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Flames of Love -- Louise de Marillac and Elizabeth Ann Seton

By

BETTY ANN McNEIL, D.C.

Louise de Marillac (1591-1660, canonized 1934) and Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821, canonized 1975) clothed themselves with grace "as God's chosen ones." They were apostolic women of deep prayer who put on the seamless garment of God's love, "which binds everything together in perfect harmony."¹ Keenly aware of their baptismal consecration, they made its significance a thread which ran consistently through the tapestry of their lives, resonating with the Vatican II's emphasis on the sacrament.² The Council called Christians to live their baptism fully by giving witness to their faith in God through the practice of charity.³

This article discusses the values that drove Saint Louise and Saint Elizabeth Ann in their mission of charity, and examines the spiritual themes which are strikingly similar. These women encountered and journeyed with their Triune God, whose graciousness revealed divine love which they embraced enthusiastically and knew as Providence. Their engagement with the divine in human events energized them for mission.⁴ "Alive for God in Christ Jesus,"⁵ along the way both Louise and Elizabeth struggled in faith and hope through the murkiness of their own creativity. These women of charity model a spirituality for mission by the way they experienced and responded to the presence of the Almighty in their lives. The stories of how Louise de Marillac and Elizabeth Seton found the Divine Lover, and where they saw the face of God, reveal two passionate hearts in whom flames of love burned for their mission.

Louise de Marillac, a wife, mother, and widow, committed her life to serving persons oppressed by poverty and disease in seventeenth-century France.⁶ In collaboration with Saint Vincent de Paul (1581-1660, canonized 1737), Louise co-founded the Company of the Daughters of

¹ Colossians 3:14.

² For a comprehensive treatment of the spiritual development of Louise de Marillac, see Kathryn B. LaFleur, S.P., *Louise de Marillac: A Light in the Darkness, A Woman of Yesteryear, A Saint and Model for Today* (New York: New City Press, 1996). For a thematic discussion of the spirituality of Elizabeth Seton, see Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M., *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton. A Spiritual Portrait* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990).

³ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 10-11. December 24, 2001.

⁴ Rev. Stephen J. Rossetti, Ph.D., D. Min., "Spiritual Asphyxiation," *Journal of Human Development* 17:4 (Winter 1996): 5-10.

⁵ Romans 6:6.

⁶ See Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., "Understanding Hearts -- Elizabeth Seton and Louise de Marillac" *Vincentian Heritage* 20:2 (1999).

Charity in Paris (29 November 1633). Together they developed a rule of life for their Company of Charity tailored to its mission of serving persons oppressed by poverty, illness, and injustice.

Elizabeth, also wife, mother, and widow, committed herself to the mission of education and charity, especially for poor children, in the United States of the nineteenth century. With the support and guidance of the French Sulpicians in Maryland, Elizabeth founded the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's (31 July 1809) in Emmitsburg, Maryland. For her sisterhood, the first new community established in the United States, Elizabeth adapted the rule Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul gave their Daughters of Charity.

Women of Heart

Louise and Elizabeth knew their gracious God, who bestowed both joy and sorrow on them but who also had gifted them with love and hope. The Word, the Eucharist, and events bore God's plan and revealed it to them in the fabric of their lives. Both women were not only influenced by Vincent de Paul but also by Francis de Sales whose *Introduction to the Devout Life* they had read. Louise and Elizabeth were women:

- Who loved their God, their husbands, their children, their friends, their students, their directors, their companions, poor persons, and all of creation.
- Who faithfully did the works of mercy and justice caring for orphans, widows, poor families, and persons in need.
- Who cared about others, sought ways to close service gaps, and tried to satisfy unmet needs among the poor persons to whom they ministered.
- Who attended to household details in sick rooms, classrooms, and homes of those who were poor.
- Who communed with nature, walking humbly with their God in prayer and the ways of the Spirit.

Louise faithfully celebrated the anniversary of her baptism.⁷ She recorded the desire that her "spiritual birth" enable her life to "be solely for Jesus and my neighbor, so that by means of this unifying love, I may love all that Jesus loves" and benefit from "the graces which His mercy wills to bestow upon me."⁸ Similarly, reflecting on Jesus as her

⁷ The date and place of Louise de Marillac's baptism are unknown.

⁸ "Thoughts on Baptism," in *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, ed. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1991), 786, A. 23.

Redeemer, Elizabeth made this entry in her copy of the *Imitation of Christ*, "Will not Jesus Christ be with me? Was I not signed with the cross of salvation in Baptism?"⁹ Their rootedness in faith enabled both Louise and Elizabeth to live by Christian values along life's journey.

Although both Louise and Elizabeth were women who had personal scars because of loss, they were sustained by their loving Creator, despite their emotional pain and feelings of isolation. Their lives, deeply imprinted by suffering, became conduits of a sense of gratitude toward their Creator on whom they relied and whose will became a driving force in their lives. This appreciation became a bond which nourished the wellspring of their interior life. Centered on their All, they waited with serene detachment for key epiphany moments when God would speak clearly in their lives. Their peaceful posture of letting go of their own agendas in order for God to act testified to their availability for service among the people of God -- continuing the mission of Jesus.

Women of Values

Before adopting a lifestyle focused on charity, both Louise and Elizabeth had been involved as lay ministers to persons caught in poverty. Both women lived by values which impelled their hearts toward the needs of the neighbor. By kneading the lives of these women, their Creator molded Louise and Elizabeth into instruments of God's divine love. Blessed with values and grace these exemplary Christian women led lives which reflected gospel values.¹⁰ Their hearts were so enmeshed with their treasure that they focused on the present only in the light of eternity. Concern for the individual, especially compassion for the sick, the suffering, the dying, the grieving and the outcasts of society consumed their attention.¹¹

They both breathed and exhaled the spirit Vincent de Paul had instilled in the first Daughters of Charity in the seventeenth century. Like Jesus, they, too, sought ways to be in solidarity with poverty

⁹ "Mother Seton's Baptism," *Mother Seton Guild Bulletin* 16 (November 1945): 3. Since this article was submitted publication of the Seton papers has begun. See also Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., Ellin M. Kelly, mss. ed., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2000-2002; volume three forthcoming). The correspondence of Elizabeth Seton appears in volume one and two; the preparation of a third volume of her spiritual writings (instructions, meditations, translations, etc.) is in process.

¹⁰ Cf. #50, "On the Spirit of the Company," 2 February 1653, *The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, ed. and trans. by Joseph Leonard, C.M. (Norwich, England: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1979), 520-21. *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, 14 vols. (Paris: Lecoffre, 1920-1925), 9: 597-98. (Hereinafter Coste will be cited as *CED*.)

¹¹ Cf. Luke 12:34.



Louise de Marillac. Etching in Arthur Loth's,
St. Vincent de Paul et sa Mission Sociale, 1880.

