

Article

Walking to/with Queen Saint Elizabeth: “Where Your Very Steps Lead Me”

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Abstract

The cult of Queen Saint Elizabeth constitutes one of the most persistent manifestations of popular religiosity in central Portugal, especially in Coimbra. Following her death, popular veneration of this saint rapidly consolidated, later legitimized by her beatification in 1516 and canonization in 1625. This article aims to understand how Elizabethan devotion currently constructs an identity in Coimbra, Portugal. To characterize the pilgrimage and expressions of faith, I observe the biennial festivities, the processional routes, sacrifices, adherence, and generational beliefs in this feminine cult, relating them to the pursuit of health. The article studies the main institutions that regulate devotion in modern times (notably the Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth) and explores some processes of its patrimonialization and touristification. Finally, I also analyze the performativity of rituals and the identity of pilgrims, highlighting how expressions of faith also constitute social, cultural and economic practices. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and documentary analysis. The ethnography (still ongoing) on this very Portuguese pilgrimage already reveals points of differentiation and of commonality with other more famous pilgrimages, such as Fátima and Lourdes, while remaining a significant and unique part of the character of popular religiosity and the local identity of Coimbra.

Keywords: Queen Saint Elizabeth; pilgrimage; promises; sacrifice; health; relic



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1. Introduction

Elizabeth of Aragon (1270–1336) became known as the Holy Queen or Saint Elizabeth of Portugal thanks to her intense religiosity, her Franciscan spirit, the founding of hospitals and convents, and her charitable and assistance work. She was a peacemaker, a woman whose intelligence and education prepared her to serve as a diplomat within the Kingdom of Portugal and neighbouring kingdoms. Although the Marian cult of Our Lady of Fátima, encouraged by the Estado Novo, has apparently¹ diminished the importance of the Elizabethan cult, it remains a powerful example of popular religiosity that deserves further study in Anthropology.

The overall objective of my research is to understand how Elizabethan cult—through pilgrimages and the search for healing—constructs an identity in central Portugal, starting from the city of Coimbra. More specifically, I intend to understand the institutions that regulate this cult in modern times, namely the Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth; characterize the pilgrimage and expressions of faith, particularly by observing and investigating sacrifices, processions, adherence to the cult of Queen Saint Elizabeth, and generational belief in the feminine; analyze the relationship between pilgrimages to Queen Saint Elizabeth and the search for health, specifically considering healing processes; and

explore some processes of patrimonialization and touristification of the cult, connecting the iconography of the Queen Saint to belief and expressions of faith today.

Taking into account such questions regarding the Elizabethan devotion, there are still no studies in the field of Anthropology of Religion in Portugal, despite the fact that the Portuguese academy has devoted numerous research works to this historical and religious figure, mainly in fields such as History or Art History. Thus, I draw on other work already carried out—in the Portuguese context, for example, on Our Lady of Health (Pereira 2019, 2021) or Fátima (Pereira 2003), or in the international context, such as the sanctuary of Lourdes (Gesler 1996; Harris 2013). Indeed, there are aspects that bring these cults together (such as their feminine nature and the pursuit of health), but others that separate them, since the cult of the Holy Queen is not recent (it has existed since the Middle Ages) and is not a Marian cult, but rather a cult of a historical figure whose actions during her lifetime led to her sainthood.

Indeed, the cult of Saint Elizabeth (11 February 1270–4 July 1336) has existed since the 14th century, having begun as a popular cult shortly after her death. With her beatification (requested by King Manuel I in 1502) in April 1516, the cult was officialized and expanded throughout the diocese of Coimbra, later propagating throughout the kingdom with her canonization (the apostolic process was initiated by King Sebastian and concluded during the Philippine period²) on 25 May 1625 (Rebelo 2020a, pp. 274–75). In fact, this is even an aspect that shows that this canonization process was also driven by political interests, as this monarch would have had every interest in seeing his “grandmother” (since Elizabeth was from Aragon) canonized by Rome. The sacralization of royalty and medieval noble houses was one form of political-religious propaganda that also involved the cult of Saint Elizabeth (Tavares and Pereira 2018, p. 1). In 1556, the University of Coimbra began to officially participate in this cult, which intensified its importance³. Furthermore, after the 1755 earthquake, the city council of Coimbra decided to name Saint Elizabeth, Saint Theotonius, and the Holy Martyrs of Morocco as protectors of the city against misfortunes and adverse weather conditions⁴.

Currently, the cult is promoted by the Confraternity of the Holy Queen, with other institutions (mainly municipal and commercial) showing interest in holding the festivities. In 2025, the festivities have taken on a special character, particularly due to the opportunity to venerate the Saint’s incorrupt hand. Although religious festivities occur biennially in Coimbra in even-numbered years—which Vasconcelos ([1974] 2012, p. 495) states was decided on 17 January 1883, because it was a festivity that entailed considerable expense and labour—it is true that, exceptionally, they have been held in odd-numbered years after this decision, as the author himself notes, especially in times of war or when the city needed to protect itself for health reasons, as occurred in 1885 during a cholera epidemic. This year is also an exceptional year, as it marks the 700th anniversary of the Holy Queen’s pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in July 1325, after the death of King Denis, and the 400th anniversary of her canonization.

The notion of pilgrimage will be instrumental in this analysis, which will emerge hand in hand with the concepts of health, faith, sacrifice, and promise, which will be discussed below. However, to define pilgrimage, I will use both Christopher McKevitt’s words in the book *Contesting the Sacred* (McKevitt 1991, p. 78): “a pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place which lies beyond the mundane realm of the pilgrim’s daily experience (. . .). As well as being a literal journey, pilgrimage is a journey of the religious imagination.”, and Fiona Bowie’s typologies of pilgrimage: “to a sacred place”, “to a sacred person”, “related to a sacred object” and “as an allegorical journey” (Bowie 2006, pp. 246–49).

There are also different forms of cult participation, which leads me to question the concepts of pilgrim and participant, the concept of promise and sacrifice.

Regarding the concept of pilgrim, it is one who makes a pilgrimage, a journey to a sacred place or one made of religious imagination. In fact, since the etymological origin of the word pilgrim, which combined *per* and *agro*, that is, one who crossed a field or territory, the word evolved and acquired a religious meaning. Today, many authors consider a pilgrim to be one who makes a physical, spiritual, and emotional journey, including a search for transformation, healing, or socialization (I now refer to the definition presented by Fiona Bowie). However, this definition is debatable, according to Fedele (2014, p. 152), who states that pilgrims today, as in the past, may have different motivations that are not merely spiritual, and states that a tourist can have a transformative experience despite not considering themselves a pilgrim. On the other hand, in the words of Edith and Victor Turner (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 20), “a tourist is half pilgrim if a pilgrim is half tourist”, and these authors also refer to pilgrimage as having an individualistic and charismatic popular character that often escapes the religious authorities who condemn or control many aspects of pilgrimage, as I will mention later.

Most dictionaries define a pilgrim as one who travels to a holy place out of devotion or promise. To study pilgrimage, it is therefore important to understand the pilgrim, the route, and the sacred place, as noted by Pereira (2003, p. 44) in his anthropological study of walking pilgrimages to Fátima, or Gomes (2012, p. 18) in his *Olhares sobre o Património*, when ethnographing the Camino de Santiago.

I have used the term pilgrim up to this point, but Porto (1994, p. 59) prefers the term “participants”, since not all people who participate in the festivities can be considered pilgrims, as there are members of the clergy, brothers and sisters, the organizing committee, people belonging to the secular world, like vendors, local traders, who may themselves be pilgrims.

Given this multiplicity of agents, it is also important to reflect on the concept of identity. Cohen (1985, pp. 8, 9) states that people believe in a sense of belonging to a small-scale social and cultural identity, and that this belonging is associated with a symbolically constructed community, as a system of values, norms, and moral codes that provide its members with a sense of identity within a whole. Morris (2006) argues that religion is intrinsically related to health, gender, social identity, economic policy, and intergroup relations. For these reasons, religion can influence social life and cultural meanings at various levels.

