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The Ecological Meaning of the Presence of God in Elizabeth Ann Seton's Reflections and Translations Based on *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings Volumes 3a & 3b*

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BIO

SISTER SUNG-HAE KIM, S.C., is a professor emeritus in the Department of Religious Studies, Sogang University in Seoul, Korea. After entering the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill in 1965, Sister made her final vows in 1972. She earned an M.A. in theology from Marquette University and went on to earn her Th.D. in the history of religions from Harvard University in 1981. Kim has had numerous articles published, including “Elizabeth Ann Seton’s Vision of Ecological Community. Based on *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings*, Volume Two” in *Vincentian Heritage* 35:2, and has authored the books *Understanding the History of Religion; Primitive Confucianism: A Hermeneutical Approach to the Analects, Mencius, Hsun Tzu*; and *The Gourd and the Cross: Daoism and Christianity in Dialogue* (Three Pines Press, 2014). She also served as co-editor for *Monasticism, Buddhist and Christian: The Korean Experience* (2008).

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Introduction

I have written two articles, “The Ecological Spirituality of Elizabeth Ann Seton,” and “Elizabeth Ann Seton’s Vision of Ecological Community,” based on the first two volumes of her *Collected Writings*.¹ This is my third interpretation of Elizabeth Ann Seton’s (1774–1821) spirituality from the perspective of contemporary ecological philosophy or theology. While both volumes one and two of her *Collected Writings* include her correspondence and journals divided by her early life as a wife and widow in New York and Italy and her later life as a religious in Baltimore and Emmitsburg, volume three (comprised of two volumes, 3a and 3b) contains her reflections, meditations, copied materials from various spiritual writers, and her selected translations, such as *Life of St. Vincent de Paul* and *Life of Louise de Marillac*. Since volume 3a begins with her notes at age seventeen and continues until her “Dear Remembrances,” (contained in volume 3b) which she wrote not long before her death, these volumes cover practically her entire life.

Elizabeth’s letters and journals in volumes one and two clearly reflect her original thoughts. However, in volumes 3a and 3b, it is often difficult to distinguish which parts are Elizabeth’s own words and which parts are selections from other spiritual authors. I concur with the editors of the *Collected Writings*: “Internal evidence suggests that the material was probably copied from spiritual writers of the period ...”² After some conversations with the editors on this issue of copied materials in the midst of her reflections, I agreed with their conclusion: “Even if Elizabeth copied the content into her own papers, she thought the material was important and wanted to reflect further on it. Therefore even if it is not her original writing, the content reflects her values and thinking.”³ The same standard will apply when we approach her selection of translations, which occupies twenty-two percent of the material contained in the volume. Through her selection as well as her emphasis by underlining some words or phrases, Elizabeth expressed what she valued most in these spiritual writings for herself and her religious community, for whom she translated from French to English.

I propose to focus on the “presence of God” (a central theme that runs through these last volumes) in the life of Elizabeth as the mystery that not only sustained her throughout

1 See Sung Hae Kim, S.C., “The Ecological Spirituality of Elizabeth Ann Seton,” *Vincentian Heritage* 32:2 (2015) at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol32/iss2/2/>; and “Elizabeth Ann Seton’s Vision of Ecological Community,” *Vincentian Heritage* 35:2 (2020) at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol35/iss2/4/>.

2 Document 8.26, “Pyamingo Reflections,” which Elizabeth wrote on the boat *Pyamingo* during her return journey from Leghorn (Livorno), Italy, to New York in 1804 in *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings*, ed. Regina Bechtel, S.C. and Judith Metz, S.C., vols. 1–3b (New York: New City Press, 2006), 3a:172–73, nn. 1 and 5. Hereafter abbreviated as *CW*. Available online at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/12/.

3 The emailed response of Judy Metz, S.C., on 29 December 2015, to my question on the above footnotes. I began to realize that Elizabeth Seton’s use of copied materials was like our contemporary use of quotations when we write academic articles; the only difference is that we specify the detailed source of the quotations while Elizabeth did not bother to do that, for they were either for her personal use or for the private use of her family members and religious sisters.

her life but also united her vision of the entire universe of natural creation and humanity into one. Elizabeth was convinced that the divine presence is the very source of life, vitality, beauty, and harmony of all living material beings. Moreover, Elizabeth was in one accord with Vincent de Paul that the presence of God sustains life not only in its flourishing but also in its suffering and death. It is evident from Elizabeth's meditations during the retreats that she felt close to Vincent. She repeatedly called him "our dear father Saint Vincent" or "our blessed father Saint Vincent," and sometimes "O second father Saint Vincent most precious to every heart here," following the first father, Saint Joseph. Elizabeth gave Vincent the title of chief patron and founder in the beginning of the Constitutions of her congregation.⁴ It seems significant that Elizabeth chose to translate the part of Saint Vincent's biography in which Vincent emphasized the transforming effect of the divine presence:

Well convinced by a long experience of the multiplied graces to be acquired by this practice of recollection Mr. Vincent taught it in every manner he could ... in many parts of the House of St. Lazare he had written in large letters *GOD SEES YOU* so that going and coming the Presence of God might be remembered ... he had a particular turn in using natural and sensible objects for this purpose, not stopping on the outside shell or exterior appearance, nor even on their excellence, yet always referring them to the praise of their creator he would say what is the most beautiful compared with him, who is the source of all beauty and perfection, is it not from him the flowers, birds, stars, moon and sun draw their beauty and luster ... he said once to his community that having often to visit a sick person who suffered continual pain in the head, and bore it with great Patience, that he saw on the countenance of the person some inexpressible lustre [*sic*] which evidenced the residence of God in her soul—and he could not help exclaiming "O the happiness of suffering for the love of God!"⁵

Just as Vincent recognized the power of the divine presence in both the beauty and suffering of life, Elizabeth also embraced the Presence of God at times of wonder and happiness, and at times of anguish, suffering, and death. For Elizabeth the sense of the divine presence was the connecting cord and thread in her heart that initiated the music of grateful praise, the strength of enduring patience, and the hope for blessed eternity.

4 Document 9.15, "[Retreat Meditations]," St. Vincent's Day, *CW*, 3a:329–31. On the feast of Vincent de Paul the first group of Sisters of Charity made their vows. Elizabeth wrote on that day: "Look down and favour us, also O holy Joseph our beloved Father ... O second father O St. Vincent most precious to every heart here—take among us thy blessed day and permit us thy latest daughters and the least of all ah! Permit us to be thine also forever." Also refer to Document A-12.4, "Constitutions, Chapter 1, Article 1": "The Sisters of Charity in the United States of America... are daughters of St. Vincent of Paul, whom they acknowledge as their chief patron and founder" *CW*, 3b:541.

5 Document 13.2, "Life of St. Vincent de Paul," n.d., *CW*, 3b:309.

In order to assure and enhance the ecological character of Elizabeth's insights on the Presence of God, I will compare her visions of creation, of humanity, and of suffering and death with three theologians. I will begin with Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), a German Benedictine nun of the twelfth century who was named a doctor of the Church in 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI. She is well known for her unique image of *viriditas*, the Latin word for “greenness,” which denotes all life-giving qualities of God's spirit in matter, both human and non-human.⁶ Hildegard of Bingen explained through her writings how the Presence of God is not only the source of life and vitality but also enhances the beauty and harmony of all things no matter how different.

Next, I will focus on Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson, two important contemporary theologians of ecology. A member of the Anglican Church of Canada, Sallie McFague (b. 1933) uses contemporary science as a resource for theology and has identified the whole universe as the body of God still in process. She views human beings as partners in creation as self-conscious beings, shaping a new humanity in a Christian paradigm, which is characterized by God's liberating, healing, and inclusive love. A member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Brentwood, Elizabeth A. Johnson (b. 1941) clarifies the Presence of God in death and suffering and explains how the natural world and human beings are closely linked in the experience of death. Elizabeth Johnson's insistence that contemporary ecological theology works on two fronts at once, the Spirit and the natural world, interestingly coincides with Elizabeth Seton's understanding of suffering and death in her encompassing experience of the Presence of God.

I. The Presence of God in Creation as the Source of Life and Vitality

In 1798, after the death of William's father who safeguarded the prosperity of their family, Elizabeth and William Magee moved their young family to 61 Stone Street in New York in order to take responsibility for William's younger half-sisters and half-brothers. On 31 December 1799, realizing that a dark cloud was approaching upon the family's future, Elizabeth wrote a prayer that her inner peace would be maintained in the Presence of God:

Sitting on a little Bench before the fire—the head resting on the hand, the Body perfectly easy, the Eyes closed, the mind serene contemplating, and tracing boundless Mercy and the source of all Excellence and Perfection ... to find the Soul at Liberty—Heavenly Mercy—in thy presence and would it not tremble ... preserve me but this Heavenly Peace, continue to me this privilege [sic] beyond all mortal computation of resting in Thee, and adoring Thee my

6 Anne H. King-Lenzmeier, *Hildegard of Bingen: An Integrated Vision* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 6.



After bankruptcy forced them to give up their family home on Stone Street, Elizabeth and William moved to 8 State Street (at center) where they resided until their 1803 departure for Italy. The building is pictured here in 1891.