Courtesy Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

stricken individuals whose human dignity they respected and wished to uphold. Both Louise and Elizabeth relied on Divine Providence to accomplish their mission, and considered many events as providential, including the ordinary ones. On one occasion Louise wrote a sister that, "the City Administrators [plan] to furnish . . . water. The pipes have already been laid from the reservoir to the House. This leads me to hope that we will have a completely functioning water supply before Christmas . . . God is so good to us!"¹²

Respect for Human Dignity

Louise, because of her deep respect for all persons, insisted that persons who were poor should receive high quality services. She fostered a high regard for the worth of each person. Louise motivated the sisters to strive for excellence in their duties, and to always be compassionate toward persons trapped by poverty. Her letters are full of practical recommendations about how to care for persons oppressed. One example illustrates her awareness of good hygienic practices, "Do you

¹² Louise de Marillac to Sister Anne Hardemont, 13 November 1659, Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 654, L. 634.

provide towels at the beds of the sick? Do you maintain their cleanliness?"¹³

Louise, as both mentor and model for her sisters, fostered positive attitudes among them, especially respect, "As for your conduct with the sick, may you never take the attitude of merely getting the task done. You must show them affection; serving them from the heart; inquiring of them what they might need; speaking to them gently and compassionately."¹⁴ Another lifelong theme of Louise's focused on the sisters' interpersonal relationships with those they served. "Be very gentle and courteous toward your poor. You know that they are our masters and that we must love them tenderly and respect them deeply."¹⁵

Elizabeth knew the pain of dependency and the humiliation of being the recipient of charity. This made her even more sensitive to the individual needs of children from impoverished families.¹⁶ She also knew the weariness of emotional exhaustion and the frustration of trying to earn an honest living in the face of religious bigotry, "The so long agitated plan [to take in boarders] is given up, and in consequence, I am plagued for a house, wearied with consultations about what would be best for me. . . ."¹⁷ Finally, when settled in Emmitsburg, Elizabeth could reflect more about her role and its meaning, "I am as a mother encompassed by many children of different dispositions -- not all equally amiable or congenial, but bound to love, instruct, and provide for the happiness of all; to give the example of cheerfulness, peace, resignation; and [to] consider individuals more as proceeding from the same origin and tending to the same end than in the different shades of merits and demerit."¹⁸

Values Driven Mission

Careful planning for her educational mission was an important element of assuring quality service and engaging in advocacy for Elizabeth. "The idea of the [school] building calculated extends to a division into two separate houses: one for the rich children who may be educated in a

¹³ Louise de Marillac to Sister Elizabeth Martin, October 1646, *ibid.*, 182, L. 160.

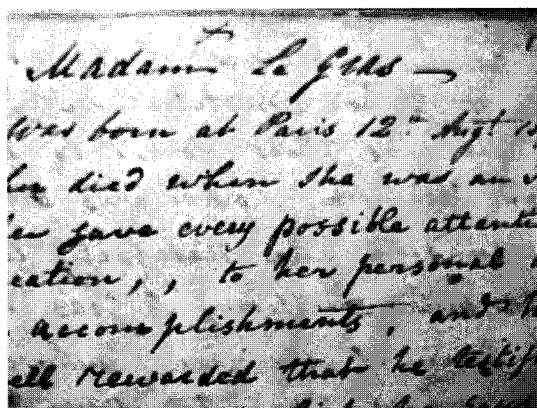
¹⁴ "Instructions to the Sisters Who Were Sent to Montreuil", October 1646, *ibid.*, 773, A. 85.

¹⁵ Louise de Marillac to Sister Cécile Agnès, 4 May 1650, *ibid.*, 320, L. 284b.

¹⁶ "My Seton has left his five darlings and myself wholly dependent [*sic*] on the bounty of those individuals who love, and respected him . . . Infinitely unconscious of the desperate state his affairs [*sic*]." #3.5, Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 15 July 1804, Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., Ellin M. Kelly, mss. ed., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2000), 1: 313.

¹⁷ #3.22, Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 6 April 1805, Bechtle and Metz, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 1: 349.

¹⁸ Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 151.



Elizabeth Ann Seton's translation (1818) of the biography of Louise de Marillac by Nicolas Gobillon (1676).
 Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, Maryland

general manner, the other for the poor and such persons as may be employed in the manufactory [or workshop]." In order to maintain both the sisterhood and her mission, circumstances forced Elizabeth to attract and admit paying boarders whose tuition she foresaw as a means to finance ministries that would benefit persons materially poor and unable to pay. Elizabeth's sense of advocacy in her mission of charity reached beyond Saint Joseph's Academy into the poverty-ridden hovels on the mountain and elsewhere, supporting the cause of those who lacked resources for a reasonable quality of life. To expand quality education through individualized instruction she even used her own daughters, at times, as teacher aids for younger children.

Honesty, integrity, and straightforwardness were qualities these foundresses fostered among the early sisters. In a conflict with her ecclesiastical superior, who wanted to make personnel changes and impose his own rules on the school she had begun in the valley, Elizabeth's integrity shone forth. With great simplicity, Elizabeth appealed to Bishop Carroll and explained that "really I have endeavored to do every thing in my power to bend myself to meet the last appointed [Reverend John David, S.S., then superior] absolute conformity with him and constant prayer to our Lord to help me, yet the heart is closed, and when the pen should freely give him detail and information he requires it stops... I remain motionless and inactive."¹⁹ But with her typical future orientation that

¹⁹ Ellin M. Kelly and Annabelle Melville, eds., *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 267.

encompassed concern for others, Elizabeth also mused, "My own troubles will teach me I hope how to comfort others."²⁰

Louise and Elizabeth's simplicity and genuine concern endeared them to individuals whom they encountered in both community and ministry. Louise's knowledge of herbal remedies and nutritional supplements were prominent threads in the advice she wrote her sisters. Among her many tips, Louise cautions her sisters to use licorice only when fresh and that the essence of cinnamon "must be placed in the sun like the other distilled waters."²¹ Louise generously mixed a spirit of faith with her home remedies, "If Sister Claude is still suffering from intestinal inflammation, please boil some chicory roots and with a little bayberry, both in generous amounts. It is a quick-acting remedy but it is very distasteful to drink if one does not try to accompany it by the remembrance of the bitter drink offered to Our Lord on the Cross."²²

In contrast to Louise's application of plants as medicine, Elizabeth speaks of being energized by the beauty of creation. She alluded to nature and its healing potential in allegorical terms such as "the sharp thorn in the heart" for emotional pain, or "a true cordial to my heart" for a welcome letter from a dear friend, and gathering "garden roots" for activities in the spring.²³ Elizabeth's appreciation of flowers often moved her to use imaginative language in reference to wild flowers, or "fresher flowers" in eternity, the invitation to "smell my roses," and reminisces of communing with God amidst "woods, rocks, walks."²⁴ At a time when she was surrounded by life-threatening illnesses among her young companions at the end of their first year at Emmitsburg, Elizabeth told Julia Sitgreaves Scott that she was "sending my rose buds to blow in heaven."²⁵

Both Louise and Elizabeth, despite their poetry and practicality, were prophets who blazed new trails for apostolic women. Their inventive spirits made them true daughters of Vincent de Paul, himself a master of creativity and initiative in seventeenth-century France. Who else but Vincent would consider, much less launch, a joint venture with a Carmelite nun, an army commander and a bishop – all of whom collaborated to establish the Char-

²⁰ Ibid., 262.

²¹ Louise de Marillac to Monsieur Vincent, October 1648, Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 266, L. 266. Louise de Marillac to Monsieur Vincent, April 1649, *ibid.*, 284, L. 259.

²² Louise de Marillac to Sister Henriette Gesseume, 7 October 1658, *ibid.*, 615, L. 596. See also Louise de Marillac to L'Abbé de Vaux, 8 February 1641, *ibid.*, 46, L. 115.

²³ #3.19, Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 5 March 1805, Bechtle and Metz, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 345. Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 20 March 1815, Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 244; 14 April 1818, *ibid.*, 1: 269.

²⁴ Kelly and Melville, "Dear Remembrances," *Selected Writings*, 352. Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 10 April 1817, Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 260; Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, June 1817, *ibid.*, 261.

