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Elizabeth Seton's Church and Ours

BY

MARY LOUISE BRINK, S.C.

If "people are the words God uses to tell God's story," as Edward Schillebeeckx suggests in his work, *Church — The Human Story of God*, then as we look at the life of Elizabeth Seton we might ask what story that life tells us about God, about the church of nineteenth century America, and about ourselves today.

Let me begin with a brief definition of *church*, borrowed once again from Schillebeeckx in the aforementioned work. Schillebeeckx puts it quite simply: "The church is the community of believers who witness to Jesus' way towards the reign of God."¹ When I use the word church I mean all of us, or to use the Second Vatican Council term, the people of God. The church is the community of those who believe in God revealed in Jesus and follow Jesus in helping to spread the reign of God.

Next, let me briefly set the historical context for the church in which Elizabeth Seton believed and worshiped. Elizabeth Seton's life spanned the years 1774 to 1821. Until 1908 the Catholic Church in America was considered a mission under the auspices of the Roman Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith. Before the revolution, Catholic missions in America were directly related to the Catholic Church in England. Between 1775 and 1789, priests from Europe went as missionaries to serve the ever increasing Catholic population.

After the War for Independence, the question of the connection of American Catholics to the wider church became a concern. The suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 had also created problems for the church in the colonies, since many of the priests living there were Jesuits. John Carroll himself, the leader of the early American church, was a former Jesuit. He had been teaching at the University of Bruges in Belgium, and returned home to America in 1774, after the disbanding of the Society.

As early as 1783, Carroll gathered representatives of the clergy in Maryland so that they could, as it is described in *The John Carroll Papers*, "establish some regulations tending to perpetuate a succession

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church — The Human Story of God* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1990), 154.

of labourers in this vineyard."² The Catholics of that time were generally poor, few in number, victims of the prejudice of the predominant Protestant population and unschooled in the principles of their faith. Between a Catholic expectation of the same kind of lay control as in Protestant congregations and internal clashes between priests of different nationalities, what little authority ecclesiastical leaders might have been able to exercise tended to erode.³

In 1790, when the Diocese of Baltimore began, of the approximately 4,000,000 inhabitants of America, about 35,000, or less than 1%, were Catholics.⁴ From this number in 1790, the church increased by over 550% to 195,000 members in 1820. The Louisiana Purchase accounted for much of this increase, since the people of the Louisiana territory were predominantly of French origin and hence Catholic. There were scarcely enough priests to minister to the widely scattered congregations. Native clergy were being trained and educated at Saint Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, an institution founded by French Sulpicians, who had come to America to escape the French Revolution. Before 1800, there were no congregations of women religious, except for a small group of cloistered Carmelites and a community of Poor Clares who arrived in the 1790s.⁵ The organizations to serve the needs of the Catholic population were only beginning to emerge.

The Catholic Church in colonial and post-revolutionary America was very close to the poor. Although the Episcopal Church, to which Elizabeth originally belonged, was made up of the wealthy and the ruling classes, the Catholic Church was composed of the newly arrived, doubly despised for their coming late to the society and for their religion. Superstition and fear made discrimination the lot of Catholics for many decades. Even in peaceful Pennsylvania, where Catholics had been present for a long time, they were prevented by law from holding office.⁶

Elizabeth Seton and her two sisters-in-law, Harriet and Cecilia, were the objects of this very prejudice from relatives and friends when they announced their intention of becoming Catholics. To understand how strong the prejudice was, it is helpful to note what a relative wrote to Harriet Seton:

