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Towards Eternity: Elizabeth Seton's Experience of Suffering and Hope

BY

REGINA M. BECHTLE, S.C., AND FAY TROMBLEY, S.C.I.C.

Introduction

BY

REGINA M. BECHTLE, S.C.

Not too many years ago, a study on the theology of contemporary religious life asked women religious to name where they experienced God most deeply. It struck me then, and it strikes me now, as significant that respondents said they found God in nature, in solitude, in relationships, but they hardly ever mentioned finding God in experiences of defeat, failure, and suffering.¹

We Christians sign ourselves with a cross; we believe and teach that we are baptized into the death of the Lord, and that in order to live with Christ we must first die with Christ. Yet we have to admit that suffering confuses us, disturbs us, confounds us. To make matters worse, in our post-modern world we know that suffering transcends the purely personal level. We cannot escape the evidence that suffering has a *corporate* face, one which engages us in a particularly compelling way today. It is surely no secret that the once hallowed institutions of Western society—families, churches, governments, even religious congregations—are undergoing, are “suffering,” diminishment of many kinds. Even having at our disposal the tools of the natural and social sciences to help us analyze the causes, patterns, and probable outcomes of suffering, does not make the experience of diminishment any less painful.

¹See the essay by David Fleming, C. M., “Faith Experience of Women Religious Today: a Critical Reflection,” in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious publication *Steps in the Journey: The Contemporary Theology Project 1976-1979* (Washington, D. C.: 1979), 46-56, especially 47.

Whether it takes the shape of famine in a war-torn country, devastation of the planet, violent crime on our city streets, or the personal tragedies of addiction, disease, or accident which befall us and those we love, we continue to wrestle with the mystery of suffering. Does it have any meaning, any value? Is it part of the Good News in any sense at all?

As we, with our communities and cultures, wrestle with this mystery, we cry out for a sense of hope. We desperately want to believe that death (on whatever level) does not speak the last word. We long for assurance that, as Saint Paul says, “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”² In our search we turn to Elizabeth Seton as mentor.

From Elizabeth’s lifelong confrontation—or better, companionship—with suffering, we seek some insight into the paschal pattern of life through death. I propose that we claim her as our wisdom figure in the school of hope.

Elizabeth the woman—profoundly in touch with herself, her times, her God. A woman rich with promise, yet dead at the age of forty-six. A blissful mother of five, yet one who later watched helplessly as two of her own daughters died in her arms.

Elizabeth—wife, mother, convert, religious foundress, mystic—yet also orphan, widow, seeker, social outcast, single parent, bereaved mother, victim of illness. Archbishop John Carroll wrote to her in December 1809, after the death of Harriet Seton in Emmitsburg, “It seems to be the order of divine providence to lead you to perfection thro’ the road of sufferings, interior and exterior; and may you always correspond with the graces bestowed on you and walk in the way of the cross with resignation and consequently with much spiritual profit.”³ And Elizabeth herself echoed the same sentiments to Julia Scott, “Tribulation is my element; if it only carries me home at last, never mind the present.”⁴

Without a doubt, the sign of the cross loomed large over her life. What sense did she make of her suffering? What sustained her through her losses? What was the ground of her unshakable hope?

²Rom 8: 18. All Scripture citations are from the Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

³Carroll to Seton, 28 December 1809, quoted in Annabelle Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton, 1774-1821* (New York: 1951, reprints 1976, 1985), 228.

⁴Seton to Scott, 27 December 1809, quoted in Ellin Kelly, *Numerous Choirs: A Chronicle of Elizabeth Bayley Seton and Her Spiritual Daughters, 1: The Seton Years 1774-1821* (Evansville, Indiana: 1981), 1:136.

We ask these questions out of more than theoretical interest. Coming to terms with suffering, reversals, failure, pain, and loss has always been an integral part of the spiritual journey for every serious believer. Deep in our hearts we know that the lessons one learns in the school of suffering can be learned in no other way.

Part 1

BY

FAY TROMBLEY, S.C.I.C.

Introduction

Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, child, young woman, wife, mother, widow, foundress, saint, was not born holy; rather, she became holy. Elizabeth's journey through life was a journey of conversion and growth, a journey of suffering and of hope and of the providence of God. We, too, have a similar journey today.

In this paper, it is our task to look at suffering and hope in the life of Elizabeth Ann Seton. To give foundation to our exploration, it is important to have some basic presumptions or notions of these two realities, the reality of suffering and the reality of hope. We will look at each of these in turn.

Both suffering and hope are basic human experiences. No one will deny the reality of suffering in the life of an individual, and just as certainly there is hope in our world or else all would have ended in destruction. Simply because we exist, there is inescapably suffering and, just as surely, hope.

From a human perspective, suffering is present in a variety of forms. One of the most basic forms of suffering is the absence of personal well-being. This could take the form of material privation, ill health, unmet personal needs, the experience of pain or unhappiness.

Another form of suffering comes from my own personal limitations and sin. I have limitations of skills, of gifts, of personality. Then there are my shortcomings and my unconverted self. As well, there is the suffering that comes from the limitations and sin of others. These I might experience as injustice, rejection, abuse, poor communication, or meanness.

There is suffering of loss, loss of what I experience as good, especially loss through death, failure in self, in others, or of projects. Suffering is also experienced in the clash of interests or ideals. There is suffering when those I love suffer. There is the suffering of painful memories, even those which have been repressed. Some of these come out in disturbing dreams.

