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Meeting the Ultimate Friend – Visions and Auditions in the Images of Dying St Francis and St Elisabeth

The parallels between the lives of St. Elisabeth and St. Francis include the reconciled acceptance of the death by the saint. This was mostly expressed by depicting miracles – visions and auditions, stressing the lively contact of the dying person with the supernatural. The supernatural consolation could be too weak to suppress the sorrow and pain as ordinary human emotions responding to the fact of death.

The representations using textual and visual *topoi* were quite conventional. The originality with which Francis and Elizabeth responded to the questions, posed by the limits of human existence in this world was rarely shown in an innovative way. The iconography of the earliest narrative cycles from the life of Saint Francis stressed the wonders taking place at his grave in Assisi, connected with the cult of the relics.

In younger pictures, the motif of the soaring soul leaving the saintly body (based on the legends by Thomas of Celano and Saint Bonaventure) became more important. In the upper church of Saint Francis in Assisi, the soul is marked by a likeness of the saint. Other miracles were associated with the death of the saint by the narrative logic of the cycles, stressing the unity of the dying and the verification of the stigmata. The images illustrated the spiritual consolation, given to the visionaries. An additional message was targeted at the social position of these persons as religious leaders.

The innovative painting on the festive side of the main altar retable in Košice, represents the dying of Saint Elisabeth without a homunculus standing for her soul. Among the witnesses of the dying, there is a group of singing Franciscans and some singing angels behind the bed, too. The roots of this motif reach back to the letter written shortly after the death of the saint on November 17, 1231. According to this source, the immediate witnesses of her passing away have heard a very sweet singing, but the saint did not move her lips. This unique miracle was represented only more than two centuries after the first reports about the dying Elizabeth. The visual sources of this image include the dying Virgin Mary by Konrad von Soest and illustrations of the *Ars Moriendi* treatise. The painter did not ignore the emotional response to death and dying, including a very human tragic perspective. One more supernatural consolation given to the saint by the vision of the opened heaven in the upper part of the image resembles the image of the death of Virgin by Hugo van der Goes.

The visionary experiences, connected with the lives of St. Francis and Saint Elisabeth continued to be a source of inspirations and consolation for people in subsequent centuries. Even if not sufficient to suppress the tragic dimensions of dying, they still could help to strengthen the minds of people in difficult situations.