



Christmas Letter of the Grand Bailiwick of Germany in the Year of the Lord 2019

Dear Sisters and Brethren:

Today one woman miraculously links the spiritual centre of the Grand Bailiwick of Germany with the first documentary mentions of the Order of St. Lazarus in the territory of the then Holy Roman Empire, modern-day Germany.

This woman is Elisabeth of Thuringia, a Hungarian princess and later a German landgravine. She is regarded as a national saint of Germany and likewise revered in Protestantism as an epitome of active charity.

In the abbot's chapel of the former monastery of Heilsbronn, she figures prominently in the frescoes on the walls.

Towards the end of the 12th century, a wide-ranging religious poverty movement established itself in Europe. Among other things, the Franciscan Order sprang from it. A lay brother from the latter became spiritual advisor to Elisabeth. The teachings of a life of poverty and practised charity resounded well with her. Thus, it is said that beneath her sumptuous regal attire she used to wear a penitential robe, and that she gave her court clothes and jewellery away to destitute people.

Legend speaks of her going to town one day to give bread to the poor. She is confronted by her husband, who does not approve of this. When asked what she has in the basket she carries with her, Elisabeth replies that there are roses in the basket. He asks her to lift the cloth covering the basket, in order to see the gorgeous roses. Elisabeth reluctantly lifts the cloth – and the basket is full of roses, in lieu of the bread for the poor.

The picture in the chapel illustrates precisely this scene.

This legend has a flavour of Christmas. Wherever one human being stands by another because he or she recognises the face of God in the other, miracles happen: "There roses can blossom out of bread!"

At Christmas, God becomes the bread of life. Taking on human form, exposing Himself to the conditions of earthly existence. Bread and wine, or even bread and water, but He will not leave it at that. There is more to this life. Hope and the promise of a life replete with meaning, of salvation, of Shalom – God's peace for the whole world. And thus bread and wine become flesh and blood – the child in the manger lives on in everyone who has faith in this.

"As God becomes man, roses can blossom from bread": Roses as a symbol of love, of beauty, of hope in life and far beyond. Encouraged by this Christmassy upswing, in 1223 Elisabeth of Thuringia founded the Hospital of Maria Magdalena in Gotha. A few years later she transferred it to the Order of St. Lazarus, tasking the Order to use it for the care of the sick and needy.

In Thuringia, documents are preserved that confirm this; thus e.g. a parchment from 1253 says: "Konrad von Alt-Mühlhausen, Rabote von Biedorf and his wife, as the heirs of Wenker Schiverstein, transfer the church of Breitenbach with all its acreage to the Order of St. Lazarus for eternal possession."

Dear Sisters and Brethren,
the most important eternal possession is sharing in the hope and promise that roses will blossom from bread, and that we carry this Christmas promise of salvation within us.

Yours sincerely,
Pastor Klaus Buhl
Chaplain General of the Grand Bailiwick of Germany

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www.rpz-heilsbronn.de



Saint Lazarus
Grand Bailiwick of Germany
www.st-lazarus-orden.de