

# ELIZABETH PROUT

1820-1864

Servant of God

## FOUNDRESS OF THE SISTERS OF THE CROSS AND PASSION

*She read the signs of the times, the plight of the marginalised in an age of transition, the homeless, the poverty of living conditions of the immigrants, the dreadful work conditions in the factories and the absence of God reflected in prostitution and crime. And by her actions she was to say:  
'We will be a presence of God among these people;  
we will let our actions speak of his love'.*

Fr Luke Magee CP



She died on January 11<sup>th</sup> 1864 just a hundred and fifty years ago this weekend at the age of 43. She didn't write many inspiring words, she didn't get any awards but she often referred to as the Mother Teresa of Manchester! So who was she and why do we recall her memory at this time 150 years after her death? She was a woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but she is also a woman for our times and still inspires us. Her name is Elizabeth Prout. She is the Foundress of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion, the religious congregation to which Sisters Anne, Joan and Brigid belong.

Let's meet Elizabeth and get to know a little of her story. Elizabeth Prout was born in Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England on 2nd September 1820. Her mother was a staunch Anglican, her father a lapsed Catholic. Elizabeth was baptised and brought up in the Anglican tradition. Sometime before 1841 the family moved to Stone in Staffordshire where her father worked as a journeyman cooper in Joule's Brewery. He earned a good wage enabling the Prouts to live in relative comfort. We are told that Elizabeth was gently nurtured, refined, intelligent and well educated according to the standards of the time. She was a delicate young woman, barely five foot tall, of fragile build but she was no shrinking violet. Fr. Ignatius Spencer CP described her shortly before her death as "a little woman brimful of energy and will."

She was a tough opponent. By nature open and honest, she hated deceit. Writing to Fr. Gaudentius she says of herself: "I cannot, dear Father, say one thing and believe another."



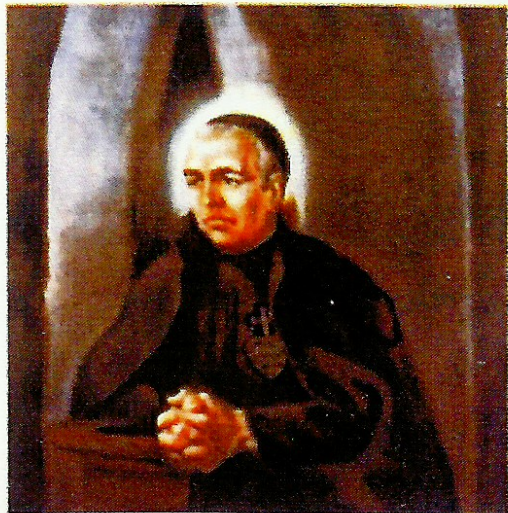
Fr Ignatius Spencer

### Beginnings of a New Religious Institute:

Aged 29, Elizabeth Prout, a delicate Victorian woman, was chosen by God to do an impossible thing: to found a Congregation of Religious women to bring the compassion and love of Christ to the poor. This she accomplished over a period of sixteen years of self-sacrifice, grinding poverty and total submission to the will of God. She died at the age of 43, her mission accomplished. She had laid the foundations of "The



Congregation of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion", an international missionary Congregation, dedicated to keeping alive the memory of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection "even unto the ends of the earth."



### Blessed Dominic Barberi CP

Elizabeth, in her mid-twenties, was living in Stone, Staffordshire when she met Fr. Dominic Barberi, an Italian Passionist now Blessed Dominic. Under his influence she became a Catholic at a time when Catholicism was viewed with suspicion in England. In 1848 she entered the convent of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus at Northampton. After six months she

developed a tubercular knee and had to return home. Nursed by her mother she got well. Forbidden to go to Mass, she was forced to make a choice between her family and her faith. Elizabeth left home and made her way to Manchester looking for work. Here, in September 1849, with the help of Fr. Gaudentius Rossi C.P. she got a job teaching in St. Chad's School, Angel Meadows, and Manchester's most deprived area.

Manchester in 1849 was at the height of the Industrial Revolution. It was an age of exploitation and greed. The poor lived and worked in appalling conditions. Many were Catholic, famine refugees from Ireland. Children from the age of five worked long hours in the mills; they could neither read nor write. Thousands were without any religious instruction. Mill girls were particularly vulnerable. Shocked by this inequality and injustice Elizabeth and a few companions were moved to do something about it.

### The Catholic Sisters of the Holy Family

In 1852, in St. Chad's parish, with the help of Fr. Gaudentius Rossi, Fr. Croskell and Fr. William Turner, later to become Bishop of Salford, Elizabeth founded "The Institute of the Holy Family". Elizabeth, the Leader, was given the name Mother Mary Joseph of Jesus. The spirit of the Institute was to be the spirit of the Holy Family living, working and praying in their home at Nazareth.



Elizabeth Prout's Institute was a new venture. The Sisters lived in community combining a humble and prayerful life with an active ministry outside the convent. There was no class distinction among members. No dowry was required. Lack of education was not an obstacle. Sisters went out to teach, to sew, to work in the mills or in any employment compatible with their religious state. They had no property, no patrons, and no security. They pooled their wages and when they were out of work they, like their neighbours, went hungry. Dire poverty was often their lot.

This was a radical departure from the established Religious Orders of the day. In the 1850's this "classless" community, was considered "revolutionary". It aroused fierce opposition. The very existence of the Institute was seen as a threat to the "status quo".

The annalist tells us:

"The Sisters at this period had to suffer the most determined opposition from all the priests in their neighbourhood who treated them as persons devoid of reason for attempting this foundation under what seemed to them unfavourable circumstances."

