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Elizabeth Ann Seton and the Church

BY

JOSEPHINE BURNS, D.C.

“Be children of the church. Be children of the church.” Elizabeth’s last words to her daughters have caused us all to ponder many times. They are surely a testament to her undying and fervent love for the church which gave her strength and sustenance for both her living and her dying. In this church Elizabeth found everything she needed.

But what, exactly, did Elizabeth mean by these words? What was “the Church” for her? What was her understanding of the way in which God was present in the Church and in its ministers? Is that belief still the same? Can we, living and struggling in the world of today, be “children” in the same way that Elizabeth envisioned? What quality illumined her obedience? Is it possible for us to incarnate that same quality today? Can we follow truthfully in the way of Elizabeth Seton, still being faithful to our own call and personhood? What is that call for us now, today, at this time and in this place?

Obviously, one person’s research cannot discern another person’s call. This paper will study the words and experiences of Mother Seton, laying the groundwork as carefully as possible so that each of us, in the presence of God, can discern that personal overwhelming Word of God to us. “How did Elizabeth understand her Church?” That is one question. “How must I respond?” Ah, that is truly another question, to be answered in a far different way. Let me use the analogy of baking a pie. Here are the ingredients: I will try to assemble them all in the proper order, weighed and measured correctly. I will even provide the directions for the recipe. But making the pie? That is the task of each of us in our own private time. And there is our personal challenge.

In the years when I was teaching philosophy, I realized that each philosopher had a basic assumption, derived from some fact, some experience, some insight, that was so strong and convincing it became the starting point, the foundation, of that thinker’s entire world view or philosophical system. No matter what might happen after this initial illumination — generally not “provable” in a logical way — this basic insight is never questioned, never abandoned. Witness Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am,” Plato’s “What is really real cannot change,” Kant’s “We know only phenomena filtered through our sensibility

and understanding, never things in themselves," the Logical Positivist's "Only that is meaningful which can be verified in sense experience." And on, and on.

Elizabeth Seton also had such a powerful experience, convincing her of the One Reality on which she thereafter based, not a philosophical system but her very life itself. When she first received the Body of Christ as a Catholic on 25 March 1805, she received, at the same time, a profound illumination, setting her on a path she could never relinquish. At that moment of Communion she experienced a triumphant and joyous confirmation of her belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Remember her words to Amabilia about that moment?

At last Amabilia—at last—GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS—Now let all go its round—I HAVE RECEIVED HIM—[sic]... [that morning] every step counted...nearer the moment he would enter the poor poor little dwelling so all his own—and when he did—the first thought I remember, was, let God arise let his enemies be scattered, for it seemed to me my King had come to take his throne, and instead of the humble tender welcome I had expected to give him, 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...¹

I believe that this overwhelming moment of grace, so different from what Elizabeth had imagined or expected, convinced her irrevocably of the real presence of her Lord and Savior in the Blessed Sacrament. She had expected to give him a welcome of humility and tenderness, but she found that the Lord himself, in a surge of triumph and joy, took over her entire being. "Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered!" This profound awareness of the otherness of the Lord, the surprising truth of his presence as unique, totally unimagined-above all real — became the experiential fact upon which Elizabeth based the rest of her life. This "Real Presence" so long desired and waited for, so deeply experienced, was the foundation and confirmation of her faith in Jesus, in the sacraments, in the Church.

¹ Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville, eds. *Elizabeth Seton. Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 167.

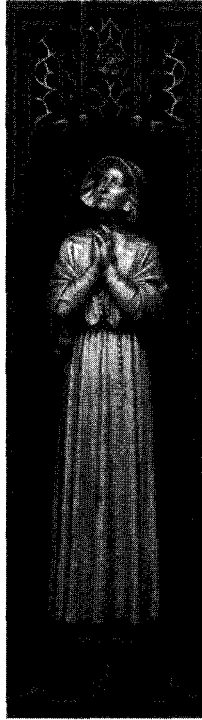
What was the Church?