Pignatelli (2008) also reflects on the concept of identity, drawing on the work of several authors. Since identity is something that simultaneously makes us similar to and different from others, this is a paradoxical process, as the image each person constructs of themselves may not correspond to the social dimension of their identity. Furthermore, the author includes in her work a reflection on the notion of belonging and the networks of multiple multicultural relationships, which lead to different identity dimensions such as social, ethnic, or cultural ones. Recalling Turner’s theory of social identity, Pignatelli (2008, p. 43) states that social identity takes into account a question “about social dynamics and changes, through claims of belonging”.

According to Turner (1974), the pilgrim’s identity depends, among other factors, on the increase in the world population, improved communication methods, and new modes of transportation, which may explain the increase in visitors to a place of pilgrimage. Participants who call themselves pilgrims (Turner 1974) may go to fulfill a promise, make a request, or make a vow addressed to the altar’s patroness, seeking a spiritual remedy in the future or a cure for a physical ailment; they may ask for a grace or give thanks for a benefit already received, so that simply touching the image can constitute a way of obtaining that grace.

A promise is, therefore, a commitment that a person makes to a divinity in order to obtain a favour or grace. It thus consists of a system of exchange. Sanchis (1983, p. 85) refers to “the ‘going’ accompanied by modalities that emphasize its character as a painful offering: walking, fasting or in silence (...), on one’s knees. (...) translating through mime

their impotence and accentuating their pain, they approach the saint who dominates the crowd from the top of his altar or from the float where, already prepared, he awaits the procession. In the pilgrim's current consciousness, promises participate in the sacrifice. They perpetuate on an individual level—however, they become collective through the combination of multiple initiatives, a multitude of attendees, and the centrality of the place, so that they end up transforming into a common rite of purification and offering (...). This author also refers to the promise as having “an essentially sacrificial meaning. One symbolically promised one's own death (‘going dead’).” Of the original forms it took, what remains today is the “gesture of the shrouded ones, men, women and children who rent a shroud and [who] dress to (...) accompany the procession, behind the saint's float.” (Sanchis 1983, p. 87).

In this work, I will consider popular and institutional cults as manifestations of religious devotion of a deceased person considered a saint, based on Vasconcelos and Saraiva (2004, p. 95). Vasconcelos refers to the distinction made by canonists between private, public, and solemn cult: the first is that performed by anyone, without a public purpose and in a private manner; the second is that performed in a public place, in the presence of others, but without an official purpose or without the presence of a priest; the third is that performed in the name of the church and with the intervention of its ministers. However, there are acts common to both private and public cult, depending on whether the intentions of those who practice them are revealed or not to those who witness them. Thus, I choose the term popular cult to refer to the private or public acts of those who venerate Saint Queen Elizabeth and represent her as a sanctified entity, without the intervention of ecclesiastical entities. With regard to institutional cult, it is similar to Vasconcelos' solemn cult, as it considers the intervention of the clergy as a regulatory entity for religious acts, as well as an entity such as the Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth.

2. Methods

The methodology used an ethnographic approach, primarily focused on data collected and analyzed using qualitative tools. The research encompassed descriptive and explanatory data, also obtained using comparative and historicist methods. Religious festivities occur in even-numbered years, so data collection began in February 2024, when I established contact with the president of the Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth. That year, in July, I also attended the religious festivities, particularly attending the two processions, which I will mention later. However, considering that 2025 marks the 400th anniversary of the Queen's canonization and the 700th anniversary of her pilgrimage to Santiago, various events have been held (by the Confraternity, the University of Coimbra, and the city's museums), which I have been following.

The primary method has been fieldwork with participant observation in multi-sited spaces (Marcus 1995) and interviews. The information collected and presented in this article is the result of monitoring the Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth, interacting with the brothers and sisters, the confreres, and the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Nova, a place of pilgrimage and popular and institutional veneration. I also visited the city of Coimbra, where the official processions take place (the Penitence Procession, known as the Candlelight Procession, which takes place on Thursday evening, and the Solemn Procession, held on Sunday afternoon, returning the Queen to Santa Clara), engaging in dialogue with merchants, believers, pilgrims, and their companions, the locals (Porto 1994, p. 59), the city's inhabitants, those who revere the saint, and visitors. There was also room for consultation in different archives, namely, documentary sources in the libraries of the University of Coimbra.

The interviews conducted so far were semi-structured and unstructured, with free and informed prior consent and the option for anonymity⁵ of my interlocutors, for ethical reasons. The semi-structured interviews (which took place between May and July 2025, totalling 15, with more interviews planned in the future, as this research is still ongoing) were conducted primarily with institutional actors, such as members of the Confraternity, but also with participants in various religious moments (such as the veneration of the Saint's incorrupt hand or the processions). Regarding the unstructured interviews or "fortuitous" interviews (Burgess [1984] 1997, p. 102), these were informal approaches made, during the festive periods of 2024 and 2025, to believers and pilgrims, traders (both permanent in the city and informal during the pilgrimages), tourists, and other occasional actors. Some of these informal conversations took place while I accompanied my interlocutors as they moved, through the practice of walking with them—that is, these conversations took place while accompanying the participants in the processions (in July 2024 and July 2025). The "walking research method" has thus been a supporting method for recording oral and visual data (Kowalewski and Bartłomiejski 2020), which I used to complement participant observation.

In addition to participant observation and interviews, the research also consisted of bibliographical consultation to historically frame Elizabethan devotion in Coimbra, the institutions that regulate the cult in modern times, the identity of pilgrims, and expressions of faith. Iconographic and visual analysis, considering the materiality and social life of images of the Holy Queen, was conducted through visual media (such as photography and/or video), and processions and other forms of devotion were recorded.

There was also an exchange of emails with potential interlocutors, which took place in July 2025, as well as an exchange of WhatsApp messages with members of the Confraternity, whom I either already knew (since I am from the Coimbra region) or whom I met in 2025, while witnessing the religious festivities. Finally, in addition to all the bibliography and documentary sources consulted, I consulted the official websites of entities such as the Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth and the Coimbra City Council.

3. The City of Coimbra, the Holy Queen and the Institutions That Regulate the Elizabethan Cult

3.1. Coimbra

The city of Coimbra was where the Holy Queen lived part of her life and where she spent her final years after becoming a widow. It is also the city that houses her incorrupt body, laid to rest in a silver tomb behind the altar of the church in the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Nova. This city is located in central Portugal, on the Beira Litoral (about 30 km from the sea), and is home to the first Portuguese university, founded in March 1290 by King Denis, Holy Queen's husband. Thus, it is understandable that the Elizabethan cult was concentrated in this city and that there is a centuries-old connection between that university institution and this cult. This importance is illustrated even by the fact that the city's holiday is on 4 July, the liturgical day of the Holy Queen.