Finally, there is the suffering of interior spiritual trials. There are crises of faith which involve beliefs, understanding, and control. There are crises of hope which include experiences of disillusionment, despair, fear, insecurity, and lack of trust. There are crises of love. These include loneliness, lack of support, poor communication, and abandonment.

The above awareness of the forms human suffering can take will be helpful as we look at suffering in the life of Elizabeth Ann Seton.

In addition to the specifically human perspective of suffering, it is important that as Christians we look at suffering and hope from within a biblical perspective.

While many biblical writers address the human reality of suffering, there is no single biblical theology of suffering. Throughout the Scriptures we find many different responses to suffering; we could look at Job or Hannah, at Mary or Paul.

Job, in his confusion and depression, sees his suffering as a justice issue with God. Hannah, in her pain, simply pours out her soul to God in tears and prayers. Mary "ponders" and "stands." Paul sees suffering in the perspective of the cross, which for him is inseparable from the resurrection.

Since there is no single biblical attitude or response to suffering, what then can be said in general terms from a scriptural perspective about suffering?

First, we can say, that for a Christian, suffering has meaning. Secondly, suffering can be purifying; it can be transforming; it can be paschal. I say "can be," for suffering does not automatically translate into virtue, wisdom, transformation. My response to painful experience in my life can be resentment, bitterness, retaliation, withdrawal, meanness. Or my response to painful experience can be growth in character, in virtue, in holiness.

Ultimately our call is to face suffering squarely, not try to avoid it. Actively, we try to correct the causes of suffering. Passively, we allow suffering to do its work. Then suffering will transform us. Basically, it does not matter where the suffering comes from, only that it does its

work.

In regard to hope, we can say that for a Christian this virtue resides in God's saving purpose for the world. Our horizon of hope is God and his saving purpose for each of us.

Even with only a cursory knowledge of Elizabeth Seton's life one is aware that she experienced much suffering but with it an indomitable courage and hope. What we will attempt to do in this paper is examine what we know of Elizabeth's suffering so that we can meaningfully profit from Elizabeth's response to life.

As I studied Elizabeth Seton's life, it gradually became clear to me that her life falls rather easily into three time periods or chapters. There is her childhood and adolescence, which ends with her marriage at the age of nineteen. There is young womanhood from the time of her marriage until the death of her husband when Elizabeth is in her thirtieth year. Finally, there is the maturing woman from the time of her husband's death until her own death sixteen years later.

From a psychological point of view the divisions of childhood/adolescence, young womanhood, and the maturing woman are meaningful categories for us today. Looking at Elizabeth's experiences within these three time frames, we find three clusters of suffering in her life that correspond to these same time frames.

As we look at Elizabeth's life we shall see that the early sufferings of childhood and adolescence helped to prepare Elizabeth for the responsibilities which were to mount quickly on her young shoulders soon after her marriage. Then we shall see how the crisis of faith, following shortly on the death of her husband, laid the foundation for her courage to face the insecurities and trials of providing for her family and at the same time founding a community of sisters. Finally, we will see how her crisis of hope, following the death of her first born, Anna, prepared the ground for a holy indifference to life or death and an abandonment to God, which is so characteristic of saints.

The question now arises as how best to analyze the data. In this paper, we shall use a method of theological reflection that is of long standing in the Church. Saint Thomas Aquinas, in examining any question, did so from three perspectives, namely, from common sense/human wisdom, from Scripture, and from tradition. In this way a holistic knowledge was brought to bear on any issue. We shall do the same.

First, we shall look at Elizabeth's sufferings in the light of human wisdom. Here we shall use some of the findings of the contemporary

human sciences, namely, those of Erik Erikson. Secondly, we shall look at Elizabeth's sufferings in the light of Scripture. Here we shall use Israel's journey of gift and conversion as a biblical model. Finally, we shall look at Elizabeth's sufferings in the light of tradition. Here we shall make use of classical spiritual theology, namely, the theology of the Dark Night in John of the Cross.

Elizabeth's Suffering: A Psychological Perspective

First, let us look at Elizabeth's journey in the light of awarenesses we now have from contemporary human sciences.

It is only in the twentieth century that the new sciences of psychology and sociology have explored the developmental nature of the human person. Erikson, writing primarily in the 1960s, has given a helpful structure to the phases of psycho-social development.

Erikson's foundational notion is that holistic development comes as a result of successfully negotiating the crises of human life. Furthermore, psychological development is seen as contingent on how persons interact with their social environment. It is, therefore, through crises and in relationships with others that a person comes to psychological wholeness.¹ Because Erikson relates psychological development to our relating socially, his theory is called the psycho-social theory of human development.

Erikson's theory has important implications for us as social beings. Difficulties in human relating become the way to holistic human development, rather than obstacles to the way.

As we look at Elizabeth's life, we can say that much of her suffering was the result of challenges and crises in her life. Therefore, if we were to find in Elizabeth the developmental characteristics that Erikson speaks of, we could conclude, from a psychological perspective, that Elizabeth had successfully resolved the crises life afforded her at different stages. Let us examine, then, the characteristics that result in a person who successfully meets the crises of the given stages of one's development. Elizabeth would say this is where we "meet our grace."

