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Sung-Hae Kim S.C.

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The Ecological Spirituality of Elizabeth Ann Seton

Based on Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings, Volume One

SUNG-HAE KIM, S.C.*

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Introduction

We are living in an unprecedented age wherein ecological concern is rising to be the most critical issue for humanity and all living creatures on Earth, the home which we share. The ecological movement and almost forty years of academic study have clearly demonstrated that it is not a lack of scientific knowledge or technology that makes environmental problems so difficult to solve, rather it is human arrogance or spiritual pride concerning the place of our species in the global ecosystem. Some ecologists, therefore, have asked that religious traditions establish and incorporate models for a healthy and harmonious relationship between nature and humanity, as well as amongst human beings. These models would contribute to the formation of more advanced environmental ethics based on the reinterpretation of traditional texts with ecological insights. To that end, in this paper the writings of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821) will be interpreted from the perspective of contemporary ecological philosophy.¹

Some people may object to this attempt to gather ecological insights from Elizabeth Seton. Indeed, Elizabeth never used the term 'ecology,' which was first coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist.² Understandably Elizabeth did not share the same ecological concern as that of our contemporaries because the crisis of climate change, and an understanding of water and air contamination, and the resultant destruction of the soil and many species, was not of her lifetime. Nevertheless, we find an amazing, constant insight in her writings that the natural and human world are interwoven in the life, order, and beauty of God, the Creator. She saw an inseparable interconnection between nature and human life, and she perceived both life and death as the necessary cycle of creation. She was convinced that we humans have a special calling, like the corals in the ocean, to be transformed by sufferings and hardships, through which we learn to trust God and attain the freedom of heart or the state of holy indifference.³ Thus, Elizabeth Seton's ecological sensitivity will enrich our understanding of providential interdependence between nature and our human life.

¹ Arne Naess defined ecological philosophy thusly: "The study of ecology indicates an approach, a methodology which can be suggested by the simple maxim 'all things hang together.' This has application to and overlaps with the problems in philosophy: the placement of humanity in nature, and the search for new kinds of explanation of this through the use of systems and relational perspectives. The study of these problems common to ecology and philosophy shall be called *ecophilosophy*.... The word 'philosophy' itself can mean two things: (1) a field of study, an approach to knowledge; (2) one's own personal code of values and a view of the world which guides one's own decisions...When applied to questions involving ourselves and nature, we call this latter meaning of the word 'philosophy' an *ecosophy*." Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. by David Rothenberg (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 36.

² Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 55.

³ Sung-Hae Kim, S.C., "Indifference as the Freedom of the Heart: The Spiritual Fruit of Apostolic Mysticism – Christian, Confucian, and Daoist Cases," *Vincentian Heritage* 30:2 (2010): 27-46. Elizabeth also talked about abandonment and indifference as the most desired state of complete trust in God's providence. See *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings*, ed. by Regina Bechtle, S.C. and Judith Metz, S.C., 3 vols. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2000-2006), 2:78, 103, 140, 156. Hereafter cited as CW.



Mrs. William Magee Seton.
Engraving by Charles Balthazar Julien Fevret de Saint-Mémin, 1797.

Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise
Archives, Emmitsburg, MD



We are indebted to Hans-Georg Gadamer for his vision that it is through the continual fusion of the classical horizon of the past (in our case that of Elizabeth Seton), and the contemporary horizon of the present (the modern-day philosophers of ecology) that we come to a more universal understanding of the truth.⁴ Therefore, our ecological interpretation of Elizabeth Seton's writings will not only offer us a new awareness of the ecological dimension to her spirituality, but also will contribute to the Christian endeavor of trying to find more examples of ecological saints — those such as Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen.⁵

Our primary source, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings*, consists of three volumes, each of which we will analyze separately as each has a different focus. Volume One presents her writings both as a married woman and then a widow with five children; Volume Two contains her life as a school mistress and religious founder living in community; and Volume Three is a collection of other various types of her writings. Volume One, from which this paper draws her ecological insights, is a collection of Elizabeth's correspondence and her journals from 1793 to 1808, when she left New York for Baltimore in order to respond to her calling as a religious. The volume reveals the personal life of a woman in love with her fiancé, and shares her intimate communications with family members and lifelong friends such as Julia Sitgreaves Scott and Eliza Craig Sadler. It also includes a journal to her sister-in-law Rebecca Seton, written during Elizabeth's journey to Italy. The journal manifests how much Elizabeth loved nature, and how she found strength and consolation in it during the darkest period of her life in the quarantine San Jacopo Lazaretto. Finally,

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tr. and ed. by David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edition, tr. by J. Weinsheimer & D.G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 2004). The fusion of two horizons is the third among Gadamer's four processes of human understanding through hermeneutical interpretation. The first is the present prejudice that a person holds; the second is accepting the challenge of a new horizon through reading a text; then, thirdly, in fusing two horizons one reaches a more universal understanding; finally, one starts the process of hermeneutical understanding again by asking a new question.

⁵ On 5 July 1821, six months after her death, Simon Bruté wrote of Elizabeth that "I believe her to have been one of those truly chosen souls who, if placed in circumstances similar to those of St. Teresa, or St. Frances de Chantal, would be equally remarkable in the scale of sanctity." Simon Gabriel Bruté, *Mother Seton: Notes by Rev. Simon Gabriel Bruté* (Emmitsburg, MD: 1884), 81. I propose that Elizabeth Seton can be numbered among Christian ecological saints.

this volume illustrates Elizabeth's struggle before her conversion to Catholicism, and her life as a poor widow in New York, a city hostile to Catholics.

In her writings from age 19 to 34 the following four characteristics emerge as constitutive elements in her ecological spirituality: first, the beauty of nature was the space wherein her encounter with God and friends always took place; second, when she felt abandoned, Elizabeth identified herself with the surrounding natural environment and therein experienced consolation and God's mercy; third, Elizabeth saw God's equity in nature and learned ecological balance that accepts both life and death, joy and suffering; and fourth, while recognizing the rhythm of time in nature, Elizabeth realized the importance of living in the present and learned to be content in all situations by acquiring the virtues of moderation and harmony. These four constitutive elements of Elizabeth Seton's ecological spirituality can be seen through an analysis of her writings.

I. Nature as the Space where Elizabeth Encountered Friends and God

It is clear in her letters to friends and family members that Elizabeth found happiness in the beauty of nature — sunrises and sunsets, the peaceful flow of a river, clear air, and singing birds.

A. Elizabeth's Letters to Eliza Craig Sadler

On 18 June 1797, facing the East River at her Long Island summer home, Elizabeth wrote to Eliza, the wife of Henry Sadler: "The mild, peaceful flow of the river before our dwelling, always inspires me with ideas of you, and increases the melancholy of regret which thoughts of absent friends inspire..."⁶ Looking at the river's slow movement, Elizabeth missed her friend and was reminded of life's passing.

In the summer of 1799, Elizabeth's infant son Richard Seton was taken ill and she had to nurse him for several months. Elizabeth wrote to Eliza, "I am a bond woman, and you are free. — You must come to me..." She then expressed her delight in nature in this confining situation: "...but I have had some sweet *lonely* walks while the little friend was sleeping and discovered many beauties that quite escaped *us*. Last Sunday morning before breakfast I retraced the honey-suckle walk and to my great astonishment found those bushes with buds on them which grow near the honey suckle and in great quantities in other places, bear the sweetest flower you can imagine with the great profusion. Its fragrance is beyond any wild flower I ever saw... — Oh how it would delight me to send you a branch of it..."⁷ Here Elizabeth expresses her love of Eliza through the fragrant wild flowers she gathers.

In July of 1800, while with her father at Staten Island and after giving birth to Catherine, Elizabeth wrote to Eliza: "The air is clear, Father singing, the Birds singing,

⁶ 1.11, "To Eliza Sadler," Long Island, 18 June 1797, *CW*, 1:14. Volume one contains 32 of Elizabeth's letters to Eliza, among which quotations from four letters will be introduced. Elizabeth frequently referred to her as Sad.

⁷ 1.57, "To Eliza Sadler," July or August 1799, *Ibid.*, 1:86-87. In Elizabeth's original writing the first letter of each sentence is frequently lower case; for the sake of making it easier to read I have capitalized them.

Nature refreshed, and above all my Seton restored—yet in looking at the opposite shore bright with the setting sun, I cannot help sending forth a long sigh to the one who would so much value and enjoy the blessing which seems unpossessed by any one. Every window is closed all looks solitary, and what are you doing dear Eliza—thought cannot trace you but if peace is your companion the whole beautiful universe can bestow nothing more precious—”⁸ With a new born baby, clear air, singing birds, and the setting sun, Elizabeth perceives the whole universe as refreshed. But she also longs for her friend with whom she can enjoy the beauty of nature, wishing her peace as the most precious gift.

Later, on 27 March 1798, Elizabeth wrote to Eliza about the death of the husband of their mutual friend, Julia: “The last time I wrote you... I meant to have had a letter ready for whatever opportunity presented, but Fate orders all things, and since that time has ordered the *Husband* of my poor little Julia Scott, to the regions of Peace—I have not left her night or day during the excess of her Sorrows and such scenes of terror I have gone thro’ as you nor no one can conceive—”⁹ It is noteworthy that Elizabeth used the term ‘Fate’ here. In later years when her son William mentioned ‘fate’ Elizabeth corrected him saying: “You say *tide of fate*, my beloved son, and so the poet says, but I say *tide of providence* which is as infinite goodness....”¹⁰ It is beautiful to see how Elizabeth slowly grew into total confidence in the merciful providence of God.

B. Elizabeth’s Letters to Julia Sitgreaves Scott

Elizabeth’s sense of security was upended when William Seton, Sr., her father-in-law, upon whom the family greatly depended, fell on some ice in January of 1798. His health quickly declined and he died in June. On the 3rd of June, Elizabeth wrote to Julia, mindful of the losses both had had to endure: “So you see, dear Julia, the debt we pay for this beautiful creation and the many enjoyments of this life, is to be borne in some degree by us all. Human life and sorrow are inseparable—”¹¹ Elizabeth knew that loss, uncertainty, and sorrow are indispensable parts of our life, just as we also enjoy the beauty and bountiful gifts of nature.

Elizabeth spent the summer of 1801 on Staten Island with her father and wished to share the sea breeze with Julia. “I am sure no consideration should make you neglect the thing that would conduce to your health which can only be mended by exercise and fresh air—how I wish you could share the sea breeze I now enjoy, dear, dear Julia, farewell—”¹² On 5 September 1801, she recounted a delightful evening spent with her father before his

⁸ 1.88, “To Eliza Sadler,” July 1800, *Ibid.*, 1:125. ‘My Seton’ refers to Catherine Seton, Elizabeth’s fourth child born on 28 June 1800.