What was the American Catholic Church in 1805? Viewing the huge monolithic structure of today, we find it difficult to imagine the loose structure and far-flung parishes of that time. First of all, there was only one Bishop — John Carroll. There were very few native American priests. Most of the clergy were either Irish or French immigrants — the Irish avoiding the persecutions in their homeland, the French escaping from the aftermath of the French Revolution. In 1784 Bishop Carroll forwarded the statistics on the Church to Cardinal Antonelli:

1. "There are in Maryland about 15,800 Catholics; of these there are about 9,000 freemen, adults or over twelve years of age; children under that age, about 3,000; and about that number of slaves of all ages of African origin, called negroes. 2. There are in Pennsylvania about 7,000, very few of whom are negroes, and the Catholics are less scattered and live nearer to each other. 3. There are not more than 200 in Virginia who are visited four or five times a year by a priest. Many other Catholics are said to be scattered in that and other States, who are utterly deprived of all religious ministry. In the State of New York I hear that there are at least 1,500. (Would that some spiritual succor could be afforded them!) They have recently, at their own expense, sent for a Franciscan Father from Ireland....As to the Catholics who are in the territory bordering on the river called Mississippi and in all that region which following that river extends to the Atlantic Ocean, ...this tract of country contains, I hear, many Catholics, formerly Canadians, who speak French, and I fear that they are destitute of priests....The jurisdiction of the Bishop of Quebec formerly extended to some part of that region; but I do not know whether he wishes to exercise any authority there now, that all these parts are subjects to the United States."²

Bishop Carroll goes on to explain that even in Maryland, where the Catholic Church had been tolerated for many years, the people "lack that fervor, which frequent appeals to the sentiment of piety usually produce, as many congregations hear the word of God only once a month, and sometimes only once in two months. We are

² John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States, 1763–1815* (vol. 2), 1815–1843 (vol. 3) (New York: D.H. McBride and Company, 1890), 257–258.



Statue of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. Saint Patrick's Cathedral, New York City.

reduced to this by want of priests, by the distance of congregations from each other and by difficulty of travelling." [sic]³

Prior to the American Revolution the clergy in America had been subject to the hierarchy in England. With the independence of the United States the situation had to change. John Carroll was a natural choice for leadership. Born in Maryland in 1735, Carroll had first joined the Jesuits and studied and worked in Europe. After the suppression of the Jesuit order, Carroll returned to America in 1774 to work as a priest in his native state. In 1776 he was asked to join a small delegation sent by the Continental Congress to Canada, with the aim of persuading the French to join with the American colonists in the cause of independence. A fellow delegate was Benjamin Franklin, whose positive impression of the young priest caused him to recom-

³ Idem.

mend Carroll as the first bishop of the United States in 1780.⁴

Most of the states had an established church: the Anglican, or American Episcopal church, as it became in America. In many states, Catholics were prevented from holding public office, even from voting. Massachusetts required any office holder to “abjure under oath all obedience to a foreign ecclesiastical power.”⁵ This requirement was in effect until 1821. New York, until 1806, required that foreigners to be naturalized “must abjure all foreign allegiance, temporal and Spiritual.”⁶ In Maryland and Pennsylvania, at least, there was “toleration,” but prejudice and anti-Catholic feeling was prominent throughout the country. Even the various Protestant sects which quarreled with one another were united in their fear and hatred of the Roman Catholic Church, “earth’s chief evil.”⁷

As immigrants to the United States increased, so did the number of Catholics. Some groups brought their priests along with them. Persecutions in Ireland and the Revolution in France dispossessed numerous clergy as well. The French Sulpicians were extremely active in Maryland and throughout the east, and while their help was sorely needed and appreciated by Bishop Carroll, he became steadily convinced of the need for an American clergy, conversant with and understanding of the American need for self-determination and freedom from unnecessary constraints.⁸

Bishop John Carroll was a true son of the United States. He espoused the independence of spirit which sought to establish an American church. He encouraged Catholics to be active members of society and to work closely with their Protestant neighbors. He was convinced that only by Americans’ working side by side would true acceptance be brought about. He encouraged the use of the vernacular in some parts of the Mass, to help ease the American view of the Church as foreign. As part of his plan to Americanize the church, Carroll founded the University of Georgetown hoping to form clergy

⁴ Henry de Courcey and John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States: From the Earliest Settlement of the Country to the Present Time* (New York: P.J. Kenedy, 1879), 41-43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶ *Idem.*

⁷ William Gribbin, *The Churches Militant: The War of 1812 and American Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 5.