According to Erikson, by the end of the first year, an infant will already have learned either basic *trust* or basic *mistrust*. Trust is the

¹Elizabeth's relationships played a prominent role in her growth and development, but this dimension is addressed in other articles. Here we will look only at suffering/crises in Elizabeth's life.

expectation that one will be loved and cared for. By the end of the third year a child will develop either *autonomy* or else a basic doubt of oneself. Autonomy is a trust of one's own abilities and the capacity to be self-sufficient. From the ages of three to six years a child learns *initiative* or, conversely, feeling of guilt. Initiative is the courage to risk, to step out, to be able to handle failure.

The next developmental task in life, according to Erikson, comes between the ages of seven and eleven. At this time in a child's development, the quality of *industry* develops, that is, the capacity for competence and productivity, as opposed to a sense of inferiority. If a young person successfully resolves the crises of adolescence, a sense of *identity* develops, in other words a sense of oneself, as opposed to role confusion.

Finally, reserved to adulthood, are the developmental tasks of *intimacy*, *generativity*, and *integrity*. Intimacy is both the capacity for another-centered love and a capacity for a variety of relationships. Generativity is the capacity to perform meaningful work and to pass on what one has become. Integrity is the finding of meaning in one's life. If these last developmental stages are not successfully negotiated, one is left, respectively, in isolation, stagnation, and despair.

Trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, capacity for intimacy, generativity, and integrity: these psychological characteristics are the fruit of a person successfully negotiating the crises in our human journey. This list of characteristics reads as a description of Elizabeth herself. But let us examine Elizabeth's life a little more closely.

Elizabeth was born in the summer of 1774, the second child of parents who were both from well-to-do families, respected and well-known. Her father, Doctor Richard Bayley, was a researcher in medicine and a prominent New York surgeon. Her mother, Catherine Charlton, was the daughter of the rector of Saint Andrew's Episcopal church on Staten Island, New York. To all appearances, Elizabeth was very fortunate in this life.

It was not long, however, before disadvantage came to Elizabeth's young life. Shortly after her birth, Elizabeth's father left for London to do research, and in 1775, when the American War of Independence broke out, Doctor Bayley enlisted as a surgeon in the British army. Thus, for the first three years of her life, Elizabeth did not know a father. Then, when Elizabeth was not yet three, her mother died in giving birth to Elizabeth's younger sister, Catherine.

We see, then, that until the age of three, Elizabeth had the loving care of her mother, and the companionship of her older sister, Mary. Though Elizabeth's father was away during these years, she had the environment to develop natural trust and autonomy. From her life and letters we certainly see a woman able to trust others as well as her own abilities. She was able to manage a household and to be self-sufficient. Elizabeth had learned trust and autonomy.

A year after her mother's death, Elizabeth's father remarried. Charlotte Barclay, as Elizabeth would recall later, was a woman often in great affliction, and she seemed to have little time for Doctor Bayley's first three children. Though Doctor Bayley had seven children through his second marriage, he seemed to be more wedded to his career than to his family. Thus, by the age of four, Elizabeth was motherless, and had a stepmother who was not a real mother to her.

The remarriage of Elizabeth's father was soon to be followed by the death of Elizabeth's baby sister, Catherine. This was an event Elizabeth would remember for a lifetime. Elizabeth was four years old. Loss and loneliness were taking form in this young child's life.

Outside of the home there was political upheaval. When Elizabeth was six, the War of Independence broke out. Elizabeth's father was a Loyalist and at one point was put in jail a day for attending a wounded soldier. These things are all frightening for a child. During these years Elizabeth learned to cope, to survive, to respond to life in a positive way. Elizabeth learned initiative.

Painful as these events were, it would seem that the deepest suffering for Elizabeth came from the one she loved most, her father. Doctor Bayley, totally dedicated to his career in medicine, had very little time for his family. In addition, his second marriage was unstable, ending twenty years later in separation. There was constant stress in the blended family, and as a result Elizabeth spent much time with relatives in New Rochelle.

Throughout Elizabeth's girlhood, the war continued. When she was nine, with the victory of the revolutionary army, a law of disenfranchisement was passed and Loyalists were to evacuate New York. This would put Elizabeth's father in a tenuous position.

According to Erikson, it is between the ages of seven and eleven that a child learns industry. During these years it was Elizabeth's task to learn to be competent and productive. Later in life, as we look at Elizabeth's efforts to open boarding and day schools, we will find the qualities of initiative and industry in practice. Elizabeth had weath-

ered the crises at this stage in her life.

As Elizabeth entered her teen years, family instability increased. In seven years the family residence would change five times. This was from Elizabeth's twelfth year until she was nineteen. During these years the family was also under stress from Doctor Bayley's occupation. The medical profession used bodies of criminals and the poor for research, and in 1788 New York saw the worst riot it had yet experienced. It was a cry of public outrage over "body snatchers." This implicated Elizabeth's father. Elizabeth long remembered the terror of that night of rioting.

During one's teens, identity develops. We know Elizabeth to have had a keen sense of herself. She was a woman who knew her own mind and was comfortable speaking to businessmen, bishops, or superiors. Later in life Elizabeth's sense of identity would be able to discern the dimensions of a rule that would best facilitate what her community was called to be and to do.

We see something of Elizabeth's teen years in a letter that her sister, Mary Post, wrote recalling "the very painful events that succeeded our leaving [New Rochelle] until we married. Even that eventful step [marriage] scarcely enabled us to shake off all that was disagreeably attached to our situation before."² Because of Elizabeth's open spirit in responding to these painful years, a foundation was being laid that would prepare Elizabeth for the call which lay ahead.