⁹ 1.14, “To Eliza Sadler,” 27 March 1798, *Ibid.*, 1:20-21. Julia Scott was a native of Philadelphia who moved to New York when she married Lewis Allaire Scott, becoming a good friend to Elizabeth. After the death of her husband in 1798, Scott returned to Philadelphia yet remained a faithful confidante and benefactor to Elizabeth.

¹⁰ 7.150, “To William Seton,” March 1818, *Ibid.*, 2:540.

¹¹ 1.21, “To Julia Scott,” New York, 3 June 1798, *Ibid.*, 1:33.

¹² 1.127, “To Julia Scott,” *Ibid.*, 1:170-71. The date on the outside of the letter is 20 June 1801.

sudden death from yellow fever: “On the 10th August—in the Afternoon My Father was seated at his Dining room window composed, cheerful and particularly delighted with the scene of shipping and maneuvering of the Pilots etc., which was heightened by a beautiful sunset and the view of a bright rainbow which was extended immediately Over the Bay — ...He called me to observe the different shades of the sun on the clover field before the door and repeatedly exclaimed ‘in my life I never saw anything so beautiful’ —”¹³ It must have been a great consolation for Elizabeth to remember the delight she and her father shared in observing the different shades of the sun reflected on the clover field.

During her trip to Italy this same appreciation of nature is vividly depicted in Elizabeth’s letter to Julia on 28 October 1803: “My Seton is daily getting better, and... little Ann and myself are well—If I dared indulge my Enthusiasm and describe as far as I could give them words my extravagant Enjoyment in gazing on the Ocean, and the rising and setting sun, and the moonlight Evenings, a quire of Paper would not contain what I should tell you—but one subject you will share with me which engages my whole Soul—the dear the tender the gracious love with which every moment has been marked in these my heavy hours of trial—”¹⁴ We see how sensitive Elizabeth was to the orderly changes of nature in the ocean, sun, and moon, and the consolation she found in perceiving the love of the Creator in them.

C. Elizabeth’s Letters to her Family Members

Elizabeth found the same consolation in nature when faced with her husband’s financial difficulties. On 1 March 1801, she wrote to her father: “—the blossoms and Zephyrs of Spring the gentle but animating colors of Nature heightened by the converse and smiles of ‘her love’—that is one side of the scene, the other I dare not look at.”¹⁵ In spite of her family crisis, Elizabeth sees the beauty of spring flowers and the loving smile they bring, and then juxtaposes these scenes of life-giving nature to the horrible storm descending upon the family.

In September of the same year, after the death of her father, Elizabeth wrote to her sister Mary about the uncertainties of human life. “—But now whether standing on the rock watching the passing waves which picture the passage to eternity, wandering in the woods, or pouring tea for the ladies, all is uncertain—and the sinking Sun behind the mountain—calls thoughts away to the scene where all uncertainties shall be made clear—”¹⁶ It is noteworthy that Elizabeth finds certainty through her faith in eternity, which becomes her life’s anchor and the vision from which she values everything.

¹³ 1.141, “To Julia Scott,” New York, 5 September 1801, *Ibid.*, 1:185. Elizabeth continues with a description of how her father fell sick from fever the next morning, from which he would not recover. She remembered his last words before he passed away, holding her hand, “I would cover you more, but it can’t always be as we would wish.” (p. 186.)

¹⁴ 2.3, “To Julia Scott,” 28 October 1803, *Ibid.*, 1:245. Elizabeth made it clear in the following sentence that the gracious love she mentioned was divine love: “—you will believe because you know how blessed they are who rest on our Heavenly Father—”

¹⁵ 1.107, “To Dr. Richard Bayley,” New York, 1 March 1801, *Ibid.*, 1:149.

¹⁶ 1.143, “Draft to Mary Bayley Post,” September 1801, *Ibid.*, 1:188-189.

Similarly, in her sister-in-law Rebecca Seton, Elizabeth found a kindred spirit with whom she shared her deepest thoughts. In 1800, when Elizabeth and her children arrived at her father's home on Staten Island to spend the summer, she revealed her heart to Rebecca: "I cannot tell you how well how happily we made our Voyage yesterday. We found dear Father at the Wharf with such a welcome as dispelled all the gloom of my heart and made me only wish that you were present... —the House so neat... —the Birds the little garden—every thing so cheerful— Holy Nature was the first thing required— ...just as we were going to tea a great Punch bowl of garden strawberries...crowned the feast the sweet setting sun too—how the heart did melt before him the giver of all—"17 The elements that constitute Elizabeth's happiness are a welcoming heart, a clean house, tea and fresh strawberries; the garden with its trees, the birds, and the sunset lead her heart to the Giver of all.

On 7 June 1801, Elizabeth wrote to Rebecca that "with all this wide and beautiful creation before me the restless Soul longs to enjoy its liberty and rest beyond its bound."¹⁸ Elizabeth repeatedly expressed to her, "How much I wish you were here to enjoy this beautiful sunset";¹⁹ and again, "—a sweet afternoon with a sunset in peace and elegant light, red clouds over my head at the back door—a quiet Evening... —but 'mercy's in every plan' and I hope you have your share too of comfort."²⁰

Elizabeth's love of nature also extended to a concern for all creatures' happiness, as seen in an anecdote she shared with Rebecca. "You would have enjoyed the last half hour past as much as I have—imagine a young robin in a cage, its mother on the top which she never left but to fetch it food, and the male chipping on a tree near it. Nelly was its owner and I *coaxed* her to make them happy and open the cage-door, and the moment it was done, out went the little one with both the old ones after it."²¹ We perceive that Elizabeth's happiness is not complete until the creatures around her are also happy, because she knows that sharing love is the basis of all happiness.

It is amusing to read how Elizabeth tried to transmit her love of nature to her young daughter Anna Maria, passing along a copybook of her poetry: "This book was began [*sic*] when I was *fifteen* and written with great delight to please my Father— ...those even that examine the beautiful order of creation are more suited to fill the mind that is making acquaintance with their great Author— ...I must leave it to *you* my love to finish what I have begun—and recollect it as a Mother's entreaty that you <spend> give some time in every day if it is only half an hour to devotional reading—which is as necessary to the

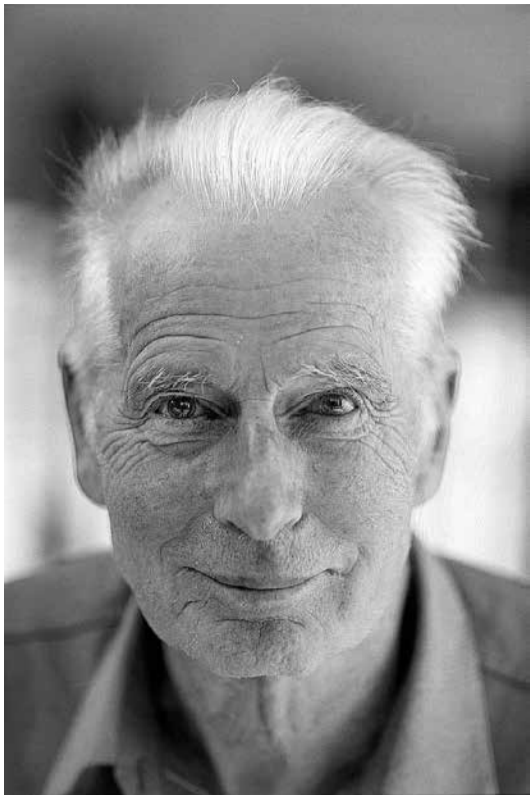
¹⁷ 1.84, "To Rebecca Seton," 1800, *Ibid.*, 1:123. The date is not specified, although the time is: "6 o'clock—thought it was 7." William Magee, Elizabeth's husband, remained in New York City during the summer.

¹⁸ 1.115, "To Rebecca Seton," 7 June 1801, *Ibid.*, 1:157.

¹⁹ 1.123, "To Rebecca Seton," 1801, *Ibid.*, 1:164. On 24 July 1801, Elizabeth wrote Rebecca: "My own Rebecca's heart will rejoice when I tell her that the Setting Sun of last evening and the Glory of this morning were both enjoyed with Dué—" See *CW*, 1:178. Elizabeth connects with friends by sharing her experience of happiness in nature.

²⁰ 1.116, "To Rebecca Seton," 1801, *Ibid.*, 1:158. This letter was written on a Thursday morning.

²¹ 1.123, *Ibid.*, 1:164.



Portrait of Arne Naess (1912-2009).

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well ordering of the mind as the <careful> hand of the gardener to prevent the weeds destroying your favorite flower.”²² Here Elizabeth compares the cultivation of mind with nurturing a beautiful flower garden according to the order of creation. In fact, the primary characteristic of Elizabeth Seton’s ecological spirituality is her constant love of nature’s beauty, something that enabled her to meet her friends and her God more deeply.

D. The Ecological Value of Elizabeth’s Love of Nature

We have seen that Elizabeth Seton’s writings reveal her sensitivity to and enjoyment of nature, her observance of a sunset, river, flower, and bird, ultimately finding in them the caring love of the Creator. Now we should address the ecological meaning found in Elizabeth’s love of nature and view her writings in the light of Arne Naess (1912-2009), a Norwegian philosopher and founder of the Deep Ecology Movement.²³ Naess believed that direct experience of nature-as-beautiful offers the foundational basis for our ecological way of life. “Human beings can perceive and care for the diversity of their surroundings. Our biological heritage allows us to delight in this intricate, living diversity. This ability to delight can be further perfected, facilitating a creative interaction with the immediate surroundings.”²⁴ He emphasized that we all have the ability to delight in nature, though

²² 1.171, “To Anna Maria Seton,” 1803, *Ibid.*, 1:219. The date of this letter, presumed 1803, means Anna would have been eight years old. To read the entire copybook, see “Elizabeth Bayley Seton’s Commonplace Book of Poetry: Archives, St. Joseph Provincial House, Rare Book 31,” Transcribed and Introduced by Ellin M. Kelly, Ph.D., *Vincentian Heritage* 29:1 (2009): 35-131. Available for download at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol29/iss1/>

²³ Naess coined the term “deep ecology,” meaning we have to learn and gain insight striking at the core of ecological problems. He thought that “shallow ecology,” built on short-term technological fixes designed to benefit human beings in advanced countries, would not solve the problem. “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecological Movement, a Summary,” *Inquiry* 16 (1973), 95-100.

²⁴ Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 23.



The Lazaretto at Livorno, Tuscany, Italy. Panoramic view.
Color etching by P. Lapi (1824).

