Real Ordem de Santa Isabel

LITURGICAL MEMORIAL OF SAINT CHARLES BORROMEO

Basilica of the Estrela, November 4, 2026

Homily at the Mass of Thanksgiving for the 225th anniversary of the foundation of the Royal Order of Santa Isabel

Dear brothers and sisters,

We gather on the morning of this 4th of November, in the magnificent temple that is the Royal Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus—known as the Basilica of the Estrela—to offer thanks to the Lord for the 225th anniversary of the founding of the Royal Order of Santa Isabel. Established on this very day in 1801 by the then-Prince Regent Dom João—the future King João VI—on behalf of Queen Dona Maria I (who is laid to rest here and for whom we pray during this Mass), the Order exists as an honorary dynastic order, exclusive to the Portuguese Royal House. It functions as a private association of the Catholic faithful, dedicated to keeping alive the devotion to Santa Isabel the Queen. It seeks to address the moral and material needs of our times—particularly by defending the values of life, the human person, and the family—and remains true to the motto displayed upon its insignia, *Pauperum Solatio* ("comfort for the poor"). Its hallmark is service to the most vulnerable, with a particular focus on supporting motherhood, children at risk, the elderly, and the provision of palliative care.

While we give thanks to the Lord for the graces received and the good bestowed throughout these two hundred and twenty-five years of the Royal Order of Santa Isabel, we also wish to offer prayers in this Holy Mass—fittingly, during what is popularly known as the "month of the Souls"—for the souls of all the Grand Mistresses of the Royal Order of Santa Isabel whom the Lord has called into His presence: Her Majesty Queen Carlota Joaquina; Empress Maria Leopoldina; Empress Amélia;

Her Royal Highness Adelaide; and Their Majesties Queen Maria II, Queen Estefânia, Queen Maria Pia, and Queen Amélia, as well as Her Royal Highness Augusta Vitória; along with all the Dames of the Royal Order of Santa Isabel who "have gone before us, marked with the sign of faith, and now sleep the sleep of peace" (Roman Canon).

First of all, I would like to greet

His Royal Highness, the Duke of Bragança, in his capacity as Head of the Royal House; Her Royal Highness, Dona Isabel, Duchess of Bragança and, by virtue of her position, Grand Master of the Royal Order of Santa Isabel; as well as the entire Royal Family;

all the distinguished Dames of the Royal Order of Santa Isabel;

and the distinguished Knights of the Royal Military Order of Nossa Senhora da Conceição de Vila Viçosa;

the Reverend priests concelebrating this Mass: Canon Monsignor Duarte da Cunha, parish priest of this Basilica—who welcomes us so warmly—and Canon António Marim, who served this Basilica, as well as the Royal Order of Santa Isabel, for so many years.

Dear brothers and sisters,

Saint Paul's exhortation to the Philippians, which we heard in the first reading of the Holy Mass, reaches us all—and, in a special way, each of you, Dames of the Royal Order—as a powerful invitation: "Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." The image that Saint Paul offers us is of extraordinary beauty: every Christian is called to shine like a star in the world. Not seeking the luster of vain human admiration, but rather reflecting—through a consistent witness of life—the very light of God; and thus, not flaunting human glories or worldly privileges, but, by radiating the light of Faith, firmly upholding the Word of the Lord Jesus, who is our Life.

This image seems particularly apt and well-suited to the celebration that has brought us together today: indeed, this Order was established to honor ladies who—through their service to the Crown and to Portugal, and through extensive charitable works—seek to make the light of the Christian

Faith shine in all its splendor, even in increasingly dark times. They have taken as their Patroness one of the most luminous figures in the history of holiness in our nation: Santa Isabel the Queen.

The word of God offers us a remarkable answer in this regard: the true greatness of a person does not lie simply in the position they hold, the honor due to them, or the prestige their status may command; rather, it is found, first and foremost, in the light they radiate—a light that stems from the nobility of the virtues that crown their character.

There is a providential circumstance surrounding this celebration. Today, November 4th, the Church throughout the world observes the obligatory liturgical memorial of Saint Charles Borromeo—an illustrious Archbishop of Milan, born into one of the most prestigious Italian families of the 16th century, and a shining example of a shepherd deeply zealous for souls.

This fortunate coincidence allows us to reflect on how Saint Charles Borromeo understood—as few others have—that the true greatness of any high office lies not so much in the privileges it confers, but in the obligations it entails.

Among his writings are eighty letters addressed by Saint Charles Borromeu to the Princes of Savoy—Emanuele Filiberto and, subsequently, his son Carlo Emanuele I—covering the period from 1565 to 1584, the very year in which the saintly bishop would pass away.

