Homily at the Mass of Real Ordem de Santa Isabel

Dear brothers and sisters,

On this day of celebration, we gather here to sing of the wonders of God, which are so brilliantly reflected in Santa Isabel of Portugal, our Holy Queen. In this afternoon Mass, the presence of Real Ordem de Santa Isabel stands out with particular significance; it was established in 1801 by Prince Regent D. João, in the name of Queen D. Maria I. It is an honorary dynastic order, exclusive to the Portuguese Royal House, organized as a private association of the faithful of the Catholic Church. Its purpose is to keep alive devotion to the Holy Queen Elizabeth, fulfilling the mission of responding to the moral and material needs of each era, particularly the defense of the values of life, the person, and the family.

I would therefore like, first and foremost, to extend my greetings to: Their Royal Highnesses, Dom Duarte, Duke of Bragança, and Dona Isabel, Duchess of Bragança and, by virtue of that title, Grand Master of the Royal Order of Saint Isabel; Their Highnesses present here today, in particular the Duke and Duchess of Coimbra; and the Duke of Porto, with his fiancée, Countess Anna, who, in this first public appearance following the very recent announcement of their engagement, entrust themselves here to Saint Isabel of Portugal. May Your Highness, Lord Dom Dinis, and Lady Dona Anna, receive our most heartfelt wishes for much happiness and blessings in the Lord as you embark on this journey of engagement: may the Holy Queen watch over you and strengthen you until the joyful day of your marriage!

A word of greeting is also due to all the Most Excellent Dames of Real Ordem de Santa Isabel and to the distinguished Knights of the Real Ordem de de Nossa Senhora da Conceição de Vila Viçosa;

To Monsignor José António Teixeira Alves, Counselor of the Apostolic Nunciature, and to the remainder priests and deacons;

To the President of the Administrative Board of the Confraternity of Queen Saint Isabel, who always welcomes us so warmly in this beautiful church;

And, finally, to all of you, dear faithful devotees, who find in Queen Santa Isabel a confidante at all times, an intercessor in times of trial, and a faithful reflection of God's tender love for humanity.

"Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort! He comforts us in all our tribulation, so that we too may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of tribulation, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God." (2 Cor 1:3–4).

These words of Saint Paul aptly summarize a common trait in the lives of all the saints, without exception, and therefore also a trait very much present in the life of Santa Isabel of Portugal in particular: we are comforted so that we may comfort others. Only a heart capable of suffering out of love is capable of having compassion for our brothers and sisters. Only a heart that is capable of taking up the daily cross, of enduring its own passion out of love, is capable of compassion; it is capable of true compassion.

The first reading introduced us to the widow Judith, who, after the death of Manasseh, offered her people an example of unshakable faith and hope. The pain she suffered from losing her husband did not rob her of hope, nor did it lock her away in a prison of bitterness. Judith discovered that God never abandons those who have lost everything. In fact, this heroine of the Old Testament, before being presented as the one who will save Israel from the hands of Holofernes, is first and foremost portrayed as a fragile widow—a situation that in Sacred Scripture is always a symbol of the condition of those who can no longer rely on human security and, therefore, have only the Lord as their sole refuge. The sacred author thus seems to want to tell us that Judith's strength and courage do not come from weapons, money, power, or influence, but spring, above all, from a hidden life of prayer and total surrender into the hands of God, who entrusts her with such a great mission.

As Judith, our Holy Queen, when the cross of widowhood came upon her—at a decisive and transformative moment in her entire life—resolutely cast aside her robes of majesty to clothe herself in the humility of the Gospel, woven into the Franciscan habit, dedicating herself entirely to the mission of loving and serving God, loving and serving, in particular, the poorest, with whom the Lord identified Himself. If she had done so before, she will now do so with even greater zeal!

How often, in the face of life's tribulations and sufferings, does the question well up deep within us: "Why? Why me, Lord? Why must I suffer this?" Surely, many of us here have, at one time or another, been confronted with these same heart-wrenching questions... And like Saint Teresa of Jesus, we may have let the exclamation slip from our lips: "Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few!"

