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# Elizabeth Seton: A Spirituality for Mission

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# Elizabeth Seton: A Spirituality for Mission

BY  
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## Introduction

This conference is intended to enter into a dialogue between Elizabeth and ourselves, between her time and ours, and it seems to me that there are four levels at which we can do so. At the first level we learn the facts, we know something about her life, her world. We can tell about particular events and quote various sayings of hers. We have visited Emmitsburg, perhaps, and have seen the historic settings and the artifacts that give us some sense of her times. During the sessions of this Legacy program, we will learn many things about Elizabeth that we have forgotten or have never known before. We will, perhaps, know more about her than we did before.

The second level calls us to move somewhat deeper, to relate to the life of Elizabeth in a more empathetic way. We weep with her as we reflect on some of the dark and heavy moments of her life. Who, unmoved, can read her own accounts of the distraught and depressed days which followed upon the deaths of her beloved William and her uniquely loved Annina? Or, we are struck by Elizabeth's sense of fun and find that she can make us laugh with her reflections on the humorous aspects of people and events in her life. We smile knowingly, perhaps, as she relates her struggles as woman, wife, mother, widow, and foundress.

As we begin to interpret something of the meaning of Elizabeth Seton's life for us, we move to yet another level of understanding. We are interested in knowing the books she read and how they shaped her thought, the people who influenced her and how, the signs of her times that affected her and were affected by her. We conjecture about the meaning of this or that journal entry or what the implications might be of a reference in a letter.

Building on the three previous levels, the fourth level of reflection raises the most important question: "So what?" This is the stage of our knowing that asks us what difference it makes to us that Elizabeth

Seton lived, that we are her heirs, that we belong to this great tradition of Charity with her as our particular exemplar and guide.

The conference called the Seton Legacy engages us at all four levels of reflection. The one, however, that will alone ensure that this meeting will not end for us with the final presentation is this "so what?" level. As we move through the various topics on the program, it is essential that we understand them not as five independent themes, but rather as five interrelated perspectives on Elizabeth Seton. Dissection is helpful only for theoretical analysis. To experience the whole, one has to meet a living being. For this conference to meet its goal, it will not be enough that we know about Elizabeth Seton, but that we come to know the person, Elizabeth, in ways which move us in our lives. When Elizabeth lives for us, this is when it is likely that we will find her life addressing our own. It is for this reason that we reflect on Elizabeth Seton's "spirituality for mission." Can this nineteenth-century woman be our mentor and guide as we try to develop an understanding of this topic in a way that is congruent with contemporary insights?

### **Spirituality and Mission**

The title of this session includes three rather vast topics: Elizabeth, spirituality, and mission. The presentations that preceded this one have told us much about Elizabeth the woman, in the social, historical, and ecclesial settings in which she lived. Later we will hear more about Elizabeth's relationships and how suffering and hope are recurrent themes in the drama of her life. This presentation seeks to consider Elizabeth Seton's spirituality and how that spirituality formed her for mission. To do this within the scope of our time and the nature of this conference, it will be necessary to delimit the treatment of each of these concerns and to focus our discussion rather particularly on certain aspects of Elizabeth Seton's life.

This topic is not one that we can develop simply from Elizabeth's writings. The concern about mission, for example, is reflective more of our times than of hers. It is not a theme that she would have been likely to consider, let alone write about. It is chiefly since the Second Vatican Council, after all, that we have realized that "mission" is not something that one can merely take for granted, but rather a concept that requires and deserves a good deal of probing. Our contemporary understanding that the Church does not merely have a mission but is

mission has spawned much deep and rich reflection.

The second word in this title, "spirituality," while certainly connoting something that Elizabeth strove to develop her whole life long, will still not be found in her writings as something discussed theoretically. No, in reading Elizabeth's journals and letters we find ourselves to be more like witnesses as we watch unfold the remarkable life that not only led her to God but which was filled with God. It is Elizabeth's life, in fact, that might raise the question of how appropriate it is to speak of spirituality in the way we are doing here. Although it is quite common in our times to speak of spirituality as modified by some word such as "mission" or "lay" or in some other way, still it is important to say right at the outset that there are problems with this approach. Spirituality, in its deepest sense, is not like a dress or a suit that is tailored for particular occasions: an evening dress, a party dress, a wedding dress, a business dress, a housedress. Rather, we must remember as we go, that spirituality is holistic, an integrating dynamic in one's life. This is particularly important when joining the word "mission" to the word "spirituality," since the former connotes outward moving action while the latter often connotes interiority and solitude.