New York Historical Society, Public Domain

Father—Friend— and never failing Support.—for this alone I implore, let all other concerns with their consequences be intirely [sic] and wholly [sic] submitted to *Thee*—⁷

Elizabeth trusted that if God, who was her Father, Friend, and Supporter, would stay with her, she would be able to endure whatever trials may come and enjoy liberty of the soul. Elizabeth’s constant desire was that she would be fit to dwell in the Presence of God:

Almighty Giver of all Mercies, Father of all, who knows my Heart and pities its weakness and errors, thou knowest the desire of my soul is to do thy will, it struggles to wing its flight to the creator ...

... cleanse me and fit me for thy presence.⁸

What is noteworthy is that as much as Elizabeth desired the Presence of God in her heart, she perceived the same divine presence in all of God’s creation.

A. The Presence of God in Creation: Elizabeth’s Reflections and Meditations

On a beautiful evening in October 1800, at her father Dr. Richard Bayley’s home in the quarantine station on Staten Island, Elizabeth described in detail the wonders of nature:

The most beautiful mild Evening my eyes ever beheld, the moon perfectly unclouded—a large cloud like a Bank of pure snow arises behind the fort and

⁷ Document 8.4. “Sitting on a little bench...,” 31 December 1799, *CW*, 3a:18.

⁸ Document 8.22. “Almighty Giver of all Mercies...,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:36–37.

gradually spreads toward New York retaining its whiteness from its centre [sic] but very dark beneath now and then lit up with lightning while the Sky over our Establishment and Long Island is clearest blue spangled with the bright stars—this continued about a quarter of an hour the most perfect scene imagination could form a light wind rises, the thunder is heard—the clouds approach and by degrees cover the bright Moon, pass to Long Island and the fort is covered with as blue and spangled a sky as before this while the rain is beating over us.⁹

Elizabeth watched and marveled at the ever-changing beauty of creation, believing that the natural world contains the excellence of the Divine Law set forth in the most impressive and endearing manner,¹⁰ and was comforted by the thought that “all nature is bright, every blessing below is perfect.”¹¹

It was in the “Pyamingo Reflection” where Elizabeth elaborated most clearly her vision of the Presence of God in the entire universe:

Of all the exercises in a Christian Life there are none more strongly recommended or more carefully practiced by the Saints of God, than that of a constant sense of his presence—Our obligation for this practice is founded on two principles of faith—God is every where [sic], and sees every thing [sic]—... The Majesty of his presence consecrates every part of the universe, and wherever I am, I may say with Jacob “This place is holy” and I knew it not, or rather I do not consider—thus the recollection of God’s presence is the lawful homage and faith I owe to his immensity—St. Augustin [sic] figured it himself a vast Ocean wherein all creatures are inundated and penetrated with the essence of God without ever being able to escape or detach themselves from him because they are present with him by the necessity of their nature.¹²

The basic idea of the above quotation is from Saint Francis de Sales, but instead of introducing the four chief considerations of practicing the Presence of God as the preparation for meditation, Elizabeth focused on the first point, namely that God is in all things and all

9 Document 8.6, “The most beautiful mild Evening...,” 2 October 1800, *CW*, 3a:19–20.

10 Document 8.14, “Do we wish to view religion...,” 26 September 1803, *CW*, 3a:28. The editors explain that this reflection is possibly from notes Elizabeth took from a sermon of Rev. John Henry Hobart, given the initials that appear at the bottom of the page (n. 1).

11 Document 8:18, “Father Almighty I know not what I would ask...,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:34.

12 Document 8.26, “Pyamingo Reflections [Living in the Presence of God],” n.d., *CW*, 3a:189. The editors state that this section “indicates the influence of Saint Francis de Sales on Elizabeth. She received a copy of his *Introduction to the Devout Life* from Filippo Filicchi while she was in Italy (n. 40).” Refer to *Introduction to the Devout Life*, translated by John Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 84, and in particular “The Second Part, section 2: A Short Method of Meditation, and First of the Presence of God,” which is the First Point of the Preparation.

places. Therefore, Elizabeth did not follow the conclusion in this part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* that “God is indeed here.” Rather, enlarging the scope of the vision to the entire universe, Elizabeth said that the Majesty of God’s presence consecrates every part of it. Elizabeth’s conviction that God is everywhere throughout the whole universe is restated in her reflection on the “Exercise of the Presence of God”:

God is every where [sic]—on the throne of his glory among the blessed indeed, but also throughout the whole universe which he fills governs and preserves, ruling it by his wisdom and power

... as birds in changing their places find the air wherever they fly, and fish who live in the water are surrounded by their element wherever they swim, so wherever we go we must find God every where [sic], he is more within us, than we are in ourselves.¹³

The examples of the birds of the air and the fish of the sea enjoying the immensity of the sky and the ocean, yet never reaching their limit and boundary are used again in Elizabeth’s later reflections. God’s immensity and the finiteness of creatures including human beings are illustrated: “So we plunging in the Ocean of the Divinity, or winging our flight to its infinity will yet find we can never reach its full enjoyment which will still remain infinitely above our highest capacities.”¹⁴ In a similar reflection entitled “Our Sister departed,” Elizabeth manifested her ability to see God in nature:

all nature speaks to us of heaven—the delights of the morning—a flower of the field.

... We are to sanctify ourselves in our happy position, to remove all obstacles to grace when he calls—our life should be pure as the clear running stream.¹⁵

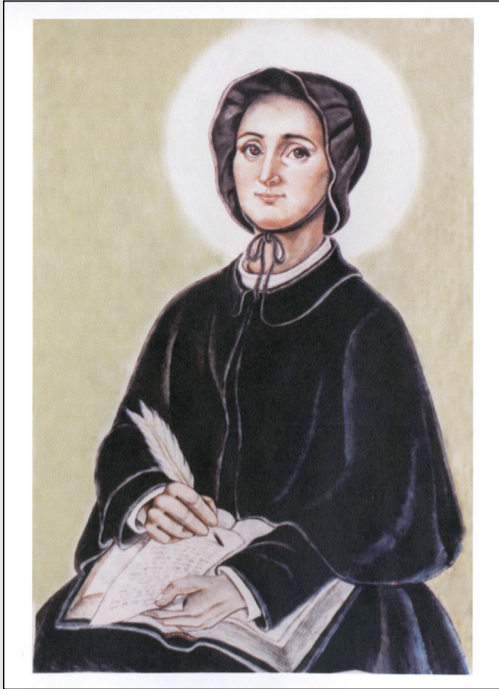
Because the life of the natural world and that of human beings is so closely interconnected and harmonized, Elizabeth was not hesitant to see nature as the metaphor for our life. For instance, Elizabeth loved to use the sun as the symbol of God’s constant presence and integrity: “Can we wonder enough at our singular blindness of heart, in preferring the thought of created things to our God, who is as a sun which shines night and day on us and in us.”¹⁶ Second, in her advice to her daughter Catherine, Elizabeth used the righteous sun as a metaphor for integrity: “*I would be kind to every body* [sic] but admit a

13 Document 9.20, “*Exercise of the Presence of God*,” n.d. *CW*, 3a:392. The editors add that a similar treatment of this theme is found in Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Second, chap. 2.

14 Document 11.9, “departed St. Teresa’s day,” Saint Teresa’s Day, *CW*, 3b:11. The editors write that “this is probably a funeral sermon” for Sister Maria Murphy (who died 15 October 1812) “given by Bruté, followed by other reflections” (n. 1).

15 Document 9.7, “Our Sister departed.....,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:250.

16 Document 9.20, “*Exercise of the Presence of God*,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:401.



***Portrait of Elizabeth Seton by Sister Sung-he Choi,
Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Korean province.***

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

few *within* my heart, and I would have the *pride* to do what I knew to be right as quietly and calmly as the sun rides on the heavens and let the world go on at its pleasure.”¹⁷ Elizabeth explained to her daughter that this inner strength to do what we know to be right comes from the divine look that enkindles the fire of love in us.

Elizabeth perceived that the Spirit of God is present everywhere in creation not only in the glorious sun, but also in a little flower: “The very immensity of God is most admirable, that at the same time it is greater than the whole universe it is as small as the least object of the creation, and we find it whole and intire [sic] in a little flower, and as perfect as in the emperial [sic] heaven.”¹⁸ The very fact that everything in the universe, small and great, is animated by the divine presence offers the theological basis for the ecological community of all living beings.

B. The Presence of God in Creation: Elizabeth’s Translated Works

When Elizabeth was translating the French original of *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul* by Louis Abelly, she did not translate it in its entirety; rather, with a clear purpose, she selected what she thought worth translating. Among the three volumes Elizabeth did not translate is the first volume of Abelly’s biography of Vincent, which deals with historical materials. From the second and third volumes she chose only the parts dealing with Vincent’s virtues such as humility, obedience, simplicity, prudence,

17 Document 10.3, “Catherine Seton’s Little Red Book,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:491.

18 Document 9.20, “Exercise of the *Presence of God*,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:409.

meekness, mortification, patience, love of God and charity toward the poor.¹⁹ Elizabeth's selection for translation makes her intention very clear; she wanted to provide spiritual reading for the spiritual formation of the early Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg for which she was responsible.