If the "whys" distress us, a faith-filled reading of the mystery of suffering opens up a "what for?" that is full of meaning. As St. John Paul II so aptly put it, "Suffering is present in the world to unleash love, to give rise to works of love toward our neighbor, to transform the whole of human civilization into the 'civilization of love.'" (Salvifici Doloris, 30).

In fact, we have lived long enough to realize that the Cross is not an exception in our lives… it is the rule. In a world that despairs in the face of suffering, these two women, Judith and Isabel, teach us another kind of wisdom: suffering is present in the world to stir up love, to call us to love.

As our beloved Pope Leo so aptly put it in his first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, recently published: "Our relationship with life seems to be in crisis today. Everything that presents itself as a 'limit'—disability, illness, old age, suffering, vulnerability—tends to be interpreted, first and

foremost, as a defect to be corrected, rather than as a space where the human person matures and opens up to relationship" (MH, 118). And with words that fit so well with the biography of the Holy Queen, the Holy Father continues: "It is precisely in our limitations that compassion finds room, as does sincere concern for the needs of others, generosity that surprises even in the midst of darkness and failure, spiritual experience, and the worship of God. We see this in so many moments when these limits become tangible in our lives—when we are rejected, when we suffer because of illness or the death of a loved one, when we experience a sense of helplessness or failure. Mysteriously," concludes the Holy Father, "it is precisely in these adversities that we can find a new wisdom, touch the affection of others with our own hands, and experience diverse. (MH 119)

Dear brothers and sisters, Saints are not made overnight. They are forged on the Cross, in the school of suffering—suffering embraced and understood in the light of Faith. The Gospel parable of the house built on the rock or on the sand reveals a profound truth: no one is immune to storms. The rains, torrents, and headwinds of life's sufferings and tribulations spare no one, not even those of royal blood.

And it is no coincidence: this year, 2026, marks the 75th anniversary of the death of the last—to this day!—Queen of Portugal. Like Judith and Isabel of Portugal, Queen Dona Amélia—to whom we owe this precious image of the Holy Queen—also bore the heavy cross of suffering. She endured, as no one should ever have to, the supreme pain of seeing her husband, her firstborn son, and, finally, her country mercilessly taken from her. In one of her letters to the Bishop-Count of Coimbra, Dom Manuel de Bastos Pina, she confided: "I remain quite concerned; but as far as I am concerned, while I cannot help but suffer from the injustice and infamy of some, the knowledge that I have done my duty, along with the esteem and sympathy of so many, give me more strength than ever to continue on my path, steadfastly and serenely. May it all be by the Grace of God!" (Letters from Her Majesty Queen Dona Amélia to D. Manuel de Bastos Pina, Bishop-Count of Coimbra, Livraria Clássica Editora, Lisbon 1948, p. 139).

Brothers and sisters, only by grounding ourselves in faith—like Judith and Isabel—and living a life of intimacy with the Lord through prayer, shifting our focus away from ourselves and toward our brothers and sisters, will we not allow ourselves to be swept away by the storm. But who among us here, glancing back at what has already happened in our own lives, is not filled with wonder: "How did I not break down? How did I not crumble?" And with gratitude and humility, we must acknowledge, as we heard from Saint John in the second reading: "Who is the one who overcomes the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:5). In fact, "this is the victory that overcomes the world: our faith" (1 John 5:4). On this day, as we celebrate our Patroness, Santa Isabel, we realize that the mystery of suffering, viewed in the shadow of the Cross, becomes redemptive: the Passion opens the way within us to compassion.

We therefore offer this Holy Mass for all those who suffer the most and face the most diverse trials in this life. We ask the Lord on our behalf that, by embracing our own sufferings, we may not be indifferent to the suffering of our brothers and sisters, so that in everything, like Saint Paul, we may say: "Blessed be the God of all comfort [...] He comforts us in all our tribulation, so that we too may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of tribulation, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God." (2 Cor 1:3–4).

Amen.