⁸ An interesting treatment of the relationships between the clergy of various nationalities in America is found in “The Formation of the Catholic Minority in the United States, 1820-1860,” an article by Thomas T. McEvoy in *The Review of Politics*, 10 (1948), 15-20. This article is reprinted in William L. Portier, *The Inculturation of American Catholicism, 1820-1900: Selected Historical Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1988), 13-34.

there, and also established a seminary at Saint Mary's in Baltimore. He realized the need for a consistent Catholic education, and thus saw Elizabeth Seton as an important part of bringing about a school system.⁹

Carroll at first saw as practical the institution of "trusteeism" which many Catholic parishes took over from their Protestant brothers. Here a group of lay people would set up and administer the parish and its finances, "governing" the local church, but leaving to the Bishop (Carroll devoutly hoped) the appointment and transfer of priests and clergy. Some severe problems arose in New York and other cities as lay trustees began to overstep their bounds. Of special concern was Saint Peter's in New York, between 1784 and 1790, where the trustees sought to replace the Irish pastor with another Irishman who was a far better preacher.¹⁰ This entire controversy was long past when Elizabeth Seton came to Saint Peter's to be baptized; her letters and journals show no awareness of the earlier difficulties.¹¹

One of the results of the struggles with trusteeism, especially severe in the larger congregations (New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans) was to solidify in the hierarchy that would follow Carroll a "mentality of opposition to lay and clerical participation in the church's administration."¹² Trusteeism thus "provided the occasion for the bishops to create a church in the United States that had few if any local checks upon episcopal authority."¹³

Elizabeth's Attitude

I have not been able to discover in any of Elizabeth's writings any mention of this political and social hotbed which was the American Church. How could this be? Certainly Mrs. Seton was aware of her surroundings; she was educated, well-read and traveled. She took

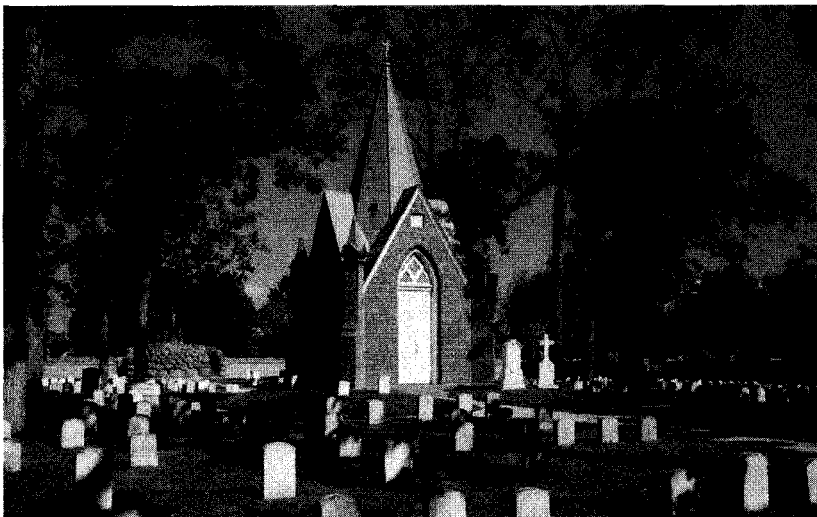
⁹ Material on John Carroll is abundant. My chief sources are John Carroll, Archbishop, *The John Carroll Papers*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976); Joseph Agonito, *The Building of an American Catholic Church: the Episcopacy of John Carroll* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1988); John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States, 1763-1815 (vol. 2), 1815-1843 (vol. 3)* (New York: D.H. McBride and Company, 1890); and Henry de Courcey and John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States: From the Earliest Settlement of the Country to the Present Time* (New York: P.J. Kenedy, 1879).