Exploring Vincent's submission to all authority, both spiritual and secular, Elizabeth chose one interesting episode that happened in the Congregation's motherhouse between Vincent and a brother, who caught birds in a cage to present as a gift to the superior general. Elizabeth translated all the details Abelly described, signifying that in the end obedience means submission to God who loves and supports all forms of life:

One of the Brothers of the house of St. Lazare having found a pa[r]tridge [pheasant] nest in its enclosures and set the eggs under a hen that he might have the pleasure of presenting the little pa[r]tridges to Mr. Vincent, received no other answer when he brought them to him in triumph but "Well my brother let us see if they can run yet" and setting out quietly with the Brother to reach a field of plowed ground, he bade him open the door of the cage, and enjoyed the pleasure of seeing them all escape ... then turning kindly to the Brother who had expected quite another kind of pleasure he said "You know his Majesty has forbid us taking pa[r]tridges, so of course he did not mean that we should take their eggs, and the least disobedience to our King in temporal matters is always more or less displeasing to God."²⁰

When she was living in New York, Elizabeth also coaxed a girl named Nelly to release a young robin from a cage to make the robin family happy,²¹ so she must have found Vincent's action letting the brother release the birds very significant. For both of them, care for birds as well as for the poor is an act of obedience to the Creator, who wants all life to flourish.

Elizabeth agreed with Vincent that the Holy Spirit animates all of creation, as seen in her translation of Abelly's account of Vincent's retreat work at Saint-Lazare, where no less than 700 persons were received, lodged, and fed without charge every year. When his companions asked Vincent to lessen the number of the retreatants, Vincent answered: "Let us thank God a thousand times that he has hitherto made our house a theatre of his mercies, on which the holy Spirit is continually descending ... Yes our house becomes the place of Rest for the King of Kings, the throne of his Justifications."²²

19 Document 13.1, "Life of St. Vincent de Paul," n.d. and document 13.2, "Life of St. Vincent de Paul," n.d., *CW*, 3b:217–354. The editors note that the Seton translation of Abelly comprises two copybooks, each of which is a distinct document: *Seton Writings* 3:13.1 and 13.2. It is unknown how or why the early archivists differentiated between the two copybooks in the assignment of archival numbers since document 13.2 covers material earlier in Abelly than document 13.1. I agree with them and found the beginning of 13.1 follows the end of 13.2. In a word, archival numberings should be reversed. The translation of the biography of Vincent occupies 143 pages in the *CW*, while that of Louise occupies thirty-nine pages.

20 Document 13.1, "Life of St. Vincent de Paul," n.d., *CW*, 3b:221.

21 Document 1.123, "To Rebecca Seton," [1801], *CW*, 1:164.

22 Document 13.1, "Life of St. Vincent de Paul," *CW*, 3b:277. Also see "we really are animated with the divine presence," document

Elizabeth would have delighted in translating the description of how Vincent tried to walk in the footsteps of his divine Master: “he might mould and form himself to this divine original and might truly say with the Prophet ‘thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a guide to my paths.’ ... - but in all guided so well by the Spirit of God that it was evident it influenced whatever he did –”²³ Truly, Jesus, who was guided in all by the Spirit of God, was an example who inspired both Vincent and Elizabeth.

Finally, Elizabeth wrote in her “Meditation on Heaven” that we can call for the praise of all creatures because Jesus took on himself our humanity thereby uniting all material creation to the spiritual:

God himself becomes our praise from our lower material World ...
... endless love and HARMONY the SONG of MARY...
... is it possible this Atom being I possess shall be eternally blessed without
end and limitation.²⁴

Here Elizabeth calls herself “Atom being” among the lower material world, which was lifted up to the world of the spiritual, so that the eternal praise of endless love and harmony can be achieved. On the feast day of Vincent de Paul when the first group of Sisters of Charity made their first vows, Elizabeth described herself as a “wretched atom” whose unwilling heart must be bound by the grace of God, and she prayed to Vincent: “Blessed father St. Vincent assist by thy love and powerful intercession thy poor daughters here.”²⁵

Elizabeth looked forward to the day when the whole of creation would be glorified because the complete transformation of the earth would include not only the salvation of human beings but also the glory of the natural world: “yes I will look forward to the Arch-angels Voice to the transformation of the heavens, the renovation of the earth, the liberty of the elements Universal natures change, then Shall I behold my A[nnina] and R[ebecca] no longer shrouded in the tomb.”²⁶

C. The Ecological Meaning of the Presence of God in Creation

In order to perceive more clearly the ecological meaning of the Presence of God in creation in Elizabeth’s writings, we will now look into what the divine presence meant in the ecological theology of Hildegard of Bingen. For Hildegard, all life is living in the constant presence of the Living Light of God. She noted that in this life we experience the shadow of

13.1 “Life of St. Vincent de Paul,” *CW*, 3b:310.

23 Document 13.1. “Life of St. Vincent de Paul,” *CW*, 3b:252.

24 Document 9.14, “Meditation on Heaven,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:314.

25 Document 9.15, “Retreat Meditations,” St. Vincent’s Day, *CW*, 3a:330.

26 Document 10.3. “Catherine Seton’s Little Red Book,” *CW*, 3a:494.



***Saint Hildegard von Bingen, Sibyl of the Rhine
(1098–1179).***

Hildegard was canonized 10 May 2012.

Courtesy of Encyclopedia Britannica

the Living Light, but when we complete our journey, we shall be bathed in the Light itself. Her constant awareness of the Presence of God in creation was very much influenced by the rich natural environment of Disibodenberg, where she spent twenty-four years of her early life. Her first Benedictine monastery was located on a site between two rivers filled with vitality and sheer greenness, which inspired her imagery of the life-giving power of God in the natural world, *viriditas* (Latin: greenness, vitality), with its lush trees, ivy, grass, moist soil, and rocks.²⁷

Hildegard wrote that eternity is the essential quality of the Father, for God lives in eternity as the source of life. Life proceeds not from mortality, but life is in life. Every living thing has its own life force because all things are born from God the Father: “The clouds have their course, and the moon and stars burn with fire. The tree brings forth the flowers through invigorating sap, and water, in its rarer essence, has the ability both to make the wind moist and to bring forth rivulets. Even the earth exhales moisture.”²⁸

In a letter to Abbot Manegold, who was elected abbot of Hirsau and experienced the general unrest in the monastery, Hildegard recommended the virtue of patience to him so that he might realize his full potential:

In your works and morals I see you as a tree that has great viridity in its leaves. One branch, however, is drying up ... This is Patience, which produces

27 King-Lenzmeier, *Hildegard of Bingen*, xv–xviii and chapter 1, 6–9.

28 *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, translated by Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, 3 vols. (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1994-2004), 1:98. 31r Hildegard to Eberharild, Bishop of Bamberg, 1163–64. Four hundred letters are available to us, and they are considered as prophetic witness, for Hildegard was not hesitant to say what she received from the Divine Light in her correspondence with the popes, bishops, priests, religious, and laity including the king of England.

humidity and viridity in all good works. Patience's house is harsh and bitter, but it gives great rewards and opens the gate of the heavenly kingdom.... That monastery in which you live is pleasing to God. Therefore, embrace and kiss Patience, and do not put her aside, for you have the potential to wash clean the wounds of men, and thereby to set up a ladder to heaven. And you will live forever.²⁹

Hildegard's emphasis on patience can be compared to Elizabeth's continual comments on patience as her lifelong companion, for "Patience will at last bring all right."³⁰ Moreover, Hildegard adds that viewing patience as an ecological virtue will enable us to wait for the right time and help to bring everything into fruition. One of Hildegard's songs praises the Holy Spirit as the Life of the life of all creatures, summarizing what the Presence of God means in creation:

O You, fire of the Spirit, Paraclete,
Life of the life of every creature,
Holy are you for giving life to the forms,
Holy are you for anointing ...
From You, the clouds flow, the ether flies,
From You, the rocks have their moisture,
From You, the waters bring forth their rills,
From You, the earth exudes its viridity
And so all creatures,
Which have life from You praise You,
Because You are the ointment beyond price
For open, festering wounds,
And You transform them into rarest gems.³¹

The most important virtues that Hildegard saw in creation were moderation and

29 Letter 135, Hildegard to Abbot Manegold(?) 1156–65, *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 2:76. For historical information of Manegold, see p. 67.

30 Letter 6.32, "To Sister Maria Murphy Burke," [April 1810], *CW*, 2:119. For the comment "my companion the remainder of my fine life," see letter 7.144, "To William Seton," [1818], *CW*, 2:532. Also refer to letter 6.4, "To Archbishop John Carroll," [August 6, 1809], *CW*, 2:79; letter 6.30 "To Julia Scott," March 26, 1810, *CW*, 2:116; letter 6.53 "To Matthias O'Conway," July 30, [1810], *CW*, 2:152; letter 6.61, "To Matthias O'Conway," October 9, 1810, *CW*, 2:161; letter 6.68, "To Julia Scott," February 1, 1811, *CW*, 2:169; letter 6.69, "To George Weis," [February 1811], *CW*, 2:171; letter 6.73, "To Archbishop John Carroll," March 16, 1811, *CW*, 2:179; letter 6.74, "To George Weis," [April 27, 1811], *CW*, 2:180; letter 6.129, "Copy to George Weis," March 26, 1813, *CW*, 2:243; letter 6.206, "To Rebecca Seton," September 25, [1815], *CW*, 2:344; letter 7.16, "To William Seton," April 9, 1816, *CW*, 2:386; letter 7.18, "Copy to William Seton," April 21, 1816, *CW*, 2:388; letter 7.39, "To Catherine Seton," [July 1816], *CW*, 2:412; letter 7.69, "To William Seton," [early 1817], *CW*, 2:460; letter 7.77, "To Rev. Simon Bruté, S.S.," [February 1817], *CW*, 2:467; letter 7.112, "To Eliza Sadler," August 24, 1817, 2:504; letter 7.165, "To William Seton," [June 1818], *CW*, 2:561; letter 7.215, "To Rev. John Hickey, S.S.," [June 1819], *CW*, 2:615; and letter 7.253, "Copy to Catherine Seton," [July 4, 1820], *CW*, 2:660.