Perhaps two of the most visible characteristics of Elizabeth are intimacy and generativity. Elizabeth had many friends, both men and women, and in many walks of life. Elizabeth was equally at ease with clerics, businessmen, persons of wealth, children, her sisters, or the poor. In her letters and writings, we find Elizabeth pouring out a wide range of emotions with both integrity and ease.

As we look at Elizabeth in her twenties, we see a young woman happily married, delighting to be wife, mother, and mistress of her household. It is during these years that Elizabeth's correspondence shows her developing deep friendships. In her early twenties Elizabeth begins her correspondence with Eliza Sadler and Julia Scott. To these women Elizabeth pours out her delights and her sorrows. When she is twenty-six Elizabeth begins to develop a relationship with John Henry Hobart who becomes her spiritual director.

²Mary Baley Post to Elizabeth Ann Seton, 1 August 1808, cited in Annabelle Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton* (New York: 1951), 38.

Finally, at the age of twenty-nine, Elizabeth comes to know the Filicchi family in Leghorn, Italy. She develops close and trusting friendships with Philip, with Amabilia, and especially with Antonio. Also, during these years, Elizabeth is developing a deep relationship with Rebecca Seton. These friendships will remain and deepen until the separation of death.

It is clear that in young womanhood, Elizabeth is developing the quality of intimacy. During this same space of time in Elizabeth's life, namely, her twenties, we also see how Elizabeth grows in the characteristic of generativity. Elizabeth is mother to her own five children, as well as to six of William's younger brothers and sisters. She is capable in administering her household, and she is active as well in providing for poor widows. Elizabeth was passing on what she had become.

Finally, in Elizabeth's thirties and forties we see integrity and integration gradually transforming her life. We see a woman overcoming great odds, finding profound spiritual meaning in life, a woman who experienced the human feelings of being crushed but who let the pain of it open her to profound hope. This phase of Elizabeth's life, however, can best be examined in the light of John of the Cross, and it will be explored more fully later in this paper.

Thus, using the developmental structure of Erikson, we see Elizabeth resolving the crises of life, transforming them into the fruits of trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity. Elizabeth developed, through the struggles, sufferings, crises of her life, to psychological wholeness.³

Elizabeth's Suffering: A Biblical Perspective

Secondly, let us examine the sufferings of Elizabeth Ann Seton using a biblical model, namely, Israel's journey of conversion and gift.

The whole of the Old Testament can be summarized as God's saving history, his plan for our salvation. In Israel's journey of faith we find a model for our own faith journey. Israel first has concrete lived experience upon which it reflects over and over again. Then each of these levels of reflection in time is written down and becomes Sacred Scriptures. Each of these layers of Israel's story is grace.

First we see the historical books which record Israel's lived history. Then, as Israel reflects on experience, God's saving presence in

³For a summary of the above, see Table 1 on Erikson.

history becomes more and more clear. Israel comes to know patterns, order, structure, foundations. This graced reflection becomes the books of law. Again, Israel reflects on God's presence in its history, and this time the faith of God's people is expressed in moans and cries and songs. These are the books of Lamentations and Psalms. Later Israel's graced reflection on God's presence in life is experienced as call, as mission, as a sense of direction. These are the books of the prophets. And finally, Israel's graced reflection on its past and its call, culminates in integrity and wisdom, and we have the books of wisdom.

The biblical pattern observed here moves from lived experience to law/tradition to lamentations/praise to mission/sense of direction and finally to wisdom. This pattern was effected in Israel through graced reflection on the saving action of God in its history. We might also see these differing gifts as gifts of mind, gifts of heart, gifts of Martha, and gifts of Mary.

This saving pattern of God can also be a model for each of us. Our conversion/faith journey begins with concrete experience, becomes patterned through law/tradition, is experienced in our own hearts as lamentation and praise, contains a call and a sense of our direction, and finally matures as wisdom. Each is gift and each is necessary for wholeness. If we get blocked at any one gift, we will not mature to the holiness of the whole.

Let us now use this biblical pattern to better understand Elizabeth's journey of life, suffering, and hope.

It is easy enough to give a simple chronology of Elizabeth's life. But to stop there tells us nothing. From the pattern of Israel's journey we see that one of the first gifts of gracefully responding to one's personal history is the gift of order and law. This gift is a healthy sense of tradition which forms one to a faithful lifestyle. Elizabeth in young womanhood was already managing a large household. This soon shifted to her needing to support her family, seeking to establish schools, and later to her founding a religious community. It is apparent that Elizabeth had a clear sense of fidelity and commitment in her life. She had chosen marriage and family, and these responsibilities, once undertaken, were faithfully carried out. Later, we see Elizabeth passing on this sense of order and tradition to her young community as she helped to determine the lifestyle and rule they should best follow.

From the biblical pattern, after the gifts of order and law, come the gifts of the heart's response, namely, lamentations and praise, open-

hearted feelings expressed to the creator. From Elizabeth's life and letters we clearly see praise, anguish, and hope poured out to God and to others through her whole lifetime. Elizabeth had a wide range of relationships and many deep friendships. To her friends and to God she poured out her soul in writing and in prayer. Elizabeth had not only common sense and gifts, gifts of order and law, but also a full heart that did not shun the depths of pain and misery nor remain stranger to praise and joy.

