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## Ordinariness, Eternity, A Woman of Insight: Mother Seton's Spirituality from East-Asian Perspectives

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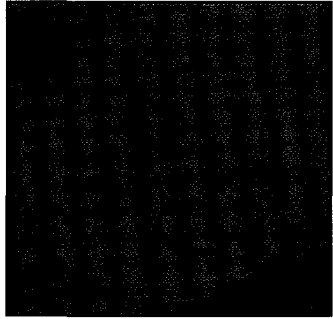
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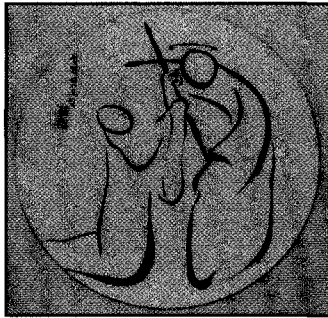
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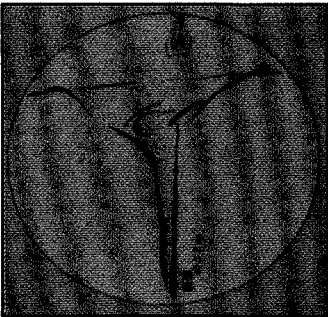
*The second station of the Cross.*



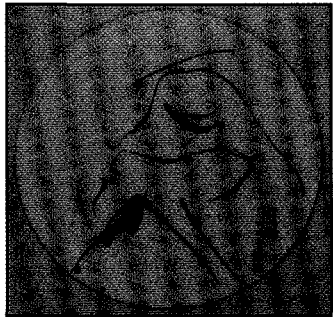
*The third station of the Cross.*



*The sixth station of the Cross.*



*The twelfth station of the Cross.*



*The thirteenth station of the Cross.*

Five of a series of twelve brush paintings on Stations of the Cross by Sr. Sun-hyun Youn, S.C. The originals hang in the chapel of the Seton Retreat House in Seoul, Korea. Courtesy of the artist, and the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Korean Province. Our thanks to Sr. Jane Ann Cherubin, S.C., Seoul, Korea

**ORDINARINESS, ETERNITY,  
A WOMAN OF INSIGHT:  
Mother Seton's Spirituality  
From East-Asian Perspectives**

BY

SUNG-HAE KIM, S.C.

PRESENTED AT THE

VINCENTIAN-SETONIAN FEDERATION CONFERENCE  
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Culture will be the major theme in the twenty-first century. The encounter between the east and west, especially that of Christian spirituality and an East-Asian cultural heritage which includes Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, is thought to be one of the most fruitful areas of exploration. Both traditions possess highly developed systems of thought, refined symbols centering around human perfection, and social ideals which can be embodied in the image of the saint or the sage.

Here I choose Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821), the early nineteenth-century woman who was a wife, a mother, a widow, and a religious whose spirituality encompassed both the best of American pragmatism and the depth of the Christian paschal mystery. That is the reason why Gabriel Bruté, the French Sulpician who was her spiritual confessor, proclaimed after her death: "In the first place I will say as the result of my long and intimate acquaintance with her, that I believe her to have been one of those truly chosen souls who, if placed in circumstances similar to those of Saint Theresa, or Saint Frances de Chantal, would be equally remarkable in the scale of sanctity."<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth's passionate heart reached out further than the boundary of the known Christian sphere in her yearning to follow the footsteps of Francis Xavier,<sup>2</sup> and her proclamation of being a citizen of the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Simon Bruté, *Mother Seton. Notes by Rev. Simon Gabriel Bruté*, From original papers in the possession of the Community (Emmitsburg, MD: 1884), 81. This was written on 5 July 1821. Originally in French.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph B. Code, *Daily Thoughts of Mother Seton* (Emmitsburg, Md: Mother Seton Guild Press, 1957), April 6.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Dirvin, C.M., *Mrs. Seton, Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962), 399.

The fruitful growth of Setonian spirituality in Korea, and in the other Asian countries, proves that her wish was fulfilled in the amazing providence of God.

