

Elizabeth II, the "last Christian monarch", has died

This article, written by Matthieu Lasserre, was published on Thursday night by La Croix - International, an independent Catholic magazine, few hours after the Queen died.

Queen Elizabeth II has died at the age of 96. Her 70 years on the throne marked the longest reign in British history, one that was also distinguished by her Christian faith.



Queen Elizabeth II died at her Scottish estate on Thursday surrounded by her adult children and other members of her family.

"The Queen died peacefully at Balmoral this afternoon," said a statement from Buckingham Palace. Her funeral is expected to take place within 10 days-time at Westminster Abbey and her coffin then be entombed in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle.

There will be much religious symbolism on display as Britain mourns these days and finally lays to rest a monarch who was known to be a devout Christian. And she was not afraid to show her faith in public.

Elizabeth was only 26 years old and not yet crowned when she gave her first Christmas address, a true British institution in which each sovereign addresses the Commonwealth with his or her best wishes.

"Pray for me," she said. "May God give me the wisdom and strength to keep the solemn promises I shall make, and that I may serve Him, and you, all the days of my life."

Seventy years later, the exercise remained imbued with the religious sensibility of the longest-serving Queen in British history.

"Since the early 2000s, the Queen herself wrote her Christmas addresses for the Commonwealth," said Andrew N. Wilson, a columnist, writer and biographer of the Queen.

"These broadcasts were a kind of public witness to her faith in Jesus Christ each year," he noted. Her addresses sometimes took the form of a sermon, such as the one in 2020, a year marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Elizabeth II said she regretted not being able to *"celebrate normally"* the birth of Jesus.

"The teachings of Christ have served as an inner light for me, as has the meaning we can find when we come together to worship," she confessed.

A "living" faith

British monarchs, although they hold the titles *"defender of the faith"* and *"supreme governor of the Church of England,"* are not necessarily believers themselves. But Elizabeth II was a monarch apart.

"To understand her relationship to faith, you have to distinguish between Queen Elizabeth II, sovereign and formal, and Elizabeth Windsor, whose personal faith was alive," explained Gavin Ashenden, a former Anglican priest who was the Queen's honorary chaplain from 2008-2017.

This allowed him to meet with the royal family on several occasions during receptions or services. He said the fact that the sovereign expressed her faith speaks volumes about the importance she placed on God.

"The constitutional balance requires that the Queen does not express personal opinions," said Ashenden, who became a Roman Catholic in 2019.

"So the fact that she spoke openly about her faith was not insignificant," he pointed out.

Behind closed doors, Elizabeth II was very religious.

"Everyone knows that the Queen said her prayers, read the Bible and went to church every week," said Matthew Dennison, another of her biographers.

At the beginning of October 2021, the Queen did not go to church for Sunday services because she was undergoing tests in hospital. The British press was concerned about the unusual absence, which fuelled speculation about her health.

God's representative in the country

"It was her mother, Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, who taught her the formal repetition of evening prayers and attendance at church," said Dennison.

"She was very traditional," he added.

"If Elizabeth II's mother instilled this in her, it is more from her father, a Christian at heart, that she got her faith," argued Andrew Wilson.

"He passed on to her a very deep and personal faith, which clung to God in difficult times: he held, for example, a National Day of Prayer during the war," the author added.

In addition to her private practice, the Queen took her role as head of the Church of England and its clergy very seriously.

"Her sister, Princess Margaret, told me that the Queen saw herself as God's representative in the country," recalled Wilson.

"She was concerned about the decline of the Church of England and was personally involved in the appointment of bishops and her personal chaplain," the biographer said.

But the sovereign was above all a fervent Christian.

"She will be remembered as the most ecumenical of monarchs," said Matthew Dennison.

One of the most revealing encounters of the Queen's public spirituality, as well as one of the most controversial, was with the famous American Baptist preacher Billy Graham.

Their first meeting gave birth to a friendship that continued over the following decades, until the preacher's death in 2018. It was in London in 1954 that Graham launched his international "crusades", preaching conversion to Christ and the forgiveness of sins to some 200 million people in 185 countries.

An ecumenical queen

In one episode of the popular TV series *The Crown*, the Queen appeared alongside Reverend Graham and asked him how to forgive her uncle, the Duke of Windsor, for his involvement with the Nazi party during World War II.

While biographers have subsequently refuted that such an exchange took place, the fact remains that the two figures developed a friendly and spiritual relationship.

"Billy Graham was invited to dine and preach at Windsor Chapel," remembered Gavin Ashenden.

"The Queen greatly appreciated their exchanges: they shared a deep attachment to the Bible," he said.

Elizabeth II was very open towards Catholics, who had long been reviled in the United Kingdom and seen by Queen Victoria as a risk to the country's security.

"(Elizabeth) called Cardinal Basil Hume 'our cardinal' and was very affectionate with Cardinal Murphy O'Connor," said Dominican Father Timothy Radcliffe, former provincial of England and then Master of the Order of Preachers.

"She also appointed a Catholic as Lord Chamberlain, the first time since the Reformation!" he pointed out.

Queen Elizabeth met five popes during her long reign. The only ones that served during her lifetime that she never met were Paul VI and the John Paul I, who died just 33 days after becoming pope.

She provoked discontent among some Britons attached to state Anglicanism when she attended Catholic Vespers in Westminster Cathedral in 1995 for the church's 100th anniversary.

This show of friendship and kindness led a senior Vatican official to describe Elizabeth II to the London press as "the last Christian monarch".