The third aspect of grace from our biblical model is Israel's prophetic gift. This gift includes the sense of call, mission, direction in one's life. As we look at Elizabeth's life, we see her keen sense of call to be wife, mother, foundress, teacher, and especially we see in Elizabeth her sense of call to growth in holiness. Then, especially after Baltimore, we see Elizabeth aware of having a mission in the Church. Initially, she recognized the needs of education in her own day; gradually she became aware of future needs.

In addition to sense of mission, the prophetic gift includes the gift of a listening heart, a heart attuned to the Spirit breathing in events. After the manner of her day, Elizabeth respected the Spirit as expressed through superiors and directors. At the same time Elizabeth listened to the Spirit moving through the gift of human prudence and the needs of the heart. We certainly see Elizabeth expressing her preferences in choosing spiritual directors, showing human prudence in her suggestions regarding superiors, and calling on personal wisdom in adaptations made to the rule of Saint Vincent. Elizabeth possessed the gifts of Martha with the spirit of a listening heart.

Finally, this biblical pattern unites all the gifts with the gift of wisdom. This final grace in Israel's journey embodies the gifts of maturity, integrity, wholeness, and holiness. The surest sign of the increasing presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of Elizabeth and the young congregation is the good fruits which accompanied their lives. Elizabeth was maturing from being ready and willing, to being patient and wise, with the heart of God.

Thus, by using the biblical pattern of saving history, law and tradition, lamentation and praise, directedness and a listening heart, culminating in wisdom and holiness, we see once again the work of grace in Elizabeth's life.⁴

⁴For the summary of the above see Table 2 on Israel's Conversion and Gift Story.

Elizabeth's Suffering: The Perspective of John of the Cross

Finally, let us look at the suffering in Elizabeth's life from the perspective of classical spiritual theology, especially that of John of the Cross.

For John of the Cross, the spiritual journey is likened to the ascent of Mount Carmel. This ascent is characterized by darkness and light. John described the darkness using the metaphor of the Dark Night. John sees this Dark Night as having both active and passive phases, and each of these phases can be of the sense or of the spirit. According to John of the Cross, the night of the senses pertains to the seven capital sins and their corresponding virtues, while the night of the spirit pertains to the three theological virtues.

Active purification or active night in our lives is the ascetical part of our journey. It is what we can do when God graces our efforts to eradicate sin and to develop virtue. Expressed in scriptural terms, this is "to put on Christ." Active practice of mortification and virtue is a lifelong task. From birth until death we are engaged in this constant Christian call of discipleship. Most of the suffering events of Elizabeth's life can be understood in this perspective, as an active night of sense and spirit, in which she was being purified and was putting on Christ.

Passive purification or passive night in our lives is what God works secretly in us through deep inner spiritual pain, over which we have no control. We have control neither of the pain, nor of the fruit resulting from the purification. This part of the human journey is a call to sit in the emptiness, in the dust, out of which God creates.

John of the Cross tells us the role of the passive night of the senses is to bring to stillness the desires of our sensual appetites. The role of the passive night of the spirit is to bring about in us purification of the soul or psyche. This purification is threefold, namely, a purification of our understanding to *faith*; purification of our memory (psyche) to *hope*, and purification of our will (self-centeredness) to *love*.⁵

As we will see later, most of the sufferings in the life of Elizabeth can be understood in the sense of active purification of sense and spirit, that is, Elizabeth actively practiced discipline, mortification, as well as virtue in her life and actively chose to live faith, to exercise hope, and to practice love.

⁵For a summary of the theology of John of the Cross, see Table 3.

Two clusters of suffering in the life of Elizabeth Seton, however, culminate in what can be understood in terms of passive purification, as passive nights of the spirit. The first cluster of sufferings takes place between 1789 and 1805 and culminates in a passive night of faith which terminates with Elizabeth's profession of faith in March 1805. The second cluster takes place between 1809 and 1812, culminates in a passive night of hope, and ends at the time of her taking vows for the first time under the rule of Saint Vincent. We shall examine each of these in turn.

When Elizabeth was nineteen she married William Seton and entered into what might be called the springtime of her life. From her writings at this time we can see that Elizabeth was devout and as wife and young mother was supremely happy. This was a time of spiritual consolation for Elizabeth, following on the very difficult times of her childhood and adolescence. However, this period was to last only four years.

In early summer of 1798, when Elizabeth was in her twenty-fourth year, a very difficult period begins. In June Elizabeth's father-in-law dies suddenly at the age of fifty-two. This man had been like a true father to Elizabeth, and his death left a deep void in her life. The death of the elder Mr. Seton meant also that the family business now had to be managed by William. In addition, Elizabeth undertakes the responsibility of William's younger brothers and sisters, so Elizabeth now has two children of her own plus six young Setons.

A month later Elizabeth's third child, Richard, was born. Elizabeth was so run down that both mother and baby almost died. This was followed by sickness all summer and winter in the Seton family. Then, instead of a respite coming in the spring, Elizabeth's father's second marriage broke up. Richard Bayley left his second wife and children after being married for twenty years.

By the time the new century dawned, William had chronic tuberculosis, it was evident that he did not have his father's business sense, and Elizabeth was pregnant with Catherine. In June Elizabeth's fourth child was born. Six months later, William declared bankruptcy. This meant that the family home on Wall Street had to be sold, with all its expensive furnishings, in order to pay creditors. In the face of all these events, Elizabeth decided to get a spiritual director. She was twenty-six.

