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Some Aspects of Elizabeth Seton's Spiritual/ Theological World

BY

KATHLEEN FLANAGAN, S.C.

Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born in New York on 28 August 1774. She was the second daughter of Doctor Richard Bayley and Catherine Charlton Bayley. She was of French and English ancestry. Her father was born in Fairfield, Connecticut, and her mother in Staten Island, New York.

Her religious ancestry was staunchly Protestant. She could claim two of the original Huguenot settlers in New York among her ancestors and her mother's father was the long-time rector of Saint Andrew's Anglican Church on Staten Island.¹

Though no baptismal records for Elizabeth have ever been found, we can say with confidence that she was baptized into the Anglican Church as an infant or small child.² Elizabeth's mother died in 1777, leaving Doctor Bayley with three small girls. The youngest, Catherine, died in 1778. Doctor Bayley married Charlotte Amelia Barclay in that same year, and Charlotte and Richard eventually had seven children of their own.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth and her older sister Mary Magdelene never completely fit into the new family, and they knew many periods of loneliness, especially because they had such love for their father, who could be cold and inattentive. They spent extended periods of time with their uncle William Bayley's family in New Rochelle, New York. In 1812 Elizabeth wrote down her recollections of this period of

¹Elizabeth's maternal grandfather was Reverend Richard Charlton, rector of Saint Andrew's church on Staten Island. Though Americans are more familiar with the term "Episcopal Church," technically this Church became independent from the Church of England at a Church convention held in Philadelphia in 1785. It was at that convention that the Church formally adopted the name of Protestant Episcopal Church. After the first few early references to Anglican church, I will use the term Episcopal Church.

²Trinity, the mother church for Anglicans in New York, was burned to the ground in 1776, when British troops were leaving the city. All church records for that period were lost. Elizabeth was listed as a communicant at Trinity in 1801 and was married before Bishop Provoost in 1794. Only baptized members of the church could receive communion or be married in the church.

her life in a diary called “Dear Remembrances.” The “Remembrances” show an ardent and sensitive young girl, one who is sometimes lonely and sad, but at other times is completely content, immersed in the beauties of nature, friends, and relatives “in the country.” The diary also reveals a young woman who is very close to God, finding God’s presence in nature as well as in her own prayer.³

It would appear that Elizabeth’s religious upbringing was somewhat eclectic. Her father was a nominal Episcopalian but like many of that day was very much influenced by the the thinking of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on science and reason and human freedom and its disdain for institutional religion. Her stepmother was a practicing Episcopalian, and Elizabeth noted that her stepmother taught her the first prayers she learned, especially the twenty-third psalm.⁴ From her Huguenot relatives in New Rochelle, Elizabeth learned to love the psalms and the religious hymns so special to their tradition. But one also reads the following in “Dear Remembrances,” “Methodist spinning girls—their continual hymn ‘and am I only born to die’ made deep impression, yet when I would be my own mistress I intended to be a Quaker because they wore such pretty *plain hats—excellent reason*”⁵

We do not have written evidence to indicate how active Elizabeth was in Trinity parish, New York, during her childhood and teenage years. She was married to William Magee Seton on 25 January 1794 at her sister Mary’s home on John Street in New York City. Bishop Samuel Provoost, pastor of Trinity Church and bishop of the Episcopal diocese of New York, presided at the marriage. One would assume that the bishop/pastor accepted the invitation to preside at the service because the families were parishioners in good standing and maybe because the bishop remembered who the young bride’s grandfather was (Reverend Richard Charlton). One cannot discount the additional fact that these families were seen as prominent and an important part of upper class New York society of that time. We do know that she was an active communicant at Trinity as a married woman and was listed (along with her husband) as a communicant in 1801.

³The original is to be found in the archives of Saint Joseph Central House, Emmitsburg, Maryland, hereinafter cited as ASJCH. The complete text is also published in *Madame De Barberey, Elizabeth Seton*, trans. Joseph B. Code (Emmitsburg: 1927), 350-60, and in *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, ed. Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York: 1987), 344-53. I will refer to this last work when quoting from “Dear Remembrances.”

⁴“Dear Remembrances,” 344-45.