Therefore, I will look into how Mother Seton's spirituality has been embodied in the hearts of our Seton Sisters in East Asia, enlarging Christian expressions which have been familiar to us. Moreover I will attempt this hermeneutical process in a dialogical context. Sister Regina Bechtle, S.C., of New York, came to Korea to give a presentation on the Spirituality of Mother Seton at a seminar from the 16th to 27th August 1998. I was not only a translator of her nine conferences, but a dialogue partner seeking to bring about equivalent interpretations from East-Asian perspectives. Our dialogue took place before two hundred Korean Sisters who were divided into three successive groups, juniors, finally professed, and those in initial formation.

Here I will choose only three of the topics among the many themes that we discussed and present them in a summarized format. I hope to develop them further through utilizing themes and ideas Sister Regina proposed. I will try to expand upon 'the grace of moment,' comparing it with the Confucian understanding of ordinariness as the way to benevolence. I will develop further the idea that for Elizabeth eternity begins 'here and now,' relating it with the Taoist freedom of viewing everything from the absolute Tao. And, I will interpret the perception of Elizabeth as a 'woman of the paschal mystery,' paralleling it with the Buddhist understanding of reality as suchness.

*1. The Grace of the Moment and the Confucian Timely Mean:  
Sanctity in Ordinary Life*

In her presentation, "Elizabeth Ann Seton: A Woman of Trust in Providence," Regina pointed out the importance of 'the grace of moment' in Elizabeth's spirituality, and commented:

Each moment, each event of life, God's provident care -- God's Will -- is waiting to be discovered and discerned. No matter what the situation, we can meet our grace -- our God -- in it, if we are open to receive, if we trust in God's desire to be a provident giver. Let us close these reflections on trust, Providence and the will of God, with the powerful words of our Vincentian tradition. Vincent tells us, "Grace has its moments;

trust in Providence." Louise de Marillac adds, "Make room for the guidance of God in your lives." And our Elizabeth urges us, "keep well to what you believe to be the grace of the moment. . . Go to meet our grace."

Elizabeth, just like Vincent and Louise, thought that God gives us the grace to know what to do and to fulfill the task which comes from Providence. God's will is not known once and for all, but rather gradually unfolds in the events and daily struggles of our life. It is trust in Divine Providence that enables us to be open and accept the grace of the moment. Moreover, this grace of the moment comes not only through our prayer and inner urgings, but also through outside requests and discernment through counseling. That is the reason why Vincentian discernment, more so than Ignatian discernment, takes seriously the need of the wise counsel of two or three prudent people who understand a given situation well.<sup>4</sup> There is a conviction that God speaks through the community, as well as in the depths of the heart. This reverence for community, whether it is represented by a few prudent people or through the process of consensus/vote, is a quality that is very much valued in our contemporary world. The concept of the grace of moment has a value transcending both time and culture, for we can recognize the same idea in the Confucian understanding of the 'timely mean.'

Abiding in the Mean is the central concern for the Confucian tradition which has formed the backbone of social ethics in East Asia. In the writing of Confucius its importance is well illustrated: "The Master said, 'Supreme indeed is the Mean as a moral virtue. It has been rare among the common people for quite a long time.'"<sup>5</sup> The person who has acquired the virtue of the Mean knows when to proceed and when to withdraw, when to speak and when to be silent, and when to love and when to hate. Even the intensity of his/her loving or hating is proper in each situation. Abiding in the Mean, therefore, is an ideal and only the benevolent person who has attained a height of virtue is capable of practicing it in the proper time. In this case time stands for the total situation and ability to discern how to act rightly.

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<sup>4</sup> Hugh O'Donnel, C.M., "Vincentian Discernment," *Vincentian Heritage* 15:1 (1994): 7-23.

<sup>5</sup> Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius* 6, 29, trans. by D.C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1979), 85.

The thirty-first chapter of the Book of Rites, one of the Five Confucian Classics, develops the concept of the Mean further than the Analects.

