

## **Elisabeth Leseur: A unique path to Holiness – The Experience of Jennifer MacNeil**

For forty plus years I lived out my faith confident that my Catholic upbringing, education (from kindergarten through my undergraduate degree) and parish life had fully formed me and prepared me for any challenge. I could not have been more wrong. In the midst of my first great struggle, wrestling to understand my barrenness, I found no easy answers from my Catholic faith. When a married Catholic woman remains barren, it generates a huge, if silent, shame. Pushed to the margins of normal parish life and longing for direction, I turned to lives of the saints. Surely with over 10,000 saints, there would be one with whom I could find solace. While the Catholic Church has a few patron saints for barren women, including even a few men, I could not find a single female saint who was both married but barren. Having exhausted the sources I thought would be helpful, my faith was slowly withering.

But I continued to read “posts” on social media from a favourite local priest. At one point I followed a link to the article “She Loved Him To the End – Elisabeth Leseur. Ms. Leseur is currently recognized by the church as “A Servant of God”. Her husband, Dr. Felix Leseur, was instrumental in opening the cause of her beatification in 1934 after his conversion back to Catholicism and ordination into the Dominicans.

Their story was absolutely fascinating to me. How did she not know her husband was raised Catholic but was a practicing atheist when they married?! How did they handle their inability to bring forth new life with one spouse a devout believer and the other an atheist?! How did they not talk about faith as a couple married in Christ?! And how did Elisabeth endure so much silent suffering, with her faith so big a part of her private life but mocked and derided in her public life with her spouse?

I was blessed to discover Ms. Leseur just a few months before my husband and I embarked on an eight-week pilgrimage to the Holy Land. During this pilgrimage I initially took some time to study her life, writings and spiritual practices. Ms. Leseur had started to fill a tremendous void in my search for an example within the Catholic Church of a married woman whose life was devoted to holiness, but a holiness outside of the bounds of either virginity or motherhood. She struggled mightily, but crafted her own unique path to holiness.

Ms. Leseur’s struggle was not confined to her barrenness; it was only one of the many crosses she carried. However, it was what drew me to her initially. Her health also challenged her for most of her adult life and she eventually succumbed to breast cancer at an early age. Given husband’s avowed, public atheism and social circles she found herself in, she accepted and carried those crosses in silence. Although it is one hundred plus since her death, silence still seems to be the most common way in which people address crosses and sufferings they find difficult to reconcile with a loving God. And it has been the experience of my husband and I that silence is the way most people find easiest to interact with us in knowing of, or assuming, our inability to conceive. I found myself drawn to her writing, which included her reflections but also her methods for continually working on her faith, and I contemplated many of her words as we made our way through the Holy Land.

Even prior to leaving for Jerusalem, one of her thoughts on suffering began to resonate with me:

*“Suffering is an act. Christ on the Cross has perhaps done more for humanity than Christ speaking and acting in Galilee or Jerusalem. Suffering creates life; it transforms all it touches, all it strikes.” (p.165)*

My husband and I spent many hours in Jerusalem walking our favourite paths to the sites of Christ’s passion, and spent much time in silent reflection. We often found ourselves all alone in the late afternoon in the Church of Gallicantu (Peter denies Christ) and its surroundings. Sitting in the cistern within the church, where tradition has it Christ was held prisoner on Holy Thursday night, my reflection turned to patience and trust in God, my lack of both at times and Ms. Leseur’s patient development of both. She eventually asks God in her prayers to let her sufferings be given for the conversion of her husband.

She inspires me to pray and advance beyond asking God to take away the suffering; challenging me to think of it as serving some higher purpose. Knowing how her story ends, (after her death, her husband Felix not only converts but becomes a Dominican priest), I wonder how much I might open my heart to let that story impact and influence me in increasing my trust in God.

As I struggle to reach that point in my prayers, I often think of the words of Ms. Leseur’s spiritual friend, Sister Marie Goby, with whom she exchanged many letters. In one of those exchanges, Ms. Leseur and Sister Goby write to each other about following the will of God and seeking only to love Him. Ms. Leseur quotes Sister Goby back to her noting how she will let her heart ponder the spiritual bouquet she finds in her most recent advice:

*“The important thing is to follow Jesus and to love him, much more for what He is than what He gives.” (p.238)*

I cannot stop thinking about this advice throughout our time in the Holy Land and even after our return home. How shallow my faith is at times to think that everything we do in Christ should return something to us, rather than just simply loving Him. How can I think about suffering as joining to Christ and moving towards greater love of Christ? It seems extremely difficult to reverse 40 years of my own Catholic living and influences, where the cross and suffering are avoided or something to be just offered up. I find it difficult but more beautiful to think of embracing the suffering with and in love of Christ.

*“There are moments in life when we must look neither ahead nor behind nor to the side, but contemplate only the cross God offer us, from which will flow great graces for ourselves and others.” (p.96)*

Almost daily we would walk in brilliant sunshine through the Kidron Valley to the Garden of Gethsemane. Entering from the clear blue skies and the beautiful flowers / olive trees of the Garden into the darkness of the Church of Agony, sadness and stillness overwhelm you. While we can experience both the light and the darkness in our lives, the darkness does not need to dominate my thoughts and prayers. I think at these times of Ms. Leseur’s words that “to live is to flight, to suffer, and to love”. I spend time reflecting and asking to grow closer, to love Christ more in the darkness, silence and suffering, but also to pass through the suffering to see the light. I know that in all this I am so blessed to hold the hand of the man I love all over Jerusalem as we walk and sit in silent reflection. I have no doubt of my love for him and it grows greater during this time away

Prior to arriving in Jerusalem, my husband and I talked often of spending large amounts of time praying in Holy Sepulchre. However, once we have visited a few times, its constant chaos makes it very difficult to reflect, much less to pray. We try visiting at different hours of the day and find it makes no difference; we are going to have to first grow the silence in our hearts and bring it with us to this most Holy of places.