⁵*Ibid.*, 345. Emphasis in original.

It was in December of the previous year that a young minister joined the staff at Trinity, and this minister would have a significant impact on the life of Elizabeth Seton. The minister was John Henry Hobart. Hobart was born in Philadelphia on 14 September 1775. His father was a sea captain who died in 1776, leaving a wife and nine children, including his youngest son John Henry. Mrs. Hobart was a strong and capable woman who held the family together and made sure that even this youngest child would have a secure home and a good education. The family were members of the Anglican Church, but Captain Hobart's forebears were staunch New England Puritans. Edmund Hobart had emigrated from Hingham, Norfolk, England, in 1633 and settled in Massachusetts Bay, where he established a town bearing the same name as his hometown in England.

John Henry was baptized by Reverend (later Bishop) William White in Philadelphia. White was an extraordinary man who was one of the leaders of the 1785 convention that gave birth to the Protestant Episcopal Church. He became a bishop of that Church (along with Samuel Provoost) in 1787 and continued to be active until the time of his death in 1836. He was Hobart's teacher and guide. Hobart was confirmed by him, studied Anglican theology under him, and in 1798 was ordained deacon by him. White was also significant because Hobart's more formal theological training took place at the College of New Jersey (later known as Princeton). Princeton was under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church, and the theology of John Calvin was taught. The theology of the Protestant Episcopal church was different from that of the Presbyterians, and it was Hobart's task to balance what he learned at Princeton with what he learned from his mentor, William White.

Princeton provided him with a solid grounding in Scripture, a grounding which was a major influence in his adult life. He also learned to present his own theology with solid Scriptural foundation and with a hard-headed reasonableness. But the theology of Princeton also enabled him to see where his own theological/faith understanding differed from the Presbyterians. He would use this knowledge in later controversial writing with Presbyterian/reformed clergy of his day.⁶

⁶The two main sources I am using for the material on Hobart are my own dissertation, "The Influence of John Henry Hobart on the Life of Elizabeth Ann Seton" (Ph. D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1978), and Bruce Robert Mullin, *Episcopal Vision/American Reality: High Church Theology and Social Thought in Evangelical America* (New Haven: 1986).

White and Hobart were a formidable duo, and both deserve much credit for helping the Protestant Episcopal Church to survive and grow in the new nation.

Hobart came to be one of the leaders of that Church who consciously tried to articulate the uniqueness of the Protestant Episcopal Church among Reformation churches in America, and in some cases, against the Roman Catholic Church. He put emphasis on the fact that the Episcopal Church was the pure remnant of the Church of Christ, maintaining apostolic roots and visible structures (including the orders of bishop, priest, and deacon) and a central place for sacramental rites. Such teaching was not unique with Hobart; it was standard thinking of the great Anglican theologians, starting with Richard Hooker (1553-1600) and Richard Field (1561-1616), through the seventeenth century Caroline divines and the beginnings of the "High Church" theological tradition first in England and then among some early Anglican divines in the American colonies.

Henry Hobart is a complex figure who is not easy to interpret. Biographers of Elizabeth Seton have often seen him as an important figure in her life, but a stumbling block and source of pain as she searched for God's will for her. Even among more recent Protestant scholars, Hobart is sometimes characterized as taking positions more for reasons of political or social advantage than for reasons of theological convictions.⁷ Like many persons with strong opinions, he could appear obstinate, even arrogant if crossed, yet I have seen him more as one who has shaped his views because of his study and because of his conviction in faith and has become even more attached to these convictions because of the challenges of others. His Church was a minority church in early nineteenth-century America, and he had to define the unique identity of that Church over against other Reformation Churches, especially Evangelical Churches, as well as against the Roman Catholic Church.