¹⁰ Patrick W. Carey, *People, Priests, and Prelates: Ecclesiastical Democracy and the Tensions of Trusteeism* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 8-10.

¹¹ A curious note, however, connecting the Seton family with these trustees is that one of them, Hector Saint John de Crevecoeur, was the French Consul for the States of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, and had received considerable personal help for himself and his family from the elder William Seton. See Henry de Courcey and John Gilmary Shea, *op.cit.*, 246.

¹² Carey, 2.

¹³ *Idem*.



The Mortuary Chapel Shrine, Emmitsburg, Maryland. The resting place of Elizabeth Ann Seton's remains until 1962 when, in view of her beautification, they were moved to the Saint Joseph's Central House Chapel.

The National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emmitsburg

part in the social and business doings of New York in the years of her marriage, she certainly grasped the difficulties of the immigrants from observing her father at work. She was not stupid.

One reason is, I believe, that the truth of her faith so overwhelmed Elizabeth that the setting of it was of little importance. Her early experience of the Church was in Livorno, in the midst of a devout Catholic family. In her journal at that time she mentions having special "reverence and love to Mrs. Amabilia Filicchi when she came home from communion."¹⁴ Later, after her own communion she writes of "the two miles walk back with the treasure of my soul — first kiss and blessing on my 5 Darlings, bringing *such a Master* to our little dwelling."¹⁵

Elizabeth's faith transcended politics. What was important to her, even with those persons most dear to her, was the interest of God. In a letter to her son William written at the close of the 1812 war with Britain, she writes: "Your poor mother looks only at souls. I see neither American or English, but souls redeemed and lost."¹⁶

¹⁴ Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M. *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 69.

¹⁵ Rt. Rev. Robert Seton, ed. "Dear Remembrances." In *Memoir, Letters and Journal of Elizabeth Seton, Convert to the Catholic Faith and Sister of Charity*. (New York: P. O'Shea, Publisher, 1869), 156.

¹⁶ Dirvin, 62, cf. n. 38.

Elizabeth's faith, based on her own conversion struggle and experience, was intensely personal, not in the sense of being self-centered or indulgent, but rather focused always on persons — on their salvation. Her zeal in this regard could be upsetting at times to her friends and relatives; her sense for the opportune moment was sometimes lacking in her earliest years as a Catholic. She knew better, later on, and was not afraid to reprove or chastise her priest friends, for example, John Hickey, who had been rather severe in a letter to his little sister, a student at Saint Joseph's.

I do not like... some things you wrote Ellen lately. You and I speak all through eternity; but take advice from your old Mother — I am a hundred to your thirty in experience, that cruel friend of our earthly journey. When you ask too much at first, you often gain nothing at last. *And if the heart is lost, all is lost.* If you use such language to your family, they cannot love you, since they have not our microscopes to see things as they are. Your austere, hard language was not understood by Ellen who, dear soul, considers your letters as mere curiosity. She loves and venerates you, but do not push her away....Gently, gently, my father in God and son in heart.

Then the swift larger, telling question: Do you drive so in the tribunal? I hope not.¹⁷

Note, however, that throughout this quotation Elizabeth's focus is on the individual person — be it Ellen, Father Hickey, or the person in the confessional — and the effect on that person of what is being written or preached.

