

Worship Notes: Relics in the Altar

It would be easy, I suppose, to worship at Ascension for a lifetime and never know that the relics of two saints are embedded in our high altar. Pleased as I am to have relics in the altar where I celebrate the mass, and not wanting to diminish anyone's devotion, they should perhaps be described as *purported* relics. Consider Waldemar Januszczak's jaundiced *Sunday Times* review of the magnificent 2010-2011 British Museum exhibit of medieval relics. The "world of the medieval relic," he scorns, is a "world of fraud, greed, madness, delusion, cannibalism, gullibility and pretense." His view makes me regret all the more that I've been unable to learn any specific history with regard to Ascension's high-pedigree relics.



Queen Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-1231) was married at age 14 and widowed at 20, after which she sent her children away, regained her dowry and used the money to build a hospital where she devoted herself to serving the sick. The numerous miracles associated with Elizabeth contributed to her canonization in 1235, only four years after her death (at age 24).

King Louis IX of France (1214-1270), widely known as Saint Louis, is the only canonized French King. Louis (*Ludovici* in Latin) developed French royal justice, a system in which anyone could appeal to the king for amendment of a judgment. He banned trials by ordeal and introduced the judiciary principle of presumption of innocence in criminal procedure. By our own prevailing standards, some of his religiously inspired commitments were extreme.



St. Elizabeth cares for the poor, from *Leben der Heiligen* (Lives of the Saints), 1883.

Following a vow he made after an illness from which he was miraculously cured, he took an active part in the Seventh and Eighth Crusades. He imposed serious punishments for blasphemy (mutilation of the tongue and lips), gambling, interest-bearing loans and prostitution. In the context of the Inquisition, he ordered the burning of Talmuds and other Jewish books. Notwithstanding, Louis was canonized by Pope Boniface VIII in 1297.

The Ascension altar reliquary, embedded in the altar where the Communion elements are consecrated, is shown above nearly to scale. Relics are typically any body part and may be tiny parts thereof. Ours are not more particularly identified, nor am I aware of any surviving 'authentication' of the kind often accompanying relics. - Fr. Raymond +

Response to Worship Notes from parishioner Jim Wilson

Dear Fr Patrick,

As I mentioned to you this morning, the labels on those relics in the altar are quite puzzling to me, or at least one of them is. The label *S. Elisab. Reg. Hun.* is, I assume, *Sanctae Elisabethae Reginae Hungariae*, which is to say "of Saint Elizabeth, the Queen of Hungary." I assume it is in the genitive only because the other label clearly is. The problem is that the woman you talked about, St Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-31) was never a queen, and in all of the works about her I have read, I have never seen her referred to as *regina Hungariae*. She was the daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary, but she was married to Ludwig IV, the Landgraf of Thuringen. She was, thus, a landgravine in English, and I have seen her referred to as a duchess or countess (my *Régi Magyar Szentség* calls her a duchess), but never a queen. Of course, it might just be that the person who made this label knew very little about St Elizabeth, one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages, maybe the female saint closest in popularity to St Francis at the time.

I can think of one other possibility, if this label was made in Europe. Elizabeth Łokietkówna, Queen of Hungary (1305-80) was a great patroness of monasteries in both Hungary and Poland, and I have seen her referred to as a saint, though I have never seen her on any list of either Hungarian or Polish saints. She is a wonderfully interesting queen, the grandmother of a number of female saints. Her son, King Louis I the Great of Hungary (r.1342-82) I have also seen referred to just once as a saint, and I'm afraid I can't recall where. I agree with you that the *Sanctus Ludovicus Rex* in the altar is probably Louis IX of France, though it is a tiny, intriguing possibility to me that these could be two related saints (never officially canonized), mother and son, of the Angevin dynasty of Hungary.

If you ever do find anything else about these than the labels, I would love to see it.

Yours,
Jim