²⁵ ASJPH 1-3-3-6:83.

ity at Troyes in 1638.²⁶ Both women viewed time as a good belonging to those persons enmeshed in poverty whom they served, and, therefore, to be revered and used responsibly like good stewards. This exactitude for time management permeates the charism of charity, "To accomplish God's will in this matter, you will be careful not to waste time. . . . I am sure that . . . you are very exact about this and that Divine Providence does not fail to provide you with enough work wherever you have to go."²⁷ Such has been the reality in the Company of Charity!

A Living Spirit

After 1810 Elizabeth began translating works about Louise, and the French Daughters of Charity, into English. In that year the request was made to obtain the *Common Rules for the Daughters of Charity*, the text of which reflects Louise's administrative insights and her compassionate heart. Elizabeth read the *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity* and became familiar with Louise de Marillac's leadership and formation roles in the Company of Charity. It is not surprising that Elizabeth became intrigued by this kindred spirit of the seventeenth century whose similarities of life were striking. What must have been Elizabeth's thoughts as she translated the selection "Thoughts of Mademoiselle Le Gras On [the] Vocation of [the] Sisters of Charity"?

One of the principal graces God has given you my sisters is your call to this company and vocation of charity, therefore I will tell you what your thoughts should be of it – they may be both very high and very low and still without contradiction. . . . They may be very low, my sisters, for can there be anything lower in the eyes of the world than our condition? . . . *Country women* [sic], assembled to serve the *poor*, to carry them *food* and *remedies!* . . . what could be more humble than our beginnings. . . . Yet on the other hand, what consolation to see the goodness of God *who has* chosen this manner of life for you to honor by it the life of his Son on Earth. What can be more exalted than a Vocation which

²⁶ Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., "Vincentian Values and Fund Raising for the Mission," *Vincentian Heritage* 1:13 (1992): 33.

²⁷ Louise de Marillac to "My Very Dear Sisters at Chantilly," 15 September 1657, Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 569, L. 545.

engages us to the imitation of so great an example --"²⁸

The charism of charity was formed by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of Louise and Elizabeth through the hand of Divine Providence. The foundresses' flames of love continue to ascend through the dynamism of their daughters who live their spirit today.²⁹ Although Vincent de Paul guided her along the spiritual journey of most of her adult years, Louise de Marillac expresses her unique charism through her own rich personality. At times she held different views from her saintly director, Vincent -- and in several major instances she prevailed!³⁰ In a similar fashion, in the face of obstacles from some of her ecclesiastical superiors regarding the direction of her sisterhood, Elizabeth was also a woman of determination. Both Louise and Elizabeth imbibed the richness of the Vincentian tradition and refined it with their genteel and sometimes not so gentle touch.

The Sulpicians introduced Elizabeth to Louise de Marillac by presenting a copy of the first biography written about the French foundress, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, authored by her pastor, Reverend Nicolas Gobillon (1676). Elizabeth's translation of this work is still extant in her own hand. The final paragraph, which Elizabeth translated, reads "[Charity] is traced through the whole course of her life . . . this virtue regulated and animated her whole conduct . . . to find out the wants of the poor, to procure them relief, employment, and instruction seemed the sole [aim of her] ambition or pleasure."³¹ This description also applies to Elizabeth Seton.

Spirituality for Mission

"From God's fullness" Louise and Elizabeth received many blessings and became devout women in whom God made "all things new."³² Called to conversion for mission, their zeal for the Divine led them

²⁸ Mother Elizabeth Seton, trans., "Thoughts of Mademoiselle Le Gras On [the] Vocation of [the] Sisters of Charity," *Reflections of Saint Louise*, ASJPH 1-3-3-24B. This document (written in Elizabeth Seton's own handwriting) is an English translation of the final book of Gobillon's text, *La Vie de Mademoiselle Le Gras* (1676). That portion has never been published in English, except in the edition printed for private circulation cited above.

²⁹ Elizabeth wrote to Pierre Babade, S.S., in July 1809: "Our happy retreat ended, the flame of love ascending," quoted in Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 274.

³⁰ Louise had to wait patiently while Vincent pondered her recommendation for training the village girls coming to Paris as volunteers for the Confraternities of Charity. Likewise Louise insisted that direction by the Congregation of the Mission was essential for the Company of the Daughters of Charity to preserve its primitive spirit after the death of the founders.

³¹ Mother Elizabeth Seton, trans., *Life of Madam [sic] Le Gras* (1818), 13. ASJPH 1-3-3-24A.

³² Cf. John 1:16; Revelation 21:5.

into an ever deepening spiral of spirituality. The spiral immersed them in a generative relationship with their God, who had first loved them as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Their mission oriented spirituality reflects the blessings of suffering, healing, and growth as they followed the One who is the "Way, the Truth and the Life."³³ Louise and Elizabeth were women whose enthusiasm and compassion became catalysts. Their life-giving spirit was and is contagious. They radiated a joyous peace -- an "ultimate sign of a spirit that is fully alive."³⁴

What inflamed and sustained them to live the Gospel so passionately? Key motifs of their spiritual legacy give us some insights into how they became energized for mission. Their experience informs today's women of faith who follow them in the Company of Charity. We are called to probe their legacy of charity, and examine its core values once again, in order to discover new insights that might assist us in ministry among the people of God for the next millennium:

- Serving Jesus Christ in Persons who are poor
- Being Daughters of the Church
- Living the Paschal Mystery
- Pursuing the Will of God
- Depending on Divine Providence
- Hungering for the Word of God
- Confiding in Mary, Mother of God
- Focusing on Eternity

Jesus in Persons Who are Poor

Deeply moved to seek ways to alleviate the suffering of needy individuals and families, Louise and Elizabeth recognized Jesus Christ as the model servant -- source and model of all charity. Balancing feeding with nourishing, and caring with care taking, mutuality graced their ministry. The foundresses came to a more profound understanding about Jesus's promise for the compassionate: "Whatsoever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."³⁵ How does this promise affect our ministry today?

Louise

³³ John 14:6.

³⁴ Rossetti, "Spiritual Asphyxiation," *Journal of Human Development*, 10.

³⁵ Matthew 25:40.

One hallmark of the Vincentian mission embraced by both Louise and Elizabeth, is the conviction that in doing ministry with and among social outcasts and persons in need, one serves Jesus Christ in the person of the individual being served. "How obliged you are to serve the poor respectfully as your masters, and devotedly because they represent for you the person of Our Lord who said: 'What you do to the least of mine, I will consider as done to me.' So then, Sisters, Our Lord is really with that . . . person [in need] who is receiving the service you render."³⁶ Louise had a deep and persistent passion for her sisters to be in solidarity with persons in poverty. She also fostered strong bonds among them because of her rootedness in the Word of God and the Church "by means of the close union of each member of our communities [the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity] with the poor, in conformity to the will of God."³⁷

Realistically, Louise and Vincent recognized that apostolic women need to be both spiritual and flexible to accomplish their mission. "We are leaving God for God if we leave one of our spiritual exercises for the service of the poor."³⁸ Yet, Louise often became the supportive mentor who chided and challenged her sisters. "I beg all of you to renew your courage so that you may serve God and the poor with more fervor, humility, and charity than ever. Strive to acquire interior recollection in the midst of your occupations."³⁹

Louise emphasized community life as an essential support for the mission, and often encouraged her sisters to invest themselves in building community through quality relationships. I "rejoice with you, by thanking God for the graces His goodness has bestowed upon you, enabling you to continue to love His service by observing your Rules especially by the cordiality and support you show one another . . . You can be certain that God is with you."⁴⁰

Louise realized that new members would be attracted only by quality community and meaningful ministry. Vocation recruitment and discernment were also timely issues for the foundresses. Louise raised the question of co-responsibility for vocation recruitment with Marguerite Chétif, whom the foundress later recommended as her successor. "So you have not found any women who want to give themselves to the

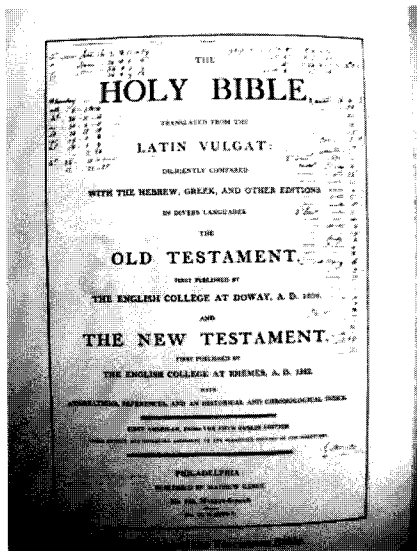
³⁶ "Conference on Serving the Sick and the Care of One's Health," 11 November 1657, Leonard, *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul*, 923-24, #85.

