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Embracing Eternity in the Present: Elizabeth Seton's Incarnational Spirituality

BY

ANNE HARVEY, S.C.

What I want to express in this article about the spirituality of Mother Seton has been shaped by an attentive reading of her life and writings and also by what has transpired in my own life during the time that I was preparing it. Two experiences have been especially significant: the first one, more general and pervasive, the second, more specific.

I accepted the invitation to contribute to this seminar as a wonderful opportunity to focus on the life and spirituality of Elizabeth Ann Seton in a way I have longed and purposed to do for years. But no sooner had I accepted the task than a previous commitment took on a new dimension that began to take up much more space than I had anticipated. To this was added the consistent challenge of unplanned happenings and unforeseen calls. As weeks and months passed, all kinds of forces seemed to conspire to undermine my best efforts to allocate time to this longed-for project. What resulted was a very real experience of limits: the limits of time, of energy, of humanness.

Even as my prayers to Elizabeth grew more urgent to intercede for the inner and outer space I needed to articulate what I wanted to say, these factors persisted. Knowing God's ways with me, I began to suspect that these sometimes pressing and "contrary" experiences themselves, and the situation of growing helplessness in which they were placing me were to be a significant part of my learning and of what I would eventually write.

So as I responded to the needs and demands that presented themselves, as I attended to the happenings beyond my prudent planning, and as one day flowed into the next and into the next, I began to ask myself, "How would Elizabeth view this happening, these circumstances, this concurrence of events? How would she respond to this experience of mine?" or "When in her life might she have experienced something like what I am experiencing now?" This process of dialoguing, as it were, with Elizabeth about my life and hers, of finding points

of convergence and similarity, of reflecting on her life through the circumstances of my own, has given me a keener appreciation of her own human experience and has brought us into a deeper mutual relationship in the communion of saints. (In the past I had been drawn to engage in such a process with Jesus of the gospels and with Mary, and this exercise had deepened my appreciation of my humanness and of God's presence in the human. But I had not before been moved to do it with other persons.) The experience of reflecting with and carrying on an ongoing interior dialogue with Elizabeth, of living with her as it were, has both deepened my affection for her and confirmed the insights into her spirituality that were emerging from my reading of her life and writings.

Elizabeth lived her life fully and consciously. She was committed and practical. She gave herself over to each event as it presented itself. She knew how to be with suffering. She knew how to be happy and how to laugh at life and at herself. My reading, reflection, and experience have led me to see that what is central to Elizabeth's spirituality is an active and passionate love born of her perception that God is encountered in every moment of the journey. What took root and grew within her in the unfolding of her full forty-six years was the graced conviction and expectation that in every event and happening and in every relationship, the gift of life, of deeper life, of life beyond what is immediately perceptible, the gift of eternal life was offered her and those she loved. And because she was so disposed, because she surrendered herself to what each moment brought—not passively accepting in an indifferent way, (no, she was too strong and fiery a person for that!), but receptively embracing and giving shape to the event or relationship by her own loving response to it—something happened in the encounter that transformed both her own being and the event.

Elizabeth was not born with this gift full-blown. Her response to life was shaped by her nature, by her history, and by God's free action in her soul. For her, as for us, significant passages led to new spaces of integration and peace. An intelligent, affectionate, vivacious person with a deep capacity for loving, she was introduced early to a life beyond this one and to an example of selfless service of others. Her human journey was continually marked by significant losses and trials, as also by deep friendships and intimate relationships.

From a young age her experience of life taught her the truth of Léon Bloy's words, "There are places in the heart which do not yet

exist and into them suffering enters in order that they may have existence" and she learned that God enters and fills these places.¹ So, from her experience of the deaths of her mother and little sister she understood somehow that heaven and eternity held them and would some day reunite her with loved ones. And in the loneliness made keener by an absent father, she was given to experience that God was her Father, able to lift her beyond any sorrow. The pattern, unfolding already, would often be repeated: in loss, uncertainty, and darkness, she was taught the mystery of life through death. Again and again she was steeped in the paschal mystery.

But suffering was not her only teacher. Drawn to God through the beauties of nature, through the Bible, the sacraments, and the Church, through the intimate and affectionate relationships she enjoyed throughout her lifetime, and which she fostered in person and through correspondence, through the fortifying inner graces that accompanied every time of trial, Elizabeth grew ever more aware of and attentive to the "beyond," the "above," the eternal life that brought her deepening peace and joy. And it was this "eternity" that she longed for increasingly, not so much as rest but as fullness of life and communion with God. She learned that God was at work in the world and in her life and that the providential will of God, unfolding in often unexpected, unplanned ways, held a treasure when it was entered into and embraced, the treasure of eternal life, where the beatitudes are tasted and one senses that the reign of God is coming.