31 "Songs and Meditations before 1173," *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 3:202–204.

harmony. In one of her sermons, Hildegard states that God is a living fountain as well as a blazing fire, and so the waters and the sun complement each other to maintain life on the earth:

The waters, however, steep the whole earth with the heat of the sun, which as a kind of image below the circuit of its orbit and which is humidified by the watery air, and so with the two together mingling with one another, they bring forth all living plants. And the waters, which are the mirror of the sun, refrain the sun lest it burn up the earth with its excessive heat. In turn, the sun curbs the waters so that they will not submerge the earth with overabundant rains.³²

Just as the water and the sun complement each other, so that life on earth may flourish, human beings have to cultivate moderation and harmony.³³ If we look at Elizabeth Seton's vision of the life of creation as sustained by moderation and harmony from the perspective of Hildegard of Bingen, it is clear that Elizabeth's insight is ecological, and at the end it is the Majesty of the Divine Presence that consecrates every part of the universe.³⁴

II. The Presence of God in the Midst of Humanity

Even though Elizabeth's vision of creation is filled with the divine presence which resides in every atom of the natural world, she was convinced that human beings are especially destined to be brightened by the splendor of the divine presence through preserving integrity and simplicity in our words and actions.³⁵ Elizabeth confessed repeatedly that "Divine presence is the most precious treasure to me"³⁶ and also proclaimed that "in [God's] presence is the fulness [*sic*] of Joy."³⁷

A. *The Presence of God in the Midst of Humanity: Elizabeth's Reflections*

For Elizabeth, creatures are God's image and mirror, representing God's perfection in their diversity. Reflecting her religious life in the quiet valley of the small village of Emmitsburg, Elizabeth found the ecological meaning and mission of human life in her intimate connection with its natural environment:

32 "A Sermon on the Perverse Doctrine of the Heretics," (1171), *Letters of Hildegard Bingen*, 3:170–71. She gave this sermon at the age of seventy-three and began the sermon with the confession that she saw this vision in her spirit, being fully awake, having been compelled by the Living Light.

33 115. "Concerning the punishments of the Immoderate" Hildegard of Bingen, *The Book of the Rewards of Life*, translated by Bruce W. Hozeski (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1994).

34 Document 8.26. "Pyamingo Reflections," [Living in the Presence of God], *CW*, 3a:189.

35 Document 13.1, "Life of St. Vincent de Paul," *CW*, 3b:223.

36 Document 8.26, "Pyamingo Reflections," *CW*, 3a:191, and document 9.20, "Exercise of the *Presence of God*," *CW*, 3a:396.

37 Document 8.24, "Extracts from George Glasse's *Contemplation on the Sacred History*," *CW*, 3a:94.



Mosaic depicting canonization banner of Elizabeth Seton, located in the Queen of Heaven Mausoleum, Hillside, Illinois.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

Silence, and retirement, regular hours of communion with God and separation from the tumult of the world. Order in action ... doing nothing but in the spirit of obedience to God and the accomplishment of his good will and pleasure seeking God in things the most indifferent, <and> considering the creature *only* his image and mirrors to represent to us his perfections—the heavens as the throne of his glory, the earth as his footstool, mankind as the ministers of his providence, prosperities as the effects of his liberality, and adversities as the chastisement of his justice.— this is the secret of finding God in all things and every where [*sic*].³⁸

In Elizabeth’s reflection above, humanity forms the triad of material creation with heaven and earth, and human beings are regarded as “the ministers of God’s providence.” While recognizing that all other creatures are also the images of God reflecting divine perfection, she admitted that humans have a special mission to fulfill. In order to realize this mission, we must know God’s mandate for each of us through the cultivation of our sense of the divine presence.

We find the concrete way of cultivating this sense of the divine presence in Elizabeth’s dialogue with Sister Mary Vincent Langley, who was admitted to the novitiate on 21 January 1819, two years before Elizabeth’s death. As the superior of the community Elizabeth advised Mary Vincent to practice five things³⁹ which demonstrate Elizabeth’s mature teaching of how

38 Document 8.26, “Pyamingo Reflections,” *CW*, 3a:191.

39 Document 9.9, “Mother Seton’s Last Writings,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:254. The editors add that this document is not in Elizabeth’s handwriting. Probably one of the sisters in Emmitsburg who was present there with Mother Seton and Sister Mary Vincent wrote the dialogue between them.

humans can become “the ministers of God’s providence.” First, she advises us to constantly guard our senses in order to nurture our Savior’s life in us; second, to preserve moderation and harmony in life reflecting our dear savior’s life; third, to cultivate the Presence of God as our focus in the spiritual life; fourth, to secure and renew pure intention and work with a lively, cheerful heart, even when the things we are to do displease our poor nature; and fifth, to persevere in daily trials with the pure eyes of faith and to fight cheerfully.⁴⁰

Here I will focus on the third point, the unique Presence of God in every human person. Unlike other creatures who reflect God’s perfection through their natural existence, human beings can ignore and resist the grace of the divine presence because we are endowed with self-consciousness and freedom. Elizabeth described this human phenomenon to Sister Mary Vincent in a personal way:

See your dear Saviour sitting alone in the midst of your soul, like a shepherd he calls for all the powers of your soul, all the affections of your heart to come round him like his own little flock—but how they are scattered about—See, he holds a paper in his dear hand—what is written on it? “*Speak little, my child; pray much; cherish no attachment; keep close to me; let everything that passes, pass; mind nothing but what is eternal*—I never take my eyes off of you night or day, how can you forget me so often.” See my daughter, our dear Lord speaks plainly—and on the other side of you know your *enemy* never rests, trying to stifle your good resolutions, to strengthen you[r] bad inclinations, and awaken your passions—how many secret wounds, he will give you, if you do not keep close to our God.— ... the sweet peace and joy, which will recompense your fidelity in keeping close to God, will a thousand times redouble your happiness here in our land of trial.⁴¹

Elizabeth gave the same advice to other sisters of her congregation: “Your first step in this heavenly way is to contract a habit of God’s presence and the spirit of recollection—and let Divine Love cast out Fear, *fear nothing so much as not to love enough.*”⁴²

In her “Dear Remembrances” Elizabeth recalled different times when she vividly experienced the Presence of God: at age six when she learned Psalm 22, “I will fear no evil for thou are with me”; at age eight when she tried to bring bird eggs to life; at age fourteen in New Rochelle during spring finding joy in God while gazing at the stars and walking among cedars surrounded by lambs and sheep; and at age twenty-nine how she delighted

40 Document 9.9, “Mother Seton’s Last Writings,” *CW*, 3a:254–64. I summarized the talk into these five points.

41 “Mother Seton’s last writings,” 3a:256. The editors comment that this type of practical spiritual advice is reminiscent of words attributed to Saint Teresa of Avila, whose spiritual writings Elizabeth Seton read widely (n. 9).

42 Document 10.5, “Gospel of Matthew Notebook,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:525. The editors comment that Elizabeth copied selected excerpts from the Gospel of Matthew, chaps. 3 to 15, and the rest of the notebook contains excerpts copied by Elizabeth from various spiritual writers and readings from the Divine Office (nn. 4 and 5).

in packing up all her valuables to be sold, enjoying the *adieu* to each article. She knew God's presence in the freedom of her Soul even in painful times; when seeing a Eucharistic procession, she felt anguish at the thought she might be the only one *he* did not bless. Back in New York, she described her "Supreme happiness" on receiving her God in communion for the first time as a Catholic.⁴³

Elizabeth's remembrances continue in Emmitsburg with her intimate feelings of connection with woods, rocks, the bright moonlight walks to the church, and the people meeting each other and departing: "Cecilias [*sic*] [Seton] gentle death the 29th April 1810—her burial—the children gathering wild flowers—... Evening before Nina's [Anna Maria] Death ... this world passes away—*Eternity!*"⁴⁴ Her "Dear Remembrances" ends with a reflection on eternity, for Elizabeth understood that eternity is the completion of humanity's mission to become "the ministers of God's providence."⁴⁵

Even though Elizabeth agreed that our soul is God's palace and our free will is the noblest gift of God, she took seriously our body, the instrument of our loss or our glory: "this body to last but a moment—a mass of matter to be destroyed in the destruction [*sic*] of all nature which is all to disappear—to be dissolved—and tho' by Faith we know that our body shall be restored yet it will be as by a new creation—this body the envelopment of a pure spirit destined to share its bliss of eternity."⁴⁶ Therefore, Elizabeth advised her Sisters of Charity that our bodies should be consumed in promoting all the interests of God's Kingdom. Actually, great esteem for the present moment when the grace of the moment flows from eternal love is closely connected with this constant sense of the Presence of God.⁴⁷

B. The Presence of God in the Midst of Humanity: Elizabeth's Translations

Elizabeth spent much of her time in Emmitsburg translating French spiritual books that Father Bruté provided to her religious community, which was in need of spiritual nourishment.⁴⁸ Probably because of the lack of time, instead of translating entire books,

43 Document 10.4, "Dear Remembrances," n.d., *CW*, 3a:519. I summarized Elizabeth remarks concerning the divine presence from 510 to 523.

