

ARTICLE 8



The Lumen Fidei Institute

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Another Difficult Marriage

Elisabeth Leseur

Another more recent example of a wife obtaining the great fruits promised by St Peter is the story of the servant of God, Elisabeth Leseur, who was born into a well to do family in Paris in 1866. She was fervent in the practice of her faith as a child and was very well educated. She married Felix Leseur on July 31st 1889.

Felix was brought up a good Catholic and qualified in medicine in Paris. However his materialist education and his reading of the libertine authors of the eighteenth century led to him abandoning his faith and all belief in God. He allowed Elisabeth however complete freedom to practice her faith and they had a very loving marriage although they were not blessed with any children.

Decline and re-birth of Faith

Over time Elisabeth lost her fervour and eventually abandoned her relationship with God. Felix, who at this time was editor of one of the anti clerical papers in Paris, in order to complete the destruction of his wife's faith, recommended to her to read the writings of the French philosopher Renan. However his recommendation, to his disgust, had the opposite effect. Elisabeth saw through the façade of Renan's "Life of Jesus" and returned to reading the gospels. She also began to study philosophy and the Catholic faith in more depth. Her faith was restored and renewed in a remarkable way. She had suffered from ill health since shortly after her marriage but in this new phase of her life she began to offer all her sufferings for the conversion of her husband but without saying anything to him.

For his part he, and sometimes his friends with him, would openly mock her faith and would raise all sorts of intellectual objections to the faith. She held her ground and defended her corner with gentleness and patience. She was a loving wife, however, as in the case of Elisabeth Canori Mora, her subjection to her husband was limited by the superior demands of God. She refused to approve of the marriage between one of her husband's friends and a divorced woman which led to Felix flying into a towering rage. But she remained calm and firmly explained her position on the matter.

Health Problems & a visit to Lourdes

Elisabeth's health continued to be problematic and in 1912 she and Felix went to Lourdes. Whilst at the grotto, she prayed to Our Lady for her husband's conversion. Felix spotted her in prayer and later on he related the following regarding this incident "I had before my eyes the spectacle of an event that escaped me, that I did not understand, but which appeared to me to clearly be 'the supernatural'... I returned to Paris very disturbed... but all this quickly faded away in my mind, on the surface, at least..."

Elisabeth was now suffering from cancer which had spread by 1913. Once she told her husband that after her death not only would he be converted but he would become a Catholic priest. She died

in her husband's arms on Sunday May 3rd 1914.

The Spiritual Diary - Conversion

Shortly after her death Felix discovered her journals which gave intimate details of her spiritual journey and of her desire for and willingness to suffer for his conversion. On a subsequent trip to Lourdes, which he felt was inspired by Elisabeth, he asked the Blessed Virgin to obtain forgiveness for his sins and from this moment on his soul was conquered for God. He returned to Paris and began studying the Catholic faith in earnest using the library of books that Elisabeth had built up.

In 1919 Felix Leseur entered the Dominicans in Paris and was ordained a Priest on July 8th 1923.

The following extract from Archbishop Fulton Sheen's talks entitled "You Shall Know the Truth" which were broadcast in America and are available to download online, adds some interesting details to this story. The subject matter of this particular talk is '*marriage problems*'.

"A wife can redeem her husband and a husband can redeem his wife. There is a spiritual communication. It does not have indeed much romantic satisfaction in it but its returns are eternal and many a husband and wife after infidelities and excesses will find themselves saved on judgement day as the faithful partner never ceased to pour out prayers for his or her salvation.

Let me tell you this story to indicate how the merits of one will pass into the merits of another. At the turn of this century there was married in Paris just an ordinarily good Catholic girl and an unbelieving medical doctor by the name of Leseur. He promised to respect the faith of his marriage but immediately after marriage tried to break it down. In addition to practising medicine he became the editor of an anti-clerical atheistic newspaper in Paris. His wife reacted and decided that she would study her faith. So she built a library of apologetics and he built up an atheistic library in the same house.

In May as she was dying she said to her husband, "*Felix, when I am dead you will become a Catholic and a Dominican priest*". He said, "*Elisabeth you know my sentiments, I have sworn hatred of the church and sworn hatred of God and I shall live in that hatred and I shall die in it*". She repeated her words and passed away.

Fumbling amidst her papers he discovered her will and the will stated that, in 1905 she asked almighty God to send her sufficient sufferings to purchase his soul. Then she added, "*on the day that I die I shall have paid the price, you will have been bought and paid for. Greater love than this no woman hath that she should lay down her life for her husband*".

He dismissed this as the fancies of a pious woman. Though he loved his wife, in order to forget his grief, he took a trip in the southern part of France. He stopped in front of a church into which his wife during their honeymoon had gone for a visit. She seemed to be speaking to him saying, "*go to Lourdes*". He went to Lourdes but he went there as a rank unbeliever. He had written a book against Lourdes proving that miracles were a fraud and a superstition. But as he was standing before the grotto of Our Lady he received the gift of faith, so complete, so total, that he never had to go through that process of juxtaposition and say "*well now that I believe how will I answer this difficulty or how will I answer that difficulty*". He saw all that he had believed in its utter error and stupidity.

Well the conversion of Dr Leseur was about as exciting as the news of the bombardment of Rheims. Then time passed. In 1924 I made my retreat in a Dominican monastery in Belgium and there four times a day in forty five minutes each day I made my retreat under and received the spiritual direction of Fr Leseur, Dominican, Catholic and priest who told me this story. I tell you it is not

often that you can make a retreat under a priest who every now and then will say, “*as my dear wife Elisabeth said*”. But the moral of the story is, Love is not here completely and totally, it is in God, and by loving God here we save the other partner whether it be a bad wife or a bad husband for once married they are two in one flesh” (extract from Archbishop Fulton Sheen – You Shall Know the Truth)

The fruits of St Peter's advice

Once again, the story of the Leseurs, like that of Blessed Elisabeth Canori Mora, highlights what St Peter is trying to get across to his readers in his first letter concerning how to live the married state. The salvation of souls is what is important. It was for the glory of God, through the salvation of souls, that Christ became incarnate, lived, died and rose again. In marriage, regardless of whether or not the marriage is happy, we are called to co-operate with Christ in giving glory to God for the salvation of souls. We do this by trying to become Holy in how we live our own married lives.

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