Even within his own Church, his views were a minority opinion. Most late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Episcopals were "Low Church," or evangelical. That meant that they prized Scripture as the chief guide for the Christian, saw episcopacy as a valued but not inherently necessary office in the Church, expected to

⁷See Richard W. Wertz, "John Henry Hobart, 1775-1830: Pillar of the Episcopal Church" (Ph. D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1967). Also see Mullin, *Episcopal Vision/American Reality*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

attend weekly worship services which were characterized by singing of hymns, praying psalms, reading from Scripture, and a lengthy sermon. Even in Episcopal churches, at least in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the Communion Service was celebrated about six times a year. Use of vestments or adornment of the church was minimal. Hobart and others of the "High Church" party saw this as a weakness in the life of the Church which needed to be remedied. It should be noted that the first two books published by Hobart were *A Companion for the Altar* and *The Companion for the Festivals and the Fasts* (1804). Both works were devotional in nature, reminding the Episcopalian of the importance of the liturgical year and the saving power of the sacraments. *A Companion for the Altar* provided daily meditations in preparation for receiving communion. Where Hobart was decidedly "Low Church" was in his view of the presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements, and in his view of the eucharistic rite as a sacrificial rite. He accepted a spiritual presence of Christ in the elements for one who believes but no objective presence. He saw the eucharistic rite as a sacrifice of praise but not a propitiatory sacrifice. In a small work edited by Hobart in 1825, he distinguished Roman Catholic and Episcopal views of eucharist. He said:

In the Sacrament of the Eucharist, both they and we believe a commemorative oblation of the elements; but a propitiatory sacrifice, as they believe it, we utterly disclaim; and a corporal presence, or what they call Transubstantiation, we justly reject; the cup of blessing as a part of the institution, is acknowledged by both; but a power of depriving the laity of that blessing, and the practice of the Romish Church, as founded on that pretended power, we must ever renounce and abhor.⁸

Despite these views, I believe that Hobart was a strong and positive influence on the life of Elizabeth Seton. She became a much more committed member of Trinity parish after meeting Hobart.

Whether consciously or not, he helped her to see the "High Church" understanding of Christian life. She was clearly inspired by his sermons and deepened in her life of faith. Scriptural piety was characteristic of Elizabeth Seton from her youth and Hobart nourished that

⁸John Henry Hobart, *The Churchman's Profession of his Faith and Practice as a Member of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America*, 2nd ed. (New York: 1825), 18. It should be noted that Hobart's views did not change much over the years. Though written in 1825, this quotation represents his thinking at a much earlier period.

piety. She may have been subtly influenced by his sacramental piety and for a long time shared his views of the kind of presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements.

The Hobart and Seton families were friends, and when she and her husband and oldest daughter were to leave for Italy in 1803, “she left some of her pictures and furniture in the care of the Hobarts, and . . . asked him to care for her boys, should anything happen to Will and herself on the long voyage.”⁹

Later writers in the Episcopal Church lament that the Church’s eucharistic theology and practice were not stronger while Elizabeth was a member. In 1911, Bishop Charles Grafton wrote, “It is to be remembered that Miss [*sic*] Seton, a devout person, besought the rector of Trinity Church, New York, for more frequent celebrations [of the eucharist]. She was refused, and subsequently Joined the Roman communion, where she founded an order of the Sisters of Charity.”¹⁰

I think that the struggle that Elizabeth underwent to decide which Church she should belong to strengthened and deepened her faith. I think the readings given her by Hobart, Filicchi, and others forced her to think through on a rational level where her commitment should be. The readings were difficult, but she persevered.¹¹ It is also clear that she came to realize that her decision could not be made by reason alone. She admitted this in an 1815 letter to Father Simon Gabriel Bruté, when she told him,

I tell you a secret hidden almost from my own soul, it is so delicate, that my hatred of opposition, troublesome enquiries etc. brought me in the church more than CONVICTION—how often I argued to my fearful uncertain heart: at all events, catholics must be as safe as any other religion, and they say none were safe but themselves—Perhaps it is true; if not, at all events I shall be safe with them as any other.¹²

⁹Quoted in Flanagan, “The Influence of John Henry Hobart,” 162

¹⁰Charles C. Grafton, *The Lineage from Apostolic Time of the American Catholic Church Commonly Called the Episcopal Church* (Milwaukee: 1911), 275.

