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Part 2

Elizabeth Seton and the School of Hope

BY

REGINA M. BECHTLE, S.C.

What grounded Elizabeth's hope? How did she allow suffering to become a school of hope for her? How did she allow suffering to transform her? And what lessons can we learn from her experience?

As I listened to Fay Trombley's presentation, I reflected on how Elizabeth might very easily have responded to the tragedies in her life by becoming bitter, withdrawn, self-absorbed, fearful. Suffering does that to some people. Instead, Elizabeth took on the mantle of suffering as part of the human condition. It did not surprise her that she, like all mortal beings, should have to endure pain, separation, loss, death. This attitude was not fatalism but realism.

In this she reminds me of the young Jewish woman, Etty Hillesum, who lived in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation. In her diary, *An Interrupted Life*,¹ Hillesum writes about her growing awareness that the Nazis are sending Jews like herself to the death camps. She says, "I have looked our destruction . . . straight in the eye and accepted it into my life, and my love of life has not been diminished. . . . I have come to terms with life."² And Hillesum continues, "It is not as if I want to fall into the arms of destruction with a resigned smile—far from it. I am only bowing to the inevitable and even as I do so I am sustained by the certain knowledge that ultimately they cannot rob us of anything that matters."³

For Elizabeth, as Gertrude Foley has reminded us, suffering seemed to *generate* hope. Whenever she went into the dark tunnel, she emerged, sooner or later, more deeply rooted in God. And so she learned to enter each new abyss of suffering—she learned to "see in the dark"⁴—

¹(New York: 1985).

²*Ibid.*, 162.

³*Ibid.*, 185.

⁴For an insightful application of this metaphor to the contemporary experience of many women religious and their congregations in the context of the classical spiritual theology of the dark night, see Janet Ruffing, R. S. M., "Seeing in the Dark: The Present Moment in Religious Life," *Review for Religious* 51, no. 2 (March-April 1992):236-48.

with a hope that steadied and sustained her.

As I stood before the mystery of Elizabeth Seton's hope these past months, I found five ways to name the energy that fueled her hope, five ways in which she "met her grace" through suffering.

(1) She *clung to the God who was always with her*, the shepherd at her side, leading her through the dark valleys. Even as her beloved William lay dying, she was able to see God's hand in this incomprehensible set of circumstances—not God's punishing hand, not God's vindictive hand, but God's tender hand. At times, she felt an abiding presence with her as she prayed, "Dear indulgent Father—could I be alone, while clinging fast to thee in continued Prayer or Thanksgiving? Prayer for *Him*, and Joy wonder and delight to feel assured that what I had so fondly hoped and confidently asserted really proved in the hour of trial to be more than I could hope, more than I could conceive[sic]—that my God could and would bear me through even the most severe trials."⁵

At other times, even when she could not feel or touch or taste God's nearness, she believed. She described the depth of her desolation after her daughter Anna Maria died to her friend and director Simon Gabriel Bruté, "In meditation, prayer, Communion, I find no soul. In the beings who surround me, I who love them so tenderly, find no soul. In the tabernacle, where I know that He is, I do not see Him, I do not feel His presence. A thousand deaths might be suspended over my head in order to force me to deny, and I would brave them all rather than hesitate even for a single instant, yet, it seems to me that He is not there for me."⁶

Elizabeth had the profound insight that in her times of difficulty more was going on than merely her own solitary struggle. She believed that the very life and death of Jesus was being lived out in and through her own living and dying. For she had learned, as she told the sisters, "that an interior life means but the continuation of our Saviour's life in us."⁷

Thus she entered into the mystical experience at the heart of the Incarnation. She met God in meeting and embracing her own life. And

⁵Seton, "Italian Journal," 12 December 1803, quoted in *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, ed. Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York: 1987), 119. Emphasis in original.

⁶Quoted in Madame de Barberey, *Elizabeth Seton*, trans. and adapted by Joseph B. Code (Emmitsburg, Maryland: 1927, reprints 1931, 1940, 1957), 346.