The aforementioned monastery of Santa Clara-a-Nova also houses the headquarters of the Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth. Adjacent to it, there has been a hostel for both Santiago and Fátima pilgrims since 2014⁶ (the church sacristan's house was reused and beds and other amenities were invested in). The monastery is a landmark of local Jacobean memory and a concrete preservation of the fact that the Holy Queen was herself a pilgrim to Santiago. As is well known, the Portuguese Central Camino was already travelled in the Middle Ages and passed through Coimbra, where a church of Saint James has stood since 1206 (Fernandes 2014, p. 157). According to the then president of the Confraternity's board, the opening of this hostel made it possible to fulfill a religious tourism strategy ("The president of the confraternity emphasized that the Church of Queen Saint Elizabeth already

‘receives many pilgrims who request the stamp on their credential’ for the pilgrimage of the Camino de Santiago, and, with the hostel, ‘religious tourism strategies’ will be deepened.”, news item of 11 March 2014⁷; the translation is mine). However, I do not consider that there was a “caminoisation” (a term that Lunde 2023 recovers from Bowman and Sepp 2019) of the pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Queen Saint Elizabeth, since both the Camino de Santiago already existed and passed through Coimbra before the Saint was born, and the pilgrimage to the Queen does not imply established routes or the existence of hostels. There is a geographical or physical coincidence regarding the spaces that are shared in the monastery (the hostel for pilgrims of Santiago and the sanctuary where the Queen’s body is laid to rest). There will, in fact, be a patrimonialization of religion, since this sanctuary and the cult it represents allow us to interpret religion as part of the cultural heritage for contemporary purposes (Lunde 2023, p. 5), as does the touristification of these physical spaces or even the holding of the city’s festivities together with the religious festivities of Queen Saint Elizabeth, including a popular fair and several musical concerts.

In this monastery, there is also Elizabeth’s first tomb, commissioned by her before her death, and it is open to visitors. Visits to her tomb are held on special occasions (such as the 500th anniversary of her beatification in 2016 or the 400th anniversary of her canonization in 2025). Visitors can climb to the place where the tomb is and peer through a glass window at her incorrupt right hand, the only visible part of her body.

The Queen’s treasure is divided between this physical space of the monastery, belonging to the Confraternity, and the Machado de Castro National Museum (located in the upper part of the city, close to the University of Coimbra). This treasure consists of relics such as the Reliquary of the Holy Wood, the image-reliquary of the Virgin and Child, a processional Cross, the gold and precious stone necklace and the jasper and silver staff, in the shape of a Tau, found in the 17th century on the tomb where her mortal remains were kept and which was the one offered by the Archbishop of Compostela to Queen Elizabeth, during her pilgrimage to Santiago⁸.

3.2. *Who Was Saint Elizabeth of Portugal?*

To understand the cult of Saint Elizabeth of Portugal, it is necessary to briefly touch on some aspects of her biography or hagiography.

Probably born on 11 February 1270, in Zaragoza, Aragon, she was named Elizabeth “in memory of her aunt Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, whose virtues were to serve as her model, and to whose heavenly patronage her maternal piety wished to entrust her” (Vasconcelos [1974] 2012). She lived in the palace with her grandfather until his death, and her father, Dom Pedro of Aragon, who inherited the throne, distinguished her above all his children for her great intelligence, for revealing virtuousness from a very young age, and for having excellent gifts. She married by proxy to King Denis on 11 February 1282 (Rebelo 2020b, p. 1) and came to Portugal, receiving the nuptial blessing in the town of Trancoso in June of that same year.

Queen Saint Elizabeth played a pivotal role in the political affairs of her time, both within the kingdom and in relations between the Iberian kingdoms and with the Holy See. This was a period of enormous internal and external turmoil, marked by attempts to establish monarchical regimes more centralized around the royal figure, marking the end of feudal rule in the Iberian Peninsula. There is considerable historical documentation on the life and work of Queen Saint Elizabeth, and especially on her cult, especially up to the end of the 19th century. Among these, the works of Vasconcelos⁹ ([1894] 1993), Pero-Sanz (2014) and Castro (2007) are particularly noteworthy.

This role as mediator or peacemaker in political matters is due, in Pero-Sanz’s words, to her father’s “diplomatic intelligence”. She was, therefore, “a prudent negotiator, capable of skillfully solving intricate problems and negotiating difficult agreements” (Pero-Sanz

2014, p. 19, the translation is mine). It is also true that her intelligence led her, despite her pious character, not to renounce her possessions or the exercise of her freedom in the last years of her life.

Queen Saint Elizabeth followed the example of her aunt, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. Having lived in a period when the poor coexisted with the privileged, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary dedicated her life to helping the most disadvantaged. The great religiosity of medieval times explains the feeling of beneficence, material deprivation, and the exaltation of poverty as an ideal of life, in accordance with what was spread by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At the time, the belief was that the only way for lay people to achieve salvation was by despising material goods, helping the needy, establishing monasteries and convents, and founding hospices and hostels—“alms kills sin” (Rosa 2000, p. 465). Similarly, in medieval times, a group of individuals emerged, including aristocratic women with great fortunes (princesses, queens, noblewomen) who, when widowed, decided to live according to the Franciscan message.

Considering the biographical and hagiographical similarity between aunt and niece regarding their welfare practices (Castro 2007, p. 106), it is clear that, regardless of the charitable and welfare-oriented nature of the Holy Queen, her actions were a product of both her upbringing (religious and social—she was educated at her grandfather’s court and prepared to be queen) and the social and political context in which she lived. It is not unreasonable to assert that political interests were behind her sanctification, in the sense that the families’ prestige was maintained, as well as the idea that they were representatives of a divine order on Earth. History shows us how some of the queens who followed Saint Elizabeth of Portugal imitated her in practicing charity and assisting the poor and vulnerable.

According to some authors, namely the most reverent, such as Pero-Sanz (2014) or Vasconcelos ([1894] 1993); Vasconcelos and Saraiva (2004), after becoming a widow, the queen would spend a significant part of her daily life either performing religious activities, prayers and masses, or providing assistance and overseeing the construction work, especially at the monastery and royal palace in Coimbra, where she established her permanent residence. The purpose of thus emphasizing her character of devotion and piety seems quite evident. Indeed, the queen’s strong religiosity always appears widely extolled in writings after her death.

According to Veloso (2014), Queen Elizabeth was a great devotee of the cult of the Holy Spirit, introduced in Portugal by the Franciscans, to whose programmatic principles the queen was also devoted, and which the queen would have known during childhood, through Arnaldo de Villanova, her grandfather’s doctor and theologian. This author even argues that it was the queen who institutionalized the cult in Portugal and organized the first festivity in honour of the Holy Spirit, in the Franciscan convent of Alenquer, in 1323¹⁰. Therefore, this commitment and devotion of the queen for her charitable works to the poor and disadvantaged are not strange, nor her connection with the Franciscans and their female branch, the Poor Clares.

Elizabeth died on 4 July 1336, in Estremoz, where she had gone to prevent a confrontation between her son and grandson. She was taken in a funeral procession to Coimbra, where she had expressed her desire to be buried, arriving on 12 July 1336.

3.3. *Beatification and Canonization of Elizabeth of Portugal and the Elizabethan Cult*

The cult of Queen Elizabeth, at least what can be called popular cult, began as soon as the funeral procession arrived in Coimbra. According to António Vasconcelos, in addition to the queen’s virtues during her lifetime, this popular veneration was greatly influenced by the fact that an aromatic liquid exuded from her coffin, which heightened popular belief in the late queen’s sanctity (Vasconcelos [1894] 1993, pp. 244–45). This author also emphasizes

that a huge crowd awaited the arrival of the funeral procession in Coimbra to venerate the queen (Vasconcelos [1894] 1993, p. 253). From then on, especially in Coimbra, regular veneration of Queen Elizabeth was shown. António Vasconcelos states that, even before the beatification and from the 14th century onwards, it was already a popular custom to call the queen a saint, despite officially not being so (Vasconcelos [1894] 1993, p. 276).

With the beatification in 1516, the solemn cult was inaugurated, which was immediately institutionalized in the monastery of Santa Clara. The day of her death, 4 July, was dedicated to her festivity day, celebrated for the first time the year following her beatification, that is, in 1517. The Papal Brief of Leo X stipulated the city of Coimbra as the place of cult for the queen. However, King John III would later request authorization from the Holy See to extend the cult to the entire kingdom, which Rome granted in January 1556 (Vasconcelos [1894] 1993, p. 304). In this sense, 4 July became the official day of institutional cult for Queen Saint Elizabeth.