Wellcome Library, London. Wellcome Images: <http://wellcomeimages.org>



this innate ability has to be nurtured through appreciative experiences.

Naess further developed the platform of the Deep Ecology Movement based on the principle that all creation has the “equal right to live and blossom.” He held that for those who love nature this was an intuitively clear and obvious value. “This quality depends in part upon the deep pleasure and satisfaction we receive from close partnership with other forms of life. The attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master–slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself.”²⁵ Since we can control and sacrifice ourselves only when we love and find joy, it is imperative that we have direct experiences of nature as beautiful, and ultimately realize that nature is indispensable to our happiness. Elizabeth would have agreed with Arne Naess that human beings are not the center of the world, but that everything on this earth is interconnected as “the relational, total-field”²⁶ of life flowing from God. Therefore, the happiness of a robin family affects our human happiness as an integral part of the whole. Both Elizabeth Seton and Arne Naess encourage us to spend time in nature and to learn to be sensitive to its seasonable changes, so that its beauty might change our arrogant view toward other living creatures on Earth.²⁷

II. Elizabeth’s Experience of Unity with Nature in Her Abandonment

During her experiences of abandonment, Elizabeth identified herself with the natural environment that surrounded her and learned to trust in the mercy of God. Through this identification with nature she found the consolation and energy to rise up and pierce through the value of suffering, a transformational act both in the natural and human world.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28. Through his own experience of living in a mountain hut, Naess was convinced that we have to learn humility and moderation from nature. He stated that only those who experience “exuberance in nature” understand its true value and richness. The eight formulations of his platform are found in the same book, 29-31.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28. Naess rejected the image of “the man-in-environment” as anthropocentrism and proposed the image of “the relational, total-field” as the basis of deep ecology.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 104-178. When he retired from the University of Oslo in order to commit himself to the ecological movement, Naess proclaimed “I wanted to stress the continued possibility for joy in a world faced by disaster.” See *Ibid.*, 2.

A. Elizabeth's Italian Journal

In her Italian Journal to Rebecca Seton, Elizabeth's experience of unity with nature is vividly manifested by its powerful energy to heal and console. While passing through a group of islands on the southeast coast of Spain, Elizabeth wrote of how much she was moved by the beauty of nature, "Can I ever forget the setting sun over the little Island of Yivica."²⁸ At the same time she expressed mixed feelings of trust and fear during an unavoidable storm at sea: "A heavy storm of thunder and lightning at midnight—My Soul assured and strong in its almighty Protector, encouraged itself in Him, while the knees trembled as they bent to him."²⁹ Her joy in listening to the ringing of the bells of Ave Maria as the ship *Shepherdess* arrived at Leghorn turned to deep sorrow as William, Anna, and Elizabeth herself were taken to the Lazaretto quarantine. Here, because of William's sickness, they were quarantined for a month from 19 November to 19 December, 1803. In Elizabeth's Journal at the Lazaretto we find her soul's struggles as she faced the unexpected frustrations and hardships which would hasten her husband's death.

On the first night in quarantine, Elizabeth graciously accepted the mattresses, dinner, and other necessities from the Filicchi family, and wrote, quoting Anna, "'Mamma if Papa should die here—but God will be with us'—God is with us—and if sufferings abound in us, his Consolations also greatly abound, and far exceed all utterance—"³⁰ However, awakening the next morning, Elizabeth struggled with her own disappointment and the temptation to revolt against this seemingly unjust situation:

The Matin Bells awakened my Soul to its most painful regrets and filled it with an agony of Sorrow which could not at first find relief even in prayer—In the little closet from whence there is a view of the Open Sea, and the beatings of the waves against the high rocks at the entrance of this Prison which throws them violently back and raises the white foam as high as its walls, I first came to my senses and reflected that I was offending my only Friend and resource in my misery and voluntarily shutting out from my Soul the only consolation it could receive—pleading for Mercy and Strength brought Peace—and with a cheerful countenance I asked William what we should do for Breakfast.³¹

This journal entry reveals that, in shutting down and dwelling on the "painful regrets" of having traveled to Italy in hopes of curing her sick husband, Elizabeth soon came to understand that she was voluntarily closing the door to the source of her grace. She likens the state of her agonizing, struggling soul to the violent beating of the waves

²⁸ 2.5, "Journal to Rebecca Seton," Gibraltar Bay, 8 November, *CW*, 1:247. This journal entry to Rebecca Seton was written in 1803. Simon Gabriel Bruté wrote a short explanation about the location of this island (see note 3).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:247-8. This journal entry is dated 15 November 1803.

³⁰ 2.7, "Journal to Rebecca Seton," 19 November 1803, *Ibid.*, 1:253.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1:254. It is recorded as the 20th Sunday morning, 1803.

against the rocks, flinging white foam as high as the quarantine's walls. However, instead of wallowing in self-pity and blaming others for her situation, she pleaded for God's mercy and strength, which brought her peaceful resignation.

In Elizabeth's journal on 29 November, after a ten day stay in this miserable situation, she writes of the family's daily life in the Lazaretto:

After breakfast read our Psalms and the 15th Chapter of Isaiah to my William with so much delight that it made us all merry—He read at little Anna's request the last chapter of Revelation, but the tones of his voice no heart can stand—A storm of wind still and very cold—Willy with a Blanket over his shoulders creeps to the old man's fire—Ann jumps the rope, and Maty [notation: name for herself] hops on one foot five or six times the length of the room without stopping—laugh at me my Sister, but it is very good exercise, and warms sooner than a fire when there is a warm heart to set it in motion— Sung Hymns—read promises to my Willy shivering under the bed clothes—and felt that the Lord is with us—and that he is our All—"32

Despite her husband's worsening condition, his weakening voice, the bed shaking with his shivering breath, Elizabeth leads her family to find consolation in God's promise by reading the Scriptures aloud.

Although every page of Elizabeth's journal at the Lazaretto is inspiring, it is in the journal of 1 December 1803, after two weeks of soul-searching purification, that we find a classical example of nature mysticism. Elizabeth recalls how strongly she experienced God in a beautiful spring day at New Rochelle, New York. It was 1789, her father having traveled to England for medical research and leaving her feeling abandoned. In juxtaposing the two dark situations, the Lazaretto and New Rochelle, Elizabeth reaffirms how she met God so intimately in the bounteous beauty of God's creation. As it reveals the important place of nature in her encounter with God, this rather long quotation must be read in its entirety. She describes her present situation, her experience in New Rochelle as a 15 year old staying at her uncle's home, then marries past to present:

Arose between 6 and 7, before the day had dawned the light of the Moon opposite our window was still strongest—not a breath of wind—the sea which before I had always seen in violent commotion now gently seemed to creep to the Rocks it had so long been beating over—every thing around at rest except two little white gulls flying to the westward toward my Home— ...At ten o'clock read with W[illiam]. and Anna—at twelve he was at rest—Ann playing in the next room—alone to all the World, one of those sweet pauses in spirit when the Body

³² *Ibid.*, 1:261. Entry dated 29 November. Chapter 15 of Isaiah talks about wailing, tears, and the weeping of the remnant of Israel. The last chapter of Revelation portrays the river of the water of life and the tree of life, where God will be their light. Both mirror the situation and hope of the Seton family in the Lazaretto.

seems to be forgotten came over me—in [sic] the year 1789 when my Father was in England I jumped in the wagon that was driving to the woods for brush about a mile from Home[.] The Boy who drove it began to cut and I set off in the woods—soon found an outlet in a Meadow, and a chestnut tree with several young one[s] growing round it, attracted my attention as a seat, but when I came to it found rich moss under it and a warm sun—here then was a sweet bed. the [sic] air still a clear blue vault above, the numberless sounds of Spring melody and joy—the sweet clovers and wild flowers I had got by the way and a heart as innocent as a human heart could be filled with even enthusiastic love to God and admiration of his works—still I can feel every sensation that passed thro’ my Soul—and I thought at that time my Father did not care for me—well God was my Father—my All. I prayed—sung hymns—cried [sic]—laughed in talking to myself of how far He could place me above all Sorrow—Then layed [sic] still to enjoy the Heavenly Peace that came over my Soul; and I am sure in the two hours so enjoyed grew ten years in my spiritual life...

Well, all this came strong in my head this morning when as I tell you the Body let the Spirit alone. I had both Prayed and cried [sic] heartily which is my daily and often hourly Comfort, and closing my eyes, with my head on the table lived all these sweet hours over again, made believe I was under the chestnut tree—felt so peaceable a heart—so full of love to God—such confidence and hope in Him... in the Bond of Peace, and that Holyness [sic] which will be perfected in the Union Eternal—The wintry storms of Time shall be over, and the unclouded Spring enjoyed forever—”³³

In the first paragraph Elizabeth describes feeling alone with God. In this still moment, the light of the moon, the tranquil sea, and two little white gulls flying westward form a natural background for her experience of God. In the second paragraph she recalls the beautiful spring day she went to a meadow, lying for hours on rich moss under a chestnut tree, feeling the warm sun, listening to the sounds of a spring melody, breathing the clear air, and looking up at a blue sky. Here she prayed, sang hymns, cried, and laughed, convinced that God would care for her even though her father had abandoned her. Her comment “I am sure in the two hours so enjoyed grew ten years in my spiritual life” is very significant. In fact, we find similar affirmations from many mystics who had direct experiences of God.

Consider Ignatius of Loyola who had an intellectual vision/enlightenment at the river near Manresa, where he stayed for around one year learning from God like a child from a schoolmaster. In his autobiography, or Original Testament, Ignatius recorded his story in the third person:

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:263-265. Entry dated 1 December 1803.