In view of the other four topics of this conference, let us remember that Elizabeth Seton, a woman so authentically loving and relational, (and so authentically struggling with it all!), a woman who was so intensely and thoroughly involved with her world and her Church, a woman who lived the mystery of hope in such a remarkable way that it somehow seemed factually to be engendered by suffering more than it was a way of transcending suffering—let us remember that it is only within this totality of her being and doing that we can understand a little of her spirituality. It is only in this context that we can ask how her spirituality formed and energized her for mission.

Spirituality can be understood as the way one connects the everyday events of one's life and relates them to a larger meaning. It is the way and the gift of the human spirit, writes Carolyn Gratton, "to reach out beyond the concrete visible realities to invisible Mystery. In both the East and the West these attempts are called spiritualities—systems embodying a 'direction' or pattern for the life journeys of searching, questioning human persons."<sup>1</sup> For Christians, the foundational prin-

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<sup>1</sup>Carolyn Gratton, "Spiritual Direction From A Foundational Formative Point of View," *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 7, no. 2 (May 1986):194.

ciple of any such system is the person of Jesus Christ and the Spirit whom Jesus promised to send to teach us all that he had commanded (John 14:26). To live one's life in response to the promptings of this Indwelling Spirit is the most basic way of describing Christian spirituality.

It is here that we might also relate the two words in our title, spirituality and mission. If one puts on Christ in baptism, then it seems appropriate to conclude that one also puts on the mission of Christ. It is possible to conclude further, therefore, that Christian spirituality must always be for mission. Jesus promised to send the Spirit, and told us that he himself was sent by the Father. "As the Father has sent me," declared Jesus, "I also send you" (John 20:21). Christian spirituality must always have that about it which is diffusive, expansive, and outward moving toward others and toward the world.

Mission, this diffusive and outward movement, is implicated in the core message of Jesus, which is integral to our faith. Jesus taught us and we believe that God is love. What this means is that for Christians the mystery at the heart of the universe is not truth but love. Evelyn Underhill states it well, "God is Love . . . generous, out-flowing, self-giving love, *Agape*. When all the qualities which human thought attributes to Reality are set aside, this remains. . . . To enter the Divine order then, to achieve the full life for which we are made, means entering an existence which only has meaning as the channel and expression of an infinite, self-spending love."<sup>2</sup>

Bracketing all that one could say about mission and setting aside for a moment the extensive theological reflection and writing on this topic since the Second Vatican Council, I would like to pose these words of Underhill's for us as the operational definition of mission for this paper: "to enter an existence which only has meaning as the channel and expression of God's infinite and self-spending love."<sup>3</sup> What better way to define mission for those who embrace the tradition called charity? To channel God's infinite, self-spending love to every person and to express that love in one's way of being, thinking, and

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<sup>2</sup>Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity* (Harrisburg and Wilton: 1991), 10.

<sup>3</sup>An excellent summary of the evolution in the understanding and practice of mission during almost twenty centuries of Christian missionary history is given in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: 1991).

doing. This, it seems to me, is what it means to be in mission in the Charity tradition. In those who embrace this tradition, "the Divine Charity must be incarnate; take visible, tangible form."<sup>4</sup>

The opening article of the original rule for the Daughters of Charity, which Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget brought to the United States in 1811, clearly reflects this understanding of mission. "The principal end for which God has called and assembled the Sisters of Charity is to honor Jesus Christ Our Lord as the source and model of all Charity by rendering to him every temporal and spiritual service in their power in the persons of the poor either sick, invalid, children, prisoners, even the insane or others who through shame would conceal their necessities in some instance."<sup>5</sup>

### Elizabeth's Spiritual Journey

After reading the rule, Elizabeth wrote to Bishop Carroll, "I never had a thought discordant with them."<sup>6</sup> It would appear that Elizabeth did not "take on" the tradition of Charity but rather that she recognized herself within it. As a young married woman in 1787, Elizabeth had been one of the charter members of the Society for the Relief of Widows with Small Children. Ellin Kelly remarks, "Even as a young married woman, Elizabeth Seton fitted no stereotype; most appropriately she joined the vanguard of the female voluntary societies."<sup>7</sup> It would seem, however, that for Elizabeth the fourteen year journey between her membership in the Society and her observation about the rule suggests that we are looking at a deeper theme in her life than mere voluntarism.