Some years later, around 1576 to 1578, during the brief reign of King Sebastian, this king petitioned the Holy See for the queen's canonization. In 1611, during the reign of Philip II (III of Spain), and on his initiative, a new petition was filed with the Holy See. However, this process included an initiative that had not been carried out before: the opening of the queen's tomb on 26 March 1612. In the history of Christianity, one of the most relevant motives for sanctification, whether popular or solemn, has been the incorruptibility of bodies *post-mortem*. Pina-Cabral (1983, p. 78) argues that in popular representations, the incorruptibility of bodies is generally associated with sanctity, contrary to the conception of the local clergy and the Church. The face, neck, chest, arm, and hand were detached, and it was found that "[Queen]Elizabeth's body had been reduced to a mummy and remained in a perfect state of preservation" (Vasconcelos [1894] 1993, p. 402). Thus, the incorruptibility of at least part of Queen Elizabeth's body, detected in 1612 when the tomb was first opened, contributed indelibly to the consolidation of the queen's sanctity. On 25 May 1625, Pope Urban VIII canonized Queen Elizabeth.

It is true that this first opening of the tomb occurred after the queen's beatification, so it was not this fact that induced, in both popular representations and the Holy See's attitude, the belief in the queen's sanctity. Rather, the veneration of the incorruptibility of her body, and especially of her right hand, became an integral part of the cultic acts in her honour. Later, with the transfer of the queen's body from the monastery of Santa Clara-a-Velha to the new monastery of Santa Clara-a-Nova on 29 October 1677, this date also became part of the official acts of veneration of Queen Elizabeth.

Queen Elizabeth has gone down in history primarily for her charitable works and her religiosity, which has given rise to countless legends surrounding her sanctity. Over the centuries, beginning with the famous *Legend of the Holy Queen*¹¹, allusions to the queen's miracles and deeds, performed both during her lifetime and after her death, have emerged, serving as proof of her sanctity for the beatification and canonization process. On the other hand, such accounts would cement, to this day, a popular mythology surrounding the queen's deified abilities. Among all these deeds, or "miraculous facts", the one that stands out most and still best identifies the sanctity of Queen Elizabeth is undoubtedly the so-called miracle of the roses, which has multiple variations, but can be summarized as follows: Elizabeth left the palace with bread in her arms to give to the poor and was surprised by the king, who asked her what she was carrying there. The queen reportedly replied that they were roses, and when the king was surprised by the presence of roses in January and asked her to open the hem of her dress, roses fell out. According to José de Pero-Sanz, this miracle, which is not in the Legend, first appears in a 16th-century text, although, according to the author, the popular version predates it, perhaps from the 15th century (Pero-Sanz 2014, p. 50)¹². However, this type of miracle is not exclusive to Elizabeth,

as there are at least two other reports of similar feats: in the 11th century, attributed to Saint Cacilda, daughter of a Moorish king of Toledo, who is said to have transformed cloth into flowers; and, in 1332, a report emerged that Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, as it turned out to be Elizabeth's great-aunt, had also transformed food into roses (Pero-Sanz 2014, pp. 43–47). It is, however, the “miracle” that predominates in her current iconography, in the minds of believers and is the one that is perpetuated by the roses that are offered to her when visiting the monastery where her body is or by the fact that her float, during processions, is decorated with roses.

3.4. *The Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth*

The Confraternity was created in 1560 by King Sebastian's grandmother, Dona Catarina (a believer in the Holy Queen and for whom she ordered Mass to be said at the time of her grandson's birth). This institution aimed to promote the cult of its patron saint, Saint Elizabeth of Portugal. In 1556, Dona Catarina's husband, King John III, ordered the Rector of the University that the institution participate in the festivities of the Holy Queen. Thus, even before the founding of the Confraternity, the professors were already involved in the cult of the then-Blessed Elizabeth, which also led to the intensification of this cult. It was with Dona Catarina's patronage that the abbess of Santa Clara, Dona Ana de Meneses, founded the Confraternity (Rebelo 2020a, pp. 275, 276; Vasconcelos [1894] 1993, p. 310; Pero-Sanz 2014, p. 192).

The Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth is the custodian of the body of Queen Saint Elizabeth and the main organizer of the festivities in her honour in the city of Coimbra. It can therefore be said that it possesses the material legacy to which Christopher McKevitt refers when discussing the cult of Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo (McKevitt 1991, p. 87), as it is the confreres and brothers who control the place of veneration, who keep the Queen's body in the church of the monastery of Santa Clara-a-Nova, who possess part of the Queen's relics, who promote the publication of books that encourage pilgrimage and belief in the intercessory powers of Saint Elizabeth of Portugal, and who, at the aforementioned historical moment, were also present at the process of the Queen's canonization.

Asad (1993, p. 114) believes that religion and power cannot be separated, which is also evident in the actions of the Confraternity members in organizing and carrying out the processions. In addition to the police presence (to control the thousands of people who go to the churchyard of the Holy Queen and to provide an honour guard for the float during the processions), it is clear that the brothers themselves, as well as the local clergy who participate in these devotional moments, model behaviours (the formation of the procession is regulated, for example), impose norms (for example, in the physical space of the chapel, by prohibiting people from touching the image of the Saint or her shrine), and produce discourses of authority. Durkheim (2002, p. 43) refers to this prohibition¹³: “The sacred thing is, par excellence, that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity.”

However, pilgrims often attempt to break through the physical barriers created by those protecting the float and actually manage to touch the wood or even take a rose. This is what Eade (1991, p. 59) states about the pilgrims of Lourdes and that we can verify in Coimbra: they “are not docile bodies subject to the control of others: they can and do resist the power of the organizers—within limits—in order to achieve their own objectives.”. Considering the actions of the police and the Confraternity brothers who regulate the procession, I can also agree with this author when he states in the same chapter, on page 74, that “Lourdes (...) provides a striking illustration of the manner in which religious enthusiasm can be at once stimulated, channeled, controlled, and curtailed by an internally differentiated and hierarchical cult officialdom.” (Eade 1991). In a previous study of Elizabethan cult in a municipality belonging to Coimbra, I was able to verify the

same form of action by the Brotherhood that promotes the devotion to the Holy Queen (Rodrigues 2022, p. 46).

4. Pilgrimage to the Holy Queen: Physical Journey and Inner Journey—There and Back

The Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth is the current promoter of institutional cult and, as such, has been organizing various events since 2024, some of a cultural nature, such as “São Rosas, Senhores”, a series of musical performances held at the Convent of Santa Clara. Furthermore, the Jubilee Pilgrimage of the “Fragile” took place in the churchyard of the Church of Queen Saint Elizabeth, in which Private Institutions of Social Solidarity and Charities from across the diocese participated. This was an initiative by the Diocesan Secretariat for Social and Charitable Pastoral Care, which challenged each participating institution to create a rosary from recycled materials, with the help of the elderly, identifying the institution. The University of Coimbra also held an open conversation about Queen Saint Elizabeth in the Library Archives, and this year the University Press published the *Legend of Queen Saint Elizabeth*, a highly anticipated and well-attended event at the Machado de Castro National Museum, concluding the International Colloquium “Elizabeth of Portugal—Women in the Sphere of Holiness. On the 400th anniversary of her canonization”, organized by the Centre for Classical and Humanistic Studies and the Academic Centre for Christian Democracy. On July 2025, at the weekend preceding the religious festivities, a sculpture of the Pilgrim Queen Saint was unveiled in Trouxemil (a toponym related to the legend of the saint’s passage through that location, as it was said to have been the queen’s first stop on her journey to Santiago), in the presence of the bishop of Coimbra and the president of the Confraternity’s board. The Weddings of the Queen Saint¹⁴ were also held. Coimbra also hosts two exhibitions alluding to the Saint Queen Saint, her iconographic representation, and including objects from her treasure in the city’s museums.