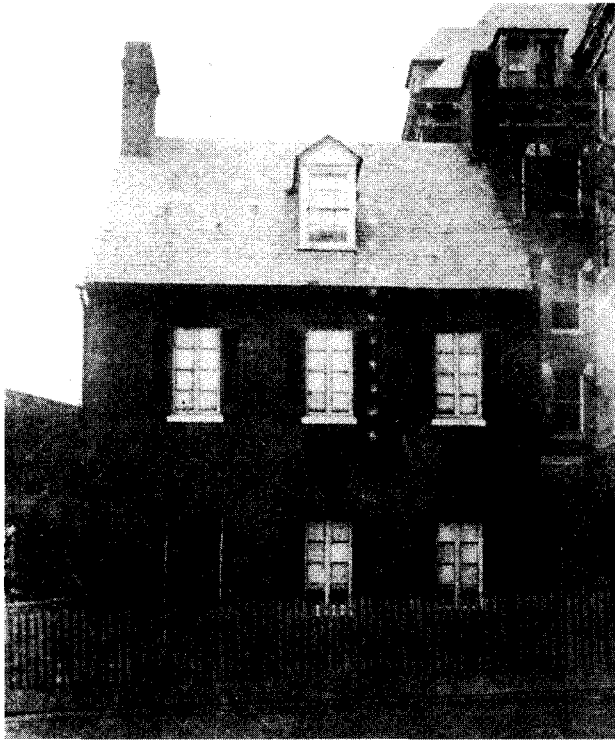
² Thomas O'Brien Hanley, SJ, Ed., *The John Carroll Papers* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame press, 1976), Vol. 1: 1755-1791, letter to Charles Plowden, Sept. 26, 1783, 78.

³ *Ibid.*, 427.

⁴ *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1967), Vol. 14, 425.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 426-427.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 428.



Mother Seton's home and school on Paca Street, Baltimore.
Courtesy Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg, Maryland

The establishments at Baltimore and Emmitsburg are novel things in the United States and would not have been permitted by the populace in any other place than in democratic, Frenchified, Maryland. The religion they profess is uncongenial to the habits, manners and nature of Americans, and I predict ere long, from many causes, the demolition of every building in that state in any wise resembling a convent or Catholic hospital.⁷

This was a church requiring courageous leadership, the kind that John Carroll and others like him could provide. Carroll's family, and Carroll himself, had supported independence from England. Carroll had even traveled on a mission to Canada with his cousin Charles and other patriots to persuade leaders in Montreal to join forces with the

⁷ Ellin M. Kelly, Ed., *Numerous Choirs*, (Evansville, IN: Mater Dei Provincialate, 1981), Vol. I: The Seton Years 1774-1821, 135, letter of Gouverneur Ogden to Harriet Seton, Nov. 27, 1809, from Archives, Saint Joseph's Provincial House, VIII, 83.

American revolutionaries. They believed in the future of America as a new country with seemingly unlimited possibilities, and offering equal opportunities for women and men. The early church in America tried to follow the democratic principles so integrated into the constitution of the new nation. John Carroll was actually elected by a gathering of priests to lead the church in America. His name was proposed to Rome, and in 1789 he was appointed bishop of the newly formed diocese of Baltimore.

Elizabeth Seton became a member of this loosely organized and even chaotic church in March 1805. She was then thirty-one years old. She had first been attracted to the Catholic Church in Italy where, as a bereaved young widow, she lived for some months with the wealthy Filicchi family. The order, stability, rituals, and peace of Italian Catholicism were very appealing to the grieving Elizabeth. The sacraments, especially the Eucharist, drew Elizabeth's yearning heart. It was God's gift to Elizabeth that she had felt her first attraction to the Catholic Church in her own kind of milieu, among people of wealth. But it was to the church of the very poor that Elizabeth was welcomed in New York in 1805.

When she returned from Italy to her family and friends, Elizabeth was already at heart a Catholic. Not one to analyze the differences between the Catholic faith and her Anglican upbringing, Elizabeth, always a people person, sought unity with God through unity with the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Once having become aware of what Catholicism offered, Elizabeth could never return wholeheartedly to the Anglican church.

Back in New York, Elizabeth wrote to Amabilia Filicchi in Italy, "I have been to what is called here among so many churches the Catholic Church. When I turned the corner of the street it is in — 'Here, my God, I go,' I said, 'heart all to You.'"⁸ Despite a short period of intense struggle and doubt, Elizabeth quickly knew that she must go "peaceably and firmly to the Catholic Church."⁹ Her statement of faith, her first confession and communion, opened for her, in her own words, "new scenes for my soul," a "new life, a new existence itself."¹⁰

Elizabeth knew herself as daughter — to a mother dead long before when she was a tiny child, but safe in heaven with God — to a much beloved father whose commitments often took him far from