One day he was on his way out of devotion to a Church, named I think after St. Paul, just a little more than a mile from Manresa. The road to it runs along beside the river. On the way, occupied with his devotions, he sat down for a little while with his face turned towards the river, which flowed down there below him. As he sat there the eyes of his understanding began to open. It was not that he saw a vision but he came to understand and know many things, as well about spiritual things as about matters of Faith and secular learning, and that with so strong an enlightenment that all things seemed quite new to him.... It was such that if he were to put together all the helps God had given him, and all the many things he had learnt in the whole of his sixty-two years, all these taken together would not, he thought, amount to what he had received on that single occasion.³⁴

In his famous book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James described how these mystic experiences imprint on saints the invincible conviction and courage to carry out demanding tasks. "Saint Ignatius was a mystic, but his mysticism made him assuredly one of the most powerfully practical human engines that ever lived."³⁵

In the third paragraph in her journal entry Elizabeth applies her initial experience of God's goodness to her present abandonment at the Lazaretto. Closing her eyes she lives all those sweet hours at New Rochelle over again, assured the wintry storms of time will end and that she will enjoy unclouded spring forever. Throughout her life Elizabeth saw spring as a symbol of life — the time when God's mercy and goodness manifest itself through the life energy of creation. It is noteworthy that in the Lazaretto she wrote that when God is our portion, there is no prison, nor bolts. "For this freedom I can never be sufficiently thankful."³⁶

Later in Elizabeth's Italian Journal we find that whenever Elizabeth remembers significant moments of her life she links them with descriptions of nature, thus portraying an environment filled with divine presence:

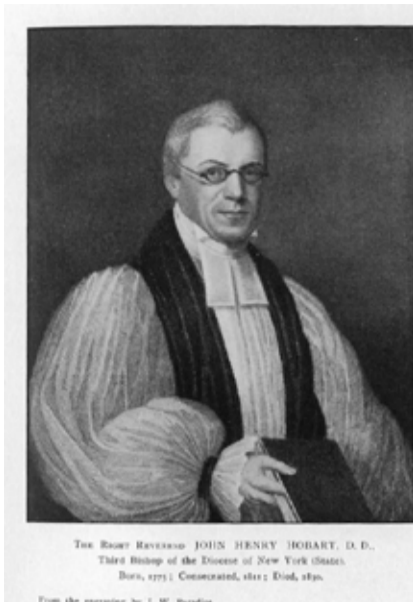
- "This evening standing by the window the moon shining full on Filicchi's countenance he raised his eyes to heaven and showed me how to make the Sign of the CROSS."³⁷ Here the full moon provides an atmosphere of solemnity to this significant occasion.
- "This mild heavenly evening puts me in mind when often you and I have stood or leaned on each other looking at the setting sun, sometimes with silent tears and

³⁴ Peter Du Brul, S.J., *Ignatius: Sharing the Pilgrim Story: A Reading of the Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Inigo Text Series 6, Leominster: Gracewing, 2003), xxxiii-xxxiv.

³⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, The Gifford Lectures delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902 (A Mentor Book from New American Library, 1958), 317.

³⁶ 2.7, *CW*, 1:265.

³⁷ 2.14, "Journal to Rebecca Seton continued," 18 April [1804], *Ibid.*, 1:296. Elizabeth was strongly affected by making the first sign of the cross, writing to Rebecca: "The Sign of the CROSS of Christ on me—deepest thoughts came with me of I know not what earnest desires to be closely united with him who died on it—"



The Right Reverend John Henry Hobart (1775-1830), 3rd Episcopal bishop of New York.

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sighs for that HOME where Sorrow cannot come.”³⁸ Two days before her departure from Italy, a beautiful sunset brought Elizabeth’s heart to happier times when she and Rebecca shared their faith.

- “Mrs. Filicchi came while the stars were yet bright to say we would go to Mass and she would there part with her Antonio... The last adieu of Mrs. Filicchi as the sun rose full on the balcony where we stood and the last signal of our ship for our parting—will I ever forget—while I gave dear Amabilia thoughts to that hour when the Sun of Righteousness would rise and reunite us forever.”³⁹ Here is Elizabeth’s sensitivity to nature in the progression of time, the stars, the rising and then bright sun under which she and Amabilia embrace in a final farewell. It is noteworthy that Elizabeth immediately connects the glorious sunlight to the Sun of Righteousness, making clear that she not only encountered her friends in nature but also found God.

B. Elizabeth’s Return Journey from Italy

On 23 April 1804, en route home and looking at the natural beauty of the Pyrenees Mountains, Elizabeth expressed her hope that God’s providence was leading her to a new path.

We have passed this day opposite the Pyrenees. Their base, black as jet, and the dazzling whiteness of the snow on their tops, which were high above the clouds that settled round there, formed a subject for the most delightful contemplations, and spoke so loudly of God, that my soul answered them involuntarily in the sweet language of praise and glory. The gentlest motion of the waves, which were as a sheet of glass reflecting the last rays of the sun over the mountains, and their

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:297.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:298-299. This was the last parting of Amabilia and Elizabeth, although they continued to correspond. Elizabeth wrote her journal of the conversion for Amabilia.

rising moon on the opposite shore—and more than all, that cheerful content in my soul that always accompanies it when it is faithful to its dear Master, has recalled the remembrance of precious hours, and makes me incessantly cry out, my God! my God!”⁴⁰

Interestingly enough, in her delightful contemplation Elizabeth was communicating with nature, awed by the dazzling snow on the mountain tops while attuned to praise God. The gentle motion of the waves, the last rays of the sun, and the rising moon fill her heart with cheerful contentment.

Also during this journey from Italy, using an analogy of ocean coral, Elizabeth depicted the transformation or divinization of a human being. On 12 May 1804, while on the ship, Elizabeth wrote: “The coral in the ocean is a branch of pale green, it is almost a rock. Its tender color is changed to a brilliant red: so too we, submerged in the ocean of this world, subjected to the succession of the waves, ready to give up under the stress of each wave and temptation. But as soon as our soul rises, and it breathes toward heaven, the pale green of our sickly hopes is changed into that pure bright red of divine and constant love. Then we regard the disruptions of nature and the fall of worlds with an unshakable constancy and confidence.”⁴¹ Elizabeth saw a mystery of transformation in the coral, weak and pale in the ocean water but once out changed into a solid and brilliant red jewel. She realized how the human soul, also, can be strengthened and made beautiful through rising above all human attachments, thereby breathing in heavenly values. Elizabeth’s Italian journey, begun with agony, was to conclude with a new-found hope and vision of faith.

C. Elizabeth’s Internal and External Struggles in New York

We know that Elizabeth’s own soul was transformed, like a coral, through the purifying struggle of her conversion experience and her continuing hardships as a poor widow in New York. She gave up all her former relationships; for example, with Episcopal minister John Henry Hobart, her former spiritual director, who objected to her conversion, and with her wealthy Protestant relatives, who would have offered the financial support she sorely needed. It is no wonder that after returning home Elizabeth consistently emphasized ‘patience’ as the most important virtue. “Patience says my soul He will not let you and your little ones perish and if yet your life is given in the conflict at the last he will nail all to his cross and receive you to his mercy—”⁴²

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:301. Dated 23 April.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1:304. Dated 12 May 1804. See note 17, which explains that Elizabeth’s return journal from Italy was sent to Madame Hélène de Barberey, who was writing the first biography of Elizabeth Seton, and never returned. The quote, then, is the translation from Madame de Barberey’s French biography, *Elizabeth Seton et les commencements de l’église catholique aux États-Unis* (Paris, 1868).

⁴² 3.15, “To Antonio Filicchi,” 13 December 1804, *Ibid.*, 1:339. In this letter I was struck by the frequency and importance Elizabeth has placed on the virtue of patience. Other instances of when Elizabeth mentioned patience after returning to New York can be found in Volume One at: 351, 362, 383, 404, 438, 439, 442, 445, 460, 468, 485, 489, 512, 514, 516, 519, 525, 529, 530, and 543 (where she illustrated the fruits of patience).

Elizabeth endured not only external persecution, ostracization, and poverty, but also interior doubt and agony. The spiritual uncertainties which assailed the deepest part of her soul left her completely abandoned and without comfort. In a letter to Filippo Filicchi, who had strongly encouraged her conversion, Elizabeth vividly portrayed her circumstance: “If you knew the pitiable situation to which my poor Soul has been reduced, finding no satisfaction in anything, or any consolation but in tears and prayers, but after being left entirely to myself and little children, my friends dispersed in the country for the Summer season, the clergy tired of my stupid comprehension, and Antonio wearied with my Scruples and doubts took his departure to Boston; I gave myself up to God and Prayer encouraging myself with the Hope that my unrighteousness would be no more remembered at the foot of the Cross, and that sincere and unremitted asking would be answered in God’s own time.”⁴³ Once she resolved to enter the Catholic Church, Elizabeth’s patience, waiting for God’s time, was well rewarded by the peace that filled her heart, an unwavering confidence in God despite repeated failures and social alienation.⁴⁴

Elizabeth wanted to be purified by emptying herself completely. In her “Spiritual Journal to Cecilia Seton” she used the image of ‘a rotten tree’ to portray the deep roots of our selfishness: “—imagining the corrupted heart in Thy hand, it begged Thee with all its strength to cut, pare, and remove from it, (whatever anguish it must undergo) whatever prevented the entrance of Thy Love—again it repeats the supplication and begs it as Thy greatest mercy—cut to the center, tear up every root, let it bleed, let it suffer anything, every thing, only fit it for Thyself, place only Thy Love there, and let Humility keep centinal and what shall I fear— ...Lord, I am dust—”⁴⁵ Elizabeth is asking God for self-annihilation in order to live completely in God. It is an image reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah’s proclamation of God’s holiness, using the analogy of the stump when the forest was burned for purification: “Even if a tenth part remains in it, it will be burned again like... an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.”⁴⁶

This same attitude of dying to self is found in the writings of St. Teresa of Avila. “Bear in mind. Friends: the silkworm must die. This death is at your expense. But union with the Beloved reveals that a new life is about to unfold, and this glimpse helps tremendously with your dying... I confess that killing the silkworm requires inordinate effort, but it’s worth it; if you succeed, your reward will be manifold.”⁴⁷ While Teresa of Avila used a silkworm to illustrate the mystery of transformation, Elizabeth Seton chose a rotting tree that has to be cut and rooted out in order to safeguard the space for a new life. It is significant that

⁴³ 3.17, “Draft to Filippo Filicchi,” after 1/6/1805, *Ibid.*, 1:341.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Elizabeth’s letter to Filippo Filicchi in 1805. Also refer to pages 421 [4.27, “To Bishop John Carroll”] where she talks about trust, and 435 [4.33, “To Julia Scott”] where she confesses how she reached a cheerful, contented state of heart.

⁴⁵ 4.55, “Spiritual Journal to Cecilia Seton,” *Ibid.*, 1:476. Dated 18 September 1807.

⁴⁶ Isaiah 6:13.

⁴⁷ St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, New Translation and Introduction by Mirabai Starr (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 139. This death to self happens in the fifth dwelling. It is interesting to note Simon Gabriel Bruté’s remembrance of Elizabeth: “Saint Theresa [Teresa of Avila]’s liberty of spirit with her directors, her gayety, her contempt of what people called her sanctity and extraordinary graces, accorded more with Mother’s own turn of mind.” Bruté, *Mother Seton*, 86-87.

both saints perceived the mystery of transformation through nature, be it a silkworm or a rotting tree.