³⁷ "Meditations," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 732, L. 21B.

³⁸ Louise de Marillac to Sister Laurence, 20 June 1656, *ibid.*, 510, L. 439.

³⁹ Louise de Marillac to the Sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu of Nantes, 13 July 1658, *ibid.*, 600, L. 581.

⁴⁰ Louise de Marillac to Catherine Gesse, 4 May 1659, *ibid.*, 639, L. 619.



Elizabeth's copy of Rev. Simon G. Bruté's bible, which she was using at the time of her death. Note her handwritten marks in the margins.

Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, Maryland

service or Our Lord in the poor as members of the Company?"⁴¹

Although both Louise and Vincent were concerned about having new "servants of the poor" to meet the increasing requests for their services, he (Vincent) was also involved with other religious communities in various roles, whether in helping to establish or stabilize them.⁴² But did Louise envision herself as developing a prototype that would be replicated throughout the world, much less in North America where exploration was just beginning?⁴³ Elizabeth Seton became the one chosen to bridge the gap of time and culture, and to add the Setonian dimension to the Vincentian tradition.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth recorded her sentiments about her new vocation, and its vowed commitment on the feast of Saint Vincent de Paul, probably in 1813 at the conclusion of the first novitiate of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's. "Our heart is pleased to renew its consecration to thee,

⁴¹ Louise de Marillac to Marguerite Chétif, 10 January 1660, *ibid.*, 674, L. 651.

⁴² Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., *The Vincentian Family Tree* (Cape Girardeau, Missouri: Vincentian Studies Institute, 1996), xviii-xxii.

⁴³ Vincent de Paul arrived in Paris in 1608 the year after colonizers established the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown in Virginia (1607).

O my God, exceedingly dear to us through thy grace is that blessed feast of our father [Vincent] which must seal for a whole year the resolutions of our retreat. First, we place ourselves in the presence of thy most adorable majesty . . . thy goodness . . . thy saints . . . their sight inflames our hearts with boundless desires to share in their happiness before thee, to share in their denial, love and praise through our perseverance and unwearied fidelity in thy blessed service during our short stay here below -- O beloved Lord, sweetest Lord of our heart, here we are all in thy presence and all our hearts speak with ardor to renew all the resolutions of our service to thee of our dear consecration."⁴⁴

Elizabeth taught the Sisters of Charity that their service to God consisted in the exercise of faith, hope, and charity: "Do we give him the Service of *Faith* in applying to our Spiritual duties? . . . Do we serve God in Hope, looking to his promises, confiding in his love, seeking his Kingdom, and leaving the rest to him? . . . Our Charity, does it extend to all -- is our love for all in our Jesus -- is our whole heart truly his, do we unite it so closely with him that life, soul, and body are all devoted to him?"⁴⁵ Finally Elizabeth raises the question, "Does the life of our Jesus animate us -- do we indeed give him the true *service of the heart* without which whatever else we give has no Value --"⁴⁶

Elizabeth's aspirations about serving God through serving the needy impressed her Sisters in community, who remembered the most ardent desires of her heart, "I long and wish to serve our Lord with every breath I draw."⁴⁷ All the same, recognizing the ebb and flow of zeal in human nature, Elizabeth encouraged her sisters to be courageous women oriented to mission, "No personal inconvenience should prevent Sisters of Charity [from] doing what duty and charity required."⁴⁸

Daughters of the Church

Louise and Elizabeth were drawn into the life of the Church through liturgical experiences centered on the Eucharist, a source of both sustaining grace and consolation for them as lay women and foundresses. Both women were creators, architects, not of mortar (although they knew construction projects), but of the Church of their day for the kingdom. The

⁴⁴ "Saint Vincent's Day," *Retreat Meditations of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton*, ASJPH 1-3-3-20E.

⁴⁵ *Retreat Meditations of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton*, ASJPH 1-3-3-20E.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 22 May 1810, Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 280.

⁴⁸ Council Minutes of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, 20 August 1814, ASJPH.

profundity of their servant leadership derived much of its graced generativity from Louise and Elizabeth's understanding of the Eucharist and Jesus's invitation – "Do this in memory of me."⁴⁹ How does this invitation affect the way we are *ekklesia*, the Body of Christ today?

Louise

Louise's liturgical sense prompted her to focus on the Trinity, Pentecost, and the Nativity of Jesus as important points of spiritual reference. She urged her sisters to appreciate the importance of being in tune with the liturgical seasons and participating actively in the life of the Church, especially "in the perpetual sacrifice of the Cross, reenacted and offered on our altars."⁵⁰ For her, the Eucharist existed in relation to the Holy Trinity, "The awareness of the dignity of this most Holy Sacrament should make us realize our powerlessness to prepare adequately to receive Him. Thus we must turn to the Spirit of Love, the Holy Spirit, who furnished this gift, and beg Him to come into our hearts and to fill them with the dispositions necessary to honor the presence of such a Lord."⁵¹

A few months before her death, Louise recorded that as she "was receiving Holy Communion, I felt, upon seeing the Sacred Host, an extraordinary thirst . . . which led me to understand that Jesus was bringing not only Himself to me but also all the merits of His mysteries . . . No desires, no resolutions. The grace of my God will accomplish in me whatever He wills."⁵² The Liturgy of the Eucharist and reception of Holy Communion disposed Louise to be a woman of the Word and Sacrament -- available for mission.

Elizabeth

The rhythm of Elizabeth's prayer and worship was set by the patterns of her faithfulness to the liturgical life of the Protestant Episcopal Church in New York where she had such a deep devotion to the "sacrament."⁵³ Elizabeth reminded her sister-in-law Rebecca how they "were laughed at for running from one church to another, *Sacrament Sundays*, that . . . [they] might receive [communion] as often as . . . [they]

⁴⁹ Luke 22:19.

⁵⁰ "The Virgin Mary, Co-Redemptrix," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 831, M. 5B.

⁵¹ "On Holy Communion," *ibid.*, 822, M. 72.

⁵² "On Holy Communion," *ibid.*, 833, M. 8B.