To understand pilgrimage as the act of going to a sacred place (McKevitt 1991; Bowie 2006) or as a spiritual journey of religious imagination, I photographed the processions and spoke with several merchants in downtown Coimbra, realizing that some identify as both believers and pilgrims. They display the image of the Saint in their shop windows during the festive weeks, participate in the making of the Queen’s Roses (a sweet created by the Association of Confectioners of Coimbra to celebrate the anniversary of her beatification) and are people who, outside of their professional lives, walk from their homes to Santa Clara during this week. This walk consists of the act of “going” to the Saint, but also of “taking” the Saint with oneself, which is one of the characteristics commonly associated with pilgrimage, which need not consist exclusively of physical movement but can also involve an inner journey.

The religious festivities begin with a triduum during the week of 4 July. As mentioned above, there are two processions: the Penitence or Candlelight Procession, which takes place on Thursday evening; and the Solemn Procession, which takes place during the day, the following Sunday. In the Candlelight Procession, the image of the Holy Queen leaves the church on a float carried by the confreres and proceeds to the Church of Santa Cruz, in the centre of downtown Coimbra, where it remains in veneration until Sunday. In the Solemn Procession, the Queen returns to the monastery.

The float carrying the image of the Holy Queen weighs about a ton, and ten members are needed to carry it. The procession covers a distance of about 3.5 km, but lasts about six hours, at the pace of the participants. Chaplaincies and brotherhoods from various locations in the central region and other parts of the country take part in the procession. This year, exceptionally, a brotherhood from California, which has a special connection with Coimbra, was present. When the procession is organized, behind each entity, a philharmonic band

from the Coimbra district, invited by the Confraternity for this purpose, walks behind each entity. Also noteworthy is the presence of former combatants of the armed forces (paratroopers, commandos, etc.), as during the Colonial War, many of them saw their faith in the Holy Queen or that of their mothers as a guarantee of protection (many even recount giving gold—necklaces, earrings, bracelets—to the Queen as a promise upon their return from Africa in good health) (informal conversation with ex-combatants on 11 July 2024).

In the Penitence Procession, one of the highlights is when the Holy Queen stops on the Santa Clara Bridge (which connects the two banks of the Mondego River) and is welcomed by the city with a speech by a priest invited by the president of the Confraternity's board for this purpose. This is the most anticipated moment for the thousands of people who gather there, both those who join the procession and those who, without physically moving, await her passage on the sidewalks of the bridge deck and in the city streets, saving their place since the morning of that day. The University students kneel to let the float pass through, with candles in their hands, which can be a very emotional moment, and extend their academic cloaks to pay homage to the saint. It is the launching of fireworks that also leads many people to prefer to be on the bridge before the procession forms, which demonstrates the different intentions (Fedele 2014; Turner and Turner 1978) that can lead them to participate in the religious festivities of Saint Queen Elizabeth.

In the speech given by the priest chosen for the procession on 13 July 2024, words such as “patron saint”, “confidant”, “advocate”, “intercessor” and “godmother” were used to refer to the Holy Queen. The priest referred to the believers as “God’s people who journey through history” and said that the Queen walks with her people.

This priest referred to the Holy Queen as the patron saint of Coimbra, but emphasized the life path taken by those who find support in her and feel her ever-present. It remains to be seen who the people are that walk toward and with the Saint, and who make this cult a manifestation of popular religiosity today—a cult that reflects cultural identity, strengthens social bonds, and offers emotional support.

Another moment of enormous importance that occurred in this year of 2025 was the opportunity to venerate the Queen’s incorrupt hand (from 17 June to 2 July 2025), which represents pilgrimage both to a sacred person and related to a sacred object as it is considered a relic, a “part of a holy person (...) that may be held to contain sacred powers and benedictions” (Bowie 2006, p. 248). To this end, Vespers is celebrated, a Mass presided over by the Bishop of Coimbra and the parish priest of the Diocese of Santa Clara, culminating in the opening of the silver tomb where the saint’s body rests and a visit to it, exclusive to this day. In his homily, the bishop stated that “the common vocation of all Christians is to live paths of holiness” and the parish priest, before inviting those present to climb the steps leading to the tomb, said that this would be a moment to “ask for the gift of a vocation (...), the love and courage to continue on our path”. The word “path” is often used in speeches relating to the Holy Queen and is present in the sentence that begins the book published by the Confraternity of the Holy Queen, *Popular History of the Holy Queen Elizabeth, Protector of Coimbra*: “Walk before us and, as a guide, show us the path to salvation.”.

During these moments, some expressions of faith and sacrifice are observable and likely to be recorded, namely the delivery of roses, placed at the feet of the Saint, the candles the size of the person that are carried during the processions or left in the church, the coming on foot to Coimbra, the participation in the processions going barefoot, on knees, on all fours and or even with their backs turned, that is, always facing the Queen’s float, so as to permanently look, during the procession, at the image of the Queen (informal conversation, on 10 July 2025, with a pilgrim who, by lifelong promise, goes with her back to all the processions of the Holy Queen). However, the promises are not limited to health issues, as some of the interlocutors

told me: the fact that their children are going to take an exam at university leads them to be accompanied by a medal with the Holy Queen, and there are couples who wish to get married in the Queen's church in order to bless their union.

In the processions of Queen Saint Elizabeth, we find people who fulfill their promises, as analyzed by Sanchis (1983), going shrouded or dressing as Queen Saint Elizabeth in a rented suit. Whether in relation to going shrouded or in relation to dressing as Queen (in different modalities, i.e., as a Poor Clare, as a widow, as a member of the nobility), I turn to Michel Foucault, for whom "(...) tattooing, applying makeup, masking oneself is (...) making the body communicate with secret powers and invisible forces. (...) And if we consider that sacred or profane, religious or civil, clothing allows the individual to enter the closed space of the religious or the invisible network of society, then we will see that everything concerning the body—design, colour, crown, tiara, clothing, uniform—all of this makes the utopias sealed within the body blossom in a sensitive and nuanced way." (Foucault [1966] 2013, pp. 12, 13).

There is a performative character, referred to by Schechner (1988) and Turner (1986), which is also visible in the white robes worn by people participating in the procession, and in the robes worn by both members of the Confraternity and those from other brotherhoods. It is also evident in the fact that, in religious ceremonies or even when providing a guard of honour to the Queen's float, the sisters, confreres, and ladies of the Royal Order of Saint Elizabeth¹⁵, as well as their Grand Master, D. Isabel de Herédia, perform a dress code consisting of all-black clothing, a black veil, a colour that one of the ladies told me was associated with respect and widowhood, and uniformity if there was a widow in the group, and white gloves, a symbol of purity (informal conversation held on 4 July 2025, after the mass held with the presence of the Royal Order). I offer an interpretation of this colour code and my interlocutor's use of the word "purity" in light of the work of Douglas (1991, p. 23), because the separation between these people, not only visual and achieved by the use of the colour black, which distinguishes them from the others, but also physical, due to the place occupied in the church during Mass, next to the altar and on a path to it flanked by brothers and confreres, also represents the separation between access to sacred objects and profane reality. Furthermore, this dress code also reveals the roots in the moral values of the community (Douglas 1991, p. 29), by associating black with widowhood and respect and white with purity, or even the need for delimitations and prohibitions of the sacred, expressed by the separation and demarcation of these ladies—closer to the altar and the saint, in relation to the other participants in the ceremony (Douglas 1991, p. 35).

By participating in this ritualistic moment, according to Turner, they are actors in a social drama, and ritual and performance are ways of expressing and resolving social tensions, with an emphasis on symbolic and communal aspects. However, I will find myself here with Schechner (1988, p. 171), who draws inspiration from Turner but who approximates ritual to theatre and artistic performance. For this performance theorist, rituals and theatre share similar structures: both involve a separate space, roles, spectators, and transformation. In the case of processions (Schechner 1988, p. 159), which the author considers to be a type of pilgrimage, the event takes place along a prescribed route, with spectators along the route. The procession stops at a predefined location, and there are performances, including, for example, the selection of a woman dressed as the Holy Queen and a man dressed as her page to walk in front of the float, as I observed in the three processions I attended.