D. Contemporary Communicative Ethics and Elizabeth Seton

Elizabeth Seton spontaneously understood the reciprocity she shared with nature, she communicated with beauty, with the mountains, sunrise and sunset, calling to her friends and surrounding creatures to praise God. Elizabeth found consolation and strength in unifying experiences to elements, such as the roaring waves of the ocean, or a sunny spring day in the forest. Natural life forms, like the coral or the rotting tree, taught Elizabeth about human destiny transformed through complete change.

In much the same way, Anthony Weston, a post-modern ecological philosopher, tried to lead us beyond the anthropocentric worldview with which we are so accustomed to discover a space where the possibility of reciprocity between humanity and the rest of nature can be safeguarded. Weston proposed a new 'communicative ethics' repositioning the familiar one-species monologue to a multi-polar dialogue with the natural world.⁴⁸ In order to open up reciprocity we must safeguard a space not wholly permeated by humans, and also create "space" that is conceptual and experiential, as well as literal/physical, where we feel the seasonal changes, the wind, see the stars, hear silence, and even bird songs.⁴⁹ He described a biotic community which is far more tolerant and inclusive. "The crucial thing is that humans must neither monopolize the picture entirely nor absent ourselves from it completely, but rather try to live in interaction, to create a space for genuine encounter as part of our ongoing reconstruction of our own lives and practices. What will come of such encounters, what will emerge from such sustained interactions, we cannot yet say."⁵⁰

Of course, Elizabeth's communication with nature was not intentionally drawn from communicative ethics, but, as she herself wrote, spontaneously she heard the loud praise of the Creator in magnificent nature and she responded to it in praise of God. Most probably she was trained to a communicative understanding of the universe by her continual reading and reflection on the psalms, particularly those that summon all creation to praise God.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Anthony Weston, "Multicentricism: A Manifesto," *Environmental Ethics* 26:1 (2004): 38; "Before Environmental Ethics," in *Postmodern Environmental Ethics*, ed. by Max Oelschlaeger (Albany: State University New York Press, 1995), 230. Also refer to John Dryzek, "Green Reason: Communicative Ethics for the Biosphere," *Environmental Ethics* 12:3 (1990): 95-110.

⁴⁹ Weston, "Before Environmental Ethics," 234.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 237. Even though Weston argued it as something that will come in the future, he recognized Henry David Thoreau demonstrated in his own person "how a human being can meet the evening, between the squirrels and the shadows, or how to look at a lake." See Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 7:4 (Winter 1985), 335.

⁵¹ Herman Gunkel categorized the psalms into eight categories. The first category is Hymns with a liturgical pattern of initial invitation, illustrating the reasons of praise, and conclusions with final praise of all creation (psalms 8, 29, 33, 46, 47, 65, 76, 84, 87, 93, 100, 104, 111, 113-4, 117, 122, 129, 134-6, 139, 145-50). *All Creation Sings: Praying the Psalms with St. Elizabeth Seton*, selected and edited by Regina Bechtle & Margaret Egan (Sisters of Charity of New York, 2009), contains the psalms that Elizabeth loved throughout her life.

III. Elizabeth's Awareness of Ecological Balance

Contemporary biology recognizes that everything on Earth participates in a vast process which involves a continual breaking down, changing, and emergence into a new form. With this knowledge we understand that death is an integral part of the life cycle. "When death is recognized in a broader perspective as transformation in a larger system, it can be seen to be an essential aspect of elegant patterns that are orderly as well as beautiful."⁵² If there is no death, the ecosystem cannot be maintained. A problem arises when we apply our ethical concepts to death, a natural phenomenon. We should talk about ethical good or evil only when we discuss intentional human acts.⁵³ A result of the decline of Christianity, and the influence of modern hedonism, we have come to equate suffering with evil, negating the value of suffering. That said we must revive the Christian perspective that suffering and death not only are a part of life, but are also able to purify and transform us into the image of God. Elizabeth Seton is a wonderful guide for us in regaining this perspective. Elizabeth's letters to her friends and family members, in their loss and misfortune, reveal how she saw God's equity in nature, and understood the place of suffering in the wholeness of creation.

A. Elizabeth's Letters to Julia Scott

On 16 May 1798, Elizabeth wrote to Julia who, having lost her husband, returned to Philadelphia. "All I wish for you is that nature may take its course, and Affliction be allowed its advantages, as it certainly has the power of giving the mind a Peaceful course, and procuring future tranquility—" ⁵⁴ Elizabeth consoled Julia that it is best to learn from afflictions and wait for natural healing. Around four months later, Elizabeth shared her conviction that suffering is a common experience. "Dear Julia consider the lot of Humanity is to *suffer* and bow with me in patient submission to our All-Wise Director.—I am in extreme pain while I write occasioned by a boil on my arm therefore must say Adieu."⁵⁵

Elizabeth kept her balance during the misfortune of her family bankruptcy, writing to Julia: "I write only to wish you a happy New Year—and to tell you if the news of our Misfortunes has reached you that you must do as I do, *Hope the best...* —dear dear Julia how long I have been tired of this busy scene, but it is not likely to mend, and I must kiss Dick and be thankful for what remains from the ruins of Wall Street ...Heaven grant you all a happy *century* if it is but a happy *one*."⁵⁶ She repeatedly reminded Julia that "a passing

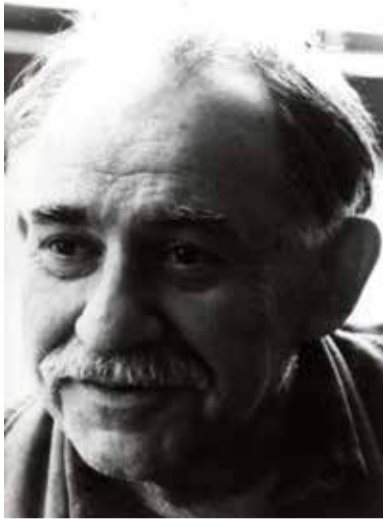
⁵² Paul Shepard, *Encounter with Nature: Essays by Paul Shepard*, ed. by Floren R. Shepard (Washington, D.C.: Island Press), 69-70. This understanding was well developed by Zhuangzi, an ancient Chinese philosopher, who taught that the Dao (道), as the great transformer, gives life to all living beings through the natural cycle of prosperity and disease (chapter 6).

⁵³ Nathan Edward Kowalsky, "Beyond Natural Evil" (Dissertation, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2006). He states that "to equate suffering with evil is hedonistic, and hedonism is variously anthropocentric." (Abstract)

⁵⁴ 1.19, "To Julia Scott," New York, 16 May 1798, *CW*, 1:30.

⁵⁵ 1.27, "To Julia Scott," Bloomingdale, 28 September 1798, *Ibid.*, 1:45.

⁵⁶ 1.74, "To Julia Scott," 3 January 1800, *Ibid.*, 1:108-109.



Murray Bookchin (1921-2006).

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scene of natures suffering will lead to happiness,”⁵⁷ and that we should be ready to be “happy in life and Death.”⁵⁸ Elizabeth trusted that there is divine providence in everything, and that we should be able to find its wisdom and harmony in the darkest moment. “As in every other instance now too, I look up in silent acquiescence adoring that dear hand which will one day shew [*sic*] every apparently dark and mysterious event in the most beautiful and perfect perspective of Wisdom and Harmony—”⁵⁹ She was certain harmony would be achieved in a mysterious way, despite our inability to penetrate the depth of providence.

B. Elizabeth’s Letters to Rebecca Seton and Eliza Sadler

Facing the financial breakdown of the family’s mercantile firm Seton, Maitland and Company, Elizabeth revealed her healthy worldview to Rebecca Seton, one which sustained her hope even in the darkest of situations. “As I said before we must Hope the best, for Myself I fear nothing but tremble at the hold these crosses take on Williams Spirits—for one entire week we wrote till one and two in the morning and he never closed his eyes till daylight and then for not more than an hour—but when things are at the worst they must grow better, and since he has arranged the Statement of his Accounts etc. his mind is more composed, tho’ his is really very unwell—”⁶⁰ Elizabeth was well aware of what her family would soon face, but she believed that everything under the sun was changing, and when it reached bottom it was bound to rise again.⁶¹

Seeing the queen’s country palace and the elegant apartments in Florence, Elizabeth wrote: “Solomon’s vanity and vexation of spirit was all the while in my head.”⁶² Elizabeth

⁵⁷ 1.118, “To Julia Scott,” 11 June 1801, *Ibid.*, 1:160.

⁵⁸ 4.67, “To Julia Scott,” 8 March 1808, *Ibid.*, 1:498.

⁵⁹ 4.43, “To Julia Scott,” 20 July 1807, *Ibid.*, 1:450. This letter to Julia was written after the sorrowful death of Mary Gillon Hoffman Seton, the wife of her brother-in-law, James Seton.

⁶⁰ 1.75, “To Rebecca Seton,” 3 January 1800, *Ibid.*, 1:110.

⁶¹ This is the worldview that Qoheleth taught in Ecclesiastes. It is also the wisdom the Book of Changes taught, and with which for centuries East Asian people accepted the ups and downs of life with tranquility of heart. See *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, trans. by Richard John Lynn (Columbia University Press, 2004), 602 pp.

⁶² 2.10, “Florence Journal to Rebecca Seton,” January 1804, *CW*, 1:284.

agreed with the wise words of Qoheleth, who observed the vanity of all things and announced “there is nothing new under the sun.”⁶³ She also trusted in the providence of God. “I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken away from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.”⁶⁴ Elizabeth possessed the same humility before the mystery of God as the wise man of ancient Israel. “Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.”⁶⁵ She urged Rebecca to maintain hope,⁶⁶ and gratefully accepted her father’s invitation to a Christmas party and received his New Year presents. Because of her faith in the providential care of God, Elizabeth did not allow herself to wallow in extreme emotion and she preserved a balanced outlook throughout her life.

In a letter to Eliza Sadler on 6 October 1807, Elizabeth more clearly articulated what might be considered a worldview of ecological balance. After writing about the illness of Anna, her sister Mary’s miscarriage, her own tedious ague, her half-sister Helen’s fever and tending to her during a several-day bedside stay, she states: “—Well dearest—so we go—the wheel goes round—precious inestimable privilege,—may [we look] up all the while—”⁶⁷ Elizabeth perceived that suffering, illness, and death are an inescapable lot for us, yet also precious privileges once we learn to bear them. The wheel of joy and suffering goes round with equity, maturing and transforming us. Yet, how many of us will proclaim, as did she, that suffering is a “precious inestimable privilege”?