Her awareness of the Church as such is as "the only ark in the world"¹⁸ through which all humankind is to be saved. Through the Church and the priesthood are given the Sacraments, from which Elizabeth (and all Christians) gain their spiritual sustenance. From this results Elizabeth's great devotion to the priesthood. In a letter written to Bruté and William on their way to Italy, for instance, she writes of the possibility of a physical death as unimportant. "But the poor pupil who may make shipwreck of his dear eternal interest, or the one hand less to hold the chalice — there *the point, and the immense interests.*"¹⁹ For this reason, I believe, Elizabeth's understanding of the Church is best discovered by examining her relationship with individual mem-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

bers of the clergy. As a woman of her time, albeit an intelligent and active one, Elizabeth would naturally have found herself dependent to a large extent upon the men in her life — her father, her husband, her male relations through marriage, her revered minister Henry Hobart. It is not surprising that when she became Catholic she transferred this reliance to her priest, her confessor, her superiors, her Bishop. As she writes herself upon her conversion:

For as to going a-walking any more about what all the different people believe, I cannot, being quite tired out — and I came up light at heart and cool of head for the first time these many long months....²⁰

And again:

After all were gone, I was called to the little room next to the altar, and there professed to believe what the *Council of Trent* believes and teaches; laughing with my heart to my Savior, who saw that I knew not what the Council of Trent believed — only that it believed what the Church of God declared to be its belief, and consequently is now *my belief*.²¹

Elizabeth's moment of grace, her turning toward the search for the one true faith, seems to be revealed in a conversation she had with Filippo Filicchi in Livorno. Father Dirvin remarks that she felt it important enough to record word for word in her journal for Rebecca:

Filippo more bluntly informed her of her obligation to seek the truth. She tried to pass it off with banter: "Oh, my, sir, if there is but one Faith, and nobody pleases God without it, where are all the good people who die out of it?" Filippo was not to be deterred: "I don't know," he answered frankly. "That depends on what light of Faith they had received. But I know where people go who can know the right Faith, if they pray for it and inquire for it, and yet do neither." Nothing could be blunter than that, with its affirmation of the grace God was extending her and the dire results of its rejection.

Whether from embarrassment or unease or even fright, Elizabeth tried to maintain lightness of tone: "Much as to say, sir, you want me to pray and inquire, and be of your Faith?" "Pray and inquire, that is all I ask," was the unmoving reply.²²

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

²² *Ibid.*, 154.

I love this passage! Elizabeth has been well and truly caught. Her innate respect for persons makes her see the reasonableness of this request. How could she go wrong, simply by praying and inquiring? God has found the opening, because Elizabeth trusts him. Such trust in God's mercy brought an immense reward not only for Elizabeth but for the entire Church. In the midst of her struggles she wrote to Antonio:

God will not forsake me, Antonio. I know that He will unite me to His flock; and, although now my Faith is unsettled, I am assured that He will not disappoint my hope which is fixed on His own word, that He will not despise the humble, contrite heart.²³

From Elizabeth's first encounters with Bishop Carroll, Father Cheverus and Father Dubourg, she is attentive and docile. She finds her first confessor, Father O'Brien, a source of strength, writing that his "counsel and excellent directions...strengthen me and, being sometimes enforced by command, give a determination to my actions which is now indispensable."²⁴ One wonders whether Elizabeth's immediate obedience and docility could have been colored by her feelings for her own father, so necessary a part of her early life. Her great reverence for the priesthood, based on the tremendous gratitude she felt for the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, becomes one of the most distinctive marks of her spirituality. In summing up Elizabeth's faith in those things she especially loved, Father Bruté lists "the Church, the Blessed Sacrament, prayer for herself and her children, the Blessed Virgin, and the priestly character."²⁵

She wrote to a young man who had left the Seminary, full of doubts about his vocation:

To be engaged in the service of our adored Creator, to be set apart to that service...is in itself a sufficient plea on the side which I wish you to engage, but to be placed as a representative of God Himself, to plead for Him, to be allowed the exalted privilege of serving Him continually, to be His instrument in calling home the wandering soul and sustaining, comforting and blessing your fellow creatures, are considerations which bear no comparison with any other; and should lead you to consider the very possibility of your realizing the hope they present as the most precious and valued gift this life can afford.²⁶

²³ Ibid., 156.

²⁴ Ibid., 160.

²⁵ Ibid., 37.

²⁶ Ibid., 140-141.