From Elizabeth's recollections in her "Dear Remembrances," we note her remarkable awareness of God even at a very early age. "At four years of age—sitting alone on a step of the doorway looking at the clouds, while my little sister Catherine, two years old, lay in her coffin; they asked me did I not cry when little Kitty was dead. No, because Kitty is gone up to heaven. I wish I could go too with Mama."<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth recalls how, at age eight, she cried because some of her

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<sup>4</sup>Underhill, *School*, 45.

<sup>5</sup>Ellin M. Kelly, *Numerous Choirs: A Chronicle of Elizabeth Bayley Seton and Her Spiritual Daughters*, 1: *The Seton Years, 1774-1821* (Evansville: 1981), 243. Kelly includes the entire text of the original rule in the appendix to this volume.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

playmates had disturbed a nest of birds, and she feared they would destroy them. "Afterward," she writes, "always loved to walk and play alone. Admiration of the clouds. Delight to gaze at them; always with the look for my mother and little Kitty in heaven. Delight to sit alone by the water-side, wandering hours on the shore, singing and gathering shells. Every little leaf and flower, or insect, animal, shades of clouds, or waving trees: objects of vacant, unconnected thoughts of God and heaven. Pleasure in learning anything pious. Delight in being with old people."<sup>9</sup> At twelve years: "Home again at my father's. Pleasure in reading prayers. Love to nurse the children and sing little hymns over the cradle. A night passed in terror, saying all the while, 'Our Father.'"<sup>10</sup> Writing on 1 December 1803, in the midst of the Lazaretto experience, Elizabeth writes in her "Italian Journal" of an experience that had made a lasting impression:

In the year 1789, when my father was in England, one morning in May, with the lightness of a cheerful heart, 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 ones growing around 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 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 ever enthusiastic love of God and admiration of His works. Still I can feel every sensation that passed through my soul. I thought at that time my father did not care for me. Well, God was my Father, my all. I prayed, sang hymns and laughed, talking to myself of how far He could place me above all sorrow. Then I lay 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. Told cousin Joe to go home with his wood, not to mind me. Walked a mile, made another hearty prayer, then sang all the way home.<sup>11</sup>

In "Dear Remembrances" Elizabeth had also noted this experience. "Pleasure in everything, coarse, rough, smooth, or easy, always gay. Spring there. Joy in God that he was my Father. Insisting that He should not forsake me. My father away, perhaps dead; but God was my Father, and I quite independent of whatever might happen. De-

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 30.

light of sitting in the fields with Thomson, surrounded by lambs and sheep, or drinking the sap of the birch, or gathering colored stones on the shore."<sup>12</sup> Some might want to dismiss the earlier recollections of Elizabeth at ages four and eight as simply the ordinary way of a child who escapes the pain of what she does not understand by applying stories she has heard of "heaven." What confirms these memories as significant in understanding Elizabeth's spirituality, however, is that she recalls them in adulthood and sees them as related to her dispositions in her current situation. Still, we ought not to disregard too easily the signs of this early development of a religious capacity in Elizabeth.

Sophia Cavalletti, with an experience of over twenty-five years with catechesis of children and extensive study of the child's spiritual and religious capacities, offers us a perspective from which to look at these early recollections of Elizabeth's religious awareness.

The manifestations of serene and peaceful joy the children display in the meeting with the world of God lead us to maintain that the religious experience responds to a deep "hunger" in the child. The religious experience is fundamentally an experience of love, and for the human person, love is essential to life. Man is not satisfied with merely living, but living as one who is loved and loving. So we ask ourselves whether the child does not find the satisfaction of an existential need when he comes into contact with the religious reality, which will influence the harmonious formation of his personality and the lack of which will negatively affect the child's life. We would like to recall the words of Bultmann according to whom the religious act tends toward the "completion of being." A hunger such as this is more deeply felt and evident in the child, who is particularly rich in love and in need of love, as if there were a kind of connaturality between the child and God, who is Love.<sup>13</sup>