As we spend time in silence at other Holy sites, I think of Ms. Leseur's words:

*"To know how to be silent is often wisdom and an act of virtue."* (p.151)

We discover daily Eucharistic adoration in the Notre Dame Center chapel and spend hours opening our hearts to this beautiful practice, which we had recently started at home. Benediction is a bit different from home and I remember often the prayers we said, particularly a few phrases, beautiful in their simplicity but requiring complete conviction, and often tears, to mean anything. We repeat after the priest the simplest phrases including: *Lord we love you. Lord we trust in you, and Lord make us holy.* In asking to be made holy, we are asking for the path that is uniquely ours, just as Elisabeth did throughout her prayer life. I finally understand how narrow my previous conceptions of holiness had been, and how I'd kept limiting and judging myself within those constraints. But as a church do we really recognize and celebrate all the unique ways to be holy? As we near the end of our pilgrimage, after all the hours in silence and adoration, it becomes easier to find stillness and silence in Holy Sepulchre, even among the chaos.

After several weeks in Jerusalem, it is time for a visit to the Galilee. Withdrawing from the sites of the passion, I reflect on some of Ms. Leseur's thoughts on developing an interior peace, which was a struggle given her suffering and her often repeated prayers asking God to help her find the usefulness in her life. I understand this so well, as we grow up thinking our life's vocation will be as we envision it and yet God's will does not match. But I know that I cannot reconcile this any other way than to lovingly submit to God's will. And I wonder if this could take me a lifetime to do?

*"Then, Lord, accept my offering, keep our agreement, do with me as you want. I only ask for your love and your grace, the deep and lasting peace necessary for the flourishing of my interior life... I want to abandon myself to you with confidence, to bring you a generous spirit, always peaceful, and to think less of my faults than of your love. You are my Father, my Friend; be also, O Jesus, the Companion of my solitude."* (p.133)

We quickly develop a love of the "Jesus trail" in the Galilee and spend a few mornings walking in His steps, largely never encountering another person. It is impossible to be anything less than peaceful on this trail just a few hundred yards in from the Sea of Galilee, as the views are gorgeous and it is spring time in the Holy Land. And I know by walk number two how challenging it will be to bring this peaceful feeling back with me without opening my heart back up to God's love and grace.

After eight weeks of living in the most Holy city in the world, it is time to head back home to professional careers, family, and friends. We wonder how can we possibly take back all that we have experienced and how we will continue our faith journey. Ms. Leseur had a few spiritual practices that she often wrote about which I try with my husband to emulate. The writings of Ms. Leseur are largely contained in her spiritual diary. I start the practice and force myself to write

daily about my gratitude for everyday gifts from God. After several months the practice becomes less an exercise and more a nightly prayer. Decisions, relationships and God's role in it all makes its way into my writing and very slowly helps a weak prayer life.

Ms. Leseur spent the Lenten and Advent seasons reflecting on the state on her faith life and making changes as needed. While regularly observing the Church calendar, I'd never given myself such a critique and thought about what I needed to do better. My pride and the ease of resting on my established Catholicism would not allow me to find some flaws and room for growth. Similar to reflecting on the significant times of year, Ms. Leseur attempted to conduct a 1-day a month retreat to reflect on her faith and to re-energize herself. Even if the day was simply spent in more silence than usual, it was given to moving herself closer to God. During these times she often created resolutions for herself on those specific things she wanted to improve in her faith. And often these revolved around the sacraments.

I am influenced greatly by Ms. Leseur's approach and preparation as she anxiously awaited her opportunities for receiving the sacraments, particularly Holy Communion.

*“Holy Communion is a blessing that I would enjoy more often if it were not my duty... to avoid clashing with or offending the biases of others. The strength God brings, the tenderness of His presence, the vitality communicated through that blessed contact can neither be described or really explained. One can only say to those who marvel at this divine love, “taste and see” (Psalm 34:8).” (p.92)*

I am embarrassed at how much I have taken it all for granted. She often only could participate every two weeks and would participate in both confession and Holy Communion. I have changed so much my thinking about preparation and how much it is a blessing to receive Communion basically daily to the extent that we want to make it a priority.

Whether or not Ms. Leseur formally joins the communion of saints, her life and her words are a most welcome glimpse of a unique path to holiness. Whether one shares a specific cross with her or not, I believe there is much to be learned from her example by all who struggle in silence. Her words have obviously influenced my thoughts and prayers, and one of the simplest of her quotes I think of every day. *“To think is excellent, to pray is better, to love is everything” (p.153).* I think of this and Sister Goby's words when I find myself struggling and making my thoughts and prayers harder than they need to be. The call to holiness is in all of us and at its simplest it is to grow in love of Christ.

*“Let us Love. Let our lives be a perpetual song of love for God first of all, and for all human beings who suffer, love and mourn. Let deep joy live in us. Let us be like the lark, enemy of the night, who always announces the dawn and awakens in each creature the love of light and life. Let us awaken others to the spiritual life. (p.14)*

All quotes of Elisabeth Leseur are from: Ruffing Janet, *Elisabeth Leseur Selected Writings*, Paulist Press, 2005.

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