Difficulties with Obedience

In spite of Elizabeth's great reverence for the Church and her superiors, particularly Bishop Carroll, she was not afraid to make known the truth as she saw it, when she believed the needs of the Sisters required her to speak out, or if she sensed the presence of misinterpretation. She certainly did not see obedience as slavish and unthinking. Rather, it required her to make known another side of the truth, an aspect of the situation which might be overlooked were she to remain silent. It seems to me that precisely because of the overarching shelter of obedience, she was able to speak freely within that secure place. It was to Bishop Carroll she unburdened herself, since she saw him as her rightful Superior and channel of God's will. The hurt and mistrust that resulted when the Sisters were forbidden by their Superior from communicating or confessing to Father Babade, who had enjoyed their confidence, brought out one of Elizabeth's first questioning letters to the Bishop. Still, she noted that "I should have acquiesced quietly though my heart was torn to pieces but the others could not bear it in the same way and the idea so difficult to conceal that our Superior was acting like a tyrant."²⁷ Her difficulties with Father David, who wished to make Sister Rose White superior in Elizabeth's place are spelled out fully and frankly to Bishop Carroll:

Sincerely I promised you and really *I have endeavored to do everything in my power to bend myself to meet the last appointed Superior [Father David] in every way but after continual reflection on the necessity of absolute conformity with him, and constant prayer to our Lord to help me, yet the heart is closed, and when the pen should freely give him the necessary detail and information he requires it stops, and he remains now as uninformed in the essential points as if he had nothing to do with us, an unconquerable reluctance and diffidence takes place of those dispositions which ought to influence every action and with every desire to serve God and these excellent beings who surround me I remain motionless and inactive.*²⁸

²⁷ Sister Margaret John Kelly, D.C., "Her Doing Heart: Key Relationships in Elizabeth Seton's Life: 1809-1821," *Vincentian Heritage* 14, no. 2 (1993): 338.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.



Saint Elizabeth Seton, Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity.
Courtesy Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg

In spite of her admitted reluctance, Elizabeth again affirms her willingness to obey, and to follow whatever choice Bishop Carroll decides upon. She shows the same humility when she asks for a change of superior. "I open my heart on the subject only because I believe Our Lord requires me to be explicit on it."²⁹ And she sees the right order of things when the question of remaining superior seems to conflict with her duties as mother of her children: "Surely, an individual is not to be considered where a public good is in question—and you know I would gladly make every sacrifice you think consistent with my first and inseparable obligations as a Mother."³⁰ She

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 341.

³⁰ *Idem.*

continued to trust the Archbishop, even when his responses seemed somewhat delayed; Elizabeth really believed that the will of God would be discerned for her through him. The decisions of Archbishop Carroll in sanctioning the Rules for the Sisters were confirming for Elizabeth. That she learned from the entire experience can be deciphered from her advice to Bruté about how to get along with their Superior, Father Dubois:

You ought to know our Reverend Superior by this time and see that he is not to be pushed anywhere; and your urging cannot but keep him away. When anything *essential* happens, I always inform him of it; and if the thing is not essential, his absence often hinders a fuss about nothing and suffers little pets and passions to drop in silence.³¹

Elizabeth used the expression “to meet our grace” in a letter to Sister Cecilia O’Conway: “...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.”³² Evident here is the active spirit of Elizabeth Seton. For her, obedience is never purely passive, waiting to be told what to do. Every one of her advices reveals beneath it a solid fabric of prayer, discernment, struggle, and the constant willingness to “meet one’s grace.” This is living in the real world. This is calling for a clear-sighted and honest vision of the facts, remembering always that “the facts” include God and His Will for us, coming to us especially through prayer and the Sacraments as given to us in His church. For Elizabeth it was so simple. Who would ever want anything more? As she neared death she wrote to Bruté:

Oh, if all goes well for me what will I not do for you! You will see. But, alas, yet if I am not one of His elect, it is only I to be blamed, and when *going down* I must still lift the hands to the very last look in praise and gratitude for what He has done to save me. What more could He have done? That thought stops all.³³

³¹ Dirvin, 148.