The Master said, "Men all say, 'we are wise;' but being driven forward and taken in a net, a trap, or a pitfall, they know not how to escape. Men all say, 'We are wise;' but happening to choose the course of the Mean, they are not able to keep it for a round month." The Master said, "This was the manner of Hui: -- he made the choice of the Mean, and whenever he got hold of what was good, he clasped it firmly, as if wearing it on his breast, and did not lose it."<sup>6</sup>

Hui is the favorite of Confucius, who frequently praised this poor disciple, because he ardently pursued the way of benevolence by holding the Mean constantly and steadily. It is in everyday life where the Mean has to be discovered and practiced. The Confucians do not mention 'grace' or 'God,' but there is a basic trust that fulfilling the human way is the way to know and serve Heaven.<sup>7</sup> Timely Mean, therefore, is the means to follow the Mandate of Heaven, which is silently conveyed both in human hearts and in social events and human relationships. The ordinariness of life is the main stage where the Mandate of Heaven is carried out.

The ordinariness of Mother Seton's spirituality, as well as its excellence, can be well revealed in this Confucian understanding of the Timely Mean. We know that she did not work any miracles in her life, nor did she look for or want extraordinary powers as a miracle worker. At the death beds of her beloved husband and daughters she did not pray for miracles, but the grace to accept the will of God both for herself and her beloved. In her founding years of the community she prayed that God would guide Antonio Fillichi or Archbishop Carroll, so that by these ordinary human ways she would know what to do.

This ordinariness of her spirituality is, of course, rooted in the Jesus of the New Testament, who warned us not to look for miracles but to rely on faith in a merciful God. It also meets very well with the Confu-

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<sup>6</sup> Confucius, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean*, The Doctrine of the Mean, chapters 7-8, trans. by James Legge (Dover Edition, 1971), 388-9.

<sup>7</sup> *Mencius*, 7A1, trans. by D.C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1970), 182.

cian way of accepting ordinary life to be the central issue of human maturity. It is in the ordinary human web of relationships where a person should learn to cultivate warmth, generosity, and wisdom, values which are integrated in the virtue of benevolence. Mother Seton can be called a woman of benevolence, the sage, because she loved all in her life, in the proper way but ardently, so that each relationship came to be a sacrament of the divine love. Elizabeth called her friends a 'blessed chain,' and it is amazingly Confucian to look upon all human relationships as the chain to fulfill the mandate by which one gets to know and serve Heaven.

2. *The Vision of Eternity and the Taoist Norm of Great Knowledge:  
Foundation of Freedom*

One of the young Korean Sisters, who helped me in editing the translation of the *Daily Thoughts of Mother Seton*, told me that she was wondering whether Mother Seton really thought so much of eternity, or was it the editor who emphasized these beliefs. I still do not know which is the case. When we have the complete works of Mother Seton, I might be able to answer that question. Sister Regina also told us last August that she used to wonder why Elizabeth spoke so much about eternity. "Was it a morbid fascination with death? Was she avoiding the difficulties of the present?" Then she answered her own question thusly: "And I begin to see what the holy ones, like Elizabeth Ann Seton, must have felt as they longed for Jesus' final coming, for the last day, the end times, when the whole cycle of experiencing God's presence, then losing it, and longing for it, and knowing God's coming into our lives once again, is finally over, and there is only eternal, lasting, abiding presence."

In spite of acknowledging the reality of her longing for eternal reunion with loved ones in God, what seems more important for us in our age is the fact that eternity for Elizabeth was seeing things through God's vision. Sister Bechtle pointed out this dimension as well: "Eternity is the vantage point from which all makes sense, from which one can see with God's vision, see the big picture. Pondering Eternity helps put things in perspective. It shows us what really matters." Eternity, therefore, was not something which she was simply waiting for, but rather the foundation and the light by which she based her life and guided her decisions. Regina's concluding remark summarized this definition of eternity very well:

Like the writer of the Gospel of John, Elizabeth Ann Seton had a profound sense that Eternity begins here and now. The person who seeks to be contemplative in the midst of our busy lives is the one who is already living eternal life in the here and now. So let us join Elizabeth in looking toward her “dear Eternity, dear end of pilgriming.” Let us too take the long view, God’s view, keeping focused on what really matters. And let us live each now, each day, in the light of God’s forever.

