July 4th: Memorial of Saint Elizabeth of Portugal

Gospel text (*Mt* 25:31-40): Jesus said to his disciples: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’ And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

“You did it to me”

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Today we rejoice in the holiness of a queen of the late Middle Ages (13th–14th centuries), Saint Elizabeth of Portugal. She was baptized with the name Elizabeth in remembrance and honor of her great-aunt, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–1231).

Despite the distance in time and geography, the parallels in holiness between these two women are striking: both were given in marriage at a very young age, yet remained heroically faithful to their marriage commitment; both were devout and faithful to God in the midst of royal courts; both were personally inclined to care for the poorest and most marginalized, carrying out many works of charity with great generosity, making use of their social position.

Elizabeth of Portugal could well have heard the words of the “King of kings”: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). She founded hospitals, shelters, and monasteries. Her court became a center of Christian charity, and it was common for her personally to distribute alms and food.

One of Elizabeth's most outstanding virtues was her role as a "mediator of peace." "Love is patient, love is kind, (…) it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury" (1Cor 13:4-5): even into her old age, Elizabeth was a tireless peacemaker. At a time when dynastic, territorial, and political disputes were constant, she repeatedly acted as an instrument of unity, defusing conflicts, even when the wars involved her husband or her son.

Saint Elizabeth deserves the praise Jesus gives to those who foster peace: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Mt 5:9). The praise is beautiful, but attaining it is demanding and rests on friendship with the Lord. In the words of Pope Leo XIV, "the unity for which Jesus prays is a communion founded on the same love with which God loves. And as such, it is above all a 'gift' that Jesus brings with Him." Elizabeth, immersed in the always complicated world of the royal court, knew through her habitual piety how to "court" the principal Author of peace: the Holy Spirit.