³² Sister Gertrude Foley, S.C., “Elizabeth Seton: A Spirituality for Mission,” *Vincentian Heritage* 14, no. 2 (1993): 300. Emphasis mine.

³³ Dirvin, 36.

Be children of the church

“Be children of the church.” Elizabeth’s grandson, Msgr. Robert Seton, writes of her last words in his memoir of Elizabeth:

She then raised her dying voice and said: “Dear ones, pray for me when I am gone, for I shall want it. I thank God for having made me a child of His *church*: when you come to this hour you will know what it is to be a child of the church.”³⁴

For Elizabeth, that last moment brought full clarity and illumination. Her understanding of “church” was of a dynamic, interactive listening and response to God’s call, present in the church. For her, that call came clearly. Through the action of the church she — and we — are enabled to meet Christ in the Sacraments, find our strength and discern our path. That belief is unchanged, although the call may be more difficult for us to hear, buried as it is in the noisy, tumultuous baggage-ridden world of today.

What did Elizabeth mean to tell us about being a child? That word sounds false and distasteful to us, grown-up and self-sufficient as we think we are. To what aspect of childhood is she calling us? Surely not the immature self-centeredness we have all struggled to overcome. Rather, picture the child being held on its mother’s breast, or lovingly tossed into the air by its father. The little one sleeps, or laughs with joy. The parent is there; everything is safe; the world is secure. The child knows that all its needs will be taken care of. All it needs to do is look to the father, touch the mother. We are born trusting, we need to learn distrust and suspicion. To be a child of the church is to turn to God in trust and love, believing that his Body on earth, with all its imperfections and struggles, still brings God to us, and brings us to God.

Challenges to us

I believe Elizabeth’s faith was the foundation of her obedience and her unwavering commitment. Her faith was whole, she did not pick and choose what to believe and what to hold in abeyance. (Recall her laughing remarks about the Council of Trent.) But her faith was in a person, Jesus Christ.

³⁴ Robert Seton, 290.

...even in the sacred moments of the Elevation, my heart will say, half serious, 'Dare I worship You, Adored Savior?' But He has proved to me well enough there what He is, and I can say with even more transports than Saint Thomas, 'My Lord and my God!'³⁵

"He has proved to me well enough there what He is." It was through her meeting with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, a meeting which she longed for and rejoiced in during her whole life, that Elizabeth found that grace she ran to meet. She recognized the bounty of God bringing us this grace in all events of our lives, if the veil only be lifted. Faith lifts that veil.

I really do not know whether faith is harder today than it was in Mother Seton's time. I suspect that each of us feels that it is much more difficult now; but who can answer that? The waters seem muddied; the call is not so clear. Or is it that there are so many conflicting calls? I believe that what we are called to is to be weavers of that fabric I mentioned above, the fabric of prayer, discernment, struggle, and the constant willingness to "meet one's grace." If we are willing to listen actively, to pray consistently, in season and out of season, to discern, to struggle, to weigh motives and outcomes with as much honesty and clarity as we can muster, and then to trust the Lord as we go forward with confidence (dare I say "Joy?") to "meet our grace" — we will be what Elizabeth Seton called us to be — "children of the church." To follow truthfully, today, calls for us to trust deeply in the God who calls, to believe that God's will is revealed to us daily in the events of each moment, in the faces we meet, the sorrows we experience, one by one. The Church — the presence of Jesus — gives us the tools we need in order to serve, the strength to keep on, and the light that illumines our way. "Ask and you shall receive." Do we really believe this?

Conclusion

The first reading for tomorrow's mass, the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (13 October 1996), comes from the book of Isaiah, Chapter 25, v. 6-10. God is telling us something beautiful here, and I believe Elizabeth Seton's voice is joining the chorus.

³⁵ Dirvin, 73.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.³⁶

May we all meet there in God's good time.

³⁶ Isaiah 25: 6-10.