries in their homes with all kinds of "entertainment" options, but how many think of building up a family library of good Christian books, reference materials and even Christian novels, poetry and videos? Wayne & Joan Kraft had a whole wall full of Christian books (Scripture, theology, peace and justice issues, classics of spirituality, dictionaries, liturgical books...) which we always available to us their children.

Elisabeth longed to share her solitude in the Lord with the one she loved the most, but Felix's atheism did not permit that...

How blessed the Christian couples who have discovered how to pray together; the joy of making a retreat together as a couple: those who know how to respect each other's prayer time as an intimate encounter with the Lord, and then share as spouses their sense of God's presence and action in their lives. My parents experienced this blessing over many years.<sup>9</sup>

The Leseurs offer a lesson about suffering in marriage: they came to understand suffering as contributing to one's own sanctification and the good of others. Suffering consciously accepted (physical, psychological and spiritual), is a powerful means of grace in the conjugal relationship. Elisabeth first intuited it, later became convinced of it, and finally offered her life as a sacrifice for the conversion of her husband. Her suffering on many different levels of her being --consciously offered to the Lord--, achieved extraordinary results in a very difficult marital situation. Felix after her death, also became convinced of the life-giving, transforming effects of Elisabeth's suffering, offered to God for his sake.

The reality of the cross in family life is not sought, but accepted. When one of the spouses is attentive to, and supportive of, the other who suffers (even though he/she may not appreciate the depth or extent of the spouse's suffering), it intensifies the Lord's blessing upon their marital life. Some of the beneficial effects of this 'spirituality of suffering' may only be revealed after many years, even after the death of one of the spouses, as was the case with the Leseurs. It can show the way forward to couples enduring chronic illness or disability of a spouse, with conjugal misunderstanding and even intentional offenses among spouses. At the same time, Felix's tender support of his wife in her medical problems can encourage those wives and husbands who are the primary care-givers for their chronically ill spouses.

In 1924, Fr. Fulton J. Sheen (later archbishop and popular radio & television preacher) made a retreat under Fr. Felix Leseur. In the course of the retreat, Sheen learned about Elisabeth and of his retreat director's conversion. Sheen subsequently repeated this conversion story in many of his talks and sermons, in particular with regard to the role that spouses play in the sanctification of each other.

Does this aspect (helping each other grow in holiness) find its place in marriage preparation programs, in wedding-day homilies and in marriage counseling in your experience of Church? A best-selling book by a popular American Christian writer maintains that marriage is oriented more to making spouses holy than (just) to making them happy,<sup>10</sup> and that true fulfillment (deep happiness) comes only when we discover and are faithful to our God-given vocation. The search for (one's own) perfect happiness in marriage is a pitfall: it is in giving love (seeking the good of the other) that true happiness consists...

### **For further study**

I heartily recommend *My Spirit Rejoices* (Manchester NH: Sophia Institute Press 1996), which is the English

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[illustrates the blessing that retreats can be for married couples.](#) When my parents were in their late 40's, they became enthusiastically involved in the Cursillo movement, based on evangelizing retreat weekends. Then in 1977, in about the way my folks did separately: [They both soon became](#) addicted to [retreats several times a year.](#) [\(after her first long retreat\) she wrote](#) of the tremendous turning point which the retreats ~~in Wernersville~~ represented for them: "When we began coming to Wernersville we reached the point of no return – in our longing for God, our relationship to God" [retreat notes, Oct 21<sup>st</sup> 1989]. And my father, for his part, gave testimony in a pastoral magazine after 10 years of making retreats together: "Joan and I feel at home there – in spite of the fact that it's a huge, formidable-looking place, has no private bathrooms, and that we're lodged in separate rooms. The silence of the retreats appeals to us." For more than 15 years they made several retreats together each year (until my father's death, after which Mom continued going by herself on retreat as long as her health permitted ~~it~~).

[Gary Th. \*Sacred Marriage\*, available at Christian or commercial bookstores.](#)

translation of her journal, available in Catholic bookstores worldwide. The direct quotes from Elisabeth's journal come from this edition. (Other books overlapping with some of the same material are: *The Secret Diary of Elisabeth Leseur* by Sophia Press, & a volume of the "Classics of Western Spirituality" series: *Elisabeth Leseur: Selected Writings*, edited, with an superb introduction, by Janet K. Ruffing, RSM.)

For those who do not have access to a Catholic library or bookstore, the relevant Wikipedia article does a good job of presenting this couple's pilgrimage of faith: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Élisabeth\\_Leseur](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Élisabeth_Leseur); see also the fiery commentary on their journey to faith: <http://catholicexchange.com/the-mystery-of-christian-marriage-felix-elisabeth-leseur>.

I welcome comments, questions, or suggestions concerning this presentation, and I have lots more materials on other holy couples which I am most willing to share with anybody interested. You can write me at:

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**All's well that ends well!**