Elizabeth calls God "Father" because this is the name that she has learned from the adult Christians who nurtured her. Cavalletti thinks "that a vague theism cannot subsist, but that religiosity . . . necessarily tends to be configured in a determinate religion. . . . If we intend to talk about God we must use a language, and the language with which we speak of God takes the name of an actual religion."<sup>14</sup> These early intimations in Elizabeth of a relationship with God grew into a full

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Sophia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential Of The Child*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (New York and Ramsey: 1983), 22.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 28.



and rich intimacy which found expression in the language of Scripture, especially the psalms, and later in the sacraments and liturgy of the Catholic Church.

At eighteen we find Elizabeth at another stage of her spiritual development, with "passionate wishes that there were such places in America as I read of in novels, where people could be shut up from the world and pray, and be always good. Many thoughts of running away to such places over the sea, in disguise, working for a living. Astonished at people's care in dress, in the world, etc. Thousand reflections after being at public places why I could not say my prayers and have good thoughts as if I had been at home. Wishing to philosophize and give everything its place, not able though to do both."<sup>15</sup>

In this same passage, Elizabeth gives evidence of some kind of depression affecting her, and the "thoughts of running away" may be due more to that than to some desire actually to join a cloister. "Alas, alas, alas," she pines. "tears of blood! My God! horrid subversion of every good promise in the boldest presumption. God had created me. I was very miserable. He was too good to condemn a creature made of dust—driven by misery (this the wretched reasoning). Laudanum. The praise and thanks of excessive joy not to have done the horrid deed. The thousand promises of eternal gratitude."<sup>16</sup> Whatever the cause of these dark reflections, Elizabeth does not lose awareness of God present to her in the experience. "Confidence in God through all the varieties of our pains and trials," a sentiment from "Dear Remembrances," is one which we find repeated in many versions in Elizabeth's writing. From the Lazaretto she writes, "After breakfast, read our psalms and the thirty-fifth chapter of Isaiah to my William with so much delight that it made us all merry." A few days later: "With God for our portion, there is no prison in high walls and bolts, no sorrow in the soul though beset with present cares and gloomy prospects. For this freedom I can never be sufficiently thankful."<sup>17</sup>

We have these testimonies to Elizabeth's journey because of the transparency of spirit which allows her to write them down. She lets us know her, just as she let all those who loved her know her during her lifetime. If we are to understand anything of Elizabeth's spirituality "for mission," we must understand it in the context of her whole

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<sup>15</sup>Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, 37.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>*Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, ed. Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York and Mahwah: 1987) 116.

life. We have no "Amazon woman" here, no rugged individualist, achieving holiness in one clear upward path, untrammled by difficulties. Through her diaries, journals, and letters she lets us in on the difficult human struggle of it all as well as on the moments of integration and new resolve. Her spirituality seems to fit what Maria Harris describes as "our way of being in the world, in the light of being held, created, cherished and destined for the Mystery Who is called God."<sup>18</sup> It is only within this longitudinal view of Elizabeth's spiritual development that we can consider how she grew as a channel of God's infinite, self-spending love.

### Obstacles To A Spirituality For Mission

When Elizabeth said she had no thought discordant with the rule written for the Daughters of Charity in seventeenth-century France, she was speaking from a spirituality already mature, even though much was yet to be asked of her. To describe adequately how her spirituality shaped and prepared her for mission would require a work and time of much larger proportions than we are able to manage during this conference.<sup>19</sup> To make some approach to describing Elizabeth's "spirituality for mission," however, I have chosen a methodology that will allow me to do so in a more summary rather than a linear fashion.

The purpose of this conference is to create a dialogue between Elizabeth and ourselves, between her times and our own. It seems that especially for those in the Charity tradition, the alignment of mission and spirituality smacks of a perennial dilemma. To organize our approach to this topic of a spirituality for mission, then, I pose a question that comes from our times but which might well offer us insight into Elizabeth also. Keeping our definition of mission as "entering on an existence which becomes a channel for God's self-spending, infinite love," we might ask what it is that blocks us from entering such an existence. I will use this framework of "obstacles" or "blocks" as a way of organizing our search into Elizabeth's "spirituality for

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<sup>18</sup>Maria Harris, "Themes in Women's Spirituality," *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 11, no. 2 (May 1990):170.