C. Elizabeth’s Spiritual Journal to Cecilia Seton

Dated from 10 August to 16 October, 1807, Elizabeth’s Spiritual Journal to Cecilia Seton, her sister-in-law, is, unlike her Lazaretto Journal to Rebecca Seton, without obvious attraction and beauty, revealing a soul that soars above the storm. However, it does illustrate something integral to her spiritual progress as a new, fervent convert to Catholicism, leading Cecilia Seton down a similarly strict spiritual path. Elizabeth was clearly looking for a unity that could not be destroyed by separation and death. “—Divine Communion which neither absence nor Death (except the eternal) can destroy, the bond of Faith and Charity uniting All—”⁶⁸ In this journal she records her happiness when Anna made her First Communion: “—the bonds of nature and Grace all twined together. The Parent offers the Child, the Child the Parent and both are United in the source of their Being—and rest together on Redeeming Love—May we never never leave the sheltering wing but dwelling

⁶³ Ecclesiastes 1:9.

⁶⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:14.

⁶⁵ Ecclesiastes 11:5.

⁶⁶ 1.75, *CW*, 1:109. It is interesting to read that Elizabeth also gave medical advice to Rebecca (see 1.146, *Ibid.*, 1:191), as this indicates Elizabeth was proficient with the treatment of ordinary people in need.

⁶⁷ 4.54, “To Eliza Sadler,” 6 October 1807, *Ibid.*, 1:467.

⁶⁸ 4.55, *Ibid.*, 1:470. Dated 14 August 1807.

now under the Shadow of His Cross we will cheerfully gather the thorns which will be turned hereafter into a joyful crown—”⁶⁹ Here again Elizabeth expressed her faith that suffering will lead to transformation.

In a letter to Cecilia Seton dated 3 September 1807, Elizabeth affirmed that God’s equity in everything was a source of consolation for her. “Look up sweet Love—‘God is wonderfully adorable in his ways and as I am persuaded they are all founded in equity and that Salvation is alone his work, I submit to whatever trials he may please to expose me’ —”⁷⁰ Elizabeth’s reading of Hannah’s prayer⁷¹ and Mary’s Magnificat⁷² probably helped her in forming this vision of equity, as she quoted 1 Samuel 2:1 in her journal at the Lazaretto.⁷³ After Hannah, who had been afflicted by her barrenness, offered Samuel to the Lord, she expressed her experience of God’s equalizing hands: “The Lord kills and brings to life; ...The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap....”⁷⁴ The songs of these two biblical women represent the vision biblical writers had that divine providence embraces the whole of creation, and that salvation comes from self-emptying love and enduring patience. Elizabeth knew of, and also embodied, this biblical vision. Trials and suffering fundamentally equalize all human beings whatever racial background, social class, or material wealth they might possess. God’s equity ultimately destroys any kind of hierarchy that human cultures have built.⁷⁵

The ecological depth of Elizabeth’s conviction that God deals with every human being and every creature with equity becomes transparent when we compare her thoughts to those of contemporary ecological thinker, Murray Bookchin.

D. Elizabeth’s Insight on Equity and Balance in Light of Bookchin’s Social Ecology

Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) thought that the root of our ecological crisis is the concept of hierarchy, a root of discrimination and oppression in human history, and he promoted a social ecology that demolishes all concepts of said hierarchy. He was convinced that hierarchy is not only a social condition, but also a state of consciousness sensitive to all our various experiences. “By hierarchy, I mean the cultural, traditional and political system to

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:473. Dated 23 August 1807.

⁷⁰ 4.51, “To Cecilia Seton,” 3 September 1807, *Ibid.*, 1:464. The quotation is from Michael Hurley, O.S.A., one of the Monks of St. Augustine.

⁷¹ 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

⁷² Luke 1:46-55.

⁷³ 2.7, *CW*, 1:255. Dated 20 November 1803. She also quotes the first verse of Magnificat, recalling David’s and Solomon’s offerings to the Lord. See 2.10, *Ibid.*, 1:286. Elizabeth made notes beside 1 Samuel chapters 1-2. See *Elizabeth Seton’s Two Bibles*, ed. by Ellin M. Kelly (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1977), 64.

⁷⁴ VV. 6-8.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth probably learned the concept of God’s equity from her reflection on the Scriptures, for the Pentateuch clearly states that all land belongs to God, and humans are only tenants (Lev. 25:23). The prophets defended the rights of the poor, and the wisdom in the literature of Israel warned not to trust in riches (Proverbs 11:28), and asserted that the same lot of death comes to everyone without exception (Ecclesiastes 8:16-9:10).

which the terms class and state most appropriately refer.”⁷⁶ His social ecology attempts to overcome hierarchy in the human community first, thereby building a dynamic harmony wherein nature and humans live together in peace: “A distinct human natural community, the social as well as organic factors that interrelate to provide the basis for an ecologically rounded and balanced community.”⁷⁷ In other words, the aim of social ecology is to achieve freedom in human society, which will naturally lead to our reconciliation with nature. Bookchin thought that in a true ecology of freedom, social freedom and natural freedom support each other.⁷⁸

Despite an apparent common goal, Bookchin is very different from Elizabeth in that he proposed a completely rational ecology, criticizing religious faith as the snare that limits human freedom. For Elizabeth, it was God’s equity in nature and human experience that equalizes everything and offers freedom. Although Elizabeth and Bookchin represent two fundamentally different worldviews in our contemporary age, it is consoling to know that at their core, their social goals converge. Both agree that we should work for the equitable distribution of resources on this earth among all living beings, enabling all of us the freedom of life that a balanced, interdependent community affords. However, Elizabeth’s ecological spirituality is based on her faith in God, the creator and savior, who extends our vision to eternity.

IV. Elizabeth’s Focus on the Present, Moderation, and Harmony

A. Importance of the Present/Now

Elizabeth called the present “God’s Blessed Time.” She understood that each of us meets God in the present moment. When on 9 June 1798, William Seton, Sr., passed away at the age of fifty-two, Elizabeth faced financial difficulties as well as an increased responsibility for her husband’s younger siblings. During these hectic days of readjustment in their family life, including a move from their Wall Street house to the Stone Street family house, Elizabeth wrote a candid letter to Julia, dated 21 October 1798: “—but this is a subject it is vain to Indulge, for who shall dare to look into futurity—how different were my prospects in the last year, from the present, and if I now plan the futurity it may never be realized, and if it is, the causes for apprehension may be lessened—perhaps removed—therefore to intend the best, and be thankful for the present, is the only plan I can resolve on—”⁷⁹ It is clear that Elizabeth was not just enduring this situation; indeed, she was “thankful for the present.” It was in the present, after all, that she was able to receive the grace of the moment that comes in difficult challenges.

One week later Elizabeth wrote another letter to Julia: “—I resign the present and the future to Him who is the author and conductor of both—but most certainly I have

⁷⁶ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, 3rd edition (AK Press, 2005), 68.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 415.

⁷⁹ 1.29, “To Julia Scott,” 21 October 1798, *CW*, 1:48.



Aldo Leopold (1887-1948).

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no enjoyment so great as to induce me to remain Here one moment longer—⁸⁰ With a full heart Elizabeth welcomed both the time and place in which she was situated. Several months later, in a letter to Julia, Elizabeth further developed how present and future are connected: “Acting well our part in present difficulties is the only way to insure the Peace of futurity.”⁸¹

Elizabeth wrote Lady Isabella Cayley, William’s aunt living in Britain, concerning how the couple had tried their best in the year after the death of her father-in-law. She reported that although she was only 25 years old, it felt as if both William and she had grown ten years older. “All my leisure hours have that aim [honorable old age]; and if the point anticipated is never reached, it certainly occupies the present moment to the best advantage, and if ‘their memory remain,’ it will be a source of the greatest pleasure.”⁸² Here, again, Elizabeth focused on the importance of the present moment, in which she continued to find consolation.

On 25 October 1805, when she wrote to Antonio Filicchi about her unstable situation in New York, Elizabeth described the importance of time as something primarily belonging to God. “Some proposals have been made me of keeping a Tea store—or China Shop – or Small school for little children (too young I suppose to be taught the ‘Hail Mary’ —) in short Tonino, they do not know what to do with me, but God does — and when His blessed time is come we shall know, and in the mean time he makes his poorest feeblest creature Strong— Joy will come in the morning —”⁸³ Trusting that each moment was all she had, and doing all she could with it, Elizabeth knew it was best to wait for that time wherein God would disclose her mission in life.

⁸⁰ 1.30, “To Julia Scott,” 28 October 1798, *Ibid.*, 1:49-50.

⁸¹ 1.39, “To Julia Scott,” New York, 20 February 1799, *Ibid.*, 1:62.

⁸² A-1.71, “To Lady Isabella Cayley, New York, December 1799, *Ibid.*, 1:549. This is an excerpt from Robert Seton, *An Old Family* (New York, 1899), 286-288.

⁸³ 4.10, “To Antonio Filicchi,” 25 October 1805, *CW*, 1:394. At the end of this letter Elizabeth spontaneously quotes Psalm 30:5, illustrating how intimately she breathed the Bible in her ordinary life.



Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Filicchi style portrait, with impression of the harbor of Livorno in background, by Dina Bellotti for the cover of the liturgical program at the Seton canonization, 14 September 1975, St. Peter's Square, The Vatican.

Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise Archives, Emmitsburg, MD



Just as time is closely connected with order, Elizabeth saw the “Whole Natural Order” created by God’s WORD, recreated through the succession of ages.⁸⁴ Since God put all things in their proper order,⁸⁵ she willingly accepted her allotment, whether a painful separation or a dependence upon friends for her children’s sustenance. While en route from Italy, Elizabeth wrote a letter to Reverend Henry Hobart requesting his understanding why she had to leave the Episcopal Church. “As I approach to you I tremble and while the dashing of the waves and their incessant motion picture to me the allotment which God has given me, the tears fall fast thro’ my fingers at the insupportable thought of being Separated from you — and yet my dear H__[obart] you will not be severe — you will respect my sincerity....”⁸⁶ It is noteworthy that Elizabeth described the waves’ incessant motion as an image of the changes in life that God asked of her. By extension this is universal, as both nature and human life continually experience ordered changes.

B. The Virtue of Moderation and Harmony

Annabelle Melville, who wrote the definitive and most historically accurate biography of Elizabeth Seton, stated that like her father, Elizabeth had a passionate temperament. “She herself never lost consciousness of the fact that a hot temper was one of her sources of temptation. The serenity she displayed in later life was no gauge of the battles she had to fight. Her meekness and humility was hard-won.”⁸⁷ Elizabeth acquired meekness and cheerfulness by the constant practice of moderation in all her actions. For her, moderation was related not only to material possessions but also to emotional enjoyment. On 3 August 1799, Elizabeth wrote to Rebecca Seton: “I have often told you my Rebecca that I had determined never again to allow myself the enjoyment of any affection beyond the bound

⁸⁴ 3.31, “Journal to Amabilia Filicchi, *Ibid.*, 1:378. Dated 14 April 1805. Elizabeth laments the blindness of a redeemed soul not accepting the mystery of the Eucharist.