Particularly noteworthy is the letter dated November 12, 1580, in which the cardinal offers Duke Carlo Emanuele—then eighteen years old and recently ascended to the throne—a series of valuable counsels for his life as a sovereign and head of state.

Borromeu writes: "At the very beginning of your reign, I felt compelled to remind Your Majesty of what I consider to be the most essential foundation for the sound administration of the states over which God, Our Lord, has made you prince: to turn frequently to God, through prayer and the most holy sacraments, so that He may grant you the light and assistance needed to lead your people toward the purpose for which He has entrusted them to your governance. For the dignity and power of princes—like all else—are subordinate to God, and their true end is the salvation of their subjects, in union with the glory of God."

After noting that divine grace also bestows material prosperity upon those sovereigns who prioritize the spiritual progress of their nation, the saint continues: "Therefore, I earnestly desire that Your Majesty—neither because of the multitude of affairs nor for any other reason—should ever fail to present yourself daily, in spirit, before God to seek His holy light, and to frequently receive the most

holy sacraments, from which we draw such great spiritual strength and fortitude." Your Majesty has an even greater need for them now, insofar as you recognize—given the heavy burden resting upon your shoulders—that you require, all the more, divine assistance. I likewise trust in Your Majesty's piety that you will ensure those you choose to advise and assist you in the governance of your States are men firmly grounded in God, through these very same means.

What an admirable definition of true Christian nobility, expressed in these paternal counsels! Saint Charles Borromeo clearly understood that the greater the weight of responsibility borne by the elites in a society, the greater the need for divine assistance; for dignity and honor are not prerogatives that exist solely for the benefit of those who possess them. Rather, they constitute a mission received from on High—a service to be rendered—in the spirit of the Apostle's exhortation: "you shine like stars in the world." Indeed, while the young Duke of Savoy lacked neither a dynastic succession, an illustrious name, nor a crown and a throne of power, Saint Charles Borromeo made sure to point out that there was one thing he could not inherit: the virtue necessary to govern well. And that can only come through the divine Grace received into the soul.

As the master of the Italian language—and a fellow countryman—Dante Alighieri wrote centuries ago: "It is not lineage that makes people noble, but rather people who make their lineage noble." Indeed, an elevation in dignity demands an elevation in one's way of life. Herein lies the deepest meaning of true aristocracy—which, in its Greek etymology, signifies precisely "the rule of the best." This does not necessarily refer to the wealthiest, the most powerful, or those with the most illustrious genealogy; rather, it refers to those who distinguish themselves through the excellence of their virtues—most especially, and above all, with regard to the Faith.

Indeed, the Royal Order of Santa Isabel is also called upon to keep alive not merely a heritage of traditions, but—through each of its Dames—to pass on a heritage of virtues.

For this reason, the words of Saint Paul reach our ears—and today, they reach you, Dames of the Royal Order of Santa Isabel—as a powerful exhortation: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." And we do so with the awareness that, apart from Jesus, we can do nothing (cf. John 15:15); for, as the Apostle teaches, it is "God who works in you, both to will and to act."

Among the virtues that should adorn, with radiant brilliance, those who are invested with authority or honored with exceptional distinctions, is the one that stands out today in the Holy Gospel: the virtue of prudence. "Which of you, wishing to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has the means to finish it? [...] And what king, setting out to wage war against

another king, does not first sit down to consider whether he is able, with ten thousand soldiers, to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?" asks Jesus. Those who think that prudence means mere mediocre caution, a fear of taking risks, or the cleverness to seek personal advantage while avoiding difficulties, are mistaken. As Saint Thomas explains, "prudence is right reason applied to action" (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 47, a. 2)—that is, the capacity to discern what is good and to carry it out in the most appropriate way. This is why the Angelic Doctor calls prudence the *auriga virtutum*—the charioteer, the guide of all the virtues.

Finally, in this Holy Mass, how could we not implore—from the One who, as Saint Paul teaches us today, works within us "both to will and to act"—this virtue, so essential, and one in which we, too, are called to shine?

Your Royal Highnesses,

Portugal is grateful to you, for in the Most Serene House of Braganza, our nation finds the example of a Family whose brilliance is expressed through a commitment to serve and love our homeland. This becomes even more evident in this year when Your Royal Highness, Dom Duarte, will celebrate fifty years as Head of the Portuguese Royal House—a mission dedicated to Portugal and to the Portuguese diaspora present in the four corners of the world.

May Santa Isabel the Queen, patroness of this Royal Order, along with the constellation of Portuguese saints and the Virgin Mary—Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Patroness and Queen of Portugal—keep you all under their holy protection. Amen.