The importance of attaining the absolute norm is beautifully portrayed in the writing of Chuang Tzu, a famous Taoist thinker of the fourth century B.C.E. He uses natural images, and imagination, freely in order to make his point clearly:

If water is not piled up deep enough, it won’t have the strength to bear up a big boat. Pour a cup of water into a hollow in the floor and bits of trash will sail on it like a boat. But set the cup there and it will stick fast, for the water is too shallow and the boat too large. If wind is not piled up deep enough, it won’t have the strength to bear up great wings. Therefore when the P’eng rises ninety thousand li, he must have the wind under him like that. Only then can he mount on the back of the wind, shoulder the blue sky, and nothing can hinder or block him. Only then can he set his eyes to the south. The cicada and the little dove laugh at this, saying, “When we make an effort and fly up, we can get as far as the elm or the sapanwood tree, but sometimes we don’t make it and just fall down on the ground. Now how is anyone going to go ninety thousand li to the south! . . . Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. by Burton Watson (Columbia University Press, 1968), 29-30.





Sketch of Mother Seton by Sr. Nam-sun Kim, S.C.  
 Courtesy of the artist, and the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Korean Province.  
 Our thanks to Sr. Jane Ann Cherubin, S.C., Seoul, Korea

Chuang Tzu calls the secular norms that distinguish between riches and poverty, pretty and ugly, useful and useless, 'little knowledge'; and Tzu calls the understanding that comes from the absolute Tao 'great knowledge.' If one wants to fly high, he/she has to learn to look at everything from the higher point of view. One has to let go not only of worldly attachment, but of the very norms of distinction: this or that, mine and yours, even those of right or wrong. Therefore, Chuang Tzu says that "the sage illuminates all in the light of Heaven."<sup>9</sup>

When a person illuminates all the events of life in the light of Heaven, he/she begins to understand how to be content. It was Lao Tzu, the founder of the Taoist School in the sixth century B.C.E., who grasped the true meaning of contentment: "One who knows others is clever; One who knows himself/herself has discernment. One who overcomes others has force; One who overcomes himself/herself is

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 40.

strong. The person who knows contentment is rich."<sup>10</sup> If the person knows when to stop and to be content, he/she will always have enough.<sup>11</sup> It is amazing to see how Mother Seton had the same insight.

Once she wrote to a friend, "Human passions and weaknesses are never extinct, but they cannot triumph in a heart possessed by Peace."<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth did not attempt to get rid of human desires or weaknesses, but learned to harmonize them in the light of the divine wisdom. Therefore, she learned to be content with herself too: "One of the first rules of my happiness is to be satisfied with Good in whatever degree I can attain it."<sup>13</sup> Interestingly enough, because she longed for eternity and took it as her vision, she kept a balance in her heart in the midst of her passionate loving of others. I understand that this peace and contentment, which persisted in her life, was based upon the freedom that comes from the vision of eternity.

### *3. Living the Paschal Mystery and the Buddhist Experience of Tathagata: Seeing Things as They Are*

Sr. Bechtle explains the paschal rhythm of dying and rising, which Elizabeth experienced in two dimensions, i.e., letting be and letting go. By 'letting be' she means that Elizabeth allowed all the reversals, sorrows, separations, hurts, sickness, aging, and the "tears of living" into her life. Mother Seton let it be done unto her by living the root meaning of the word PASSION (to undergo, to suffer). By 'letting go' Regina points to the gesture of placing all her fears and, in fact, total life into the loving hands of God.

Ordinarily we emphasize the act of trust, letting go. But Regina made us see the importance of letting be, the act of suffering in its fullest terms: "Elizabeth certainly knew the hard times of life; pain was no stranger. What was her attitude before it? She didn't run from it, or steel herself stoically against it, but rather she allowed herself to feel it deeply, and let it teach her what it had to teach." I love that last sentence. Yes, she allowed herself to feel suffering deeply, and let it teach her what it had to teach. We should ponder this word for some time. What does it mean that one truly suffers? Centering on the paschal

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<sup>10</sup> Lao Tsu, *Tao Tè Ching*, chap. 13, trans. by D.C. Lau (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1982), 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 46, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Code, *Daily Thoughts*, May 30.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, January 14.

mystery of Jesus, perhaps Christianity teaches us most eloquently, among all the religions of the world, the value of suffering. Most Christians, however, try to escape from suffering as fast as possible and do not look at it as clearly as they should.