Giving special emphasis to the word "transformation" and trying to understand what it actually means for those who participate in these devotional moments, in conversations with my interlocutors, both those who participated in the processions during my fieldwork and those I was able to interview at other times, the word "peace" was common to many.

They mentioned seeking “peace” in the journey to the saint’s altar, in visiting her hand, but they also mentioned “the peace and gratitude” with which they return home (Interview 9, 30 June 2025), the “feeling of lightness” after visiting this place of devotion (Interview 13, 3 July 2025), or the “peace of spirit” they find and then carry with them into their lives (Interviews 2, 19 April 2025, and 5, 26 April 2025). Thus, the pilgrimage to the Holy Queen Elizabeth is, for these people, not only a physical journey, but also an inner journey that accompanies them throughout their lives when they return home. Or, as Bowie (2006, p. 249) would say, an allegorical journey to deal with life struggles and to seek spiritual perfection.

5. Relation Between Pilgrimage to the Holy Queen and Health

I return to the idea that those who dress as Queens and join the processions do so out of devotion, but mainly as fulfillment of promises, some lifelong and related to health issues. In the narrative of miracles attributed to the Holy Queen and which are in the process of canonization, as well as in the *Legend of the Queen*, many are related to health issues. There are also miracles that describe the supply of milk for a woman who needed to breastfeed her grandson. The healing power of a leper, by the Queen, who used egg white on his wounds (Pero-Sanz 2014, p. 124), is also one of the miracles cited. Although the miracle of the roses was only mentioned in 1612, according to Vasconcelos ([1974] 2012), which is also addressed by authors who studied the evolution of the iconographic representation of the saint and who verified the non-existence of her representation with roses until the 16th century (Pimentel 2013, even refers to the reinvention of the image of the Queen for political reasons), it is this miracle, previously attributed to other saints (Pero-Sanz 2014), that endures in the imagination of believers and is clearly reproduced in their speeches and practices, including in the way they dress in processions.

Among the motivations for the pilgrimage and/or for fulfilling promises, the interlocutors mentioned the search for health, thanking it or asking for it, which is in line with Pedro Pereira’s work, “Pushing the Lady Home” (2019). Fedele (2014) also refers to the search for a special healing, making requests at sacred places or altars that are perceived by the believer as being particularly powerful. There is a search for personal transformation or healing, and one must deal with the pain that comes with the journey.

The pilgrimage to Saint Queen Elizabeth differs from the pilgrimage to Our Lady of Fátima (in Portugal), Lourdes (in France), or Santiago de Compostela (in Galicia). The first two cults are Marian, historically more recent, and the result of an apparition of the Virgin Mary to the common people during historically and politically turbulent times. The third, however, is a pilgrimage that involves marked routes, the use of a pilgrim’s credential to obtain a certificate of completion of the Camino (the Compostela), and the presence of certified hostels for pilgrims along the way. However, there are common points, beginning with a general one: the fact that people undertake a pilgrimage to a place they consider sacred, which is controlled by official entities such as the church or brotherhoods. Then, and no less importantly, especially with regard to Saint Queen Elizabeth, Fátima, and Lourdes, pilgrims seek a form of healing or come to give thanks for the healing they have received. The monastery of Santa Clara-a-Nova, specifically the church and the altar, behind which the body of the Holy Queen is laid to rest, becomes a place of healing, where divine intervention is believed to occur. Even if people don’t bring with them the hope of a miracle when they go to these places, they can return to their lives (after the movement from the profane to the sacred, the encounter with the divine, according to Turner and Turner 1978), renewed in spirit, mind, and body (Gesler 1996, p. 95).

Thus, it appears that there are two dimensions involved in the contemporary cult of the Holy Queen: health and religion. People turn to the Holy Queen, as well as Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Health, Our Lady of Fátima, Senhor da Serra, to whom one of my

interlocutors is a devotee, “to deal with illness, with the suffering that surrounds it, and to promote their health” (Pereira 2021, p. 25). Faith has a medical role for believers, and the miracle of healing persists, associated with this role (Gesler 1996, p. 101), with pilgrimage assuming a holistic and diffuse transformative role that goes beyond the medicinal or metaphysical (Harris 2013, p. 31).

However, in the group of participants, according to Porto (1994, p. 59), we can consider the pilgrim (the one who intends, when moving to the physical space of the chapel or when locating themselves along the procession route, to practice religion); other practices can also be found in the group of participants, associated with the festivity (the fireworks display or the popular fair) or with commensality.

This is where the notion of pilgrim as belonging to a diffuse category is verified (Porto 1994, p. 63), due to the possibility of interspersing religious practices with others that do not involve the expression of one’s religiosity.

At the same time, the movement of participants is controlled by regulatory entities. In a procession, for example, with thousands of people lining the streets, police intervention is necessary to keep them away from the float. According to Turner (1969, 1974), a normative *communitas* that mobilizes and organizes resources to control the members who constitute and participate in the festivities is formed. All of these members share the same collective goal: the veneration of a saint. Bowie (2006, p. 242), in turn, uses the expression “competing discourses”, used to describe the different agendas and worldviews that occur at a pilgrimage site. This heterogeneity is verified by the fact that there are participants who swell the processions and others who participate in a way that is not physically present in the procession, but rather by watching the procession pass by, on a journey without physical movement (Bowie 2006, p. 245).

Bowie (2006), like other authors cited above, criticizes Victor Turner’s model. It is debatable that an “ephemeral social relationship characterized by the state of *communitas*” is formed, since in the concept of *communitas*, the previous social status is lost, which may not happen. In fact, considering the processions of the Holy Queen, the participation of brothers and sisters, of confreres, of students in academic costumes, of people from other brotherhoods in cloaks, children dressed as angels, of people dressed as queens, leads to the maintenance of social distinctions and, in some cases, to the continuation of different personal statuses.

In short, on the one hand, during the festivities of Queen Saint Elizabeth, people form a community, in the sense of a relative collectivity, which I could define as having a “commonality” of interests, temporarily suspending their lives to participate in the festivities or religious moments. On the other hand, there continues to be a distinction between their social roles.

According to Turner (1974), the regularity of festivities ensures the continuity of interaction between the population and this place of pilgrimage. Regarding the definitions of space and place, the notion of spatial turn has been debated recently. According to Palma (2023, p. 1), “the space and/or place where we live determine, in very profound ways, our own identity and culture”. Spatiality is a fundamental element for interpreting the human condition and its social dynamics. Space and place play fundamental roles in human phenomena. They play a decisive role in the religious experience of God and in the idea that believers have of Him (Palma 2023, p. 3). What qualifies space in theological terms is the revelation that occurs within it and the relationship with God that this space evokes. This is why elements such as memory, narrative, or particularity are so important for the theological classification of space (Palma 2023, p. 4). The author recovers from John Inge the idea that what begins as an undifferentiated space becomes a place when we come to know it better and attribute a value to it. Place is the space that has the capacity to be

remembered and evoke what is most precious (Palma 2023, p. 6). Furthermore, the concepts of place and space can be related to movement and journey without physical movement, as Bowie (2006, p. 245) points out.