⁷Quoted in Charles I. White, *Mother Seton, Mother of Many Daughters* (Garden City, N. Y.: 1853, reprints 1901, 1949), 222.

so, her life became the channel for God's life. In her, Saint Paul's words were realized: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."⁸

(2) She *drew strength* from the knowledge that in her moments of hardship and struggle, there were others on whom she could count for support, even if they were not physically present to her. The Filicchis, Antonio, Amabilia, and Philip, certainly fell into this category at many points in her life.⁹ Through them, and through the many others whom God used as instruments of compassion, she experienced the communion of faith which is the deepest reality of the church. "[F]ellow heirs of the same precious hopes and promises—fellow travellers thro' the same road and Journey—can any ties be more Sacred!? any bonds stronger than those which unite Christians to each other."¹⁰ The "blessed chain" that bound believers to one another and to Christ was a reality and not just an abstract concept for her.

(3) She *exercised the power of the virtue of hope*. She practiced hope, she taught herself to hope, she chose to live out of the attitude of hope. She set her will firmly on God and allowed God to shape the horizon of her life.

In the midst of her trial by quarantine in the Leghorn Lazaretto, the strength of Elizabeth's soul, steeped in hope, was strikingly evident. As November 1803 drew to an end, with William growing weaker each day, she noted in the journal she kept for Rebecca Seton, "If we did not *now know* and love God—If we did not *feel the consolations, and embrace* the chearing [sic] Hope he has set before us . . . What would become us?"¹¹

Writing to Philip Filicchi in January 1805 about her conversion, she demonstrates how she leaned on the courage which the virtue of hope gave her. "After being left entirely to myself and [my] little children with my friends dispersed in the country for the summer season, the clergy tired of my stupid comprehension, and Antonio wearied with my scruples and doubts. . . I gave myself up to God and

⁸Gal 2:20b.

⁹Gail Giacalone, a bereavement counselor who studied Elizabeth's experiences of loss, cites this ability to seek support from friends as one of several positive steps Mother Seton took to deal with, and so to move beyond, her grief. See her Ph. D. dissertation, "Elizabeth Ann Seton's Experience with Loss and Bereavement and Its Applicability for Bereavement Work" (New York University: 1987).

¹⁰Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House (hereafter cited as ASJPH), 3: 47, quoted in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 332.

¹¹Quoted *ibid.*, 111. Emphasis in original.

prayer, *encouraging myself with the hope* that . . . sincere and unremitted asking would be answered in God's own time."¹²

Today, we are familiar with the language and spirituality of the twelve-step programs which express this fundamental choice as a conscious decision to turn one's life over to a Higher Power.

(4) She set her face *towards eternity*. By this I do not mean a sort of "pie-in-the-sky" piety that made her grit her teeth and endure the pain of the present, hanging on to the dream of a reward to come in the next life. Rather, she lived her life fully and deeply, yet she lived each moment against a horizon that was always larger than the here and now. That breadth of vision enabled her to see beyond the dire appearances and events of the present and to relish the tranquility which came with the "comparison of time and Eternity" which she advised should never "slip a moment from your mind."¹³

(5) She believed in the *power of suffering to transform her*—what we might call the "Paschal potential" of suffering.

Elizabeth did not have at her disposal the theological vocabulary of "Paschal mystery" and "realized eschatology." But she understood Jesus's words: "If you would save your life, you must lose it; if you lose life for my sake, you will save it."¹⁴ She knew that this mysterious reversal of human values was the precondition for conversion and transformation. She lived by the often baffling logic which is the way things are in the reign of God.

And, as Fay Trombley pointed out, she lived through her dark nights, what I would call her "Emmaus experience"—the times when her comfortable, familiar world was suddenly turned upside down, the times when she found that the God she thought she knew was the God she did not know at all.

She allowed herself to experience pain; she let it into her life, accepting it with profound faith in its power to transform her. Can we believe that as well, in our own times of Calvary? Can we walk on the Emmaus road with all our fear and discouragement and bitterness at seeing that our cherished hopes have been dashed? And can we hear the stranger by our side, telling us once again that God is to be found where we least expect, where we most resist or fear to go?