⁵³ "Dear Remembrances," Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 347. See also "The Italian Journal," *ibid.*, 133.

could."⁵⁴ In recalling memories of her first communion as a Catholic, Elizabeth radiated her ecstasy, "the watch of the heart panting for the Supreme happiness it had so long desired . . . he would at last admit so poor a creature to HIMSELF *forever* [sic] . . . the treasure of my soul."⁵⁵ The Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament was so real, that, for Elizabeth, it was inconceivable how some individuals "for whom He has done such *incomprehensible things* should shut themselves out by incredulity from His best of all gifts, this Divine Sacrifice and Holy Eucharist."⁵⁶

At one period, deep sentiments of unworthiness gave Elizabeth a sense of alarm as well as fear "but all settled in one thought *how he loves and welcomes the poor and desolate* [sic] . . . in all my late communions this abandonment and misery has given a mixture of sorrow and peace and love which is made part of the daily Bread."⁵⁷ Many of her written reflections also portray an acute awareness of the Church year and its celebrations. Her instructions are punctuated with references to the saint of the day or the liturgical feast. For example, Elizabeth set 19 March for the first high mass in the Valley, in her community's newly constructed Saint Joseph's House, in 1810.⁵⁸

The Paschal Mystery

Paschal points of life punctuated the paths of both foundresses, who developed a poignantly personal appreciation of what Jesus meant about servanthood, with the arms of the cross extending up to the Divine and outward in community.⁵⁹ Through such service Louise and Elizabeth accepted loss for long term gain because they trusted His assurance that "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."⁶⁰ How does this promise affect the way we respond to personal suffering and poverty?

⁵⁴ #2.14, Elizabeth Seton to Rebecca Seton, 18 April 1804, Bechtle and Metz, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 1: 297.

⁵⁵ ASJPH 1-3-3-26B. Quote in "Dear Remembrances," Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 350.

⁵⁶ Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 74.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 321. ASJPH 12:47.

⁵⁸ This building is now called the White House.

⁵⁹ Cf. John 13:15.

⁶⁰ Matthew 17:25.

Louise

Louise had a particular devotion to the passion of Jesus Crucified and so adopted the motto "The Charity of Jesus Crucified Impels Us" for her Daughters of Charity, whom she felt should "choose the life of Jesus Crucified as the model" for their lives "so that His Resurrection may be a means for glory for us in Eternity."⁶¹ For the community seal Louise chose a crucifix surrounded by a heart inflamed. Her many personal experiences of the cross had made Louise keenly aware of its centrality in the spiritual life. Realizing that it was a means to "rebirth in grace," she wrote, "God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and He has hardly ever left me, at any age, without some occasion of suffering."⁶²

When corresponding with a sister whose conduct distressed her, Louise shared with her that "The desire for your perfection that God has instilled in me gives me more cause for suffering than I could ever express . . . I must also learn to renounce the abuse of my senses and passions, because no one will rise with Jesus Christ who has not first of all died in this way."⁶³ This awareness of the paschal rhythm of suffering, dying, and rising led Louise to beg her sisters "to renew themselves in His Resurrection . . . Let us be in the remembrance of the wounds He suffered for us . . . We can have no peace [but] with God, with our neighbor or with ourselves unless Jesus Christ gives it to us."⁶⁴

Elizabeth

Elizabeth cautions about the danger of being "lovers with our lips rather than our heart, while a true lover of Christ can never have enough of His cross."⁶⁵ She also encouraged others to "rejoice to bear your share in [*sic*] the Cross which is our Passport and seal to the Kingdom of the Redeemer."⁶⁶ "You and I must meet Him -- we must be crucified -- it is in vain to start, or think of escaping."⁶⁷ Yet she realized "we are never strong enough to bear our cross, it is the cross which carries us, nor so weak to be unable to bear it, since the weakest become strong by its virtue."⁶⁸

⁶¹ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:14. "Meditations," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 732, A. 21B.

⁶² "On Charity," *ibid.*, 711, A. 29.

⁶³ Louise de Marillac to My Very Dear Sisters, *ibid.*, 600, L. 580.

⁶⁴ Louise de Marillac to Our very Dear Sisters, the Daughters of Charity at Nantes, *ibid.*, 196, L. 174.

⁶⁵ Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 103.

⁶⁶ #1.77, Elizabeth Seton to Cecilia Seton, 1 October 1803, Bechtel and Metz, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 1: 224.

⁶⁷ Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 99.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

Only an understanding of the centrality of the cross could enable Elizabeth to be passionate in emoting her deepest desires, "the thirst and longing of my soul is fixed on the cross alone."⁶⁹ In a meditation on "the communion of the cross," Elizabeth reflects on the nuances of the mysteries of faith blended in her paschal experiences. "There is no possible advantage to be compared with the happiness of receiving Our Lord and Savior in the Holy Eucharist, who is our very life in all our sufferings yet we also receive Him by the communion of His cross, that is to say, we may *unite with Him, we draw His spirit on us*, and it is very certain that we receive no grace in the communion of the Holy Eucharist but in proportion as we receive it in the communion of *the cross*."⁷⁰

The Will of God

The Divine Plan seemed to be a magnet drawing Louise and Elizabeth into communion with God. Their relationship spiraled deeper and deeper to the core of their beings where they fixed their souls' desire on God and assumed a stance of availability to the Word. Like Mary, their generous "Yes" changed their lives. They discovered God's will for them, expressed through persons and events as God's messengers responding simply, "Your will be done."⁷¹ How does this attitude affect the way we perceive and accomplish our mission in the Church today?

Louise

The impulsive Louise learned over time to modulate her inclinations and to patiently pace herself in order to discern the will of God. To accomplish this Louise emphasized the necessity of asceticism and the imitation of Jesus Christ. This enabled her to know and accomplish the will of God.⁷² What eventually emerged was a woman who consciously surrendered her agenda to the Divine Plan in a spirit of unrestricted readiness. "I gave Him my full consent to operate in me by His power whatever He willed to see accomplished."⁷³

In this way, Louise, who had grasped how to seek and carry out God's plan, also mastered the fine art of cherishing it, "If you completely entrust everything to the guidance of Divine Providence and

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Seton to Philip Filicchi, 21 January 1809, Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 244.

⁷⁰ Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 101.

⁷¹ Matthew 6:10.

⁷² Louise de Marillac to Our very Dear Sisters, the Daughters of Charity at Nantes, Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 196, L. 174.

⁷³ "Renunciation of Self," *ibid.*, 720, A. 12.

love the most holy will of God, this will contribute greatly to your peace of mind and heart. In fact this is one of the most essential practices I know of for growth in holiness."⁷⁴

Often pulled by the demands of serving the poor, attending to community affairs, and nurturing her spiritual life, Louise sought unity of life that integrated the various dimensions of her commitment in the Company of Charity. She was the first to counsel her sisters about their need for balance in order to attain a unity of life. "All this . . . causes us to ask God . . . for whatever will conform more closely to His holy and perfect will. We beg you also, for the love of Him, to take care of yourself in carrying out your responsibilities so that you may accomplish this [*sic*] holy and adorable will for a long time here on earth."⁷⁵

Louise and Elizabeth both readily invested themselves in ministry within the Vincentian tradition with all its apostolic demands and activity. Neither, however, seemed to adequately heed Vincent de Paul's advice to the early sisters about practicing an asceticism of restraint. Their flair for indiscreet zeal made many of the first servants of the poor likely candidates for burn out, "Take great care to preserve [your health] for the love of Our Lord and His poor members and be careful not to do too much. It is a ruse of the devil, by which he deceives good people, to induce them to do more than they are able, so that they end up not being able to do anything. The spirit of God urges one gently to do the good that can be done reasonably, so that it may be done perseveringly and you will be acting according to the spirit of God."⁷⁶

Elizabeth

In different stages of her life Elizabeth, poised to follow God's will, was alert to discern both its imperceptible and clear manifestations. "Our Lord will direct all, whatever you say or do I shall consider as his Voice and Will," she wrote to Philip Filicchi.⁷⁷ Elizabeth riveted her focus on "trying to turn every little action on his will" with all her being.⁷⁸ As she left Baltimore to embark on her new mission she teasingly referred to her mid-life change of lifestyle by writing that "I set

⁷⁴ Louise de Marillac to Sister Mathurine Guérin, 23 December 1659, *ibid.*, 662, L. 643.