<sup>19</sup>Two recent works that explore the development of Elizabeth Seton's spirituality are Joseph I. Dirvin, C. M., *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton: A Spiritual Portrait* (San Francisco: 1990), and Marie Celeste, S. C., *Elizabeth Ann Seton: A Self-Portrait. A Study of Her Spirituality In Her Own Words* (Libertyville: 1986).

mission." From Elizabeth's own accounts it seems clear that her spiritual journey was just that, a journey. As is our own, her journey was full of ups and downs, of hills and curves, of the planned and the unexpected. If Elizabeth developed a spirituality that enabled her to enter on an existence which became a channel of God's self-spending, infinite love, then she must have met many obstacles on the way. By seeing how she met and overcame these blocks, we can find, perhaps, one more way in which Elizabeth can be our mentor and guide.

There are, no doubt, many such obstacles that one might describe. The five I have chosen to examine are the following: (1) the ego or the false self; (2) Christian faith without a social context; (3) thinking that God's reign and my goals are synonymous; (4) seeing intense activity as hostile to authentic spirituality; (5) perceiving that using energy to deal with daily life with all its struggles, sorrows, "trivia," and joys is not worthy of one truly committed to mission.

### *The False Self*

Nothing will so effectively prevent one from being a channel of God's love as will the service of the ego, the false self. The false self is the center of a very small, simplistic world where it seeks attention and approval. By definition self-centered and self-serving, the ego or false self sees everything from the perspective of advantage to itself and sees everyone else as a potential competitor for esteem, for love, for control. The false self is given to "impressive" behavior and is always concerned about the effect it is having on others, whether it is achieving others' affirmation or disapproval. You might recognize some of these characteristics as descriptive of the behavior of infants and very young children. They are, and they are normal at these early stages of human development. But when the developing self gets stuck there, it becomes a false self. We cannot be free to lay down our lives for the love of God and others, if we are concerned only with self-preservation. If we are self-serving, we cannot be expressions of an infinite, self-spending love. Nor can we simply decide to give ourselves in loving service, as though it were merely a matter of will. We must first have a self before we can spend it.

No one learns this self-spending love overnight. The development of the true self is a lifetime project. It takes one's whole life, in every way of understanding that sentiment, and it was so for Elizabeth. As we trace her story as woman in the context of her world and her

Church, as we ponder her journals, diaries, and letters, what we are privy to is Elizabeth's journey to her true self. This journey is not made in one clear, unbroken, upward movement in solitude but on a path filled with people and events, sorrows and joys, just like ours.

To become a true person—this is the goal of authentic spirituality, and it is key to being the medium of the message of God's expansive love for others and for the world.<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth, like us, was not born a whole person, an authentic person, a holy person. She became so. In her we find a strong theme which Maria Harris calls "awakening," one found in every spiritual tradition.

Awakening is clear and obvious attending. It occurs as a person begins to notice her characteristic ways of being with, staying-in, resting and listening as preliminary to whatever comes next.

Often awakening is precipitated by a crisis. Things happen in or around us which shift the furnishing of our lives just enough to suggest a new pattern. Or, at other times and more dramatically, something completely reorients us in a new direction.<sup>21</sup>

"Attending" is not something done once and for all in life; "awakening" on the journey to the true self happens again and again. At each crisis or decision point, one is at a different stage of the journey and new lessons are learned. Still one does not go "back to zero" each time. Meeting the challenges of each stage brings one to greater clarity and freedom. Each new birth of the spirit requires a death to illusion.

### *No Social Context*

A second obstacle to a spirituality for mission is to have a Christian faith that has no social context. By this I mean reducing faith to mere piety and to a relationship with God that is seen to be quite enough if I find it personally comforting and satisfying. This kind of faith is fragile and in need of protection and seeks only comfort and assurance in prayer, in the reading of Scripture, and in the sacraments. It feels a satisfaction in fulfilling what it perceives as its "religious

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<sup>20</sup>Bernard J. Boelen, "On The Formative Power of Personal Charm," *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 10, no. 3 (November 1989):324.