¹²Quoted in Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, 81. Emphasis added.

¹³Elizabeth Ann Seton to George Weis, n. d., ASJPH, XII.

¹⁴Luke 9: 24 (adapted).

The Grace of the Abiding Shepherd

After her conversion, Elizabeth seemed never again to be tormented by the kind of anxiety and worry that had marked her life while she was struggling with the decision about becoming a Catholic. She seemed to have received a special grace that freed her spirit totally, and ever afterwards she lived in its light. It could be described as the grace of experiencing that all was in the hands of God. It was like Julian of Norwich's insight, "All shall be well." It was the same grace out of which Vincent de Paul lived and moved and made his apostolic decisions. "Let us leave matters to God. . . . Remember that wherever you are God will take care of you."¹⁵ In the imagery of psalm 23, Elizabeth's favorite, it could be named as "the grace of the abiding shepherd."

This much-beloved psalm, which has woven in and out of our prayer during this conference, captures well the shape of Elizabeth's hope, and serves as a fitting conclusion for these reflections. It paints a picture of one who walks right into the terrors of dark valleys, yet *chooses* not to fear; one who stands before an unknown future, and *chooses* to name it as the dwelling of the Lord, the place where she will meet her God; one who *chooses* to proclaim almost fiercely, even in times of deepest loss, "There is *nothing* I shall want," so strong is her sense that she will be given—*is* being given—all that she needs.

So we see that hope for Elizabeth was in no sense a passive stance. It meant a conscious act of will, a choice to wait with expectant patience.

Elizabeth's hope was a deliberate decision to place herself, her worries, her fears, her confusion, in the hands of a God whom she believed utterly worthy of her trust, a God whom she experienced as Keeper of Promises.

Can we also make this choice? Can we let go of the fear of change, of transition, of suffering, of diminishment, of death itself? Can we let go of the fear of losing what we have—possessions, convictions, certainties, security, comfort, control? Can we make that choice, and allow its power to permeate our lives, our relationships, our work, our prayer?

¹⁵"On Confidence in Divine Providence," 9 June 1658, in *The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C. M. (Norwich: 1979), 1074, 1079.

Elizabeth invites us to make that choice, to enroll in the school of hope. She encourages us not to be daunted by suffering but to allow it to turn us full-face toward the gracious and holy mystery which is God. As she wrote in her copy of *The Following of Christ*, "Instead of measuring your difficulties with your strength you must measure them with the powerful help you have a right to expect from God."¹⁶

The contemporary poet Marge Piercy frames the challenge in words that touch our hearts: "We must shine/with hope, stained glass windows that shape/light into icons, glow like lanterns/borne before a procession. Who can bear hope/back into the world but us."¹⁷

Mother Seton, I think, would nod vigorously in agreement. Who, indeed, but us? But let us allow her to have the last word of these days which we have spent steeped in her spirit.

It is 1807. Elizabeth the widow, the Roman Catholic, is just about making ends meet for herself and her family in New York, but, as she writes to Antonio Filicchi, even in the midst of continuing trials, she is at peace. When she prays, she tells him, she constantly and gratefully compares the turbulent past few years to the blessings of the present. And what of the days ahead? She writes, "Hope always awake wispers [*sic*] Mercy for the future, as sure as the past."¹⁸

Elizabeth, we pray, keep hope alive and awake in our hearts when suffering threatens to engulf us with darkness and despair. Make us bold and lucid beacons of hope, always awake, you who truly did "shine with hope." As we, our communities, our Church, our culture, stand before unknown tomorrows, let us hear and believe and celebrate the still small voice of the Spirit of hope which we share with you and with our brother Jesus, the voice that whispers "Mercy for the future, as sure as the past."

¹⁶Archives of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg, PA, quoted in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 343.

¹⁷Marge Piercy, "Stone, paper, knife," in *Stone, Paper, Knife* (New York: 1983), 143-44.

¹⁸Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 22 June 1807, quoted in Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 199.