⁷⁵ Louise de Marillac to Monsieur Antoine Portail, 26 September 1655, *ibid.*, 484, L. 453.

⁷⁶ Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac in Beauvais, 7 December 1630, in Marie Poole, D.C., trans. and ed., et al, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, 14 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1985), 1: 94.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Seton to Philip Filicchi, 21 January 1809, Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 244.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Seton to John Hickey, 10 June 1819, quoted in *ibid.*, 373.

out a new career Peace and Silence and submission the whole aim."⁷⁹ Her compliance seemed especially poignant at times of loss because of death. Elizabeth often expressed peace and resignation in her voluminous correspondence. In one example, she wrote, "this world of separations must have its course."⁸⁰ Yet in her typical fashion, Elizabeth concludes a note to her former confessor, "The same fidelity in all the rest and I would be as you bid me a *SAINTE*."⁸¹

Elizabeth also instilled in her spiritual daughters her own aspiration for sanctity. In a letter to Cecilia O'Conway, the first postulant and prototype of the American Sisters of Charity, Elizabeth wrote, "Oh my Cis how *little* is all that passes with this life -- yet my Mother, you say, they are of an Eternal consequence -- they are -- and therefore we must be so careful to meet our grace -- if mine depended on going to a place to which I had the most dreadful aversion, in that place there is a store of grace waiting for me."⁸²

Divine Providence

The mantle of God's caring provided for Louise and Elizabeth, in their ministries, particularly during periods of uncertainty and insecurity to face dependency with a maturing reliance on Divine Providence. These women of faith approached reality with trust and single mindedness. Shedding anxiety and surrendering control, they sought only the kingdom, "Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all . . ."⁸³ How does this attitude affect how we respond to contemporary opportunities and challenges in ministry?

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Seton to Pierre Babade, 1809, *ibid.*, 320.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Seton to Mary Fitch Bayley Bunch, 26 June 1819, *ibid.*, 297.

⁸¹ ASJPH 12:81, quoted in *ibid.*, 320.

⁸² Elizabeth Seton to Sister Cecilia O'Conway, 20 November 1818, *ibid.*, 303. Cecilia O'Conway, sponsored by Reverend Pierre Babade, S.S., joined Elizabeth Seton in Baltimore on 7 December 1808 as a candidate for the sisterhood. (Later she was also known as Sister Veronica.) After Elizabeth Seton's death, she withdrew from the Sisters of Charity (1823) and entered the Ursulines in Montreal where she died as Mother Marie of the Incarnation. As an Ursuline she wrote her family from Quebec that she was "a happy captive to Rules more congenial to my inclinations," and added "Ever venerable will the Institution of Saint Vincent de Paul be to my memory . . . Malicious tongues shall never say that I left the Society through a contempt for it." (Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 428, n. 79.)

⁸³ Matthew 6:25-33.

Louise

Louise marveled that Divine Providence had shown special favor to the Company of Charity, protecting it from harm when the ceiling collapsed in a room where a conference (which had been canceled) would have been held. Louise herself had just left the room because a sister, after hearing the sound of a ceiling beam cracking, had warned her. This event became a pivotal sign for Louise. "With all my heart, I wanted to render glory to God . . . since this seemed to correspond to the plan of God when He permitted this accident to happen to us. To this end, I thought that I must strive to keep the memory of this event alive within me for the rest of my days and thank God for the interior sentiments which He gave me at that time."⁸⁴

The abiding sense of trust which Louise promoted among the community was partially the result of two moving religious experiences she had during the season of Pentecost. In 1623 she was conflicted about whether to leave or remain with her husband. Later, in 1642, she felt responsible for the departures, growing pains, and problems within the Little Company. Louise continually called her sisters to move beyond themselves to the needs of others. "Be particularly submissive to the good pleasure of God and abandon yourselves to His Providence. . . . Perfection is not to be found . . . [in excessive introspection] but in the practice of true charity."⁸⁵

Elizabeth

Elizabeth lived in such a way that she manifested "confidence in God through all the varieties of [her] pains and trials."⁸⁶ She often referred to the fact that she was "Looking to Providence and beyond the grave."⁸⁷ Elizabeth depended on her Creator and explained to others that "our God is God, and I know all will turn out well at last . . . [even though] the ways of Providence are mysterious indeed as to the human Nature but most clearly we may distinguish in them the progress of the Divine, pervading all."⁸⁸

When considering a new venture to support her family while still in New York, Elizabeth's firm faith shines through as she faces an un-

⁸⁴ "On the Conduct of Divine Providence," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 768, A. 75. The accident occurred in June 1642, on the vigil of the Feast of Pentecost.

⁸⁵ Louise de Marillac to the Sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu of Nantes, 13 July 1658, *ibid.*, 600, L. 581.

⁸⁶ "Dear Remembrances," Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 347.

⁸⁷ Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 167.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 24 July 1817, Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 262. Elizabeth Seton to Cecilia Seton, 1807, Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 218.

certain future with hope, "If it succeeds I bless God, if [it] . . . does not succeed . . . , I bless God, because then it will be right that it should not succeed."⁸⁹ As she came closer to eternity, Elizabeth mused about life on a more philosophical note that "this world of separations must have its course. We must take its good and evil quietly as it passes -- for my part I am now so accustomed to look only at our God in all that happens that it seems to me the most painful things in the order of his providence can but increase our confidence and Peace in him, since all will draw us but nearer to himself."⁹⁰

The Word of God

Like the porous sand of the shore at ebbtide, Louise and Elizabeth absorbed "the Word of Christ" and allowed its power to dwell in their hearts and form them for mission.⁹¹ Their familiarity with the Word enabled them to listen to the myriad ways God speaks in creation, community, and the Church. As mystics in action who lived not "by bread alone"⁹² the power of the Word moved them to compassion for the neighbor.⁹³ Their rhythm of receptivity and response became a cycle leading them forward in mission, where they saw the face of God in the poor and needy persons whom they met in ministry. How does this attitude of openness to being formed by the Word of God affect mission and ministry for the third millennium?

Louise

One way that Louise lived the spirit of the seasons of the Church year was by meditating on the Gospels in the liturgical cycle. Despite her independent insight into situations, Louise never lost her spirit of docile compliance to God's will as it was expressed through her colleague and spiritual guide, Vincent de Paul. Close to the anniversary of both the fall of the ceiling, and her inner experience of enlightenment by the Holy Spirit that changed her life, Louise posed this question to Vincent: "Please tell me also if tomorrow I should take the Gospel of the day or the Descent of the Holy Spirit as the subject of some of my

⁸⁹ #3.28, Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 6 May 1805, Bechtle and Metz, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 1: 362.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Seton to Mary Fitch Bayley Bunch, 26 June 1819, *ibid.*, 297.

⁹¹ Colossians 3:16.

⁹² Matthew 4:4.