⁸⁵ 4.50, “To Eliza Sadler,” 28 August 1807, *Ibid.*, 1:462. This letter was written to Eliza when Rev. Louis Sibourd came to New York as a new pastor of St. Peter’s Church.

⁸⁶ 2.15, “Draft to Rev. John Henry Hobart,” at sea, n.d., *Ibid.*, 1:305.

⁸⁷ Annabelle M. Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, ed. by Betty Ann McNeil, D.C. (original: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951; new edition: Hanover, Pennsylvania: The Sheridan Press, 2009), 63.

of *moderation*—”⁸⁸ And, referencing moderation in another letter to Rebecca: “I make it a rule never to answer letters whilst under the influence of the first impression I receive from them.”⁸⁹

Elizabeth’s principle of moderation seemed to take root in her heart, as we see in a letter to Eliza Sadler: “Well—internal Peace is mine, let them go round and round—”⁹⁰ And again: “—Peace—Peace—oh the very sound is harmony— ...take the all in all I am well *content*.”⁹¹ Elizabeth was practicing what she had previously written to Eliza: “As I think the first point of Religion is cheerfulness and Harmony they who have these in view are certainly right.”⁹² Even after the funeral of her father, whom she loved dearly, Elizabeth wrote to Julia: “—I am going to be well when I get a little rest from my summer fatigues—‘thy will be done’ is my constant support—”⁹³

Consider also that when Elizabeth faced a need, such as her shaky financial situation in New York, she knew how to receive, but always with moderation. Elizabeth wrote to Julia, who was helping her financially: “—my case cannot be worse, nor can it be better for my real enjoyment than it is now while I have you, Mrs. [Sarah] Startin, and [Antonio] Filicchi that is saying a great deal but it is truly so. Nothing can be worse than a state of dependence, but if it is my allotment it cannot be better than when supplied by the hand of real friendship—”⁹⁴ Although well aware of the undesirable condition of dependence, Elizabeth graciously received because she understood that God puts all things in their proper order. Sometimes, that means we stand on the side of the receiver.

C. Elizabeth’s Virtue of Moderation in Light of Contemporary Land Ethics

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), is the first contemporary scholar who raised the question of our “ecological conscience” toward the non-human. In his book *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, he stated that “conservation must spring from a sense of individual responsibility for the general health of the land.”⁹⁵ He believed we must stop thinking of responsible land-use as solely an economic problem. Rather, we should examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as economically expedient. Following a description of a biotic view and the ecological dynamics of a land community, Leopold proposed a Land Ethic. “A thing is right when it tends to preserve

⁸⁸ 1.61, “To Rebecca Seton,” 3 August 1799, *CW*, 1:91. Elizabeth continues, remembering beautiful experiences they had shared together and describing how she cried. Of her ‘crying spell’ she remarks, it “is not a very common thing for me.”

⁸⁹ 1.68, “To Rebecca Seton,” 2 October 1799, *Ibid.*, 1:100. Elizabeth tells Rebecca that, contrary to her rule, she ‘cannot refrain’ from immediately responding because of her affection for Rebecca.

⁹⁰ 1.66, “To Eliza Sadler,” 2 October 1799, *Ibid.*, 1:98.

⁹¹ 1.63, “To Eliza Sadler,” 9 September 1799, *Ibid.*, 1:94.

⁹² 1.8, “To Eliza Sadler,” New York, 8 February 1796, *Ibid.*, 1:8.

⁹³ 1.141, *Ibid.*, 1:187.

⁹⁴ 4.1, “To Julia Scott,” 10 July 1805, *Ibid.*, 1:380.

⁹⁵ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, Special Commemorative Edition (Oxford University Press, 1949), 174.

the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”⁹⁶

These three ethical norms — integrity, stability, and beauty — are quite significant in better understanding Elizabeth Seton’s ecological spirituality. As we have seen, Elizabeth appreciated and respected the integrity, stability, and beauty of this earth. We find this in her many insights into God’s equity and mercy in all creation. However, what appears prominently in Elizabeth’s ecological spirituality is her sensitivity and love for the beauty of nature. According to Leopold, human beings act not only through intellectual speculation, but also through direct emotional experience. As beauty draws out love from our heart, it is only when we love that we are willing to sacrifice our conveniences in order to nurture another life.⁹⁷

After regarding their careful observations of nature, we find that the thoughts of Aldo Leopold and Elizabeth Seton converge on the practical wisdom of moderation. In *A Sand County Almanac* Leopold stated that moderation is the best virtue if we want to live ecologically. “It is well that the planting season comes only in spring, for moderation is best in all things, even shovels. During the other months you may watch the process of becoming a pine.”⁹⁸ This same sense of waiting for natural growth and moderation in all things matured Elizabeth’s spirituality with its distinctive ecological flavor. Sensitive to nature and its seasonal changes, Elizabeth was able to identify her own sufferings within the universal equity of God. This wider ecological vision of how total creation works in the providence of God preserved her sense of harmony and contentment; or, as Leopold wrote, “Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land.”⁹⁹

Conclusion

We have discussed four characteristics of the ecological spirituality of Elizabeth Seton, and their contemporary meaning in light of ecological philosophy. Aided by the beliefs of Arne Naess and Aldo Leopold we have gained some deeper insight into Elizabeth’s sensitivity toward the beauty of nature. We can even be sure that Elizabeth established her own “ecosophy” — as Naess described, “one’s own personal code of values, a view of the world which guides one’s own decisions.”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the social ecology of Murray Bookchin guided us in understanding how closely the ecologies of humanity and nature are interconnected, and makes us appreciate just how well Elizabeth tied these

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 224-225.

⁹⁷ J. Baird Callicott, who became the spokesperson of Land Ethics, explained that Leopold incorporated an instinctual feeling of community and the concept of kinship in order to develop objective norms for the relationship between nature and humanity. See J. Baird Callicott, “Conceptual Foundations of the Land Ethics,” *Companion to A Sand County Almanac: Interpretive & Critical Essays* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 212.

⁹⁸ Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 82. Over twelve months, Leopold spent every weekend in a country farm house recording his observations of seasonal changes, as well as the preparations of animals and humans. He finished his almanac with this comment on moderation.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁰⁰ Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 36.

aspects together in her understanding of God's equity. She knew how to balance her care for human beings with her concern for nature. As when Elizabeth coaxed a child to open the birdcage-door to make a robin family happy, she also asked Rebecca Seton to bring a handsome ribbon for the child to remember this event. Elizabeth was thinking of both the animal's happiness and the psychology of a human being. Additionally, the communicative ethics of Anthony Weston helped us to see how Elizabeth was able to communicate with nature and find consolation and strength in its order, perceiving therein God's mercy which transforms suffering into new life.

Elizabeth saw the whole of God's creation in its totality, and also understood the relationships within it. Her relationship with nature was fundamental to the formation and maturity of her spirituality, and was as intimate and strong as her relationship with other human beings. Of course, God, as the Creator of both nature and humanity, always remained at the center of her heart, uniting and vivifying her sensitivity to all creation.¹⁰¹ Because of her love of nature, her insight into God's equity in creation, her practice of ecological balance and moderation, and her ability to identify herself with the sufferings of nature, which contains transformative power, it seems fitting to call Elizabeth Seton an ecological saint. Our hope is, that as we understand the ecological dimension of her spirituality, we will be able to commit ourselves more fully to the preservation of the integrity, stability, and beauty of our land, our community, and "all this wide and beautiful creation" before us.¹⁰²

Having considered Elizabeth's ecological spirituality in light of four major contemporary philosophers of ecology — Leopold, Naess, Bookchin, and Weston — let us conclude with an echoing call from Pope Benedict XVI: "Nor must we forget the very significant fact that many people experience peace and tranquility, renewal and reinvigoration, when they come into close contact with the beauty and harmony of nature. There exists a certain reciprocity: as we care for creation, we realize that God, through creation cares for us."¹⁰³



¹⁰¹Both Bruté and Elizabeth use the word 'atom,' such as "All earth an atom... I, an atom." See Shin Ja Lee, S.C., "The Practice of Spiritual Direction in the Life and Writings of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton" (The Catholic University of America, UMI Dissertation Services, 2010), 277-278.

¹⁰²1.115, *CW*, 1:157.

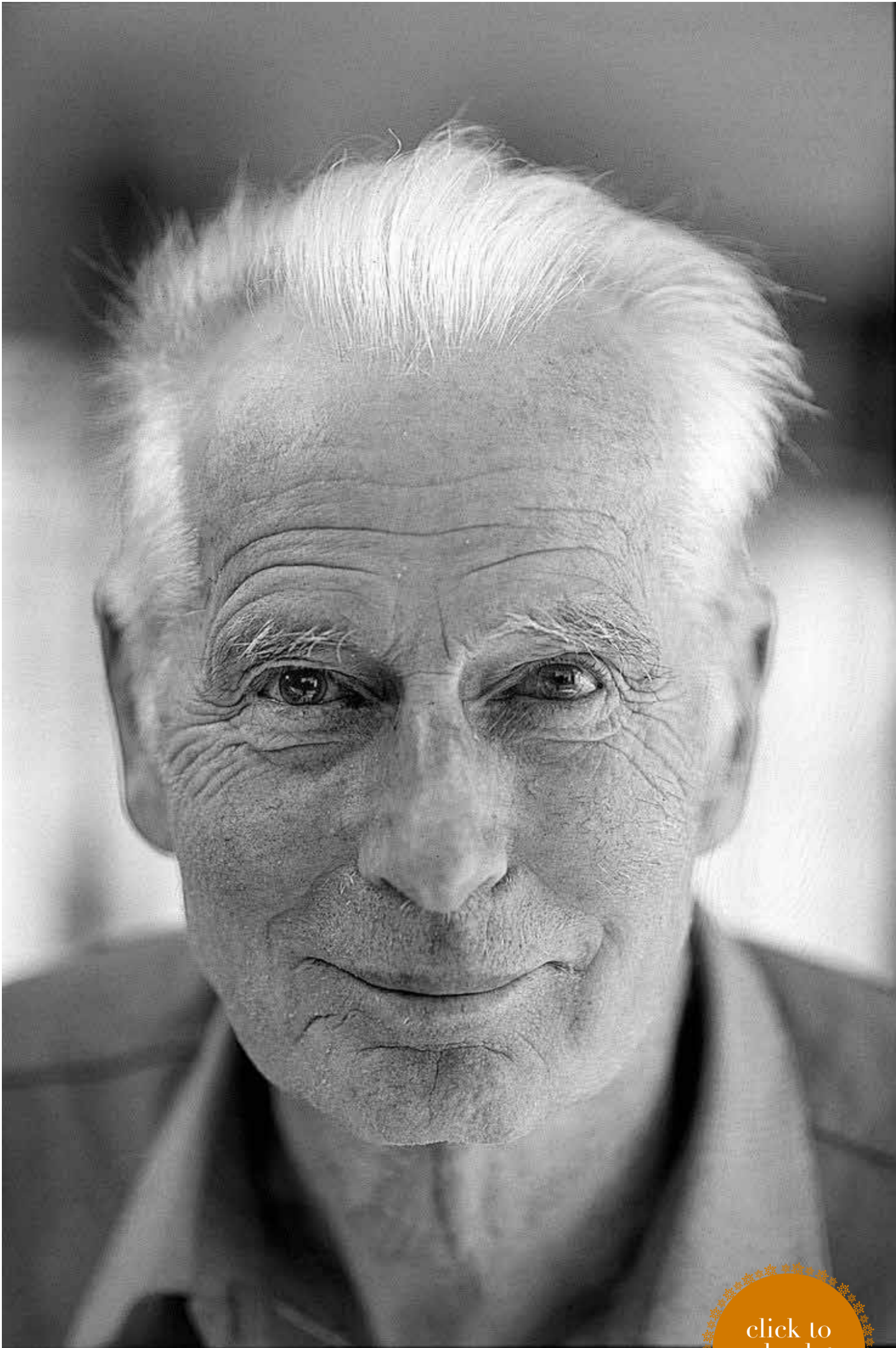
¹⁰³Message of Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2010, Art. 13.