The three years following 1798 had been terrible for Elizabeth. What she could not know then, was that she still had four of the

hardest years ahead of her. In the summer of 1801, Elizabeth's father, Doctor Bayley, took ill suddenly and within a week was dead. He was fifty-seven. All this time, William's health was deteriorating and, as well, Elizabeth became pregnant with Rebecca.

After the birth of her fifth and last child, Elizabeth waited just long enough to wean the baby, and then she turned her attention to her ailing husband. In the fall of 1803 Elizabeth decided she would leave her children with friends and embark on a voyage to Italy in the hope that a change in climate might improve William's health. In fact, this voyage only hastened his death. Upon arrival in Leghorn, the family was placed in dreadful quarantine conditions, and in less than two months William was dead. In an age when there were no social agencies, Elizabeth was now a widow with five young children and no inheritance.

This final blow, William's death, curiously contained the seed that was to change Elizabeth's life. While in Italy, she came to know the Catholic faith and to experience God in a new way. This was not, however, to be a gentle journey. Elizabeth had looked forward to unburdening her heart to her sister-in-law, Rebecca, on her return to New York, but this was not to be. When Elizabeth returned to North America in June of 1804 she found Rebecca deathly ill, and within a month she also had died. Shortly after returning to New York, Elizabeth entered now a severe *crisis of faith*. This was perhaps, the most painful trial Elizabeth had yet to endure, and it only came to an end with her profession of faith in March 1805.

Elizabeth gives us glimpses of this period in her writings. "The Scriptures once my delight and comfort are now the continual sources of my pain, every page I open confounds my poor soul, I fall on my knees, and blinded with tears cry out to God to teach me. . . . My heart struggles and prays O teach me, teach me where to go. . . . Truly I say with David 'Save me Lord for the waters go over my Soul. I am in the deep mire where no ground is.'"⁶

During this difficult time Elizabeth redoubled her penances. She says, "I never knew till now what prayer is—never thought of fasting—though now it is more a habit than eating, never knew *how to give up all*, and send my spirit to Mount Calvary."⁷

⁶Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 13 December 1804, published in *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, ed. Elin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York: 1987), 154.

⁷Ibid. Emphasis in original.

Three short months after writing these lines we find a totally different mood in Elizabeth. In March, 1805 she writes, "... laughing with my heart to my saviour . . . so delighted now to prepare for this GOOD CONFESSION. . . ." ⁸ "IT IS DONE—easy enough—the kindest most respectable confessor is this Mr. O with the compassion and yet firmness in this work of mercy. . . . My God what new scenes for my Soul. . . . I count the days and hours—yet a few more of hope and expectation. . . . How bright the Sun these morning walks." ⁹ "At last—GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS—Now let all go its round." ¹⁰ Such a transformation as we witness in these three months of Elizabeth's life does not come about from one's own efforts. This is the work of God, of passive purification and transformation.

During this period of deep inner mental anguish that Elizabeth suffered prior to her conversion in 1805, there was no doubt that Elizabeth had done nothing to offend God. She was searching for God, and she was ready to follow the road that surely led to God, but she was in utter confusion and desolation. This period ended abruptly, which is something only God can do. With her profession of faith, Elizabeth entered a period of profound spiritual consolation.

The above period of time in Elizabeth's life is easily recognizable as a crisis of faith, or a passive night of faith purification. Elizabeth's profession of faith in 1805, not only brought to an end her night of faith, but also initiated a period of spiritual consolation. This latter space of time lasted four years.

However, while interiorly Elizabeth was at peace, exteriorly her trials continued. These trials and sufferings can be understood in terms of the active nights in John of the Cross, that is, those periods of purification in which we actively exercise discipline, choice, mortification, and practical virtues. Active purification is quite compatible with sensible consolation.

Being a widow with no income or financial security, Elizabeth first had the concerns of providing for her family. Ordinarily, one would expect family to be the first to come to one's aid in a situation such as this. However, as a result of Elizabeth's conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1805, most of her family and friends abandoned her. Then, just a few months after her conversion, Elizabeth's stepsister

⁸Elizabeth Seton to Amabilia Filicchi, 14 March 1805, *ibid.*, 166. Emphasis in original.

⁹Same to same, 20 March 1805, *ibid.*, 166-67. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰Same to same, 25 March 1805, *ibid.*, 167. Emphasis in original.

and stepmother both became seriously ill and died. Elizabeth had found both the time and the means to nurse them both.

This same year, 1805, it became clear that Elizabeth herself had tuberculosis, but her task was just beginning. In an effort to support her family, Elizabeth made several attempts to set up teaching situations, but each one ended unsuccessfully. In addition, her sister-in-law and soul friend, Cecilia, became very ill. In spite of all these trials, it is plain, in reading Elizabeth's letters during these years (1805-1809), that she experienced deep spiritual consolation. This was especially true as plans materialized for Elizabeth to go to Baltimore, on the invitation of the Sulpicians, to open a school for girls.

In June 1808, Elizabeth and her family left for Baltimore. A month later "the gentlemen of the seminary offered to give [her] a lot of ground to build on," this in Emmitsburg.¹¹ Elizabeth now had the possibility of realizing her dream to found a religious community of women.