Buddhism shares with Christianity the common insight that the human condition is suffering, and that we are all blinded by our ignorance. However, we try not to see the dark and transient reality of this existence. In a tiny, but attractive book titled *A Zen-Christian Pilgrimage*, Reirin Yamada, a Zen Master, states that the Zen-sitting should be called the discipline of the Tathagatha (a Buddha in the body).

It was when Sakyamuni was awakened to truth at the age of thirty-five, and was leaving the seat of his thrilling awakening, with his heart full of its still fresh excitement, to share his joy with his five fellows, that he called himself a "Tathagata," when he was talking to a seeker for Truth who happened to appear before him. Until he was awakened to truth on December 8th, when he was thirty-five years old, he had called himself "Shakya" or "Gautama," but in talking to the seeker for Truth, he called himself "Tathagatha" for the first time. The more deeply we consider the meaning of this word "Tathagata," the more and more significant it grows. . . . I think the word "Tathagata" is a word which is too holy for us even to dare to explain. "Tathata" (from which "Tathagata" comes), though it may be explained in various ways, and has been translated in innumerable words, is "Mystery."<sup>14</sup>

"Tathata" is reality as it is, and "Tathagata" is one who has accepted this, i.e., the Buddha who has awakened to see reality as it is. The truth seen by Sakyamuni Buddha is that all existence is suffering and nothing stands alone or endures forever. He sat under the bo tree and allowed himself to feel it deeply, and let it teach him what it had to teach. His followers today try to experience the same through the whole body discipline, the life discipline, and the emptiness discipline.

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<sup>14</sup> *A Zen-Christian Pilgrimage: The Fruits of Ten Annual Colloquia in Japan 1967-1976* (The Zen-Christian Colloquium, 1981), 18-19.

Zen master Yamada describes these disciplines as a path of suffering and agony:

I remember that the teachers were clamorously insisting that there could not be such a thing as 'Mystery' and that Buddhism is really rational and purely theoretical, clearly solving all and everything intellectually; it is scientific, and is therefore, great. One might regard Buddhism like that, but no religion can be acquired by intellectual pursuit, I believe. I think that religion is a matter of one's suffering, of one's own agony, and of one's own life, and that the value of religion is in the fact that one tries to obtain its guidance through his sincere and irresistible desire to live a true, happy life by any means, under any circumstances, and finds something in it, for which one cannot help feeling gratitude, though one does not know why, and for which one cannot help feeling joy, though one does not know why. . . . Certainly, the older I grow, the more deeply I have come to feel that the essence of real religion is present when one weeps tears of gratitude for something, even though he does not understand it. The something is "Mysterious Light!"<sup>15</sup>

Christians and Buddhists will explain differently what constitutes the content of 'mysterious light': the former will point to the kingdom of God, the latter, co-origination or emptiness. But the process to reach the goal is comparable, in the fact that suffering and agony within the total commitment of life is involved until one experiences joy and gratitude in finding the light. One thing that a Christian learns from Buddhist friends is that they stay longer, and ponder more seriously on the sufferings and transient nature of all beings.

Mother Seton endured losing great treasures of her life, from the loss of her mother at the age of three to that of her husband, beloved sisters-in-law, and her two daughters. But she knew how to accept these losses while also feeling the suffering deeply:

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 19.

- all - all - gone - forever - and is Poverty and Sorrow the only exchange My Husband - my Sisters - my Home - my comforts - Poverty and sorrow - well with Gods blessing you too shall be changed into dearest friends - to the world you show your outward garments but thro' them you discover to my Soul the palm of victory the triumph of Faith and the sweet footsteps of my Redeemer leading direct to his Kingdom - then let me gently meet you, be received in your bosom and be daily conducted by your councils thro' the remainder of the destined Journey.<sup>16</sup>

Mother Seton knew how to live the paschal mystery in her daily life and that was the source of her strength and constant cheerfulness. Elizabeth pointed to her exemplar par excellence as she approached her own death: "we talk now all day long of my Death and how it will be just like the rest of the house work - what is it else - what came in the world for - why in it so long - but this last great ETERNAL END - it seems to me so simple - when I look up at the crucifix simpler still -."<sup>17</sup> Approaching her death, which is the culmination of suffering and transience of existence, Elizabeth saw things as they are, clearly and so simply. Truly she was a woman of insight and wisdom.

