

"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)

item 410

**Venerable Elisabeth Sanna –
lay co-operator of St Vincent Pallotti**

How was your interest stirred in the future 'Blessed'?

My great interest in the person of the *Servant of God* Elisabeth Sanna, began when reading her biography. I noticed that the beatification process began almost immediately after her death, in fact exactly four months from the date of her death! She died on February 17, 1857 and June 15 of that year, the Vicar of Rome appointed the first postulator of the cause [the Prelate of the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore].

So I began to investigate, to ask myself 'why so fast?' And that led me to discover that Elisabeth Sanna was already regarded by the inhabitants of Rome at that time as a truly holy person. Awareness of her holiness was so diffused that people were attracted to her personality, even although she was illiterate and did not speak Italian well.



How was her holiness manifest?

The greatness of Elisabeth Sanna was visible in her virtues, especially great strength of faith in her everyday life. The centre of that life was the eucharist. Every day she attended Mass, either in Sardinia or later in Rome. At that time there was no concelebration – leading to many celebrations of the Mass every day – so in St Peter's Basilica, when she could, she walked from one altar to another and knelt down and attended the holy eucharist. She went where there was exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, wherever there was

adoration for 40 hours; everything in her life happened around the eucharist. It is important to remember what Vat II emphasized when it declared the eucharist to be the centre of Christian life. We see that already mirrored in the personal life of Elisabeth.

Beside the cult of the eucharist, she also had great devotion to Our Lady. When Elisabeth received the image of Our Lady *Virgo Potens*, she made a small shrine in her tiny apartment. When people came to her to talk, she spoke to them about their lives and prayed for them. Prayer and conversation about spiritual issues were always the subject of her meetings. Devotion to Our Lady was the result of the fact that Mary is the Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, who was sacrificed for us and therefore she had enormous experience of the passion, especially in Lent. During Holy Week she broke off all contact with people in order to fully capture the devotion, to reflect on the mystery of the martyrdom, death and resurrection of the Lord. This is the source of her spiritual greatness.

This greatness was also evident in her gift of seeing and dealing wisely with other people, showing great personal prudence. On one occasion, before she decided to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land – influenced by a Lenten retreat preached by the Franciscans in Sardinia – she persuaded a lot of other people to go too, explaining how important it was for their spiritual development to visit the holy places. But as for herself, she talked not only to the preacher but also to her confessor. But even this was not enough. At Codrongianos where she was born, 15 km from Sassari, she also consulted the priest at the Cathedral with whom she used to share spiritual matters, about her desire for the pilgrimage. Such extensive consultation demonstrates her virtue of prudence.

What is the relationship of the Pallottine family with Venerable Elisabeth Sanna?

Elisabeth was very valued by our founder himself. Their first encounter was quite extraordinary. In a strange city she frequently became confused as to the direction she should be walking [e.g. to get to St Peter's Square]. Unable to ask people for directions she could often be seen sitting and crying alongside St Augustine's Church. On one occasion, according to her own testimony, a priest stared at her intensely and, with that, she suddenly regained courage and, although still not knowing in which direction to walk, she found herself suddenly in St Peter's Square. This priest was St Vincent Pallotti. Shortly after this event, Elisabeth met Pallotti, who agreed to be her spiritual director.

Fr Francesco Vaccari, the first successor of St Vincent as Superior General, reminded his confreres that their Society owed its very existence and development to two people: Elisabeth Sanna and Cardinal Luigi Lambruschini. Why Elisabeth? Through her prayers, suffering, and wisdom she gave invaluable advice to all those who approached her. Witnesses say that Pallotti repeatedly consulted her. Cardinal Giovanni Solgia said that, in his works and even in personal matters, Pallotti often took advice from her. In a letter to Fr Valle he wrote that Elisabeth was 'progressing on the path of holiness according to God's plan'.

Her close association with Pallotti shows in this particular incident. She went to the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore and, falling, broke her arm. Elisabeth was hospitalised and when it was reported to Pallotti, since he could not be with her he immediately sent a letter with another woman, asking her to clarify the situation and to tell her he could not come that day but would visit the day after.

Vincent Pallotti introduced her to the Union of Catholic Apostolate and she helped with her prayers, suffering, and advice. When he organized the celebration of the Octave of Epiphany she informed people about it, inviting and encouraging them to participate. Pallotti's successors also regarded her as a great person, even sending the novices, when they had difficulties, to speak with Elisabeth. Right from the beginning she played an important role in the life of the Pallottine family. She prayed in our church SS Salvatore in Onda and assisted where she could, despite the disease she suffered that did not allow her to raise her arms. She did a variety of things as, for example, taking care of the liturgical vestments. She had much involvement in the early development of the Union of Catholic Apostolate.

Why did Elisabeth not return to her family in Sardinia?

In one health crisis Pallotti immediately made contact with Elisabeth's brother, Antonio Luigi, who was a priest and informed him of the situation, confirming he was sending Elisabeth to physicians. She was declared too weak to travel home, since the four-day ship journey from Genova to Porto Torres would have been too strenuous and doctors warned of the fragility of her body. Pallotti, knowing about it, wrote to her brother saying that Elisabeth wanted to go back to Sardinia to her family, but at that time it was impossible because of her health status. When the situation improved, he said, she would embark on a return trip. However her condition continually worsened until one of the doctors issued a statement saying that, if she was ever to travel by ship to Sardinia, she would be risking her life during the journey.