<sup>21</sup>Harris, "Themes," 170. Harris describes seven themes which she has observed in her work with women "engaged in coming to deep and profound movements at the center of their inner lives." In addition to "Awakening," she names "Dis-Covering Creating, Dwelling, Nourishing, Traditioning, and Transforming."

obligations," but carefully avoids finding there any challenge or impetus for courageous action in the world. This is the faith that sees baptism as salvation but not as "putting on Christ" and his mission. This faith puts me in a constant and unsolvable dilemma of trying to love God and neighbor, but if forced to choose, I will quickly prefer prayer to action.

Elizabeth wrote often of the joy she found in her exercises of devotion and piety both as a Protestant and as a Catholic. Her writings abound with direct and indirect allusions to Scripture, testifying to its formative power in her life. We know that she loved the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Always, her prayer, her reading of Scripture, her reception of the sacraments strengthen her for the tasks at hand. She comes away sometimes exultant, sometimes chastened, always more deeply committed to being an unrestricted channel of God's love. We can be assured she loved the Eucharist not merely because she often wrote adoringly about it, which she did. We know she loved the Eucharist because her life itself became the bread broken and given for others, the cup outpoured.

This obstacle to a spirituality for mission gets a formidable strength from the dualism which has affected Christian spirituality for centuries. Dualism creates a separation between spiritual and material realities, and indeed, has often seen them as actively opposed. What is passive, quiet, ascetical is perceived to be "spiritual" and therefore preferable and superior to what is passionate, noisy, active, and involved, that is, "worldly." When we try to overcome this obstacle, we often fall into the trap of removing all distinctions, and simply decide that our work is our prayer. Elizabeth shows us a more holistic way. Cecilia O'Conway was the first young woman to join Elizabeth in Baltimore. Her original intent, however, was to become a cloistered nun, and she continued to struggle with this desire. To her Elizabeth writes "the only fear I have is that you will let the old string pull too hard for solitude and silence, but look to the Kingdom of souls—the few to work in the little Vineyard, this is not a country my dear one for Solitude and Silence, but of warfare and crucifixion."<sup>22</sup>

Bernard Boelen seems to describe Elizabeth when he writes that "mature spirituality involves every dimension of our human 'existence,' its embodiment, its interpersonal relationships, and its tran-

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<sup>22</sup>Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 298.

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obligations," but carefully avoids finding there any challenge or impetus for courageous action in the world. This is the faith that sees baptism as salvation but not as "putting on Christ" and his mission. This faith puts me in a constant and unsolvable dilemma of trying to love God and neighbor, but if forced to choose, I will quickly prefer prayer to action.

Elizabeth wrote often of the joy she found in her exercises of devotion and piety both as a Protestant and as a Catholic. Her writings abound with direct and indirect allusions to Scripture, testifying to its formative power in her life. We know that she loved the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Always, her prayer, her reading of Scripture, her reception of the sacraments strengthen her for the tasks at hand. She comes away sometimes exultant, sometimes chastened, always more deeply committed to being an unrestricted channel of God's love. We can be assured she loved the Eucharist not merely because she often wrote adoringly about it, which she did. We know she loved the Eucharist because her life itself became the bread broken and given for others, the cup outpoured.

This obstacle to a spirituality for mission gets a formidable strength from the dualism which has affected Christian spirituality for centuries. Dualism creates a separation between spiritual and material realities, and indeed, has often seen them as actively opposed. What is passive, quiet, ascetical is perceived to be "spiritual" and therefore preferable and superior to what is passionate, noisy, active, and involved, that is, "worldly." When we try to overcome this obstacle, we often fall into the trap of removing all distinctions, and simply decide that our work is our prayer. Elizabeth shows us a more holistic way. Cecilia O'Conway was the first young woman to join Elizabeth in Baltimore. Her original intent, however, was to become a cloistered nun, and she continued to struggle with this desire. To her Elizabeth writes "the only fear I have is that you will let the old string pull too hard for solitude and silence, but look to the Kingdom of souls—the few to work in the little Vineyard, this is not a country my dear one for Solitude and Silence, but of warfare and crucifixion."<sup>22</sup>

Bernard Boelen seems to describe Elizabeth when he writes that "mature spirituality involves every dimension of our human 'existence,' its embodiment, its interpersonal relationships, and its tran-

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<sup>22</sup>Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 298.

