

Spirituality

A black and white photograph of a stone path leading to a stone structure in a forest. The path is made of large, flat stones and leads from the bottom right towards the center. On the left side of the path, there is a stone structure, possibly a well or a small shrine, partially obscured by shadows. The background is a dense forest with trees and foliage, creating a sense of depth and mystery. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

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Felix and Elizabeth Leseur

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The writer, who lives in England, has written short lives of St Teresa of Avila, St John Bosco and Bl Elizabeth of the Trinity.

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The Dominican Order is promoting the beatification and canonisation of a remarkable woman whose life spanned the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Elisabeth Leseur. She was born in Paris of a wealthy Catholic family and on 31 July 1889 married a young man, Félix Leseur, five years older than her, who was likewise raised in a devout Catholic family. However Félix lost his faith during his medical studies in Paris. It came as a shock to Elisabeth, but he promised, after their wedding, that he would respect her faith, a promise he quickly broke.

Becoming editor of two atheist, anti-clerical and anti-Catholic magazines published in Paris, and with almost all their friends atheist, Félix did his best to undermine and destroy his wife's faith. He almost succeeded, until he gave her a couple of books by the anti-Catholic Auguste Renan, who had written a notorious book on the life of Christ, which challenged the Christian Gospel, and a history of the Church.

Elisabeth read the books, but with her fine and logical mind saw through the poverty of Renan's arguments; rather than being the last effort to destroy her faith, Félix's efforts revived it.

It was a great blow to her husband, who throughout their marriage never gave up hope that she would give up her faith. Elisabeth, for her part, realised that it was no use trying to argue with their atheist friends and with him, although with her great sensitivity, she would do her utmost to help those who showed any openness to belief in God. It is a testament to the strength of their marriage and the deep love they had for each other, that they remained devoted to each other despite this deep difference.

Unable to speak with her husband of that which was most precious to her—her faith—she longed to find someone to whom she could open herself up without reserve. This longing was to some extent answered when she met a Dominican priest, Fr Hébert, who became



Elisabeth and Félix Leseur

her confessor. Later, she met a nun, Sr Goby, who was a nurse in the Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune, who shared her longing for ever deeper union with God; she became a true 'soul sister' to her. Elisabeth also kept a 'secret diary' and other notebooks in which she confided her aspirations and desires for union with God, her spiritual journey and her life of prayer. As she said, she wanted to be 'Christian to the core.'

As to her husband, she never tried to convert her husband, but she wrote in her diary,

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Let him see the fruit but not the sap, my life but not the faith that transforms it, the light that is in me but not a word of him who brings it to my soul; let him see God without hearing his name.

It was a painful, deep silence within, but although she did not speak of her faith, its radiance could not be hid. Félix found his opposition to his wife's faith easing somewhat as he saw, with his medical training, the courage and even joy with which she faced continuing ill health and the final traumatic months as she died of breast cancer in 1914.

It was only after her death that he found the secret of that courage and that infectious joy when he read her diary, and other writings; in it, she described her life of prayer and her conviction that this, together with the suffering she offered up to God, would lead to her husband's conversion.

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... the first step in his return to the faith...

This was the first step in his return to the faith, and God, in his humour, used the very things that, as an atheist, Félix had been most contemptuous of about the Catholic Faith – for example, life after death and the Communion of Saints, which had been central to Elisabeth's spirituality; the 'superstition' as he saw it, as manifested at Lourdes.

He found himself hearing with total clarity Elisabeth's voice guiding him; then he met a friend who had likewise returned to the faith and who encouraged him to make his confession to a holy and sympathetic priest who turned out to be none other than Fr Hébert, his wife's confessor. Fr Hébert heard his confession, absolved him and told him to receive Holy Communion the following morning. Despite this, it was a rocky road to faith, when he sometimes returned to his unbelief; the turning point came when, during the First World War, and under the inner prompting of Elisabeth's voice, he was able to visit Lourdes, a place for which he had previously had such contempt. There before the grotto, all his doubts disappeared and he finally became confirmed in his faith.

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Soon after, he became a Dominican tertiary and he, who was so fond of fine dining and comfort, at the age of fifty-four, entered the Order and was ordained to the priesthood. He spent his years from then on

editing and having his wife's writings published. He went all over the world, giving talks on her spiritual life and message, promoting the Cause for her canonisation. This was halted only by the onset of the Second World War and his failing health. He died 27 February 1950.

The Cause for Elisabeth's canonisation has now been resumed, and her writings and her life are becoming increasingly well-known.

Is it too much to think that her Cause has been providentially delayed so that the Cause of Félix's canonisation, too, could also be promoted, and that the two of them could be raised to the altars together as another example of a Catholic couple who became holy through their committed marriage to each other, despite an atheism that could have driven them apart?



Fr Felix Leseur OP

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Sayings of Elisabeth Leseur

'My present trial seems to me a somewhat painful one, and I have the humiliation of knowing how badly I bore it at first. I now want to accept and to carry this little cross joyfully, to carry it silently, with a smile in my heart and on my lips, in union with the Cross of Christ. My God, blessed be Thou; accept from me each day the embarrassment, inconvenience, and pain this misery causes me. May it become a prayer and an act of reparation.'

'A few moments of meditation and recollection each morning in the presence of God transforms and perfumes the whole day, like flowers cast about when night comes, whose fragrance at dawn anoints everything they have touched.'

'It is a difficult task, a heroic effort, to bring forth the thought that is in us, but we must do it, breaking our souls as we might break a sacred vase so that others may breathe the divine perfume.'

'When blood no longer flows from an open wound, to the indifferent eye it seems that healing is near. Nothing could be more wrong; the wound that no longer bleeds is the one that will never heal.'

'What good is confiding one's pains, miseries and regrets to those to whom one cannot say at the end, "pray for me"?'