She learned this, as I mentioned, through her childhood experiences of loss and loneliness; she learned it through her joy in serving the poor and through her love and affection for William Magee Seton, her husband. She learned it when, at twenty-four, just as she was beginning to enjoy her own home and children and pregnant with Richard, there came the unexpected death of her father-in-law and the need to move and care for Will's brothers and sisters. She learned that God offered deepening life and grace through the failing fortunes and health of her Will, through the premature death of her own beloved father who died in her arms, through the trip to Leghorn that raised some hope about Will's health, and the dashing of that hope when they were quarantined, through the unspeakable suffering and endless vigils in the lazaretto, and through her dear William's death. She

¹Léon Bloy, as noted in *Léon Bloy, Pilgrim of the Absolute*, selection by Raïssa Maritain, trans. John Coleman and Harry Lorin Binsse (New York: 1947), 358, adapted.

recognized it in the kindness and care of the Filicchi family and in the encouragement their own faith brought her. And she learned it again when, at her return from Italy, she faced the death of her soul-sister Rebecca, for whom she had written her journal of this last trip. She recognized this treasure of life in the ineffable peace and certainty that were given her following the exhausting struggle that marked her decision to enter the Catholic Church, and through the inner strength and forgiving spirit that filled her heart when family and friends deserted her and, by their active maligning of her character and reputation, made it impossible for her to earn her living in New York. She learned it through the timely invitation to come to Baltimore, and through the searing pain of leaving her familiar surroundings, her beloved city. She learned it when she happily welcomed her first dedicated companions and when she discovered the providential concurrence of her dream with that of Samuel Cooper. She learned it in the exciting challenge of new beginnings and in the very real sufferings of pioneering in poverty. She learned it through her struggle, disagreements, and tension with superiors, as also through the support and care of helpful directors, notably Simon Gabriel Bruté, who understood so well God's ways with her and hers with God. She learned it when she entered into the dying and death of so many loved ones, especially of her dearest Anna, whose death seems to have occasioned the darkest trial of her life, as also of her Becky, and of Harriet, Cecilia, and so many sisters in the young community. She learned it when, over the years, she accepted and embraced her own frail health, and again in her final illness.

At this point the reader might find it helpful to pause and reflect on one of these questions, with a view to spending a few moments in dialogue with Elizabeth: What experience of Elizabeth's life do I feel drawn to identify with at this time? or what experience in my life do I sense Elizabeth would like to speak to? Why?

Jon Sobrino notes that spirituality demands (1) honesty about the real, (2) fidelity to the real, and (3) a certain "correspondence" by which we permit ourselves to be carried along by the "more" of the real.² From her earliest years and all through her life and not withstanding her sometimes romantic spirit, we can affirm in Elizabeth an honesty about the real, a fidelity to the real, and that certain "corre-

²Jon Sobrino, as noted by Francine Cardman in "Liberating Compassion: Spirituality for a New Millennium," *The Way*, 32, no. 1 (January 1992):12.

spondence" which allowed her to be carried along by the "more" of the real. It is expressed in her practical common sense and keen judgment of persons and situations, in her uncomplicated straight effort to please the Lord, and in her entering ever more carefully into the activity of God with her whole desire and being.

In Elizabeth we find a loving surrender to and collaboration with the Spirit of God, the "more" at work in the real, both in events and in herself. She had observed that with the sadness of loss came the consolation of God's presence and that new and challenging calls were prefaced by strengthening assurances of grace and love. It is striking that her experiences of death did not squelch her natural exuberance for life but rather refined and deepened it, and that hurt and pain made her ever more sensitive to the needs of others. She came to know that the "will of God" was the "providence of God" for her, through which eternal life was given. This is reflected in words she wrote to Cecilia O'Conway, "We must be so careful to meet our grace. If mine depended on going to a place to which I had the most dreaded aversion, in that place there is a store of grace waiting for me—What a comfort."³ Elizabeth learned that what might seem "in the way" is the way. She grew in wisdom along this path.

God worked with her talent of expecting, finding, and surrendering to the "more," the "beyond" in her life, even as she was involved in practical life situations. This conviction, this expectation, this deep trust is evident throughout her life and notably when she sets out on the long trip with her dying husband and Anna, leaving the four little ones behind. She notes in her "Dear Remembrances," "At 29, faith in our Leghorn voyage, reliance that all would turn to good."⁴ Elizabeth understood the will and the providence of God not simply as the events that presented themselves but as her response to them. This perspective can help us appreciate her words at three different moments of her life. In the midst of trials, she writes in her journal, "if Thou so ordainest it, welcome disappointment and poverty, welcome sickness and pain, welcome even shame and contempt and calumny. . . . Meanwhile Thou wilt support us with the consolation of Thy grace."⁵ To Eliza Sadler she writes after Anna's death, "You believe me when I say with my whole soul, 'His will be done forever.'"⁶ And in

³Elizabeth Seton: *Selected Writings*, ed. Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York: 1987), 47.