44 Document 10.4, "Dear Remembrances," *CW*, 3a:523.

45 Document 10.4, "Dear Remembrances," *CW*, 3a:523. For this exact wording, see also Document 8.26, "Pyamingo Reflections," *CW*, 3a:191; and Document 9.15, "[Retreat Meditations]," *CW*, 319.

46 Document 10.1, "St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi Notebook," "My God and My All," n.d., *CW*, 3a:450–51.

47 Document 9.1, "Instruction on Religious Life," n.d., *CW*, 3a:235. The editors note that this material "was copied from a treatise on the proper living of religious life" in the handwriting of Sister Margaret George, Maxims from St. Paul (n. 1). Footnote 28 illustrates the grace of moment as a recurring theme in Elizabeth's spirituality.

48 Elizabeth wrote 17 September 1818 as the date she finished her translation of the *Life of Louise de Marillac*, (*CW*, 3b:385) and the date she finished the translation of the "Life of Sister Françoise Bony" as 29 September 1818 (*CW*, 3b:412).

she selected what she judged most helpful for the sisters. Here from her translated material we will focus on what the Presence of God means for human beings and ecological virtues as the fruit of its practice.

After she finished her translation of *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, Elizabeth began to translate *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras* by Nicolas Gobillon. Just as she did with the “Life of St. Vincent,” Elizabeth selected the parts that she felt beneficial to the Sisters’ spiritual and communal life. After a short introduction to Louise’s life and ministry to the poor, which led to the formation of her little company in 1633, Elizabeth translated Saint Vincent’s advice to Saint Louise to be moderate in all things: “Be not afraid to do the present good in your power, but fear your desires to do more than you can, and more than God means you to do ... I tremble at the thought of going *beyond the means he gives*, because it seems to me a crime in the children of his Providence.”⁴⁹ Moderation is an ecological value, and recognizing its importance, Elizabeth chose to translate this advice so that her companions would also learn this virtue.

Elizabeth continued translating Louise’s teachings about the great art of serving the poor well. For example, she introduced the following advice of Louise to the sisters: “How can you support yourselves but the closest union with God and the union with him cannot be preserved but through recollection and meditation.”⁵⁰ She recommended preserving the sense of the divine presence through recollection and prayer as the strongest means to persevere in their religious life and commitment to the poor. The two ruling maxims practiced by Louise throughout her life reinforced complementary aspects of the charism of charity: first, the love of truth which detached her from creatures and united her to her creator; the second, the duty of charity for the relief of human misery.

To foster the bond of charity among the sisters, Louise especially recommended the virtue of meekness to them: “Remember how necessary the practice of *meekness* is also, Peace and harmony cannot subsist without it in your company nor can it preserve the Spirit of God, or his *presence*. This virtue of meekness is the distinctive character of a Christian and renders them worthy to bear the name of their divine master who communicates his divine qualities of Infancy to those who love and keep Peace.”⁵¹ The submission of Jesus to the will of His Father was the model for the Sisters to surrender their way of thinking to follow that of another.

Elizabeth chose to translate the parts from Gobillon’s work on vocation and vows, including Louise’s advice to her sisters regarding honoring the life of Jesus on earth by “giving your very *self*, employing every moment of life, and exposing yourself to all kinds of

49 Document 13.3, “Life of Louise de Marillac,” *CW*, 3b:363.

50 Document 13.3, “Life of Louise de Marillac,” n.d., *CW*, 3b:366.

51 Document 13.3, “Life of Louise de Marillac,” *CW*, 3b:377.



Engraved portrait of Louise de Marillac, Mother of the Poor.

*DePaul University Special Collections and Archives.
Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online*

danger for the love of God in serving the poor.”⁵² With regard to the vow of chastity, Louise introduced both exterior modesty and interior modesty and emphasized the importance of living in the divine presence: “Interior Modesty which consists in keeping the interior in the presence of God, the memory and *understanding* directed to him, and the *will* in a constant endeavor to love and please him ... exterior modesty can never be preserved without the interior.”⁵³ For both Louise and Elizabeth the Presence of God was the animating force for human life as well as the ennobling inspiration that transforms humans into the noblest embodied beings.

It is well known that Elizabeth had a special devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, which evolved into her appreciation of the Body of Christ as the Presence of God in the universe. We can find the best example of it in her quotation from an homily of Saint Augustine in the Octave of Corpus Christi: “O *Sacrament of GOODNESS*, O *SIGN of UNITY*, O *bond of Charity*, whereby whoever desires to live may find life, and become incorporated as a member of the divine body of Christ—but be not a withered member worthy of flames, or a deformed one to dishonor it, but be united and joined with it by beauty and proportion living in God, and of God—united now on earth to reign with him in heaven.”⁵⁴ The Body of Christ present in the Holy Eucharist is not only the holy of holies on this earth, but the focus

52 Document 13.4, “Life of Louise de Marillac (continued) [Book five. Chapter 4] Thoughts of Made. Le Gras, on Vocation of Sisters of Charity [1 On the esteem of this vocation.],” *CW*, 3b:387.

53 Document 13.4, “Life of Louise de Marillac (continued) [Book five. Chapter 4] Thoughts of Made. Le Gras, on Vocation of Sisters of Charity [1 On the esteem of this vocation.],” *CW*, 3b:390.

54 Document 10.5, “Gospel of Matthew Notebook. St. Chrysostom,” *CW*, 3a:541. Footnote 50 notes that this is from Monday in the Octave of Corpus Christi, from a Homily of Augustine, Treatise 26 on John.

of the divine presence in the midst of human community. Jesus' indwelling in us moderates our passions, "heals our maladies, closes our wounds," and renews in us the "royal image which God imprinted on us."⁵⁵

C. *The Ecological Meaning of the Presence of God for Humanity*

To enhance the ecological meaning of Elizabeth's vision of the divine presence in the midst of humanity, I will introduce contemporary theologian Sallie McFague. Her book *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* deals with all things from one lens, i.e., the model of the universe/world as God's Body and with her attempts to interpret the relationship between God and the world from a Christian viewpoint of contemporary science.⁵⁶

According to McFague, God is the breath and spirit that gives life to the billions of different bodies that make up God's body. In a word, God is the source, power, and goal of everything that is. McFague is searching for a new shape for humanity, a way of being in the world in keeping with who we are in the ecological, theological and Christian circle. Since all living beings have bodies that occupy and need space, space is a leveling, democratic notion that places human beings on par with all other life-forms, united with one another through complex networks of interrelationship and interdependence.⁵⁷ Therefore, space highlights the relationship between ecological and justice issues; in a theology of embodiment, space is the central category, for all beings require space, their habitat. McFague comments that Christian theologies and works of spirituality have not encouraged meditation on the beauty, preciousness, and vulnerability of the earth and its many creatures. However, as we have seen in the writings of Elizabeth Ann Seton, there are many examples of the close connections between humanity and the natural environment including her sensitive appreciation of its beauty.⁵⁸

McFague emphasizes that the earth is the body of God, which is not separate from God but the visible reality of the invisible God.⁵⁹ Therefore, we have a mandate to love Earth. We have seen how Elizabeth repeatedly stated that all creatures are the image and mirror of God, and we are the ministers of God's providence in restoring the beauty and harmony of all creatures. McFague argues that we humans have a peculiar role in this unfinished dynamic

55 Document 10.5, "Gospel of Matthew Notebook. St. Chrysostom," *CW*, 3a:541–42.

56 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), vi–ix.

57 McFague, *The Body of God*, 99–100.

58 The integral ecology presented by Pope Francis supports these connections. Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis *On Care for Our Common Home*, 24 May 2015, #139.

59 Quoting Exodus 33:20–23, McFague describes that God allowed Moses a glimpse of the divine body, not the face, but the back (*The Body of God*, 131). All bodies are the backside of divine glory and reflections of God. The creation is not identified or confused with God, yet it is the place where God is present to us (134).



Sallie McFague (1933–2019).

Vanderbilt University publicity photo taken in 1975.

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universe, as both partners in creation and self-conscious reflexive parts of creation.⁶⁰ In the end, we are not the center of things, but responsible for the universe's well-being. However, at the same time we are vulnerable citizens of this planet Earth because we cannot subsist without plants and animals:

The common creation story is more than a scientific affair; it is, implicitly, deeply moral, for it calls for a kind of praxis in which we see ourselves in proportion, in harmony, and in a fitting manner relating to all others that live and all the systems that support life.⁶¹

Therefore, our ecological sin is that we do not feel we belong to earth or accept our proper place within it.⁶² Our unwillingness to stay in our place, to accept our proper limits so that other individuals of our species as well as other species can also have needed space, is the main cause of the ecological destruction of our planet. We humans need humility, recognizing our proper, realistic place in the scheme of things. We need to change ourselves by cultivating wonder, finding awe and amazement in the life of diverse creatures. In the same way and with wonder, Elizabeth observed the sun, the moon, the flowers of the spring, and the mystery of mountains.