For Geertz (1978, pp. 129, 130), the most elaborate and public rituals, which he calls plastic dramas, allow human beings to attain faith because they portray, interpret, materialize, and perform religion through participation in these rituals. According to Turner (1969, p. 94), when participating in religious activities, similar to what occurs in the liminality of initiation rituals, the actor-pilgrim or participant engages with sacred objects and participates in symbolic activities that they believe can be effective and change both their interior and exterior selves, respectively, achieving a state of grace or a state of physical health. In the case of Christian pilgrimages, Turner emphasizes the voluntary nature of these pilgrimages, with the purpose of fulfilling a vow, fulfilling a promise (an expression denoting the contractual and individual nature of the relationship between saint and believer), or as an act of self-imposed penance. This is an exchange relationship in which the payment of the promise allows the contract between the parties to be concluded (Porto 1994, pp. 64, 65). Bowie mentions rituals that include some form of violence—and I mean the payment of promises that involve the sacrifice of going barefoot, going on one's knees, going backward. Sacrifice is seen here as a cultural behaviour whose purpose is to restore harmony and strengthen social bonds within the community itself (Bowie 2006, p. 163).

Quoting Fernandes (2014, p. 7), the pilgrim “knows that the path is hard, the roads not always safe, the lodgings and meals less dignified, that loneliness, the harshness of the journey, and wounded feet will test their faith and the limits of the human condition”. When I asked my interlocutors why they made a pilgrimage of many kilometres to Coimbra, when today it is easy to go by car, they replied that the pilgrimage is made “for sacrifice” (Interview 2, 19 April 2025; Interview 9, 30 June 2025), relativizing the pain felt on the way as being lesser compared to the reason that led them to fulfill the promise to go on pilgrimage.

Gomes also mentions the existence of physical exertion and a certain degree of risk (Gomes 2012, p. 18). Pain is seen as a way of paying for the pain that was interrupted. Interestingly, the people I interviewed who had walked to Coimbra and/or participated in the procession, some of them barefoot, mentioned that they felt no pain or heat (the procession takes place in the middle of summer), nor did they even get blisters on their feet. However, those who reported feeling pain saw it as an offering to the saint for the good they had received from her.

Participating in processions and specifically doing so while fulfilling promises that imply sacrifice are rituals that, for believers, are considered correct, as they legitimize a human action that is due to a transcendental force (Bowie 2006, p. 165).

Participating in processions allows participants to experience “sacred” intervals that do not participate in the temporal duration that precedes and follows them, that have a completely different structure and a different “origin”, that is, a return to a primordial time, sanctified by the gods and made present through the festivity (Eliade 2016, pp. 81, 82). In this way, religious festivities re-teach humanity the sacredness of models. Furthermore, frequent participation in festivities, particularly processions, whether through veneration or by fulfilling a lifelong promise, as is the case with the shrouded pilgrim, allows participants to encounter the reproduction of the same exemplary gestures of the venerated entity.

On the other hand, the pilgrimage to the Holy Queen is an example of a pilgrimage linked to a tomb and the veneration of relics—“The relics materialized the presence of the saints, gave rise to the construction of great sanctuaries, and, consequently, formed a true geography of the sacred amid so many pilgrimages (...)” (Laureano 2021, p. 270). One can venerate not only her pilgrim's staff or her jewelry displayed at museum, but also

the Queen's hand. One seeks not only a sacred place, but a person to whom holiness is attributed and who is considered by believers as a model to be followed.

During this period of veneration of the hand, I met people from various parts of Portugal, from north to south and also from municipalities in the Coimbra district. I observed people who visited the hand simply out of curiosity, others who did so out of devotion, bringing bouquets of roses as fulfillment of promises, and still others who came to ask for the Saint's intervention in marital matters or to give thanks for graces granted, such as a son's victory in a sports championship. Regarding the fact that it is the right hand that is exposed, people mentioned that this, and I quote one of my interlocutors, "it is the little hand that gave bread, gave so much alms, did so much good" (informal conversation with a member of the Confraternity responsible for supervising visits to the Queen's hand, 29 June 2025). After venerating the hand, the sisters or confreres on duty would offer a postcard and a rose to each visitor, as part of a system of exchanging the element that today is most symbolic of the Holy Queen. In his essay on the preeminence of the right hand, [Hertz \(2024, p. 7\)](#) refers to the preponderance of the right hand over the left in objects or beings, or in rituals that represent a special essence that consecrates them and grants them extraordinary powers. The right side is beneficent and renewing ([Hertz 2024, p. 13](#)), representing well-being and peace ([Hertz 2024, p. 14](#)).

On 4 July 2025, at the Mass of the Royal Order of Saint Elizabeth, the priest dedicated his homily to the theme of hands: "(...) the hands of the Holy Queen are also hands raised in the face of injustice and violence. They are hands that rise up, stopping hatred and war, opening the way to hope and harmony. Mediatrix of Peace, from her birth, Elizabeth was, throughout her life, a peacemaker, in her home and in her family. (...) we contemplate the hands of Saint Elizabeth, hands firm on the pilgrim's staff, once offered by the Archbishop of Santiago de Compostela, during the time of the pilgrimage, whose 700th anniversary is celebrated today."

Just as Elizabeth of Portugal's pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in 1325 established an identity mark on the Portuguese Camino de Santiago ([Lopes 2020, p. 66](#)), which endures through the contemplation of her pilgrim's staff, which is even represented both in her original tomb and was kept with her inside that tomb, these relic objects also constitute the possibility of creating identity marks that represent the pilgrims who visit them.

In the interviews already conducted, almost all interviewees stated that devotion to the Queen was passed down orally, through the stories and prayers of grandmothers, mothers, and also male family members. This cult is passed down through generations, reflected in the promises made, as those who promised now had fulfilled their promises when they were young with believing family members (as exemplified by the participation of one of the university students I interviewed in a novena, promised by his grandmother when he was about ten years old—Interview 7, 18 June 2025) and also because they later repeat the promises they saw made to those who transmitted their faith in the Holy Queen to them. Furthermore, belief in the graces granted is also passed down from generation to generation.

All the people I have spoken with so far consider themselves pilgrims, with some of them coming to Coimbra on foot, not necessarily for the festivities, but to participate, for example, in a novena. Some do so barefoot and in silence, whether on the pilgrimage to Santa Clara or during the procession. They embrace the pain. Participation in the procession is also common to all, in some cases in fulfillment of lifelong promises for having their requests for protection or for the cure of illness granted (a woman who comes from Estremoz to Coimbra to fulfill her promise for the cure of her husband—informal conversation, 11 July 2024, in the churchyard of the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Nova, before the Penitence procession). A couple, musicians and participants in the procession with the Taveiro Philharmonic, got married in the church of the Holy Queen (Interview

5, 26 April 2025). Some of the men I interviewed are brothers of the Confraternity of the Holy Queen. One of them, a seminarian, walked the Camino de Santiago this year, to celebrate the 700th anniversary of Elizabeth's pilgrimage to Compostela (Interview 1, 14 April 2025). Those I interviewed mentioned that the Holy Queen is their godmother, was their protector during illness, and the entity they turned to for being able to complete the course, thus wearing their academic cloaks in the Penitence procession and also in the Solemn procession, even after completing their academic career. One of these former students of the University of Coimbra (in an informal conversation on 13 July 2025, during a stop in the procession) told me that, having been born in Coimbra, she had always witnessed her grandmother's and mother's faith in the Holy Queen. Although she no longer believes in anything religious, she believes in the Queen, and it is to her that she always turns.

One of the women I interviewed also mentioned having taken her niece dressed as an angel to the procession twice and intending to do so again this year, to give thanks for the grace that her last surgery went well (Interview 8, 29 June 2025). Most of the interviewees reported having a small altar in their homes with images of the Holy Queen, among other saints they are devoted to. Since the 1755 earthquake, it has been common to find tiles depicting a saint in homes in Portugal for their protection. This is also true not only in Coimbra but also in various regions of Portugal, where a tile panel depicting Saint Elizabeth can be seen. Reference is also common to a medal depicting the Queen for one's protection in times of distress (Interview 3, 19 May 2025).