Mrs. William Magee Seton.
Engraving by Charles Balthazar Julien Fevret de Saint-Mémin, 1797.

Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise Archives, Emmitsburg, MD





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Portrait of Arne Naess (1912-2009).

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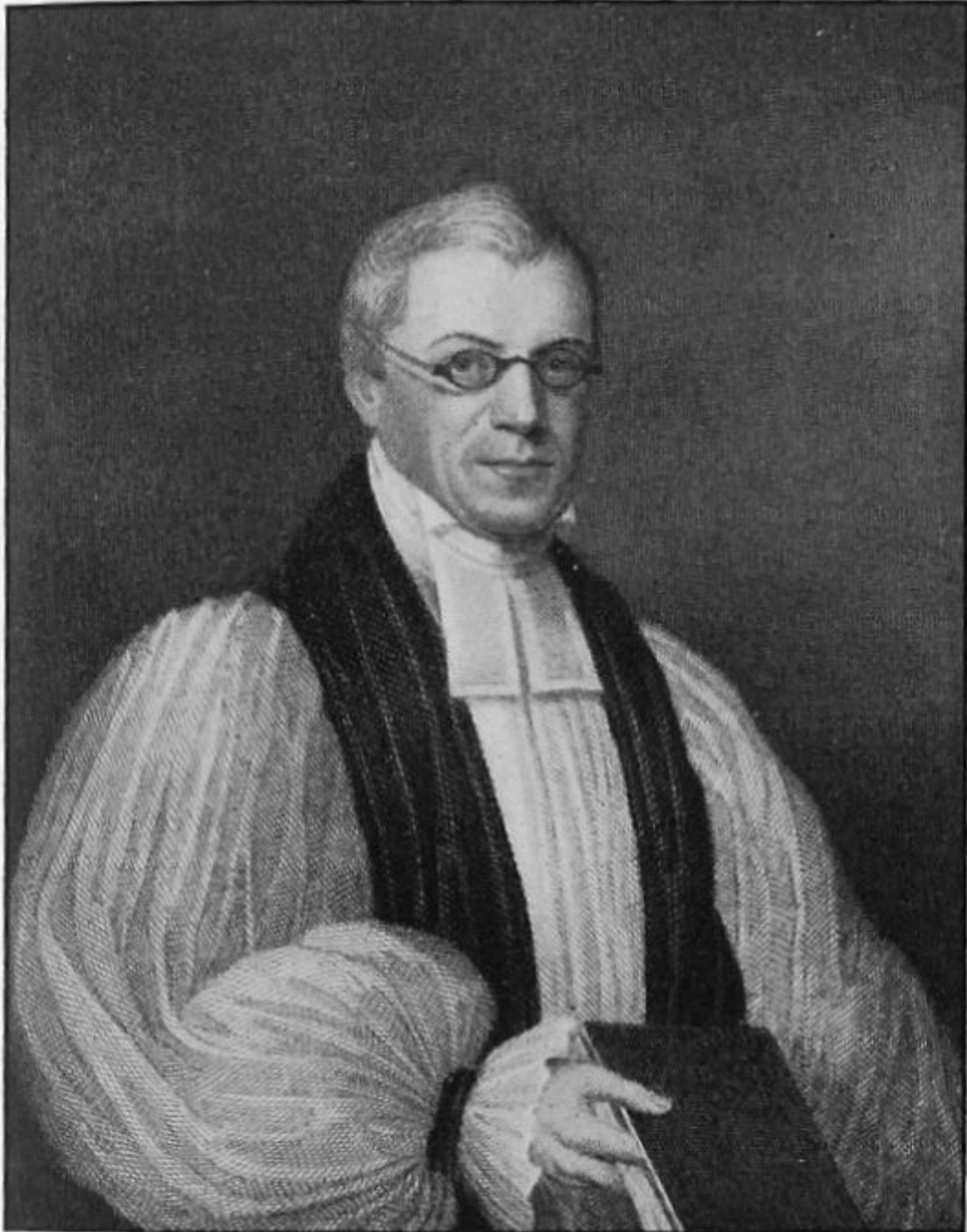
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Veduta del Lazzeretto di S. Rocco

The Lazaretto at Livorno, Tuscany, Italy. Panoramic view.
Color etching by P. Lapi (1824).

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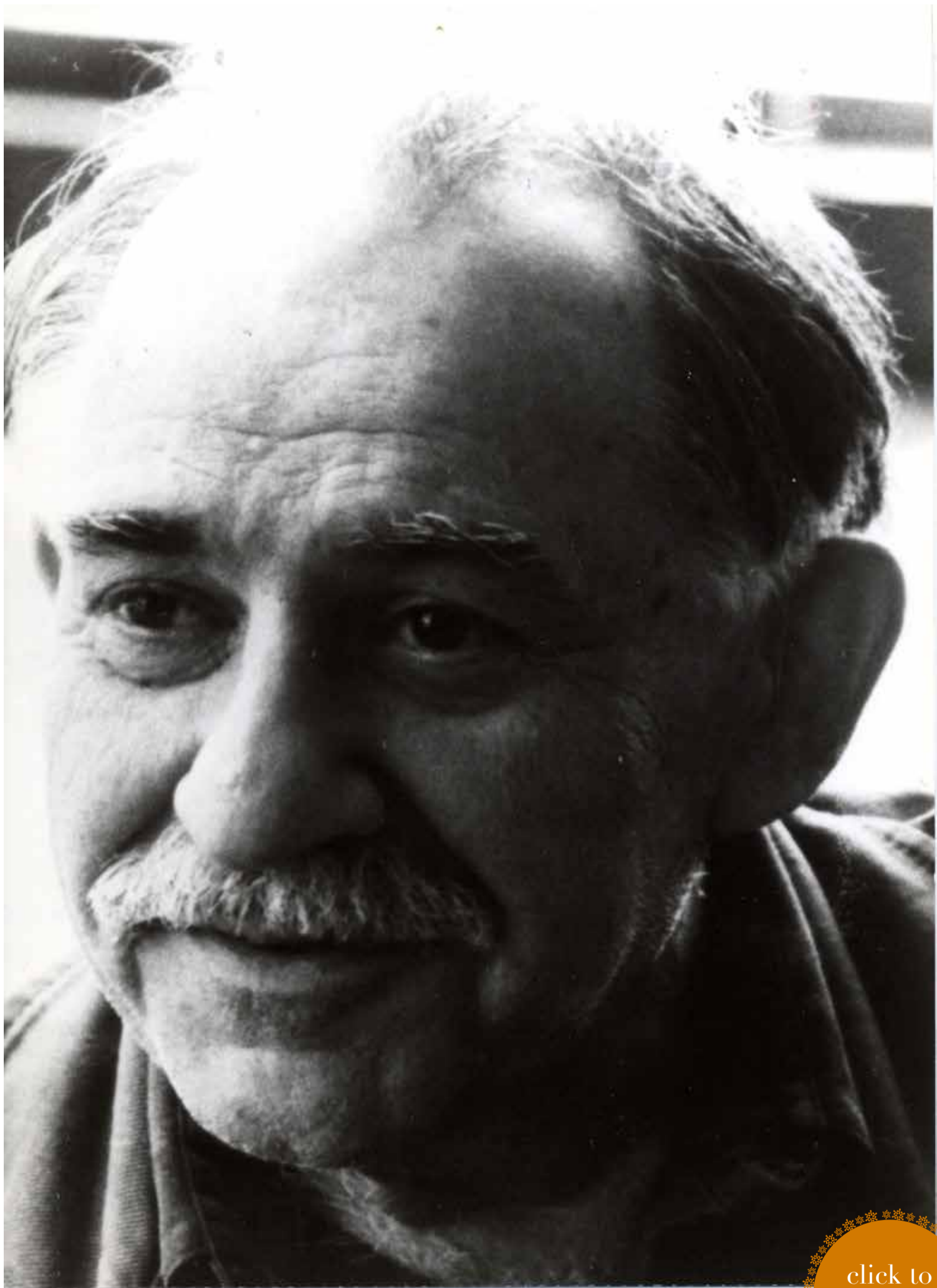
THE RIGHT REVEREND JOHN HENRY HOBART, D. D.,
Third Bishop of the Diocese of New York (State).
Born, 1775 ; Consecrated, 1811 ; Died, 1830.

From the engraving by J. W. Paradise
after the painting by J. Paradise, published
in "The Evergreen" for December, 1844.



The Right Reverend John Henry Hobart
(1775-1830), 3rd Episcopal bishop of New York.

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Murray Bookchin (1921-2006).

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Aldo Leopold (1887-1948).

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Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Filicchi style portrait, with impression of the harbor of Livorno in background, by Dina Bellotti for the cover of the liturgical program at the Seton canonization, 14 September 1975, St. Peter's Square, The Vatican.

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