She was blessed in that, despite great difficulties, she was not discouraged. She really wanted to go back to her family. Over the first five years she cried constantly. When doctors told her clearly about the danger of death should she attempt the trip, Pallotti said to her: "apparently God's will is to do something good here in Rome and not to expose yourself to death during the journey." Her family appeared to be comfortable. When they did have problems Fr Vaccari and Fr Melia organized help. Despite the fact that there were many hardships and difficulties, Elisabeth did not give up but accepted the situation. She was convinced of what God wanted and that, in her situation, to serve God was to do good. This kind of attitude fostered her holiness and hence it was easy to start the beatification process quickly.

In the nineteenth century, when the apostolate was reserved for clergy, what made Elisabeth Sanna excel in her faith?

In Sardinia she especially supported girls, teaching them the catechism. She assisted the poor and the suffering. Once, when she met a young girl entangled in an immoral life, she helped her. Although she had only a small apartment she took the girl to live with her, supporting her for a long time until she was convinced a solution was found and that she could lead a modest life.

In Rome she was much appreciated for her help to the poor. What she received from people, she gave to others, or to the two orphanages that Vincent Pallotti founded. One of them was the *Casa Pia Carita*, which still exists today. She often went to the hospital to visit the terminally ill. At the hospital she could not do much but her presence, counsel and prayer had a positive impact on the sick eagerly waiting for her.

What miracle, through her intercession, hastened the process of her beatification?

In different countries knowledge of Elisabeth's reputation for holiness and her growing fame were made possible thanks to the commitment of our confreres and sisters. This is especially so in Brazil, where she became very well known among hospital patients and where a miracle happened.

A young woman named Suzanna, when she was 25 years old, fell ill. Cancer occurred in her arm and wrist. Despite surgery and treatment her hand became paralyzed. She could not move her arm, forearm or wrist. Suzanna received a holy picture of Elisabeth Sanna from a Pallottine, Fr Daniel Rocchetti sac, and listened to the preaching of Fr João Pedro Stawicki sac, who spoke about the Union of Catholic Apostolate and about Elisabeth – that this Servant of God had *both* hands paralyzed to the point that she could not raise them.

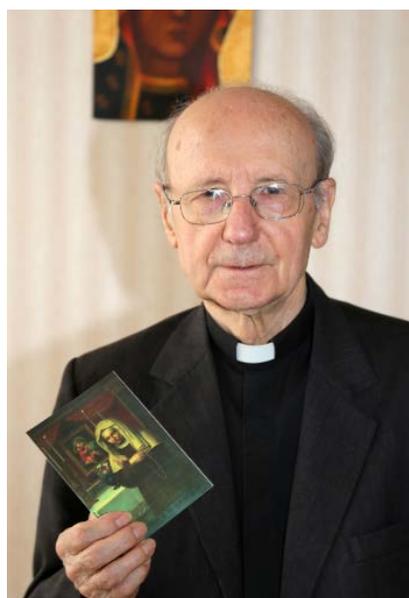
Suzanna thought, 'if Elisabeth, while having both hands paralysed did so much good, then even if I am sick I must also do something good.' So she began to pray. Fortunately a book on Elisabeth Sanna: "**Lay Co-operator of St Vincent Pallotti**" had been translated into Portuguese. Suzanna started reading it and, along with several other people, began to pray for her intercession.

In May 2008 at the church of *Our Lady of Fatima* in Niterói, in the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament and before the meeting of a youth group, Suzanna prayed with a friend. Suzanna approached the tabernacle, put her paralyzed hand on the altar, and after a moment began to shout with joy. She felt her hand straightened up and shouted, “my hand is healed!” She raised her hand up. A young priest came and confirmed that.

This young woman who, for five years had undergone different treatments, had been classified as completely unable to work. She had already been approved for a disability pension. Now she was able to freely move her paralyzed hand. Doctors found this sudden healing, with full and sustained mobility, to be scientifically inexplicable. Three years later in 2011, having concluded an official diocesan investigation, doctors confirmed complete healing. Subsequently a Commission of doctors in Rome and of theologians and cardinals, looking into this sudden cure, agreed that it was a miracle.

Elisabeth Sanna is little known in the world. How do we change that?

Vincent Pallotti recognized Elisabeth Sanna as already a saint. Her beatification is a grace that God is giving to our generation, and it is a challenge to get back to the roots of Pallotti’s vision. Elisabeth was as if a spiritual daughter of St Vincent. Like her we all must learn to trust in God, to meet him in the eucharist, to realise that we are all called to witness to faith, love and Christian hope.



So we need to inform more people about Elisabeth Sanna through disseminating information on her holiness, articles, books, and publications. We need to view her as a lay collaborator of St Vincent, who had a great awareness of the vocation of all to the apostolate and whose personal life was the realization of that vocation.

The Bishop of Sassari, Sardinia, has asked me to prepare short articles on her life. Every week, until the beatification, they will be published in their local press. This will be in Italian, but can be made available also in other countries if people are interested. Books have been published in Poland, Brazil and Germany. If we all develop more interest in holiness and in the vocation to the apostolate as the basis of personal holiness, Elisabeth Sanna will become better known.

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