McFague asks: “What does Christian faith, especially the story of Jesus, have to offer in terms of a distinctive perspective of embodiment? The distinctive character of Christian embodiment is its focus on oppressed, vulnerable, suffering bodies, those who are in pain

60 McFague, *The Body of God*, 102–105.

61 McFague, *The Body of God*, 111.

62 McFague, *The Body of God*, 112–20.

due to the indifference or greed of the more powerful. In an ecological age, this ought to include oppressed nonhuman animals and the earth itself.”⁶³ Our natural world is now poor; thus it is our mandate to recover the intrinsic values of natural bodies and to promote healing by reconciliation between human beings and the natural world. Similarly, we will see how Elizabeth Ann Seton has developed this solidarity between nature and humanity.

III. The Presence of God in Death and Suffering

Elizabeth knew that death and suffering are essential parts of life. She regarded death as the time of harvest when the divine presence is most vividly experienced.⁶⁴ Perceiving suffering and death as the common lot connecting all living bodies in the material world, Elizabeth described this reality as a blessed one that strips us from the self by linking us to the “blessed chain of suffering”:

Hasten, Hasten happy moment time I bid thee
 fly awake me to Eternity and bid this body Die
 Jesus infinite goodness
 Link by link the blessed chain
 One *Body* in Christ – he the head, we the members
 One *Spirit* diffused thro[sic] the holy ghost in us all ...
 Who can resist, all self must be killed and destroyed by this artillery of love

 ... O my Soul be fastened link by link strong as *death*
 he wills us to enter in the way of suffering, and we desire to enter
 in action—We desire to give rather than to receive—
 and do not purely seek *his* WILL.⁶⁵

Elizabeth was convinced that we learn to seek God’s will only through the way of suffering and receptivity, which overcomes our resistance to the grace or the Presence of God. She had to learn this truth through her own experience of loss, sorrow, and patient waiting.

A. *The Presence of God in Death and Suffering: Elizabeth’s Reflections*

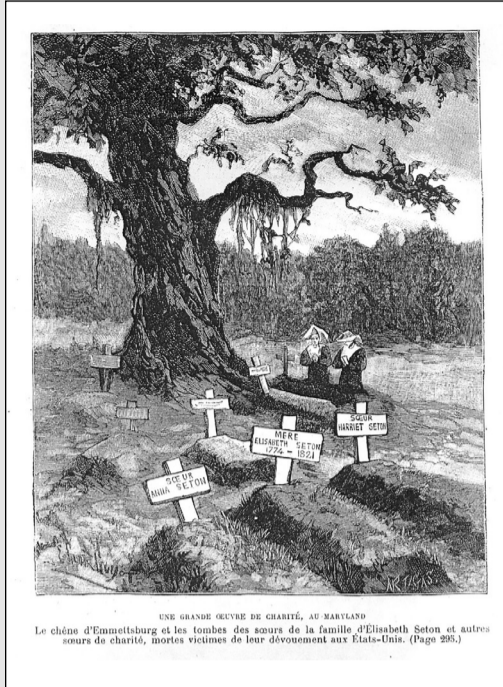
Elizabeth experienced deep desolation on the loss of her beloved ones. Looking at the graves of her daughters and sisters-in-law in the community cemetery on 9 May 1814, Elizabeth expressed the dark reality of death:

My Nina[Anna Maria Seton]—the morning is beautiful, the sky is serene the

63 McFague, *The Body of God*, 163–65.

64 Document 9.20, “Exercise of the *Presence of God*. Considerations—or—Heads of Meditations on Death,” *CW*, 3a:417.

65 Document 11.57, “Prayerbook Inscription,” n.d., *CW*, 3b:108–109.



Engraving, dated 1893, titled “A Great Charity, in Maryland.”

The text reads: “The Emmitsburg oak tree and the graves of the family of Elizabeth Seton and other Sisters of Charity, who died as victims of their devotion to the United States.”

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

sun shining, the birds warbling their sweet notes and my Nina lies cold in the *little* solitary woods—she sees no beautiful sky, she sees no sun shine, she hears none of the sweet notes of the little birds around her—no oh no my Nina lies cold and stiff in the silence of the grave—Cecilia—and our dear Maddelene [Harriet Seton] the same all thru cold and stiff their faces pale, their eyes close in the shades, of death ... My Nina hears it not, my Maddelene hears it not my Cecil hears it not, all is silent to them—and shall we see you again?—if you do with Jesus live remember those you loved so well, who shed so many tears for you—oh pray for us, dearest ones, pray for us.⁶⁶

Here Elizabeth confessed loneliness and longing for her deceased loved ones as any of us might. In this honest reflection, Elizabeth’s faith seems quite ordinary. Yet the beauty of her spirituality is that while she felt and dared to express the deepest human feelings, at the same time she knew how to fly above them and transform them by welcoming God’s presence in each moment:

All nature speaks to us of heaven – the delight of the morning – a flower of the field.

...we are ashamed to speak of our sacrifices but our Jesus accepts even the least We are to sanctify ourselves in our happy possession, to remove all obstacles to grace when he calls ...

... O and for heaven where Jesus will be himself our happiness – our praise our all – Dead in Christ –hidden in Him.⁶⁷

66 Document 9.12, “Miscellaneous Meditations from 1811–12,” 9 May 1814, *CW*, 3a:311–12.

67 Document 9.7, “Our Sister departed.” *CW*, 3a:250.

By capitalizing “Death” in her writings, Elizabeth may have been emphasizing the importance of death in our life. Elizabeth also taught that both life and death are connected, as seen in the prayer which she wrote for the First Communion class at St. Joseph’s Academy in Emmitsburg: “My Saviour, My Jesus, I come at last to my happy days of preparation, to the sweet call so long desired to make ready for my first Communion, to receive *thee my own Saviour*, to begin my dear union here with thee which I hope to carry on so happily through *life, Death, and Eternity*.”⁶⁸ In this prayer to Jesus, life, death, and eternity flow as a natural continuum.

Similarly we read Elizabeth’s reflections on death in her meditations for the Christmas season. The mystery of incarnation contains the crucifixion and the resurrection, and so the joy of Christmas is linked with the death of Jesus: “Sufferings are the ties, the bands which fasten and unite us to our dearest child of the cross! Child of Calvery! [*sic*]”⁶⁹ It is no surprise then that Annina, the first daughter of Elizabeth Seton who died on 12 March 1812, wrote the following poem on her sick bed on Christmas 1811:

Haste O Christians to the Manger
Come Behold your Infant Lord
Angels call you with the Shepherds
-our Sovereign Love is there adored

View his sacred hands and feet
Now an Infants, lovely, sweet,
The Iron nails – so soon will tear
Can you *now* refuse a tear?...

Oh Mother! In whose sweet embrace
Lies our Blessed Lord of Love and grace
Oh! Hear our prayers *our Mother dear* ...
Obtain that in his sweet embrace
We may meet Death with joy and Grace
And when admitted to his sight
Enjoy that day which knows no night.⁷⁰

Annina’s poem reflects her mother’s thoughts combining Christmas and the Cross,

68 Document 9.10, “First Communion,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:264. In 1810, Elizabeth began St. Joseph’s Academy and Free School in Emmitsburg for the girls from the local area as well as boarders from New York and Philadelphia (n. 1).

69 Document 9.12, “Miscellaneous Meditations from 1811–12,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:307.

70 Document 9.12, “Miscellaneous Meditations from 1811–12,” n.d., *CW*, 3a:307–09.

life and death in a continuous progress of life just as Elizabeth's prayers reflect the same tone: "You are my Saviour I will trust you in life and in Death,"⁷¹ "Lord make me Faithful in life and in Death,"⁷² "say with holy Job in full Confidence tho' you should Kill me yet I will trust in you,"⁷³ and "my God leave me not in life or in Death."⁷⁴

From her awareness that life and death are parts of the whole, Elizabeth developed a striking phrase, "bitter peace," to describe something we humans are capable of experiencing on this earth. This phrase appears in Elizabeth's meditation during Advent and Christmastide as Jesus's coming into the world allows us to enjoy peace even in our misery and most bitter moments of life:

O! Adorable Infant my Saviour, for thou camest [*sic*] to save, and to be saved is the only peace of our present bitterness, to wait, for Eternal joys, the blessedness, and the light of thy countenance is enough, the hope and desire of them, make us cherish in peace our *very* bitterness,....all the days of that whole Eternal we begin even now, these first present days of trial in grace, and the glorious future *ones* – oh! Here below we can enjoy our peace "but in bitterness, *most bitter*" the feelings of our misery, and the misery of others, often overpower bitterness; the temporal distresses and renting of hearts tear poor nature incessantly, and relief enough, but thy will and thy peace -...O! Mother of sorrows, ever so, and even that ninth mon[th] through such anticipations, a Mother of sorrow but the Model of our own bitter "peace"⁻⁷⁵