⁴*Ibid.*, 347.

⁵Charles White, *Mother Seton: Mother of Many Daughters* (Garden City, New York: 1949), 12.

⁶Joseph I. Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton: A Spiritual Portrait* (San Francisco: 1990), 29.

her dying she prays, "May the most just, the most high, the most amiable will of God be accomplished forever."⁷

I believe that the certain "correspondence" by which Elizabeth allowed herself to be carried along by the "more" of the real is a particular quality of feminine attentiveness and sensitivity to life within and around her, a quality enhanced by her deep maternal instinct and experience. By nature, by grace, and by practice, she was disposed to concentrate on life and life-giving, on life within and beyond the immediate events, whether they brought unpleasantness and pain or satisfaction and joy. She could set aside and let go of what was not ultimately essential. I am reminded of Elizabeth's advice to "see your dear Savior alone in the midst of your soul", encouraging "'let everything that passes pass; mind nothing but what is eternal.'"⁸

I see three elements in Elizabeth's life which I believe nourished and were nourished by her honesty about the real, her fidelity to the real, and that certain "correspondence" by which she was carried along by the "more" of the real, impulses of the heart to which she consistently responded and which are evident throughout her life. They are: faithfulness to some time of daily prayer (which took many forms), whatever the circumstances, and in all the seasons of her heart and of her spirit; the practice of journaling and correspondence which undoubtedly provided a locus for reflection and integration in her usually busy days; and her love of the Eucharist. Can we be surprised that she whose life was so marked by events deeply engraved in her maternal flesh and being would be so consistently attracted and devoted to the Eucharist, the sacrament of the Body of Christ? In a letter to her son William, for whom she held an affection stronger than all disappointments and heartaches, an affection that she herself scarcely understood, she wrote in 1818, "Last night I had you close where you used to be so snug and warm when you drew the life stream twenty years ago, and where the heart still beats to love you dearly."⁹ It seems perfectly natural then that she was so drawn to this sacrament of thankfulness for God's active presence in human history, the memorial of Jesus's experience of death and life in God, the celebration of our communion with God and in God through the Body of Christ.

I have noted that at the center of Mother Seton's spirituality is that conviction, expectation, and deep trust that in every event and cir-

⁷White, *Mother Seton*, 287.

⁸*Ibid.*, 222-23.

⁹Dirvin, *The Soul*, 30.

cumstance God offers eternal life and that in this spirit she embraced each moment with an extraordinary love that transformed her and the event. The special gift which she brings to this trusting acceptance and courageous response to the events and circumstances of her life is a feminine concentration on life, on persons and relationships, and ultimately on her relationship with God that grounds them all in eternal life. Truly she is a Mother, a receiver of life, a giver of life, a nurturer of life, completely given to finding and fostering the “more” in the real, the eternal life which is the ultimate object of her desire and longing.

Now if you were attentive at the outset, and if your memory has not been dimmed by my many words, you will recall that I began by noting that two experiences marked my life as I prepared this reflection. The first was my experience of limits—of time and of energy—as I tried to prepare this article. Now you know that the task has become a transformative event.

What, you are asking, is the second? It was a family “pilgrimage” with my sisters and brothers to our paternal ancestral home in Ireland in September. This journey was for us a special celebration of our family history, heritage, and life. It deepened the bonds among us, confirmed certain family traits, and helped us recognize the links between then and now, there and here. The gale-force winds still blow across Inishowen as they did 300 years ago, and 160 years ago when my great-great-grandfather set out. In the fields near the old family home the sheep graze as they have in the past, and the old stone bridge that fords the arm of the sea stands strong. Our family gathering and exploration helped us to see how through the dream, the courage, and the long difficult sea voyage of an adventurous young man, the sense of life and approach to life shaped by those realities have been passed on to us here, in another world, at another time.

So, too, after my exploration of Mother Seton’s life experience have I recognized more clearly how her heritage lives in me. And I trust that this reflection will have helped each of us not only appreciate Elizabeth as the wonderful woman that she is but also recognize that our own responses to our life events reflect that quality of heart that animated her and shaped the events of her life and of her time. And I hope that, recognizing her extraordinary legacy of faith, hope, and love, we will rejoice in our inheritance.