scendency." Without this "open dynamism," spirituality "turns into legalistic conformity to a static set of impersonal rules, and becomes literally idolatry. . . . Being-with-others-in-the-world is essentially . . . shared presence, creative participation, or concerned involvement. This involvement manifests itself in a variety of ways, such as dwelling, loving, thinking, planning, caring, cultivating, building, etc."<sup>23</sup>

Elizabeth and the early community, moreover, did not enjoy the spiritual "luxuries" that we Sisters sometimes take so much for granted today. No thirty day retreats, no self-chosen "desert days." In fact, it seems that they often lacked even the commonest religious articles. In her journal to Simon Bruté, Elizabeth records a touching account that reveals the poverty of the community. "Reading a picture of Judgment to our black caps the other evening I got laughing as so often happens when my nerves are weak, and to hide it I said I hope at least in the great rising we will each be able to lay hold of our crucifix that we may hold it up for defence, and all agreed it was a shame that we have so few in the house that we cannot allow a poor Sister in her coffin that last possession."<sup>24</sup>

The schedule of the day, the spiritual exercises of the community, the opportunity for quiet and prayer—all of these Elizabeth enjoyed. But she never makes the mistake of thinking that it is only here that she met her God.

### *My Goals = God's Will*

A third block to missional spirituality is to be so committed to my work for God that I begin to believe that the reign of God comes into existence when I achieve my goals. The "thinking, planning, caring, cultivating, building" mentioned by Boelen as rightful characteristics of concerned involvement can at times make us forget that the reign of God is like a mustard seed, a leaven, a grain of wheat that flourishes while the farmer sleeps, something hidden that is all the work of God. Again, to Cecilia O'Conway, Elizabeth writes:

My precious Cis I write from the big book with many tears this morning the sentence "Good and faithful servant enter the Joy of thy Lord—thou has been faithful over a little."

<sup>23</sup>Boelen, "Personal Charm," 321-22.

<sup>24</sup>Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 307.



Oh my Cis, how little all that passes with this life—yet my Mother, you say, they are of an Eternal consequence—they are—and therefore we must be so careful to meet our grace . . . if mine depended on my going to a place to which I had the most dreadful aversion, in that place there is a store of grace waiting for me.<sup>25</sup>

The reign of God must be established in my own life before I dare think I can help establish it anywhere else. To know that every good depends on my doing all I can while realizing that any good result is entirely God's doing, that what I do is nothing and everything at the same time—this is the spiritual growth that will free me from the unconscious behavior that seems to identify my dreams as God's. To believe that in every circumstance I must go to meet my grace and to respond to it—thus grows a spirituality for mission. In writing to John Carroll concerning her disagreement with the decision to replace Father Pierre Babade as the community's spiritual director, she reveals in passing a characteristic disposition, "accustomed as I am almost habitually to sacrifice every thing I most value in life I should have acquiesced quickly tho my heart was torn to pieces."<sup>26</sup> She is complaining not on her own behalf but on behalf of those under her care. For Elizabeth, God's will is all. Visiting Elizabeth during her last illness, Simon Bruté felt a renewed hope that she might recover. He said, "They think you are a little better. A hard fight you have. Here below, they are praying their best to keep you with us, while the ones above are calling, I suppose, to have you happy with them. For yourself, only God's will. 'I hope,' she answered, 'the only will.'"<sup>27</sup>

### *Activity versus Spirituality*

Our enchantment with dualistic spirituality is what keeps us blocked by the fourth obstacle: the feeling that intense activity is hostile to a spiritual life. "Spirituality is reduced to 'asceticism' in terms of 'mortification' (L. *mortificare*—to kill!) rather than in terms of striving for the freedom of authentic spirituality."<sup>28</sup> Often this mortification is by way of being passive or of assuming self-imposed "sac-

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 303.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 262.

<sup>27</sup>Celeste, *A Self-Portrait*, 255.

<sup>28</sup>Boelen, "Personal Charm," 323.

rifices." This is in no way meant to undermine the importance of spiritual disciplines. Such disciplines, however, should only prepare us for, not substitute for, the asceticism of authentic involvement in "going to meet our grace." None of the great figures in the tradition of Charity, least of all Elizabeth Seton, doubted that their extremely active lives were the very arenas of their authentic encounter with God.

