

Origin and Task of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth

Mathilde Otto, the foundress of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth, was born on December 18, 1875, in Oberweier in the Black Forest, Germany. She was blessed with really good parents who provided their daughter with a solid education corresponding to their social position and the practice of the time.

Very soon the little girl revealed "the qualities we admire in her great religious sensitivity and a tender sympathy for other" Because of the religious spirit pervading the family these qualities were detected and cultivated in a wise and kindly manner.

And so Mathilde learnt very soon to orientate her life according to Holy Scriptures and to understand every stroke of good and bad fortune as the will of God. Even in her early years she believed that her life would belong exclusively to God. Moved by this conviction, at the age of 21 she made a vow of perpetual virginity.

In the years before the First World War Mathilde moved to Freiburg and soon began to work in the flourishing Elizabeth conferences. She caught the notice of leading Catholics of Freiburg, especially the founder of the German Caritas Association, Lorenz Werthmann. Werthmann requested her to establish and direct the Caritas department concerned with the welfare of families and elderly poor.

For many years all attempts of Mathilde to realize her consecration to God in a religious community were of no avail. Her charitable work now drew her attention to the special needs of the family, the gem cell of every human society. In this she recognized the voice and will of God to help the family by means of generous women who would cooperate in such an undertaking which was up to then almost unheard of.

Listening constantly to the will of God, Mathilde gradually conceived the plan of founding her own community of sisters with a strong religious commitment to service in and for the family. She described these tasks in the first draft of the constitution: "They (the members) should regard as their task every kind of care for the poor as well as for any physical and spiritual need of the family whatsoever. Whether the sister is a welfare worker in the service of a charitable institution or of a parish-whether she takes the place of a sick mother as a temporary house-keeper whether she cares for young mothers and infants at home or in a maternity hospital - whether she shows negligent mothers how to manage a household....., she selflessly places her whole religious will and professional knowledge at the disposal of those in need"

She was supported in her plans by Father Josef Oechsler, who promised her to undertake the spiritual direction of such a community.

The official founding of the "Sisterhood of St. Elizabeth" (as it was then called) took place on Christmas Day, 1925.

In February 1929 the dream of the foundress came true: the St. Elizabeth Maternity Home in the grounds of the Mother House of the Sisterhood of St. Elizabeth in Freiburg could be opened. As matron of the institution she appointed a sister who was a midwife before she entered.

As spiritual foundation and orientation Mother Mathilde gave the new community the words of Jesus: "Love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples" (Jn 13, 34)

"Obedient to these words every Sister of St. Elizabeth should make this the purpose and goal of her whole will and aspirations: to fill her soul with this great all embracing love of the Redeemer and with this love to serve the brothers and sisters....."

"Because such a great selfless devotion is only possible and can only be carried through with perseverance if the soul has a strong never-failing driving force, "The will of God" should be the motto of our Sisterhood...."

In serving families the Sisters of St. Elizabeth should not only try to alleviate external need but also be mindful or "renewing families in Christ"

The main patron saint of the Sisterhood was to be Mary, to whom the foundress had a strong devotion since her childhood days. The Sister of St. Elizabeth should again and again meditate on the example of the Virgin Mother who "carrying the God of love hastened over the hills to serve unselfishly;" in order to develop the same dedication.

As the second patron the foundress chose St. Elizabeth of Hungary, after whom the congregation is named, since the community had grown out of the work in the Elizabeth conferences.

Although the new community of sisters was founded on the three evangelical counsels of poverty, virginity and obedience, it was not a religious congregation but just a "unio pia", "pious association", because some of their tasks were quite new, especially the practice of midwifery and the care of nursing mothers, and religious sisters were not allowed to engage in these activities at that time. So there was no possibility of applying for recognition as a religious congregation from the Congregation of Religious in Rome.

Mother Mathilde and her sisters, however, were convinced that they were called especially to serve families in need. So for the sake of their apostolic task they humbly renounced the honour of being recognized as religious sisters.

The foundress gave us these words of admonition and consolation: "We should say yes to everything God ordains. That is love to the death." "My concern for you and for our Sisterhood I place in the heart of God, I know that there it is safe."

“Be faithful and dedicate yourselves with all your love and all your will to the cause which must be borne and sustained by your faithfulness.....”