⁸ Dirvin, Joseph I., CM, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

her, but who in his final years enjoyed the comfort and love of her home and her children, and who died in her arms. Early in her life there had developed between Elizabeth and God a relationship which seemed to replace the affection she might have expected from and given to her parents. Elizabeth learned early to trust God implicitly. Throughout her life, and certainly on her entrance into the Catholic Church, Elizabeth sought the God whom she trusted so fully and with whom she longed to be united. Why else would she have uttered the words she did at the time of her first communion:

...at last God is Mine and I am His! Now, let all go its round — I have received [God]...instead of the humble, tender welcome I had expected to give, it was but a triumph of joy and gladness that the deliverer was come and my defense and shield and strength and salvation made mine for this world and the next.¹¹

From the beginning of her conversion process, Elizabeth used the image of child to describe her relationship with the church. She equated this relationship with her relationship with God, and entrusted herself to the church with the complete trust and abandonment of a child. For her the church was truly *mystery*. "I thank God for having made me a child of [the] church," she wrote to a friend shortly before her death. "When you come to this hour (final illness), you will know what it is to be a child of the Church."¹² She was, in her own eyes, most gladly a child, with all the trust and dependence and utter love the word implies. From the time of her conversion on, she could pray, "Holy Church of God, teach, direct, call to thyself thy child, docile and faithful forevermore."¹³

When she was invited by William Dubourg, superior of the Sulpician community in Baltimore, to open a school for girls in that city, Elizabeth responded to what was perceived by her to be God's will expressed in the request of a leader of the church. When it was suggested to her in 1808 by Father Dubourg and Archbishop Carroll that she begin a religious sisterhood, she complied, knowing that she was but a child in the faith, but trusting the direction of these discerning men. Elizabeth believed that she could know God's will by those who directed her: "whatever they bid me do, if it is ever so small in

¹¹ Ibid., 71-72.

¹² Ibid., 165.

¹³ Margaret Alderman & Josephine Burns, D.C., *Praying with Elizabeth Seton* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1992), 102.



Reverend Louis William Dubourg, S.S.
*Courtesy Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House,
 Emmitsburg, Maryland*

itself, is the Will of God for me.”¹⁴ When she felt that she had acted awkwardly, or even wrongfully, in the early days of her community’s unfolding, she assured Bishop Carroll:

You will see how good a child I am going to be. Quite a little child. And perhaps you will have often to give me the food of little children yet, but I will do my best as I have promised you in every case.¹⁵

¹⁴ Dirvin, *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton*, 160.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

However, Elizabeth did not hesitate to speak up to these very same church leaders when the future of her community, or the pastoral needs of people were in jeopardy. She protested vehemently over what she rightfully considered usurpations of her community and school by Father John David, who had been appointed superior of the community. Even so, closing a letter to Bishop John Carroll, she could write: "If, after consideration of every circumstance, you still think things must remain as they are — whatever you dictate I will abide by through every difficulty."¹⁶ Of Father John Dubois' government as superior of the community, Elizabeth could joke with her friend and confidant, Father Simon Gabriel Bruté:

I am so in love now with rules that I see the bit of the bridle all gold, or the reins all of silk. You know my sincerity, since with the little attraction to your Brother's (Dubois') government, I even eagerly seek the grace [of] the little cords he entangles me with.¹⁷

Apparently even Father Dubois' legalism could not deter Elizabeth's fiery spirit.

Afire as she was with zeal for God's good work, Elizabeth scolded a local clergyman who had not prepared his Sunday sermon. She reported to Bruté:

Gave our Reverend John Hickey a scolding he will remember. The congregation so crowded yesterday, and so many strangers — to whom he gave a sermon so evidently lazy; and answered this morning:

"I did not trouble myself about it, Ma'am."

"Oh, sir, that awakens my anger. Do you remember a priest holds the honor of God on his lips. Do you not trouble to spread [the fire God] wishes so much enkindled? If you will not study and prepare while young, what when you are old? There is a mother's lesson."

"But, prayer. . ."

"Yes, prayer — and preparation, too."¹⁸

¹⁶ Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Baltimore, MD, 7-M-7, Seton to Carroll, Jan. 25, 1810, as quoted in Dirvin, 166.

¹⁷ Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg, MD, XII, 31b, Seton to Bruté, Fall 1813, as quoted in Dirvin, 168.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 26, Seton to Bruté, Spring 1815, as quoted in Dirvin, 63.