Some, loud in their denunciation, called for the Institute to be suppressed. To settle the matter Bishop Turner, in July 1858, set up a Diocesan Enquiry to examine the Charges against the Sisters. All aspects of their life and works were scrutinised. The Charges were examined... and quashed... Elizabeth personally and all the Sisters were exonerated. Their opponents were defeated...and they didn't like it. After the Enquiry the Sisters had to tread warily maintaining "humble silence", waiting for the tide to turn in their favour. This took time, but turn it did.....

The Annalist records:

*"The Institute struggled on, amidst difficulties and opposition, but was supported throughout by the Providence of Almighty God who while he smites with one hand, as surely sustains with the other".*



All this Elizabeth and her companions accepted as sharing in the Passion of Christ. They were not broken. They endured. They had learnt through betrayal and rejection that "Identification with Jesus Christ in the mystery of His Passion, Death and Resurrection was at the heart of their vocation."

Elizabeth died on 11th January 1864 at the convent, Sutton St. Helens Lancashire. She was 43 years of age. Her body together with that of Blessed Dominic Barberi C.P. and Fr. Ignatius Spencer C.P lies in the shrine of St. Anne's Church, Sutton, which is in the town of St Helens near Liverpool. The church and shrine are now a place of pilgrimage.



←  
Tomb of Elizabeth Prout, Servant of God.

Shrine of Blessed Dominic Barberi, Ignatius Spencer, and Elizabeth Prout

### International missionary congregation

The Congregation began small, a little seed sown in Manchester in 1851. But from the beginning Elizabeth dreamt of an international missionary congregation ... "limited only by the limits of the earth". This was not achieved in her lifetime.

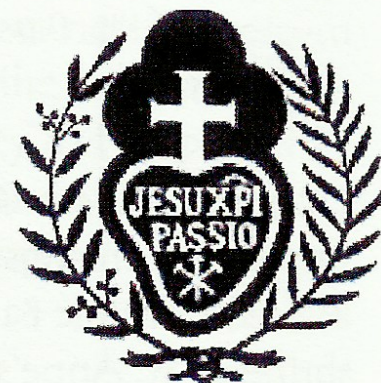
After her death only a handful of Sisters remained. But among them were exceptionally talented and inspired leaders. Numbers grew. New works were undertaken. Convents were opened throughout Lancashire and Yorkshire, Scotland and London. Sisters were missioned to make a



foundation in Bulgaria in 1873 and in Ireland in 1878. The tide had turned.....

### Affiliation to the Passionist Congregation

In 1875 the Sisters were affiliated to the Passionist Congregation, founded by St Paul of the Cross. They changed their name to "Sisters of the Cross and Passion" and ever since have worn the distinctive Passionist sign.



### Approbation of the Rule

In 1876, the Silver Jubilee year of the Congregation, the Holy See granted a Brief of Provisional Approbation of the Rule for a period of ten years. This was essentially the Rule compiled by Mother Mary Joseph and Fr. Ignatius Spencer in 1863. Definitive Approbation came in a brief of Louis XI11 dated 21st June 1887. Rome had spoken. Elizabeth Prout's work was complete.

### Meeting the needs of the time

The early Sisters responded to the need of their time through active service in diverse ministries but particularly through education and social work.

### Today's ministries:

Today we find Cross and Passion Sisters ministering to people as far apart as, England, Ireland and Bosnia, North America and Africa, Papua New Guinea and Peru, Chile and Jamaica, Argentina and Australia diverse climates and cultures. The challenges of yesterday are still the challenges of today but on a global scale as there is a need to combat poverty, inequality and injustice. The Sisters continue to make a difference and work in collaboration with many people of all cultures who feel called to work for justice.

Those of you familiar with the life of St Mary MacKillop will recognise some similar themes in the story of these two women. Whilst they never met, they had much in common and they would have had plenty to talk about if they had the opportunity to meet. Women of strength and



courage who still inspire us to be men and women committed to justice, empowerment of others, and to respect for the whole community of life.

## Prayer for the intercession of Elizabeth Prout

Lord,  
receive our prayer in thanksgiving  
for your grace bestowed on your servant Elizabeth Prout.  
We thank you for her unconquerable courage  
and her love of your poor ones,  
and we ask you for the grace to continue her work in our time.  
Through her intercession, grant us the favour for which we pray. Amen



Icon of Elizabeth Prout in Shrewsbury Cathedral



We invite you to join us in giving thanks for a woman who read the signs of her time and responded with generosity and in a spirit of faith to the needs that she saw around her.

As we continue to be inspired by her spirit of self-giving for the sake of building up the kingdom of God we pray that we too will continue in our times to see and respond to the needs around us.

Thank you for reading our story. The cause of Elizabeth Prout is currently being examined in Rome and one day she may be officially declared a saint. We have no doubt about her holiness as "The many challenges she faced would have deterred a less determined character from wishing to carry on. However, the crosses she had to bear, the hard road she had to travel and the knocks and bruises and obstacles she met and overcame along the way will continue to inspire those - not necessarily of our Faith - who seek to express their love of God in the service of the poor and the needy!"

Our presence here in Australia has broadened our horizons and has given us the privilege of meeting wonderful people from many cultures and nationalities. We pray that we will be open and alert to the needs of our time and continue to respond in collaboration with the many people who are entrusted with being carriers of the Good News. We pray that we will continue to search for ways of being faithful to the path Elizabeth began as we share God's love with all whom we meet.

For more information: [www.thepassionistsisters.com](http://www.thepassionistsisters.com)

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