⁹³ Cf. Matthew 7:24.

meditations; or should it be the subject of the entire day?"⁹⁴ Louise saw the Word of God as a primary source for nourishing the spiritual life of the sisters and forming them into servants of poor persons in imitation of the Servant of Servants. "They shall read a passage of the Holy Gospel so as to stimulate themselves to the practice of virtue and the service of their neighbor in imitation of the Son of God."⁹⁵

Louise's appreciation for Sacred Scripture and her devotional exercises led her to formulate a plan for herself during her widowhood. Her plan outlined ways she wished to deepen her spirituality as a lay woman. Reading and praying with the Word, and making an annual retreat, are but two important elements in Louise's personal spiritual regime that eventually formed the basis for the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity*. "Immediately upon rising, I shall meditate for an hour or at least three quarters of an hour on a subject taken either from the Gospels or the Epistles."⁹⁶ "I would like to spend eight to ten days in retreat twice a year. One would be during the period between the Feast of the Ascension and Pentecost in order to honor the grace which God bestowed on His Church by giving it His Holy Spirit to guide it and by commissioning His Apostles to preach the Gospel to all nations. At this time, I would strive to be particularly attentive to the Word of God."⁹⁷ For the other retreat period Louise chose Advent.

Elizabeth

The Bible remained Elizabeth's companion along her journey of faith. She prayed her way through life's joys and struggles with a biblical accent that revealed both her own relationship to God and also served to motivate others in the ways of the Spirit. Being rooted in the Word enabled Elizabeth to live serenely come what may, and to instruct others that her "little daily lesson [was] to keep soberly and quietly in his presence . . . and to praise and love through cloud as sunshine, is all my care and study."⁹⁸

Elizabeth poured over the psalms and the prophets so much that these references often found their way into casual conversation. For example, while a carpenter was whistling and finishing a coffin for the

⁹⁴ Louise de Marillac to Monsieur Vincent, 3 June 1645, Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 128, L. 120.

⁹⁵ "Order of the Day," 1633, *ibid.*, 726, A. 55.

⁹⁶ "Rule of Life in the World," *ibid.*, 689, A. 1.

⁹⁷ "Rule of Life in the World," *ibid.*, 691, A. 1.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Seton to John Hickey, 10 June 1819, quoted in Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 373.

late Sister Ellen Brady,⁹⁹ Elizabeth remarked, "Nothing in our state of clouds and veils I can see so plainly as how the saints died of love and joy since I so wretched and truly miserable can only read word after word of the blessed 83rd and 41st Psalms in unutterable feelings -- God -- God -- God -- that the supreme delight, that He is God, and to open the mouth and heart wide that He may fill it."¹⁰⁰

Elizabeth Seton used two duplicate English bibles during different periods of her life as a Catholic.¹⁰¹ In each copy she underlined innumerable words and phrases, and also made abundant notations. Antonio Filicchi had given Elizabeth a bible in 1805. She used it until 1813 when she exchanged her own bible with Simon Gabriel Bruté (1779-1839), her soul friend, for his identical copy, which she used until her death in 1821. In the New Testament of her own bible (used from 1805-1813), a gift from the Filicchis, Elizabeth seems to have had a propensity for the gospel of Matthew, the Acts of the Apostles, and the letters of Paul, especially the letter to the Hebrews. For example, in this she underlined several words in the passage from Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and effectual . . . reaching unto the division of the soul and the spirit [*sic*] . . . and is a discerner of thoughts and intents [*sic*] of the heart."¹⁰² For Psalm 118, Elizabeth alludes to the precepts of God in her notation "my loved inheritance."¹⁰³

Mary, Mother of God

Bearing scars of maternal deprivation from childhood, and inner wounds of being disconnected from the warmth of family life, both Louise and Elizabeth came to deeply appreciate the role of Mary as intercessor of graces with her Son. As women, they each identified with her divine motherhood and used their own experiences for meditation as prisms of faith. They had a keen understanding of Jesus' words: "Behold your Mother!"¹⁰⁴ How does this attitude affect the way we view the life-giv-

⁹⁹ Sister Ellen Brady (1796-1818) entered the Sisters of Charity in 1817. An older sister (Margaret) had entered the community three years earlier. She was known as Sister Felicitas Brady (1794-1883) and withdrew from the Sisters of Charity in 1846. She died as a lay woman in Philadelphia and at her request was buried at Emmitsburg.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 176. These psalms would be Psalm 84 and Psalm 42 according to post-Vatican II Catholic translations and numbering of the psalms.

¹⁰¹ Ellin M. Kelly, *Elizabeth Seton's Two Bibles. Her Notes and Markings* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1977), 15. These bibles are held in the Rare Book Collection of Notre Dame University Library (Notre Dame, Indiana) and at the Old Cathedral Library (Vincennes, Indiana).

¹⁰² Kelly, *Two Bibles*, 146.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰⁴ John 19:27.

ing potential of women in and for the Church of the third millennium?

Louise

Believing that Christians should have great devotion to the Blessed Virgin, especially in her role as Mother of God, Louise recommended that her sisters "take Our Lady as the model of our daily lives."¹⁰⁵ She believed that "it would be impossible for God to refuse [his mother] anything" and, therefore, promoted celebration of Church feasts honoring Mary.¹⁰⁶ She also encouraged the sisters to meditate during the day on the mystery proposed by the Church in her liturgical cycle.

Louise selected the feast of the Annunciation for herself and a few of her earliest companions to pronounce vows for the first time in 1642.¹⁰⁷ This union with the *fiat* of Mary reenforces and supports their fidelity to the mission, and keeps their availability fresh through annual vows made anew each year. Louise had an understanding of the Immaculate Conception long before the dogma was officially proclaimed (in 1854). "On the subject of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin . . . I saw, at one and the same time, the design of God in the Incarnation and its application to the matter that was to form the virginal body of Mary so that, although she was a true daughter of Adam, there was no stain of sin in her . . . Therefore, she should be honored by all creatures and served in a particular way by Christians since she is the only pure creature who has always found favor in the eyes of God."¹⁰⁸

Louise made a pilgrimage to Chartres in 1644 to offer the "Company entirely to Him, asking Him to destroy it, rather than let it be established contrary to His most holy will . . . through the prayers of the Blessed Virgin . . . I asked Him for the grace of fidelity for the Company through the merits of the Blood of the Son of God and of Mary. I prayed also that He might be the strong and loving bond that unites the hearts of all the sisters in imitation of the union of the three Divine Persons."¹⁰⁹ As a mother, Louise recorded several reflections about

¹⁰⁵ "Devotion to the Blessed Virgin," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 785, M. 33.

¹⁰⁶ "Thoughts on the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary," *ibid.*, 830, A. 31B. See also "Account of the Pilgrimage to Chartres," *ibid.*, 121-22, L. 111.

¹⁰⁷ The Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul continue to make annual vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service of the poor. These are simple and private vows made silently during the Eucharistic Liturgy on the Feast of the Annunciation.

¹⁰⁸ "Thoughts on the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 830, A. 31B.

¹⁰⁹ "Account of the Pilgrimage to Chartres," October 1644, *ibid.*, 122, L. 111.