In the case of objects and the social power they acquire, the Confraternity itself has for sale, at the entrance to the church, various objects such as small images of the Saint, rosaries, medals, prayer cards, postcards, soaps and books, which allows me to conclude that there is a touristification of the cult, from an economic dimension associated with the circulation of objects, because the believers, after visiting the place where the Queen's tomb is located, not being able to take with them a relic as could previously be seen (a splinter of the coffin, as Vasconcelos mentions), take an object that represents her, that means her and that protects them in their lives.

6. Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that the cult of Queen Saint Elizabeth constitutes a unique and specific phenomenon of popular religiosity, deeply rooted in the city of Coimbra and, simultaneously, an expression of cultural identity that extends over time, as it is secular, and over space, as it is not fixed in the city of Coimbra.

The ethnographic study confirmed, first and foremost, the decisive role of regulatory institutions, especially the Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth, in the preservation, organization, and transmission of the cult. By articulating the religious, patrimonial, and cultural dimensions, the Confraternity not only ensures the continuity of a centuries-old tradition but also reinterprets it according to contemporary needs, in dialogue with other local institutions, such as the University of Coimbra, the municipality, and cultural entities like the city's museums.

Second, the analysis of pilgrimages and expressions of faith highlighted the diversity of devotional practices: from individual promises, sometimes marked by physical sacrifice, to collective participation in processions and rituals. These manifestations, which integrate both elements of popular religiosity and performative and symbolic forms, reveal how the pilgrimage to the Holy Queen is simultaneously a spiritual journey, a gesture of community belonging, and an experience of ritual embodiment.

Regarding the relationship between devotion and health, the therapeutic dimension attributed to the intercession of the Holy Queen was observed to persist. The search for

healing or gratitude for graces granted continues to be a central motivation for pilgrims, distancing themselves from or establishing parallels with other shrines, such as Lourdes or Fátima, since the specificity of Elizabethan devotion lies in its focus on a historical figure whose sanctity derives from her works during her lifetime rather than from Marian devotion.

The research also allowed me to reflect on the patrimonialization and touristification of the cult. The incorporation of cultural events, the circulation of devotional objects, and the museum's appreciation of the Queen's treasure reveal processes of transformation that insert religiosity into a broader framework of cultural consumption and heritage identity. However, it was found that such processes do not nullify the authenticity of the devotion, but rather complement it, reinforcing its social and economic visibility. Finally, it was possible to understand that devotion to Queen Saint Elizabeth is strongly transmitted through women and across generations, highlighting the centrality of the family, especially maternal figures and grandmothers, in the continuity of the faith.

Thus, regulatory institutions were identified, devotional practices characterized, and the relationship between devotion, health, and heritage was analyzed. Broadly speaking, the cult of Saint Elizabeth presents itself as a privileged field for understanding the connection between tradition and modernity, between religion and culture, and between individual faith and collective identity. More than a legacy of the past, it is a dynamic reality that continues to shape the social life of Coimbra and to inscribe the Saint Queen as a symbol of spirituality, belonging, and living memory, and as an integral part of the identity of contemporary Coimbra.

In conclusion, the article demonstrates that the Coimbra identity is constructed and continually renewed through the cult of Queen Saint Elizabeth, as patron saint and protector of the city, with whom people from this city or from many other places in the region identify, even if they have no other faith or to whom they turn for physical, spiritual, or emotional blessings. This cult transcends the strictly religious sphere to assert the Holy Queen as a structuring element of the collective memory, social cohesion and cultural projection of the city, constituting herself as a lasting symbol of Coimbra's spirituality, belonging and identity.

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Notes

- ¹ [Rebelo \(2024\)](#) refers to the revival of the Queen Saint's festivities after 1910, mentioning the Confraternity's lack of activity in those early years of the republican regime and the turbulent and uncertain times (p. 81) and the fact that Saint Elizabeth, as a strong symbol of the monarchy, was an "ideological objection" considering the recent Republic. It was in this decade, in 1917, that the apparition at Fátima occurred. According to [von Klimo \(2024\)](#), the success of the cult of Our Lady of Fátima, unlike many other Marian apparitions, was due to a combination of factors: (1) the context of 1917, in which the Portuguese rural population, threatened by the anticlerical policies of the First Republic and marked by war and poverty, was predisposed to accept the apparitions; the strengthening of devotion by government repression; (2) the Bishop of Leiria institutionalized the cult, acquiring the land, building the sanctuary, legitimizing the visions in 1930, and promoting the writings of the seer Lúcia, expanding the reach of the phenomenon during the anti-communism of the Cold War; (3) the creation of the newspaper *Voz de Fátima* (1922) gave the cult an official narrative, disseminating reports of miracles and cures, which consolidated its popular impact; (4) under

Salazar's Estado Novo, the cult was integrated into nationalist and Catholic ideology, becoming a symbol of Portuguese identity and a model of "modern religiosity" centred on individual conversion; (5) from the 1940s onward, with the support of Pope Pius XII and the State, Fátima became the main Portuguese Catholic cult and a centre of devotion with worldwide projection.

The Philippine period was the one in which Portugal was united with the Kingdom of Spain under the rule of the Philippine kings (Philip I, II and III of Portugal, who were the Spanish monarchs Philip II, III and IV respectively), between 1580 and 1640. This period ended with the Restoration of Independence on 1 December 1640, led by a group of Portuguese nobles who acclaimed D. João IV as king, starting the Braganza Dynasty.

<https://rainhasantaisabel.org/culto/> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

<https://www.cm-coimbra.pt/areas/viver/cultura/arquivo-historico/festas-da-cidade> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

The interviews will be referred to by numbers ("Interview 1" . . .), according to the chronological order in which I conducted them, since I chose to conceal the identity of my interlocutors.

Until 1911, it was the guesthouse of the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Nova that sheltered pilgrims to Santiago, with this gap remaining in the city of Coimbra until 2014.

<https://www.noticiasdecoimbra.pt/albergue-de-peregrinos-abre-no-sabado-em-coimbra/> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

<https://rainhasantaisabel.org/tesouro-da-rainha-santa-isabel> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

1860–1941, priest and professor at the University of Coimbra, and a prominent member of the Confraternity of Queen Saint Elizabeth.

Pero-Sanz (2014) also alludes to this.

The *Legend of the Holy Queen or Relation of the Queen or Book that Tells of the Good Life that Queen Elizabeth of Portugal led, and of Her Good Deeds and Miracles in Her Life and After Death* was an early biography of the Holy Queen, an anonymous 14th-century manuscript, likely written by her confessor, Friar Salvado. Although the original has been lost, a 16th-century copy is preserved in the Machado de Castro National Museum in Coimbra.

The text used here by António Vasconcelos mentions these dates as probable, as this author mentions that the story appears for the first time in a writing from 1562, by Fr. Marcos de Lisboa, although the popular tradition is earlier, perhaps from the 15th century, as in the sepulchral chapel of Queen Elizabeth, built in the time of King D. Manuel, the representation of the queen with her lap full of flowers already appears (Vasconcelos [1894] 1993, p. 424).

"Note that here it is not mere symbols that implant true Christian dispositions, but power—ranging all the way from laws (imperial and ecclesiastical) and other sanctions (hellfire, death, salvation, good reputation, peace) to the disciplinary activities of social institutions (family, school, city, church) and of human bodies (fasting, prayer, obedience, penance)." (Asad 1993, p. 119). "Hence my repeated question: how does theoretical discourse actually define religion? What are the historical conditions in which it can act effectively as a demand for the imitation, or the prohibition, or the authentication of truthful utterances and practices? How does power create religion?" (Asad 1993, p. 123).

These weddings were restored in 2023, after three decades without occurring, and resumed in 2025. Until the 80s, the initiative was aimed at young couples with financial difficulties, who were also offered trousseaus. They are organized by a group of institutions, namely the Confraternity and the City Council. (<https://rainhasantaisabel.org/casamentos-da-rainha-santa/>, accessed on 9 September 2025).

<https://rainhasantaisabel.org/2010/06/28/real-ordem-da-santa-isabel/> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

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