Signs of a second passive purification are found in the utter desolation Elizabeth was to experience after the death of her oldest child, Anna, in 1812. During this space of time Elizabeth's spirit seemed crushed out of her. When this painful period had done its work, Elizabeth exhibited an abandon to God and a holy indifference that only increased until her death. Such a purification out of the depths of emptiness, poverty, and despair, is sign of a passive purification to hope.

In the meantime, Elizabeth took first vows in March 1809 in Baltimore. And three months later she and the first group of sisters arrived at the new property in Emmitsburg, which was to be their mother house.

Almost immediately, distress and trials set in. The spiritual consolation that Elizabeth had experienced the previous four years dried up. Elizabeth and her sisters were informed that they should not correspond with their former spiritual director, Father Pierre Babade. The superior of the young community, Father Louis William Dubourg, who had been with the project from the beginning, resigned. Things were not going well, and everyone was sick. There was not enough food or clothing, and there was much stress between Elizabeth and the new superior, Father David, in whom Elizabeth had a keen want of

¹¹Elizabeth to Antonio, 8 July 1808, *ibid.*, 238.

confidence. In addition, tension was growing between Elizabeth and her first assistant, Sister Rose White, who was Father David's recruit.

Besides the troubles and stress in community, there were family difficulties. Harriet, Elizabeth's sister-in-law, took ill suddenly and died, Cecilia was dying, and her son William took seriously ill, though he recovered.

All these sufferings took place in the first six months of arrival in Emmitsburg, but this was not the end. A rule needed to be decided upon, and this involved reconciling differing viewpoints. This latter task would take two and a half years and would be confused by rumours that Sister Rose was going to replace Elizabeth as Mother of the new group. Elizabeth was not sure what her role in the community was ultimately to be.

But the final blow came at the very center of Elizabeth's heart. In the fall of 1811, her eldest and dearest child, Anna Maria, became severely ill with tuberculosis. For six months Elizabeth nursed her and when she finally died, in March 1812, it was as if Elizabeth's heart and spirit had been broken. Elizabeth entered a deep depression and in retrospect we understand this as a *crisis of hope*. When this period is finally over, we will see a woman growing ever more refined in spiritual maturity.

Along with all the sufferings mentioned above, we must remember that life went on as usual. Elizabeth, from 1805 on, had chronic tuberculosis. She had constant concerns and worries in providing for her growing children. Then there were the uncertainties and labors of a growing community and ministry. And finally, there was constant sickness. Sixteen sisters, in addition to Anna Seton, predeceased Elizabeth in the first twelve years after the community's founding.¹²

Though published material for this period of Elizabeth's life is very scanty, we are still able to put some of the pieces together. Elizabeth writes, "for three months after Nina was taken, I was so often expecting to lose my senses, and my head was so disordered that unless for the daily duties always before me I did not know much of what I did or what I left undone."¹³ And again she writes, "The separation from my angel has left so new and deep an impression on

¹²These statistics were taken from a list obtained from the archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg, Maryland.

¹³Elizabeth to George Weis, 30 July 1812, cited in Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 247. Weis was a friend of Elizabeth's in Baltimore.

my mind that if I was not obliged to live in these dear ones [the children] I should unconsciously die in her."¹⁴ And later, "Begging, crying to Mary to behold her son, and plead for us, and to Jesus to behold his Mother—to pity a Mother—a poor Mother—so uncertain of reunion—Then the soul quieted even by the desolation of the falling leaves around began to cry out from Eternity to Eternity thou art God—all shall perish and pass away—but thou remainest forever."¹⁵

To judge from Elizabeth's writings this darkness lasted six to seven months. During this space of time Elizabeth took vows (July 1812) for the first time under the rule of Saint Vincent de Paul. It is only in the fall that we see the change wrought in Elizabeth by these dark times.

In September 1812, Simon Gabriel Bruté came to the Mount, and this man became Elizabeth's spiritual director. Joseph Dirvin, in his biography of Elizabeth, points out that Elizabeth and Father Bruté had "a glorious spiritual affinity" and that "they thought and acted and prayed as one soul."¹⁶ God had heard Elizabeth's prayer. Her time of deep anguish was over. At last here was someone who could understand her soul. Father John Dubois had recognized Elizabeth's depth when he told Bruté that it would take a first class saint, like a Francis de Sales, to understand and direct her adequately.¹⁷ As we read Elizabeth's writings it is clearly seen that she was well advanced in the spiritual life.

From this time on, there is a quality of joy and abandon in Elizabeth which surpasses anything to date. She exclaimed once to Bruté, "Blessed G., I am so in love now with rules that I see the *bit* of the bridle all gold and the *reins* all silk."¹⁸ As Dirvin says, Bruté blew upon her soul and watched with satisfaction as it responded into leaping, straining life.¹⁹

The passive night of the spirit belongs to that realm of the spiritual journey in which, as John of the Cross puts it, "there is no path." But what are the measuring sticks on the spiritual journey, once one has gone beyond the law to the realm of the spirit, "the place beyond which there is no path"? Scripture tells us, "By their fruits you shall

¹⁴Elizabeth to Eliza Sadler, 14 September 1812, *ibid.*

¹⁵Entry of 22 September 1812, *ibid.*

¹⁶Joseph Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton, Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: 1962), 330.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 331. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

know them." And in the life of Elizabeth Seton there is no doubt. The Spirit gives testimony.