### *Conclusion*

I have visited Mother Seton's spirituality from East-Asian perspectives, i.e., Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist. These three religious traditions are regarded as the three legs of the tripod, the symbol of East-Asian culture. Confucianism taught the ethical way of living amid the web of human relationships in order to build a benevolent society. Taoism offered the vision of freedom and playfulness, keeping people close to nature and the world of imagination. Buddhism, which came from India around first century B.C.E., contributed a certain depth, a deepened way of contemplation accompanying a path of purification of life-style, and insight, to East-Asian spirituality. On an organizational level these three traditions were in conflict during certain

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<sup>16</sup> *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, 4th June, 1804, ed. by Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 137.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

moments of time, but generally speaking they were complementary within the spiritual life of the East-Asians.

Therefore, I have attempted to interpret the strength of ordinariness in Elizabeth's spirituality in light of the Confucian timely mean. Similarly, I have tried to paint her love of eternity from the point of view of the absolute Tao that overcomes prejudices, discrimination, and social formality. Mother Seton's insight into people and events comes from her experience of sufferings and the paschal mystery, always focusing her eyes on Jesus the redeemer. I have also tried to appreciate her as a woman of insight by comparing her acceptance of suffering to the Buddhist's insight of suchness, seeing reality as it is.

Finally, I would like to posit that this hermeneutical process is not just a theoretical attempt by an individual, but rather a natural living process that a Korean community of Seton Sisters (presently 200) have gradually experienced during the last forty years. I am sure a similar process, the interpretation of charism, is going on in other parts of Asia knowingly or unknowingly, but I cannot name it clearly. We may question it ourselves. Is it necessary or desirable to interpret Mother Seton's spirituality, which clearly is marked by the American spirit, with the foreign languages of East-Asia? Does it really add anything new to our understanding of her life and charism? These questions are something which we have to explore, and pray about, before the merciful God whose providence made Elizabeth a universal saint through her canonization, taking seriously the fact that her charism is flourishing in many parts of this earth. Mother Seton herself said that "So things are shared in this life. The Hand that allots always proportions."<sup>18</sup>

In the end it is Elizabeth's motherly love and insight which appeals most directly to the hearts of East-Asians. Her spirituality of ordinary sanctity, her vision of eternity, is encompassed by the image of the mother. Mother's insight is pictured in Lao Tzu's way of Heaven: "It is the way of heaven to take from what has in excess in order to make good what is deficient. The way of man is otherwise. It takes from those who are in want in order to offer this to those who already have more than enough. Who is there that can take what he/she himself/herself has in excess and offer this to the empire?"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Code, *Daily Thoughts*, November 30.

<sup>19</sup> *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 77, 111.

*For Reflection*

1. What does eternity mean to you? How do you think Elizabeth's fixing her eyes on eternity influenced her life? Do you agree that the vision of eternity offers us a norm to relativize success and failure, life and death?
2. Does Confucian spirituality, emphasizing ordinariness as the only path leading to serve Heaven, shed a light for deepening your understanding of Mother Seton?
3. Please read over the sayings of the Zen master Yamada (quotation of footnote 15) and reflect upon whether that echoes some of your own experience? Do you think that Vincentian-Setonian discernment has something to share with the Buddhist way of seeing things as they are?



Portrait of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821),  
foundress of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's (1809)  
and first native-born canonized saint of the United States (1975),  
by Charles Bosseran Chambers.

Elizabeth adopted the simple costume of the Italian widow,  
pictured here, as the dress of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's.  
Chambers, an American artist noted for religious motifs,  
completed the painting c. 1931-38.

*Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, MD*