¹¹Documents and books read by Elizabeth Seton included a manuscript stating Catholic doctrine and arguments regarding which Church is the true Church of Christ, probably written by Filippo Filicchi and a manuscript written by Hobart refuting many of those arguments. Both manuscripts are found in the archives of Saint Joseph Central House. In addition, she read Newton’s *Dissertation on the Prophecies*, Richard Challoner’s *The Unerring Authority of the Catholic Church in Matters of Faith*, James Bossuet’s *An Exposition of the Doctrine of the Catholic Church in Matters of Controversy*, and Robert Manning’s *England’s Conversion and Reformation Compared*.

¹²Seton to Bruté, n.d., Archives of the Sisters of Charity of New Jersey, book 30, #80. Emphasis in original.

Hobart is sometimes pictured as one who rejected Elizabeth after she decided to join the Roman Catholic Church, yet two of his early biographers note the impact of her decision on his life. John McVicker, not only a biographer but also a personal friend of Hobart, notes that, "They parted, however, not in anger, but mutual sorrow, each to run the course of high and conscientious duty. . . . But it was an event that long rested on his memory with painful interest."¹³

Elizabeth Seton became a member of the Roman Catholic Church on 14 March 1805. This Church, to which she ran for peace of soul and deeper spiritual nourishment, was even a smaller minority among Christian churches in the United States than was the Protestant Episcopal Church. Saint Peter's church in lower Manhattan, her own parish, was the **only Catholic church in the city at the time**. Founded a mere twenty years before her entry, Saint Peter's had known a troubled past and was still undergoing trials. Those trials were both external and internal. Within the Church, Saint Peter's was one of the first local churches in this country to struggle with what came to be known as "trusteeism." Because there was not the usual ecclesiastical structure of authority in the United States at that time and because of the shortage of priests, lay people would often buy property, form a corporation, build a church, and try to find a priest to care for their spiritual needs. The lay trustees of Saint Peter's had leased property (from Trinity church) and had built a simple church. Contrary to usual Catholic practice, some among them thought that they had a right to hire and fire the clergy. Good preaching was an important criteria for lay satisfaction with the clergy in those days. Undoubtedly, Catholics were influenced by their Protestant neighbors, who also found that solid preaching was one of the most important qualities to be found in a minister. For these first twenty years, priests (mainly from Ireland) came and went, some of their own volition, and others because the parishioners, and in some instances the bishop, pushed them out.¹⁴ Thus this local church struggled within itself to find stability and nourishment. It is interesting to note here that Father Matthew O'Brien,

¹³John McVicker, *The Early Life and Professional Years of Bishop Hobart* (Oxford: 1838), 268.

¹⁴New York was a major port of entry into the United States, so was a usual place for priests to arrive. There was a severe shortage of priests, and a newcomer was usually welcomed with open arms. The one bishop, John Carroll, lived in Baltimore and could not oversee every new priest coming into the country or every local parish. On the one hand, he was not against lay involvement in obtaining good priests, but he did defend his rights of authority and jurisdiction. Carroll also believed that it was better to be without a priest in a parish than to have a priest who might give scandal.

who received Elizabeth into the Church, was one of those who was an excellent preacher but, because of other faults, was periodically disciplined by the bishop. Yet Elizabeth only refers to him in a positive way and seems delighted by his sermons.

Saint Peter's is often portrayed as a parish for the economically poor, mostly Irish immigrants, though we know that there were a few wealthy families in the parish. Bishop Carroll's friends, the Barrys, were members of the parish as was the Morris family. European diplomats assigned to the new government worshiped regularly at Saint Peter's. Yet Elizabeth refers to the reputation of the parish when she wrote to Amabilia Filicchi in January, 1805:

I have tried so many ways to see the Dr. O [Matthew O'Brien] who they say is the only Catholic priest in New York where they say Catholics [*sic*] are the offscourings of the people, somebody said their congregation 'a public Nuisance' but that troubles not me, the congregation of a city, may be very shabby yet very pleasing to God, or very bad people among them yet cannot hurt *the Faith* as I take it, and should the priest himself deserve no more respect than is here allowed him, his ministry of the sacraments would be the same to me if dearest friend I ever shall receive them, I seek but God and his church and expect to find my peace in them not in the people.¹⁵

One can only wonder, however, whether being part of this congregation was an additional trial for Elizabeth, especially when one compares her experience as a prominent member of Trinity church and her experience with the cultured Catholics of Leghorn. Indeed, was it part of God's providence that her first exposure to Catholicism was within the cultured context of the Filicchi family?