Then there is that other face of Elizabeth, the Elizabeth who loved to be among children in Baltimore and Emmitsburg to teach them about God and their faith. That Elizabeth loved going across Saint Joseph's Valley and up the mountain every Sunday for Mass. Afterwards she would sit on a big rock, gather the children round, and teach them the ways of God. This Elizabeth, child of the church, recognized how important it was for these children to stay close to God all their lives, so that one day they might be able to instill in their children and their children's children a love for the Catholic faith.

Looking at Elizabeth Seton today, we can recognize her as a mature woman, a widow who had buried her much loved husband, a single parent who struggled to raise her five children, a mother who nursed two of her daughters in serious, terminal illnesses, a religious leader responsible for guiding and inspiring a fragile, new religious community. Elizabeth was hardly a child! But in her faith life, in the following of that God who was for her always *Father (Parent)*, Elizabeth always thought of herself as a child. It was the highly intuitive response of her soul to the overwhelming love she experienced.

To Sisters of Charity, Elizabeth, on her deathbed, spoke the words, "Be children (daughters) of the church." In my struggle to understand the meaning of this advice of Elizabeth, I realized just how much she depended on churchmen to support and assist her young community. She trusted the wisdom of church elders to discern her situation as foundress of a religious institute while mother of five children. She believed that those appointed spiritual directors and superiors would nurture the new community, even in and through their own human frailties. I wondered whether Elizabeth ever equated the church with these clerical leaders, as we sometimes do when we misuse the word *church*, using it to refer only to the institutional framework rather than to the community of believers. I have come to believe that Elizabeth had a much broader understanding than that.

Vita Consecrata, the recently issued Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, invites consecrated women and men to consider the Transfiguration of Jesus as an icon for religious life today. Entering into the Transfiguration icon, we enter into the mystery of transformation, of God's freely given grace transforming the person privileged to receive and respond to it. *Vita Consecrata* also presents religious life today in its prophetic dimension. And what is a prophet but one who imagines a new heaven and a new earth while being firmly rooted in this world? By living lives of holiness and service, religious in every age have

witnessed to how lives of faith may be lived.

If we look at Elizabeth Seton's life, as *Vita Consecrata* suggests, through the icon of Transfiguration, we can see a woman being transformed by God's love, leading a community of women being transformed by God's love. Through the openness of her prayer, like a radio designed to pick up a particular frequency, Elizabeth was attuned to God's call. She took part in the sacramental life of the church faithfully and regularly, and drew great comfort and support especially from the Eucharist. "We enjoying God's fullness" was the way Elizabeth understood the church.¹⁹ Or to say it another way, again in Elizabeth's words, being part of the church is "resting on redeeming love."²⁰

How does Elizabeth's love for the church illuminate the challenges we face today? The disciples to whom God's glory was revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration then also witnessed the sordid reality of the Mount of Crucifixion. Elizabeth knew the triumph and joy, the tender presence and glory of God, while, at the same time, she experienced the bitter sorrow of rejections, early deaths and harsh physical conditions. Entrusting herself each day to God's provident care, she could still write to Cecilia O'Conway, one of the first Sisters of Charity and a protégée of hers, "This is not a country, dear one, for silence and solitude, but for warfare and crucifixion."²¹ Like every true contemplative, Elizabeth was vitally involved in the concerns of her time. And so, too, must we be if we are to live lives committed to contemplation.

As Elizabeth and her early sisters lived at the heart of the church of the new republic, so do we live at the heart of a church poised to enter a new century and a new millennium. The concerns we face are, perhaps, massive in proportion to those which Elizabeth faced. The needs of people are still evident before us, even as they were before Elizabeth: large refugee populations, people without basic food and clothing, some dying without proper medical attention, prejudice and bigotry, genocidal wars, the destruction of our earth. The list is endless. It is no accident that the rule of Vincent de Paul and Louise de

¹⁹ Elizabeth Seton to Rev. Simon Gabriel Bruté, n.d., 1817, Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House 1-3-3-12:42.

²⁰ Cf. Elizabeth Seton to Eliza Sadler, 28 September [1803], Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House 1-3-3-7:28. "with the strong and ardent Faith with which I receive and dwell on this promise — all is well and resting on the mercy of God —"

²¹ Charles I. White, *Mother Seton — Mother of Many Daughters* (Garden City, NY: The Country Life Press, 1949), 259.