This description of "bitter peace" is new to us, but since it depicts many experiences of our present life, it offers us comfort and courage to move forward. Because of the happy sense of the divine presence dwelling in each one of us as a consuming fire, we can withdraw from all created things and rest in God, resigning all to adorable providence.⁷⁶ The most powerful weapon is the "joy of our heart in the presence of God, for by this we carry our paradise with us where ever [*sic*] we go, and rise above the clouds and illusions of our passions."⁷⁷ Moreover, Elizabeth gave us wise advice, "To let our faults humble us without being either astonished or troubled at them."⁷⁸ We must persevere "even *unto Death* not

71 Document 9.19, "[Meditations for the days of the Christmas season]," 1817, *CW*, 3a:383.

72 Document 9.19, "[Meditations for the days of the Christmas season]," *CW*, 3a:383.

73 Document 9.19, "[Meditations for the days of the Christmas season]," *CW*, 3a:386.

74 Document 9.19, "[Meditations for the days of the Christmas season]," *CW*, 3a:387.

75 Document 9.18, "Advent and Christmas Meditations," n.d., *CW*, 3a:352–53.

76 Document 9.20, "Exercise of the *Presence of God*," *CW*, 3a:395–99.

77 Document 9.20, "Exercise of the *Presence of God*," *CW*, 3a:401.

78 Document 10.1, "St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi Notebook," n.d., *CW*, 3a:433.

relaxing through temptations and sufferings but pushing on through all trials, like the thirsty *deer*, stop at nothing till it gets to its fountain.”⁷⁹

B. The Presence of God in Death and Suffering: Elizabeth’s Translations

In Elizabeth’s selected translation of *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, we encounter a few occasions that manifest Vincent’s acceptance and even welcome of suffering and death as times of grace. First, Vincent knew the value of poverty willingly practiced among religious: “Poverty is the bond of our community—the tie which holds us from the things of the earth and fastens us to God.”⁸⁰ Vincent assured his companions that poverty makes us turn to God, and that a grace is hidden under it, saying, “The company will never be lost by its Poverty, but I much fear if poverty was wanting in it it would soon cease to subsist.”⁸¹ When one priest told Vincent, “You supply the want of others but never look at home,” Vincent replied, “God has given me grace to abandon them [his relatives] to his Providence.”⁸²

The most difficult losses Vincent suffered were the death of his missionaries by disease or martyrdom in foreign countries, but he remarked to a person near him, “They must die, but my heart is at peace—yet sometimes I fear it may be my sins which is the cause, but even in that the good pleasure of God must be acknowledged and I must accept it with my whole heart.”⁸³ Vincent said to his community that “the infirmary [*sic*] is the place of trial for *all*.”⁸⁴ Elizabeth added emphasis on “all,” expressing her agreement that suffering is the common lot for every human being. She fully agreed with Vincent that “affliction and infirmities we know come from God and are all in order of his Providence and in what ever [*sic*] way they happen are always for our good and Salvation ... —yes, suffering is a true happiness and sanctifies the Soul.”⁸⁵

It is noteworthy that Elizabeth chose to translate a few short biographies of the Daughters of Charity as well as two other saints who nursed orphans and the sick. The first biography is the “Life of Sister Françoise Bony” (1684–1759), whom the superior general sent to the royal hospital Saint-Germain-en-Laye and who worked with the poor seniors there for forty years: “The Royal Hospital of this place was in a state of utter neglect and ruin, many zealous persons wished to see it restored to its former state, but no one came forward

79 Document 9.20, “Exercise of the *Presence of God*,” *CW*, 3a:423.

80 Document 13.1, “Life of St. Vincent de Paul,” *CW*, 3b:234.

81 Document 13.1, “Life of St. Vincent de Paul,” *CW*, 3b:235.

82 Document 13.1, “Life of St. Vincent de Paul,” *CW*, 3b:234, 240.

83 Document 13.1, “Life of St. Vincent de Paul,” *CW*, 3b:247.

84 Document 13.1, “Life of St. Vincent de Paul,” *CW*, 3b:250.

85 Document 13.1, “Life of St. Vincent de Paul,” *CW*, 3b:251.

for so difficult a work although many aged persons men and women bent under the weight of years and affliction perished there for want of help.”⁸⁶ Elizabeth saw the hidden energy of this amazing woman in Sister Bony’s practice of the divine presence: “An admirable effect of her Faith also was so intimate a practice of the Presence of God ... - calm and Peace accompanied her greatest pains and labours because *God reigned* in her heart, for we know if the greatest bitterness is poured in a heart that loves God, he will still counterbalance it with ineffable sweetness.”⁸⁷

Another story Elizabeth translated dealt with the dedicated life of three Daughters of Charity at Brienne during the French Revolution. When the city of Brienne was under siege on 29 January 1814, the attack was centered on the hospital where the three sisters were serving wounded soldiers. As the situation of the town grew hopeless, and the superior of the sisters was entreated to retire, she firmly refused: “No, I am at my post, and here let me die God will ask me in my accounting day what I was doing at the Siege of Brienne.” With her, two young sisters also declared their resolution to remain faithful to their charge.⁸⁸ The three sisters died as martyrs of charity along with four hundred sick people.

In addition, Elizabeth translated two more short biographies, one of Saint Jerome Emiliani and the other, Saint Carmillius de Lellus. Born in Venice, Saint Jerome suffered greatly as a prisoner when the Citadel of Castro was taken by the enemy. Later returning to Venice, he devoted himself entirely to poor, orphaned children who wandered through the city in a deplorable condition, and found houses for them in various cities until he was felled by the plagues in 1537.

Saint Camillius de Lellis was born in a little town in the Kingdom of Naples. Although initially he embraced the military, in 1574 he renounced it. Eventually, he went to Rome, where he served the sick in the Hospital of Saint James with such uncommon prudence and regularity that later he became the director of the hospital. He formed a religious congregation, the Regulars for the Service of the Sick and Agonizing, inspiring them to teach the sick “to accept Death in the Spirit of Sacrifice and expiation of sin ... and to put themselves in a right disposition for Death.”⁸⁹ After giving a moving discourse on the love of God and of the Poor, Saint Camillis died in 1614. Clearly Elizabeth translated these biographies because she saw in them individuals in the Presence of God who dedicated themselves to the poor and sick.

86 Document 13.5, “Life of Sister [Françoise] Bonny [Bony],” n.d., *CW*, 3b:402. Elizabeth finished the translation of *Life of Louise de Marillac* on 17 September 1818 and finished “Life of Sister Bony” on September 29. In other words, it took about twelve days for Elizabeth to translate this.

87 Document 13.5, “Life of Sister [Françoise] Bonny [Bony],” *CW*, 3b:408.

88 Document 13.13, “Daughters of Charity at Brienne,” n.d., *CW*, 3b:467. The three sisters were Sister Antoinette Sirot, Sister Suzanne Tournier, and Sister Josephine-Marie Sabatine Lasalle.

89 Document 13.15, “St. Camillius de Lellis,” n.d., *CW*, 3b:471–72.



Marie Guyart, better known as Marie of the Incarnation (1599–1672).

Mère Sainte-Ursule after Enrico Bottoni, 1890.

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The most intriguing part of Elizabeth’s translations is the “Historical Letters of Venerable Marie of the Incarnation,” an Ursuline missionary from France to Québec (then known as New France) in the early seventeenth century. Elizabeth selected passages from the introduction and specific letters written during 1639–1672. Interested in the work of early missionaries to Canada, Elizabeth expressed admiration for their zeal and self-sacrifice. The widow Marie Guyart (1599–1672) was born in Tours, France, married a silk manufacturer and bore a son to whom she wrote six letters. After Marie was widowed, she entered the Sisters of Saint Ursula, taking the name Sister Marie of the Incarnation. In 1639 she led the first group of women religious to New France where they established the oldest convent in North America.

In the early days of her arrival, Marie of the Incarnation wrote to a friend, “After all our dangers we are safe arrived in the New Paradise [New France] where the cross is truly the tree of life.”⁹⁰ To her son, who also became a priest, Marie of the Incarnation told many stories of courageous martyrdom of both the missionaries and the Christian natives. Marie of the Incarnation introduced an amazing prayer of one of the converted Iroquois chiefs asking for the constant Presence of God:

This man had been the terror of his nation by his strength and ferocity before his conversion, but after it he had so tender a conscience that he called himself to account for the least impatience and his pleasure in understanding that God is with us wherever we go was inexpressible—if he went out in his canoe for

90 Document 13.6, “From Historical Letters of Venerable Marie of the Incarnation,” n.d., *CW*, 3b:415.

fishing he would as if speaking to someone present “come great *Captain Jesus* bring me success, but do as you please with me if you choose I should work in vain”—or going to the chase [hunting] he would make the same Invocation, “My great Captain Jesus do go with me and when I am faint and weary stay by me, if I meet plenty of deer I will bless you, or if they escape me I will bless you, do as you please with me my great Captain Jesus, only stay with me and keep me from sin” these people speak their mind aloud in this way with a simplicity so sincere that it extends to all occasions.⁹¹

On the feast of the Presentation, 2 February 1819, Elizabeth Ann Seton finished the translation of these letters and wrote her own reflection: “How great then the grace of being called to Instruct such blind souls ... Come and share their cross courageously you will find whole bands of little souls gathered under it, who like thirty plants in a barren ground wait for a hand to cherish and foster them —“⁹² The very fact that Elizabeth chose to translate these letters full of missionary activity and stories of martyrdom in the beginning of the Canadian Church tell us that missionary zeal was burning in her heart. She wanted her sisters to enlarge their vision to the whole world.⁹³

C. The Ecological Meaning of the Presence of God in Death and Suffering

In her *Quest for the Living God*, Elizabeth A. Johnson wrote that the history of life itself is dependent on death, for without it, there would be no evolutionary development from generation to generation.⁹⁴ She also pointed out that the natural world is not only beautiful in its harmonies, but it also presents us with an unrelentingly harsh and bloody picture of predation, filled with suffering and death. The pattern of cross and resurrection is rediscovered on a cosmic scale. As Johnson states:

Now that we realize that the world is becoming, that genuinely new things come into being by evolution and other processes, fresh ideas of divine presence and agency are needed. To date these have centered on the Spirit of God, called the Creator Spirit in the great medieval hymn *Veni, Creator Spiritus*.