Movement, activity, and what we would today call "stress" characterized the forty-six years of Elizabeth's life. She was always aware of the many demands on her, sometimes confesses to her weariness and struggle, but she never speaks as though it would be more beneficial to her spirituality if she were freed of all of it. On 29 November 1807, she wrote to Julia Scott, "Your friend is so tired she can rest even upon thorns, tired of contradictions most completely."<sup>29</sup> A human response surely, but no suggestion that life "ought" to be different. To illustrate how Elizabeth overcame this obstacle to a spirituality for mission would require me to review here her whole life story. Everything in that story suggests that a spirituality *for* mission is a spirituality developed *in* mission.

### *Energy For Mission versus Energy For Daily Life*

The fifth obstacle is also one that seems rooted in the dualism that affects our understanding of spirituality. It is not uncommon today to hear it expressed that if we were "really" involved in mission, we would not be spending our energy to deal with the struggles, the joys, the "trivia" of daily community or family life. I hardly need reference here the refutation of this modern heresy that we find in Elizabeth Seton's life. "You will be much surprised," she wrote to Catherine Dupleix in 1808, "to hear that we are no longer in New York. . . . I find the difference of situation so great that I can scarcely believe it is the same existence. All those dear little attentions of human life which I was entirely weaned from are now my daily portion from the family of Mr. Dubourg. . . . The little niceties, which I cannot afford, are daily sent to us as a part of their family, and in every respect my condition is like a new being."<sup>30</sup> In 1810, again to Catherine Dupleix, "The little

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<sup>29</sup>Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, 112.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

community I have charge of are bound by no obligations and are united only with the view of schooling children, nursing the sick, and manufacturing for ourselves and for the poor, which, to my disposition you know, is the sum of all earthly happiness." The month before, she had written to Antonio Filicchi, "In our house we have had continual sickness too all winter, and I have been obliged to incur many expenses and to go through every difficulty natural to such an undertaking as I have engaged in." And shortly later to Eliza Sadler, "Yesterday, we all, about twenty sisters and children, dined—that is ate our cold ham and cream pie—in our grotto in the Mountain where we go on Sunday for the divine office."<sup>31</sup> Three years before she died, she wrote a letter to Julia Scott. After telling Julia about the condition of her health (she had developed an ulcer on her breast), "Yet as I have an uncommon constitution and am really well in all other respects (besides being forty-five, a critical moment of life), it may pass or linger for awhile." Julia may have invited Elizabeth to visit her, for Elizabeth goes on:

I could not leave my little common habits, comforts, and enjoyment of books, pen, etc., in my present state of health besides the blow it would be to the heart of my sister if I should leave home and not put myself under my Brother Post's skill and care. Yet go on your knees, my beloved, and thank our God that you had the power of sending me such a relief as the \$100 bill. William had just left us after eight days visit. . . . I had been pushed to the extremity of a mother's anxiety as it respected his commonest comforts after his storms and loss, little as he could lose. I never knew a moment of life before in which I would have prayed for money so fervently.<sup>32</sup>

Elizabeth remarks on no distinction among her many involvements as to those which are "spiritual" and "for mission" and those which are not. She had the instinct of the mystic about the nondualism of life lived as a channel of God's infinite and self-spending love. She was totally given to God and totally present to the givenness of her life. That is where she found God.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 213-14.

## Conclusion

A spirituality for mission is one that frees us to be clear and open channels of God's infinite and self-spending love. The five obstacles considered in this paper are all interrelated, and to work at overcoming any of them begins to weaken all the others. Elizabeth teaches us that the way to overcome is to remain open to the possibility and the actuality of God's presence and action in our life. If we live out of that faith and that hope, the obstacles give way to love.

Elizabeth Seton left us no long treatises about a spirituality for mission. But the power of this brief passage from her notebook contains a truth that could not be clearer if she had taken many volumes to say it. "Many seek to love God by different methods," she wrote, "but there is none so short and so easy as *to do everything for his love*, to set this seal on all our actions, and keep ourselves aware of his presence by the commerce of our heart with him in full simplicity without embarrassment or disguise."<sup>33</sup> The emphasis is Elizabeth's. She leaves us these words. More importantly, she leaves the witness of her life. Her life was indeed complex. But the spirituality which connected all the events of her life and related them to a larger meaning is profoundly simple.

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<sup>33</sup>Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 357. Emphasis in original.