

Three Portuguese Princesses

Saint Teresa, Queen of Leon (Tarasias of Portugal)
died 17 June 1250, Lorvão, Portugal

Saint Sancha, Princess of Portugal (Sanctia)
died 13 March 1229, Alenquer, Portugal

Saint Mafalda, Queen of Castile
died 1252, Arouca, Portugal

On their way to sainthood, the king of Portugal's daughter's successfully fought their powerful brother for control of the lands their father left them.

Teresa, the oldest, married Alfonso IX, king of Leon, but after five years of marriage and three children, it was discovered they were cousins. At first, Teresa and her husband resisted efforts to separate them. Teresa yielded only after Portugal was devastated by famine, pestilence, and war. Convinced that it was because of her sin, she agreed to have the marriage dissolved. She and her husband remained good friends. Teresa acquired a disgraced monastery at Lorvão, evicted the monks, restored the buildings, and installed nuns who followed the strict Cistercian Rule. She shared their life, although she did not take vows until just before her death.

Teresa's brother succeeded their father and became King Alfonso II in 1212. Better known as Alfonso the Fat, he refused to hand over property that their father had bequeathed to Teresa and her sister Sancha. To show he meant business, Alfonso invaded Sancha's lands and killed some of her tenants. Teresa turned to her former husband, who sent a force commanded by their son Ferdinand. Alfonso the Fat was forced to turn over the properties and leave his sisters in peace.

Of the three sisters, Sancha was the most devout. She resisted Alfonso's plans to marry her to his nephew, the king of Leon and Castile. Like Teresa, Sancha assumed the Cistercian habit without taking final vows. (This allowed them to keep control of their property.) Sancha also helped the Dominicans and Franciscans make their first foundations in Portugal. At the end of her life, Sancha retired to her convent at Alenquer.

Teresa died in the chapel at Lorvão while listening to the nuns sing the Magnificat, and she was buried beside Sancha.

The youngest sister, Mafalda, was their brother's favourite, and he promoted her marriage to Henry I, king of Castile, until Pope Innocent III stepped in and annulled it on grounds of consanguinity (being related by blood). Mafalda then resolved to become a nun and built the monastery of Santa Maria de Arouca. She also built a hospice for pilgrims and a home for indigent widows, and she restored the cathedral at Porto that had been built by her grandmother. While returning from a visit to the cathedral, Mafalda was seized with a fever and knew she was dying. She ordered her body be put on a mule and buried wherever it stopped. The mule carried Mafalda's body to the church in Arouca, knelt before the altar, and laid down the precious burden, and died. Later, when their monastery was hit by fire, Mafalda appeared among the flames and saved the church and infirmary from destruction. The Cistercian Order celebrates Teresa, Sancha, and Mafalda together on 17th June.

The Genius of the Portuguese Princesses:

All three were born to power and privilege. They knew how to use it and when to let it go.

Reflection:

*"He has helped Israel his servant,
remembering his mercy."*

Luke 1.54 (last verse heard by Teresa)

Source:

Gallick, Sarah The Big Book of Women Saints p. 181