Externally, Elizabeth had to cope with the bigotry meted out to anyone who claimed Catholicism as her religion. By becoming Catholic, Elizabeth was introduced to the experience of bigotry known by poor and rich Catholics alike. New York was a particularly hostile environment, however, and she came to see within three years of her entry into the Catholic Church that she needed to find a place where she, and especially her children, could live and grow as Catholics.

It was in this context that her meeting with Father Louis William Dubourg was particularly providential. Dubourg was a Sulpician and president of Saint Mary's College in Baltimore in 1806. He was an

¹⁵Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 163-64. Spelling, punctuation, and emphasis as in the original.

enthusiastic man, with great vision of what the Church could become in this country. He was an educator, who saw that education would be the key to unlock economic, social and even religious acceptance for Catholics in the United States. He saw that the education of girls was just as important as that of boys, and was trying to find religious women who might open a school for girls which would complement the schools for boys recently opened at Georgetown and Baltimore. He had inaugurated a lottery to help pay for the new buildings being constructed for Saint Mary's and was traveling from Baltimore through New York and on to Boston in 1806 selling chances when he happened to meet Mrs. Seton after mass at Saint Peter's. He was taken by the widow's situation and listened to her story with great attention, especially when she mentioned that she was thinking of moving to Montreal, where her children could continue their education in a friendlier environment than New York, and she might find a way to teach in a school or fulfill a secret dream of becoming a sister. Dubourg seized the opportunity to suggest an alternative. She and her family could move to Baltimore where her sons (through the good graces of Bishop Carroll currently enrolled at Georgetown) could study at Saint Mary's College and her daughters could stay with her as she opened a new school for girls under Dubourg's sponsorship and support. Elizabeth was intrigued by this possibility, but it was more than a year before this inspiration could evolve into a practical plan and come to fruition. Dubourg continued as supporter of Elizabeth Seton, helping to get her settled in a small house on the college grounds, bringing prospective students in, and eventually becoming the first superior of the "Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph" as they were originally known.

As important as Dubourg was in this period of Elizabeth's life and in the beginnings of the fledgling community, none could be more important than the bishop of Baltimore, John Carroll. Carroll was a native American Catholic, raised among the landed gentry of Maryland, who completed his education in Europe, spent a significant time as a Jesuit priest and educator in Europe, and returned to his mother's farm only when the Society was suppressed by papal decree in 1773. Thereafter he became a leader among the Catholic clergy. He was elected bishop by his fellow priests on 18 May 1789 and consecrated ordinary bishop in England on 15 August 1790. Up until that time, anti-episcopal bias was strong enough to preclude the possibility of having usual Church structure present in this country. (This paralleled the experience of Episcopalians in the United States). Like

Dubourg, Carroll was convinced that for Catholics to be accepted into the dominant Protestant and republican environment, they would need to be educated. This education must include subjects which would be proper for a person of culture but also must provide a thorough grounding in the faith. Though I have little doubt that Carroll understood that education would help Catholics socially and economically, I think his conscious concern was to protect the faith. Like Dubourg, Carroll believed that the education of women was just as important as the education of men in this country. In a lengthy letter written to Mother Seton (11 September 1811) which deals mainly with the constitutions of the new community, Carroll said this, "A century at least will pass before the exigencies and habits of this Country will require & hardly admit of the charitable exercises towards the sick, sufficient to employ any number of the [illegible]ters out of our largest cities; and therefore they must consider the business of education as a laborious, charitable & permanent object of their religious duty."¹⁶

Though education was never the exclusive ministry of the early sisters even at this time, it was the main work, and continued to be so, for many years.