Mary's experience of pregnancy, birth, and nursing the infant Jesus.¹¹⁰

Elizabeth

Mary's divine motherhood touched and moved Elizabeth's own maternal heart, which had so often grieved because of her painful separations and losses, especially identifying with Mary as a sorrowful mother when caring for her oldest child who was dying. During the stark days of darkness after Annina's death, Elizabeth found herself "begging, crying to Mary to behold her Son and plead for us, and to Jesus to behold His Mother -- to pity a Mother, [this] poor, poor Mother."¹¹¹

Elizabeth wrote that "we love and honor our Jesus when we love and honor her."¹¹² After reflecting on the "Glories of Mary" viewed Mary as a model and teacher in the spiritual life, particularly in her *fiat* and feminine resilience as a courageous woman of faith.¹¹³ She often revealed about the ". . . Virtues of Mary -- the constant delight of the Blessed Trinity -- she alone giving Them more glory than all heaven together. Mother of God! Mary! Oh, the purity of Mary! The humility, patience, love, of Mary!"¹¹⁴ Elizabeth tried to imitate her as much as possible believing that "our best honor to Mary is the *imitation* of her Virtues -- her life a model for all conditions of life -- her poverty, humility, purity, love -- *and suffering*."¹¹⁵

Mary's example led Elizabeth to appreciate the role of the Mother of God in the Church, "Jesus in Mary, Mary in Jesus in Our prayers -- her name so often in the divine sacrifice."¹¹⁶ "Like Mary, our blessed mother, we will possess Jesus . . . born *for me*, lived *for me*, died *for me*, and now stays on earth to be with me as my Father, my Brother, my companion and friend -- to be . . . near me in the holy Eucharist . . . and as certainly to come to my heart as He came to . . . the arms of His Virgin Mother."¹¹⁷

A certain closeness prevailed in her Marian devotion and through prayer Elizabeth realized, "How sweet to entreat [Mary] who bore Him

¹¹⁰ "On the Mystery of the Incarnation," *ibid.*, 801, L. 13B. "Thoughts on the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary," *ibid.*, 831, A. 31B.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 82.

¹¹² ASJPH 1-3-3-3:42, quoted in Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 328-29.

¹¹³ Cf. Robert Seton, *Memoir, Letters and Journal of Elizabeth Seton* (New York, 1869), 146-48.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 83.

¹¹⁵ Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 329.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 85.

¹¹⁷ ASJPH 1-3-3-20 C, 5. Emphasis in original.

in the bosom of Peace to take our own case in hand -- If she is not heard, who shall be?"¹¹⁸ She soon concluded that "Jesus delighted to receive our love embellished and purified through the heart of Mary, as from the heart of a *FRIEND*."¹¹⁹ Like Louise, Elizabeth chose the feast of the Annunciation as the vow day for her sisters.

Eternity

With their goal of heaven in mind, the hope filled expectation of union with God in Eternity moved Louise and Elizabeth to reverence the mystery of life and death. Their personal experience of the paschal mystery in their lives became central to how they viewed life here and hereafter. Both radiated a resurrection theme -- Louise seemed to view death as a gateway to eternal life, whereas Elizabeth sighed for Eternity itself -- and longed for union with their Redeemer who lives, based on the promise, "I am going to prepare a place for you."¹²⁰ How does this attitude affect the way we respond everyday to contemporary experiences of the paschal mystery?

Louise

Louise often made death the subject of her prayer, and had the custom of consecrating her birthday (August 12) to this important meditation.¹²¹ At the time of her pilgrimage to Chartres, Louise seemed more aware than ever about her mortality. She then expressed her desire to Vincent de Paul for "practices to help me to prepare for death while awaiting the plan of God in my daily life through the practice of holy obedience."¹²²

Elizabeth

Complemented by her spiritual guide, Reverend Simon Bruté, S.S., whose leitmotif was the same, Elizabeth's thirst for eternity arose from her inner wellspring of Christian hope.¹²³ "*Comfort thy servants who trust in Thee -- bend our minds to thy Will -- enlarge us with thy Grace*

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 56.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 84.

¹²⁰ John 14:2.

¹²¹ Nicolas Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, trans. from the 1676 edition (London: Sisters of Charity, 1984), 60.

¹²² "Account of the Pilgrimage to Chartres," October 1644, Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 122, L. 111.

¹²³ Kelly, *Two Bibles*, 52.

Elizabeth Ann Seton's signature on her last will and testament, 14 November 1820.
 Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, Maryland

-- Sustain us with thy blessing -- until through the grave and gate of death WE PASS TO OUR JOYFUL RESURRECTION [sic]."¹²⁴ Thoughts of eternity generated passion for union with God in Elizabeth and prompted her to exclaim, "Oceans of LOVE to plunge in for Eternity, every faculty of our soul dilated!!!! -- heavenly pure supernatural love undivided -- God alone --"¹²⁵

Flames of Love Ascending

As women of memory, Louise and Elizabeth were on fire with the flame of faith kindled by zeal and motivated by understanding hearts, their lives echoed Vincent de Paul, "If love is a fire, then zeal is its flame."¹²⁶ Louise and Elizabeth knew the meaning of times for remembering, for kindling and tending the fire, and fanning it into flames. They were women who expressed their passion for mission with images of fire: Louise chose Jesus crucified surrounded by an inflamed heart for the community seal, and Elizabeth expressed her soul's longing as a "flame of love ascending."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Quoted in Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 86.

¹²⁵ Quoted, *ibid.*, 327.

¹²⁶ Conference of 22 August 1659 to the Congregation of the Mission, "Sur Les Cinq Vertus Fondamentales," *CED*, 12: 307, #211. Cf. Deut. 8-9; Kings 3:5-12.

¹²⁷ Elizabeth Seton to Reverend Pierre Babade, S.S., n.d., Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 274.

The legacy of charity of Louise and Elizabeth flows from their example as models of faith for both lay and consecrated women called to mission. "The heavenly Providence over us has been truly our continued scene of mercy."¹²⁸ On her death-bed Elizabeth named what she considered to be the greatest blessing ever bestowed on her by God, "That of being brought into the Catholic church" and also encouraged her sisters to be "children of the Church."¹²⁹ Her sentiments echoed the values held earlier by Louise de Marillac as a lay woman actively engaged in Church ministry.¹³⁰

Has the post-Vatican II era devoted more study to defining charism than to rekindling the fire that inflamed foundresses like Louise de Marillac and Elizabeth Seton?¹³¹ Their lives of grace enabled them to walk prophetically in the darkness of faith toward the light of promise. Their lives are pregnant with meaningful messages for women desirous of living the gospel passionately in today's Church:

Let your chief study be to acquaint yourself with God because there is nothing greater than God, and because it is the only knowledge which can fill the Heart with a Peace and joy, which nothing can disturb.¹³²

The Charity charism in the age of cyberspace continues the ideals initiated by Louise de Marillac and Elizabeth Seton. The ideas of these women of wisdom and fire have been adapted to meet different circumstances, but their ideals continue to fuel their mission. Inculturating the charism today involves internalizing the Vincentian and Louisan charism with its Setonian dimension, and unleashing its potential for the mission of the universal church. Vincent de Paul encouraged the first sisters in the Company of Charity to strive to form their lives after their foundress.¹³³ May apostolic women of today also incarnate the charism of Louise and Elizabeth. May their daughters and associates be zealous in spreading their flames of love into the next millennium - "by their fruits you will know them."¹³⁴

¹²⁸ Elizabeth Seton to Julianna Scott, 19 February 1819, Code, *Letters of Mother Seton*, 276.

¹²⁹ Charles I. White, *Life of Mrs. Eliza Seton* (New York: Edward Dunigan & Brothers, 1853), 440.

¹³⁰ "Rule of Life in the World," Sullivan, *Spiritual Writings*, 690, A. 1.

¹³¹ See Joan Chittester, *The Fire in These Ashes* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 48.

¹³² #1.66, Elizabeth Seton to Cecilia Seton, 19 November 1802, Bechtle and Metz, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 1: 214. See also: Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., *15 Days of Prayer with Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2002). Available from the Vincentian Heritage Department Bookstore, online at www.depaul.edu/~vstudies.

¹³³ "On the Virtues of Louise de Marillac," Conference #19, *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, 1276.

¹³⁴ Matthew 7:20.