91 Document 13.6, “From Historical Letters of Venerable Marie of the Incarnation,” *CW*, 3b:435–36. This is a part of the letter Marie addressed to her son Claude Martin.

92 Document 13.6, “From Historical Letters of Venerable Marie of the Incarnation,” *CW*, 3b:437–38.

93 Elizabeth also translated “Extract from St. Vincent’s Life” which portrays the miserable life of the Christian slaves in the Muslim area of Barbary (North African Mediterranean coastal area where the Turks dominated in the seventeenth century). It also presents a few stories of brave martyrdom.

94 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 2007), 189.

As it integrates the revelatory experience of a personal God into an expansive cosmological setting, ecological theology, replete in its fullest measure with social justice and eco-feminist insights, is mapping yet another new frontier.⁹⁵

It seems that our contemporary understanding that the natural world is the dwelling place of the Spirit of God, that everything abides in God and that matter bears the mark of the sacred were also natural insights of Elizabeth Ann Seton. As we have seen in her *Pyamingo Reflections*, Elizabeth confessed that “the Majesty of his presence consecrates every part of the universe and wherever I am, I may say with Jacob ‘This place is Holy’ and I knew it not.”⁹⁶

Johnson also contends understanding of the holy mysteries—namely, as matters that challenge ordinary reason and as plural, provisional and verbal statements of doctrine—is too limited and should be replaced by only one mystery of God. Johnson states:

This one holy mystery is the ineffable God who while remaining eternally a plenitude—infinite, incomprehensible, inexpressible—wishes to self-communicate to the world, and does so in the historically tangible person of Jesus Christ in the grace of the Spirit so as to become the blessedness of every person and of the universe itself.⁹⁷

Transcendence as God’s otherness and immanence as God’s intimate and faithful nearness can be integrated in the intuition of God’s presence and action as God’s preferential option for the poor.⁹⁸ Johnson continues, saying “Precisely in this partiality is the goodness of divine love revealed to be truly universal, because it includes the nonpersons whom the powerful and wealthy thought did not count... God is a liberating God whose signature deeds set people free.”⁹⁹ In addition Johnson includes the entire natural world as the new poor and asks for a vision in which the entire community of life should be viewed as our neighbor, a community of love.¹⁰⁰

Elizabeth Johnson’s appeal for one holy mystery of God is naturally met in Elizabeth Seton’s vision of creation in her reflection on Isaiah chapter one: “Hear O ye heavens—the whole firmament an immense ear of the creation to receive the voice of its afflicted and

95 Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 187.

96 Document 8.26, “Pyamingo Reflections,” *CW*, 3a:189.

97 Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 43. For this understanding of God as the only true mystery, Elizabeth Johnson quotes Karl Rahner as the contemporary theologian who found the provisional concept of plural mysteries as an astonishingly limited notion of mystery.

98 Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 73–81.

99 Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 74.

100 Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 197–198.



Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ.

2014 photo by Macey Foronda, published in “Feminism In Faith: Sister Elizabeth Johnson’s Challenge to the Vatican,” at www.womensordinationcampaign.org.

despised Lord. The ox and ass called to witness for him.”¹⁰¹ Also Elizabeth Seton quoted from Saint Chrysostom that “this holy Sacrament adorns the whole UNIVERSE, the BLOOD of CHRIST contained in it has redeemed and beautifies us.”¹⁰² Both Elizabeth Seton and Elizabeth Johnson conclude that in the life and death of Jesus Christ the whole universe is in the process of transformation.

In the first line of her Good Friday meditation, Elizabeth Seton wrote, “<Tomorrow> the good Friday of Death and Life!” signifying that death and life always walk together not only in Jesus’ life but also in all life of humanity and creation. The death of Jesus is clearly described as a cosmic event where all creation participated:

I stand upon Mount Calvary—my Saviour is there hanging on the cross these three hours of his suspension, between heaven and Earth.—the deepest darkness surrounds ...

... a voice from the height of the Cross! The Voice of my Saviour through this darkness strong—awful—loud. Spoken to the Father in the highest, and to resound to the remotest extremities of time and space, “*All is consummated*” ...

... he breathes his last with a powerful cry—Nature is convulsed – the

101 Document 11.53, “Elizabeth Seton’s Two Bibles. The Vincennes Bible Old Testament,” n.d., *CW*, 3b:105.

102 Document 10.5, “Gospel of Matthew Notebook. St. Chrysostom,” *CW*, 3a:543. The editors add that this is from a sermon of John Chrysostom, Homily 60 on Monday in the Octave of Corpus Christi (n. 49).

horrid crash of rocks and opening monuments resound—JESUS EXPIRES¹⁰³

Just as the death of Jesus was not final, the death of individual human beings as well as the death of all living creatures will be transformed into the life of eternity. Elizabeth Seton wrote the following vision of eternity:

The accidents of life separate us from our dearest friends; but let us not despond. God is like a looking-glass in which souls see each other. The more we are united to Him by love, the nearer we are to those who belong to Him. Jesus Christ encompasses all places and all his members centre [sic] in Him; we need but prostrate at His feet to find them. They may be hidden from the eyes of our body, but not from the eyes of our soul and of Faith. Death which breaks off all human ties, strengthens the union of the children of God. If time separates them, Eternity will unite them.¹⁰⁴

Jesus Christ is the center of all creation uniting all individual creatures into one. We share in His suffering and death and also enjoy His freedom and eternity, deeply experiencing the “joy of our heart in the presence of God.”¹⁰⁵ Finally, we should listen to Elizabeth Seton’s advice to focus on this high mystery of our eternal union instead of focusing upon our suffering itself:

In receiving his Cross we are not to look at what it is made of, that is on the nature of our sufferings, *it* being a mystery[.] we are to look only at the interior virtue not the exterior form, eternal life is hidden under it, and when it comes in the shape of poverty, it conceals eternal treasures, in that of shame or reproach it is the glory of God, under the form of its afflictions carries eternal Consolations ... for Patience would be but a small matter to bring there, our Lord it is true is content with our docility and resignation, but to this high mystery of our eternal union with him. We should bring the burning fire of love and gratitude.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

We have seen how Elizabeth Ann Seton perceived the Presence of God as the animating source of light and beauty of the whole universe in the perspective of Hildegard of Bingen’s *viriditas*, the greening power of God. The Presence of God in human beings

103 Document 11.21, “The good Friday...” n.d., *CW*, 3b:37–38.

104 Document 11.29, “Union in God,” n.d., *CW*, 3b:42.

105 Document 9.20, “Exercise of the Presence of God,” *CW*, 3a:401.

106 Document 9.20, “Exercise of the *Presence of God*. Of the Communion of the *Cross*,” *CW*, 3a:421. The editors point out that “several ideas expressed in this meditation are similar to those found in the *Imitation of Christ*, one of Elizabeth’s most cherished devotional books” (n. 65).

carries a unique dimension because of human consciousness and freedom. Sallie McFague's ecological vision that we should begin with our planetary citizenship and see ourselves in proportion and in harmony to all others that live, helps us to appreciate Elizabeth Seton's respect for nature and her emphasis on moderation. McFague's ecological humility that accepts our proper realistic place is well attested to in Elizabeth Seton's understanding of human beings as the ministers of God's Providence.

Both McFague's and Johnson's emphasis on the distinctive character of a Christian focus on oppressed, vulnerable, and suffering bodies is manifested in Elizabeth Seton's understanding of the Presence of God in death and suffering. God is present in death as much as in life, for death and life are two sides of the continuation of life. Suffering is a mystery that humbles and unites both humans and non-human living beings of the earth. In her selection of translations Elizabeth Seton witnessed God's partiality toward the poor and those who work and die for the oppressed.

In short, the ecological meaning of the Presence of God for Elizabeth Ann Seton is three-fold: first, the Presence of God is the Life of all living beings as the Holy Spirit; second, the Presence of God is the center of all creatures that connects and unites them as the Body of Christ; and third, the Presence of God is the transforming mystery which bestows meaning to death and suffering as an essential part of life, both human and non-human. Only through suffering and death is all life transformed in taking on the character of the Sacrament, the visible symbol of the invisible God.