Both Dubourg and Carroll shared another conviction that might be considered unique at this period. Both men accepted the fact that Protestants and Catholics would have to live together, so they could also study together. Carroll wrote to his English friend, Father Charles Plowden, that "One of the Sulpician priests, who is a man of very pleasing manners, of an active and towering genius, named DuBourg, has formed a college in this town. . . . It contains far more Protestants than Catholics. Some of the rigid Sulpicians shake their heads at this (to them) seeming departure from their Institute, but I believe that the general effect will be beneficial."¹⁷

Carroll, Dubourg, and others among the Sulpicians, were the kind of men who looked at the growth of Catholicism in the United States with enthusiasm and hope. Despite the history of bigotry and legal disenfranchisement that characterized the colonial period of English Catholicism in the new country, they saw the new situation of constitutionally guaranteed freedoms as a boon to Catholicism and compatible with the best traditions of the Church. These leaders, though

¹⁶*The John Carroll Papers*, ed. Thomas O'Brien Hanley, 3 vols. (Notre Dame: 1976), 3:157.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 3:37. The quote is just a piece of a much longer letter.

reverent toward Rome and papal spiritual authority, looked more to the Church on the local and regional level as necessarily shaping itself for the needs of the local Catholic population. Whether Mother Seton ever had a theological discussion on these issues with Carroll or Dubourg I do not know, but I do know that she accepted Protestants into her academy at Emmitsburg right to the time of her death. It is true that she occasionally was criticized by Protestant parents whose daughters wanted to become Catholic after studying at Saint Joseph's Academy. It is also known that Father John DuBois, aware of these criticisms and also recently advised by his Sulpician superiors in France to stop admitting Protestants to his college, tried to get Mother Seton to do the same, but it is clear that she declined on this point.¹⁸

Elizabeth respected the consciences of these youngsters and did not try to convert them, but also insisted that they receive the same religious instruction as the Catholic girls. Sensitivity to differences in faith commitment was characteristic of Mother Seton throughout this period of her life. She maintained her warm relationship with her long-time (Protestant) friend Juliana Scott to the time of her death. She also kept in close contact with her sister, Mary Post, who still lived in New York. Elizabeth received a letter from Mary in 1817, in which Mary told her sister that she had recently been visited by Bishop Hobart and his wife. The bishop inquired about Elizabeth, and Mary was able to show him a recent letter received from Elizabeth. According to Mary, he was delighted to be able to read the letter and even asked to take it home to read it at leisure. Mary ended her own account to Elizabeth by saying, "the high encomium he bestowed on you convinced me you have his former friendship with increased approbation—admiration I think more appropriate."¹⁹ In her own way, Mother Seton embodied the best spirit of ecumenism, a spirit which was present at this particular period in the United States, but which would be lost later in the nineteenth century with the waves of immigrants coming into the country after 1820 and the rise of nativism.

Elizabeth Seton owed other debts of gratitude to the Sulpicians. These fine priests, mainly transplanted from France because of the French Revolution, provided guidance, support, and encouragement

¹⁸See Annabelle Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton 1774-1821* (New York: 1951, reprints 1976, 1985), 285-86.

¹⁹ASJCH XII, Post to Seton 5 April 1817.

for Elizabeth and the fledgling community. They were scholars, cultured gentleman, and for the most part, saintly clergy. They had absorbed some of the best of the French spiritual and intellectual tradition and shared this with Elizabeth and the other sisters. They were fine teachers, and Bishop Carroll was happy to have them running the seminary in Baltimore. Elizabeth was also delighted to have them as neighbors and colleagues in Emmitsburg. The Sulpicians had also been trained to celebrate the liturgy with reverence and elegance, and Catholics in Baltimore and in Emmitsburg were blessed with a rich liturgical life. (Note how many of Elizabeth's later letters and journal entries reflect the rhythms of the liturgical year). Sundays were particularly rich, not only because of the celebration of a solemn Eucharist, but because of vespers celebrated in the afternoon. The celebration of the sacraments of penance and extreme unction (as it was then called) were also sources of spiritual growth and consolation.

Reflecting on all of the disparate strands that come together to shape the life of Elizabeth Seton, this writer is struck by the evidence of the providence of God. In her own way, Elizabeth embodied some of the best of the American spirit, and some of the most positive aspects of what Bishop Carroll and many of the Sulpicians hoped would become the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Historical circumstances changed the direction of American Catholicism from the 1820s to the 1950s. Perhaps it is our time that has the task of recovering this earlier tradition and bringing that to the next century.