Conclusion

Thus we have seen in this paper, that there seemed to be three clusters of suffering in Elizabeth's life. First, there was the suffering of her childhood/adolescence, especially the five years preceding her marriage. These sufferings laid the foundation of a courageous Christian woman who would increasingly be called to selfless service. Second, there was a cluster of suffering events lasting seven years, during Elizabeth's young womanhood, which culminated in a *crisis of faith* and her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1805. Finally, there was a cluster of suffering events lasting four years, during Elizabeth's mature years, ending with a *crisis of hope* in 1812. When the latter period was finally over, we see a woman daily readying for her own death but with complete abandon to what God should wish for her.

It is the daily experiences of life that are the ground of our suffering, transformation, and hope. And there is no hope without a price. The price is to suffer the crises of life with faith, and Elizabeth was a woman of faith. Suffering for Elizabeth was cause to submit in faith, and in hope, to a provident God. For Elizabeth, Eternity was concrete in the now of life. All was *blessed eternity!*

**Table 1: Suffering in Elizabeth's Life Viewed
from the Human Sciences**

Erikson's Theory of Psycho-Social Development*

<u>Age</u>	<u>Growth Characteristics</u>	<u>Events in Elizabeth Ann Seton's Life</u>
0-1 Year	TRUST	Father absent Mother present - Elizabeth received mothering ELIZABETH LEARNED THAT SHE WOULD BE CARED FOR.
1-3 Years	AUTONOMY	Father absent Mother present - Elizabeth received mothering ELIZABETH LEARNED TO BE SELF-SUFFICIENT AND TO TRUST HER OWN ABILITIES.
3-6 Years	INITIATIVE	3 years - Elizabeth's mother died 4 years - Elizabeth's father remarried - Elizabeth's baby sister died War of Independence is in process and Elizabeth's father is jailed for a day (for attending a British soldier during war) ELIZABETH'S TASK WAS TO LEARN TO STEP OUT. TO HANDLE FAILURE. TO RISE ABOVE.
7-11 Years	INDUSTRY	- the war continues - Elizabeth's father much occupied with his work - stress in the blended family - Elizabeth spends much time with relatives in New Rochelle - evacuation of New York - Loyalists, tenuous position of Elizabeth's Father (Elizabeth nine years) ELIZABETH'S TASK WAS TO LEARN TO BE COMPETENT AND PRODUCTIVE.

*Erikson: **Holistic Development** comes as a result of successfully negotiating the **crises** of human life.

Teen Years	IDENTITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elizabeth is back in New York - the family situation is worsening - family instability apparent in the fact that the family residence changed five times (Elizabeth was twelve-nineteen) - New York riot, over "body snatchers". The family was in danger <p>ELIZABETH'S TASK WAS TO LEARN A SENSE OF HERSELF.</p>
Young Adulthood	INTIMACY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elizabeth's Relationship with William, Rebecca, Cecilia, Eliza Sadler, Catherine Dupleis, Julia Roberts, John Hobart, especially Antonio Filicchi <p>GENERATIVITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elizabeth is mother to her own children as well as to six of William's brothers and sisters. - as a young widow with no inheritance she has total responsibility for her family. - Elizabeth undertakes several teaching jobs. - Elizabeth establishes a community of religious, and works out their lifestyle and Rule. <p>ELIZABETH'S TASK IS TO PERFORM MEANINGFUL WORK AND TO PASS ON WHAT SHE HAS BECOME.</p>
Adult Years	INTEGRITY	<p>ELIZABETH'S FINAL TASK. TO FIND MEANING IN HER LIFE. BLESSED ETERNITY!</p>

**Table 2: Suffering in Elizabeth's Life Viewed from a Biblical Perspective
Israel's Journey of Conversion and Gift**

Israel reflective over and over again on her lived experience and was

<u>HISTORICAL BOOKS</u> <u>(Gift of Life)</u>	<u>BOOKS OF THE LAW/TRADITION</u> <u>(Gift of the Mind)</u>	<u>BOOKS OF LAMENTATION/PRAISE</u> <u>(Gift of the Heart)</u>	<u>BOOKS OF THE PROPHETS</u> <u>(Gift of Martha)</u>
- concrete human experience	- foundations	- moans	- call
- life	- order	- cries	- sense of direction
- survival	- structure	- songs	- justice/action
	- common sense	- thanks	- mission

Elizabeth Ann Seton's Lived Experience:

- concrete human experience	- management of a household	- expressed a wide range of feelings	- call to be wife and mother
- life	- establishing schools	- deep friendships	- call to religious life
- survival	- founding religious community	- poured out her soul in prayer/writing	- ministries of leadership
	- determining a rule/lifestyle	- a wide range of relationships	- sense of mission
			- justice: served poor and oppressed protestant as well as catholic

Table 3: Suffering in Elizabeth's Life Viewed from Tradition

**Classical Spiritual Theology:
Theology of "DARK NIGHTS" in John of the Cross**

NIGHT OF THE SENSES:

Involves pain/purification through:

Discipline

Praxis

Choosing Daily

**Leads to Practical Virtues
and Gifts of the Spirit**

NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT:

Involves pain/purification of:

Understanding (intellect)

Memory (Psyche)

Will (Self-centeredness)

to:

Faith

Hope

Love

Theological Virtues

In each of these Nights there is an **ACTIVE** and **PASSIVE** phase.

ACTIVE: I Choose, I Practice

PASSIVE: God Chooses. I "sit" in. . .