“And now my last request to you, my beloved sisters.... I would like to write it on your hearts: Remain true to your motto “The Will of God”, And I will intercede for you at the throne of God that he may help you to understand His will and guide you and our cause. Remain in the love of God and love one another like sisters.” On August 20, 1933, hardly 8 years after the founding of the community, the foundress died.

Just a few months after the Third Reich' Commenced, the new regime was not thinking of the well being of the German people but the establishment of a dictatorship. It is only understandable that it considered the Church an obstacle, even an enemy. So it was not long before the regime began to fight the Church, first in a veiled manner but then brutally during the Second World War.

They began by dissolving the religious associations. Then the charitable communities were to be “forced into line” that is either amalgamated with similar state organizations or disbanded. The activities of the religious congregations, were left undisturbed for some time.

As a unio pia the Sisterhood of St. Elizabeth was also threatened with dissolution and had to face a serious decision: they had to choose between the dissolution or being taken over into the state welfare organization.

In this political situation Father Josef Oechsler who, faithful to his promise had assumed the spiritual direction of the sisters, made efforts to get the community officially recognized by the Church. He worked out statutes which he presented to His Grace, the Archbishop of Freiburg, Conrad Grober, to forward them to the Congregation of Religious. Shortly afterwards, he travelled to Rome himself in order to present the case of the sisters personally. As he had feared, the prelate responsible insisted on the prevailing ecclesiastical norms because of the midwifery practiced by the sisters.

Father Oechesler describes what then followed: “... For us, however, this was a matter of policy which for many reasons we could not and would not give up. With little hope of success I took my leave....and went to my quarters.... There I found a telegram and an express letter from the sister Superior in Freiburg with the message: The St. Vincent Hospital in Karlsruhe requests the Sisterhood to place two of our sisters working as midwives at its disposal since they had to dismiss their former lay midwife for neglect of duty. If we could not meet their request they would have to employ two so- called “brown nurses” I saw the hand of God in this telegram and the next day I presented it to the prelate at the congregation of Religious. He was understandably very impressed by it and immediately grasped the new situation in Germany. He paused for a while to reflect and then suddenly declared emphatically: “Lascia”, that is, let it be. You can imagine my delight and I thanked divine providence....”

Shortly afterwards, on July 16, 1937, Archbishop Conrad Grober was able to give official ecclesiastical approval to the Sisterhood of St. Elizabeth. The reservations of the Congregation of Religious about the midwifery apostolate was still a matter to be reckoned with; the sisterhood was recognized as a "religious community of diocesan right as defined by Can 673", Members of such institutes commit themselves to the evangelical counsels not by a vow but by a promise.

Considering the lack of public vows, that is, those formally accepted in the name of the Church, the members are religious not in the stricter sense but in the broader sense....."

The extraordinary general chapter of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth in October 1988, which was to adapt the statutes to the changed conditions according to the directives of the Second Vatican Council, opened a new era in the history of the congregation. During this chapter the capitulars formulated the constitutions now in force.

Besides, other important matters were discussed and resolutions passed which are of long-range importance for the Congregation. A questionnaire in the period before the chapter had revealed that many sisters wished to substitute the commitment by promise, by a commitment by vows in the future.

Since midwifery can be practiced by all religious sisters today and Canon law recognizes as religious only those who make a profession by vows, the question of the future form of religious profession was discussed. In the ballot which followed the sisters voted unanimously for the commitment by vows.

The general chapter also dealt with requests concerning a change of name; some felt the name "sisterhood" smacked too much of the National Socialist period. The majority voted for the suggestions: "The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth". This will henceforth be the name of our Congregation.

Even while the general chapter was going on both resolutions came into force through the confirmation by His Grace, the Archbishop of Freiburg.

The third important decision concerned the foundations in India. The region which was de facto already in existence was legally established by a resolution of the general chapter. Its rights are either anchored in the constitutions or are conferred by the superior General.

In this way the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth in Germany and India has been given guidelines for the future which give hope for a healthy development. Nevertheless, in all the changes of the conditions of the times and of the external form of the Congregation, the farewell letter of Mother Mathilde which she dictated a month before her death remains for us a valuable spiritual testament. In the future also the Congregation and all the sisters should orientate themselves to these thoughts and take fresh heart from them.