Drawing of sculpture outside of Church of Saint Elizabeth Seton.
Sun City, Arizona. Drawn and sculpted by Sister Margaret Beaudette, S.C.

Marillac was the one adapted for North American Sisters of Charity. It is following that rule that enabled Elizabeth and the early community, and that has enabled us to reach out to the everyday needs of people in ways that a more monastic or cloistered way of life would not have permitted.

Like Elizabeth patiently experiencing the working of God in her life, we, too, are called to patience with God's working in and around us. What we seem to need today is the radical patience to live in fidelity to our charism, trusting that our works are now of value and will continue to bear fruit in a later time and place in ways we cannot even imagine. We truly are the bridge to another age and culture. In this regard, the well-known words of Rubem Alves about those who

plant dates not being the ones to eat them are particularly appropriate. For Alves, living by the love of what we will never see is the secret discipline, the discipline that has given prophets, revolutionaries and saints of every age the courage to live and die for the future they envisaged.

Our relationship with the official church is not always what we would wish it to be. Like jaded and somewhat cynical veterans we wonder whether “the church” will ever change. This is where radical patience and hope beyond hope come into play. Many of us have experienced injustice, what we perceive as ingratitude, and even, perhaps, dismissal from our church ministries. We long for the day when women will be recognized as full partners in the Roman Catholic Church. We struggle, not as Elizabeth did before her conversion, to go to the Catholic Church, but to remain “peaceably and firmly in the Catholic faith.”²²

Through his Common Ground Project, the late Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago offered the challenge of dialogue among those holding very different viewpoints about the church. His desire was to pass on a gift, “a vision of the church that trusts in the power of the Spirit so much that it can risk authentic dialogue.” We, as daughters of Elizabeth Seton, want to enter into and sustain whatever dialogue may be possible. We want to speak up with honesty, respect and integrity when we recognize the violation of rights within the church.

Our heritage provides many examples of such forthrightness and integrity. Thus did Vincent de Paul defend the Company of Charity as a new form of religious life in the church of the seventeenth century; thus did Elizabeth Seton protect her small religious band against the efforts of those who would interfere and alter its purpose; thus did Elizabeth Boyle and Margaret George keep the communities in New York and Cincinnati intact as North American congregations. We need to engage in many, many conversations with others who share our dreams and even with those who directly oppose our views. We also need to be faithful to our principles and to the leading of God’s grace. Is this not being truly “simple,” (or “faithful to truth”) that virtue so central to our identity?

²² The context for this quote reads: “I WILL GO PEACEABLY and FIRMLY TO THE CATHOLICK CHURCH - for if Faith is so important to our salvation I will seek it where true Faith first begun, seek it among those who received it from GOD HIMSELF...” Elizabeth Seton, Journal to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805 entry, ASJPH, 1-3-3-10:3a.

At this moment in history, what resources do we have to offer to the church? We can continue to speak the messages we are uniquely prepared to speak, and to offer leadership in the specific areas where we have skills. We can certainly offer the witness of life lived out of a contemplative stance through which God's love and grace can so radically transform the willing spirit. We bring community-building skills and the evidence that shared responsibility, collegiality, communion of hearts and minds is not only possible but richly rewarding, and can open unimagined new horizons to groups of committed persons. We cherish the sacramental life of the church, especially the Eucharist, but we must refuse to be content with sterile liturgies, and continue to promote liturgical experiences that are lifesaving for people, affirming all the positive efforts we observe. Above all we can raise our voices for justice and for the poor of our world.

As Elizabeth loved the new church of her time, we, too, must continue to love this new church of ours into being. We may never see the results of that loving, but that does not matter, because the loving itself is worth our continued efforts. Elizabeth reminds us, "Never mind. God is God in it all. When so rich a harvest is before us, why do we not harvest it in? All is in our hands if we but use it."²³

²³ Many published quotes have altered Elizabeth's original words. This appears to be a consolidation of several of her thoughts. The first portion "never mind — *God is God*, in it all — if you are to do his work the strength will be given" is from Elizabeth Seton to Cecilia O'Conway, [September 1817], Ursuline Archives of Quebec, #2b.