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Elizabeth Vermaelen S.C.

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# Decision Making in the Life of Elizabeth Ann Seton

BY

ELIZABETH A. VERMAELEN, S.C.

Experience today reveals intense activity of the Spirit in the lives of men and women in all walks of life. This "hunger for spirituality" as it has been termed, has encouraged Western Christians to explore Eastern forms of prayer. The search for God has been for an experience of God, rather than knowledge about God.

I use the term "spirituality" in the sense in which Robert Maloney, C.M. has defined it:

A spirituality is an energizing vision, a driving force. It is, on the one hand, the specific way in which a person is rooted in God. It is, on the other hand, the specific way in which he or she relates to the created world. It is insight as the source of action. It is a vision that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction....<sup>1</sup>

We know that, in terms of discernment, of making decisions and finding God's will for us, we need first to find out who God is for us.

Discernment ultimately means placing ourselves as unreservedly as possible in God's hands, asking God to shape our lives through our decisions and thus allowing God to bring to fulfillment the creative work that God has already begun in us. For fruitful discernment, therefore, we need a God to whom we can entrust ourselves with confidence.<sup>2</sup>

How does God speak to us? How do we find the will of God?

1. God speaks to us in nature:

It seems to me that it is apparent in studying the life of Elizabeth Ann Seton that there was a gradual transformation which began early in her life. Her frequently absent father and deceased mother caused her to search for God. At the age of ten, she speaks of "taking pleasure

<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *The Way of Vincent de Paul* (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>2</sup> David Lonsdale, *Listening to the music of spirit: the art of discernment* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1992).



The Young Elizabeth Seton. Painting by Joseph Dawley.  
 Courtesy the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul of New York

in everything, coarse, rough, smooth or easy — I was always alive with joy in God, that *He* was my Father." Later on she notes, "Every little leaf and flower or animal, insect, shades of clouds or waving trees were objects of vacant, unconnected thoughts of God and heaven!" God speaks to us in *nature!*

## 2. God speaks to us in the events of one's daily life:

She writes, "In the year 1789 when my father was in England, one morning in May, (she was in New Rochelle at the time), in the lightness of a cheerful heart, I jumped into the wagon...I set off in the woods, soon found an outlet in a meadow...Here then, was a sweet bed — the air still and a clear blue vault above — the numberless sounds of spring melody and joy — the sweet clover and wild flowers I had got by the way, and a heart as innocent as a human heart could be, filled with enthusiastic love of God and admiration of his works. God was my father, my all, I prayed, sang hymns, cried, 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 the spiritual life..." In 1789, Elizabeth was 15 years old! God speaks to us in the events of one's daily life.

As we look today at the Mother/Father role of God, we can see this yearning expressed in the words of Elizabeth as child and as teenager. God then became for her the only rock of surety she could count on. With her sense of God and experience of God's presence, Elizabeth learned to look for it in the ordinary events of everyday life and learned to trust, to communicate and to expect God's support through whatever dark passages were part of her journey.

### 3. God speaks to us in prayer:

We are beginning to uncover similar themes in the prayer of the great women mystics, we are realizing that God intends this special way of relating for everyone. It is not restricted to a strata of society with the proper theological education. I am reminded of the scene in *The Color Purple* wherein the main character comments that she never found a God in church that she did not bring in with her.

#### *Vincentian Spirituality Is Incarnational*

God speaks to us, not just as instances of human nature, but to each of us as persons who have a name, an unrepeatable name. So God speaks to us as unique persons and as persons in communion with one another, either in our local communities or in the larger communities of the province or in the community of communities we know as the Church. Discernment is a choice addressed to me or to us. It is existential, historical, personal.<sup>3</sup>

So, in these homespun ways, Elizabeth's spirituality grew mostly under God's direction. We know that later on, the Reverend Henry Hobart introduced her to the beauty of the psalms and canticles, which she loved so, that her own prayers took on the cadences and rhythms of the songs of David.

The problem then of how to pray, and the problem of how to live — the two are the same problem — is the process of becoming ever more aware of the Holy Spirit within us, and of becoming ever

<sup>3</sup> Hugh O'Donnell, C.M., "Vincentian Discernment," *Vincentian Heritage* 15, no.1 (1995): 12.

more responsive as the Spirit seeks to inspire us to embrace God's saving will. It is a matter of learning to discern God's often delicate inspirations, and of responding in aspiration toward the infinite hope toward which God impels us. But it is also a matter of learning to distinguish God's presence in the various life situations in which we find ourselves. For we can make all of life a living prayer only by seeking and embracing God's salvific will as manifest in every situation in life.<sup>4</sup>

### *Discernment — Will Of God*

From another point of view, discernment, what are the *yeses* and what are the *nos* in my life? Discernment is about what we say "yes" to, what we say "no" to in the present and the near future.<sup>5</sup>

We are each being called to continual, on-going conversion which is the reality of our fidelity to the will of God. Again and again, Elizabeth Seton prayed, "May the most just, the most high and the most amiable Will of God be accomplished forever."<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the life of Elizabeth Seton, her constant search for the Will of God was a fundamental theme, overriding all other considerations. It led her to appreciate the various ways God speaks to us:

What was the first rule of our dear Saviour's life? You know it was to do the will of His Father. Well then, she said, the first end I propose is to do the will of God in our daily work, secondly to do it in the manner He wishes; and thirdly to do it because it is His will.

If the first face of discernment has to do with the paths we take, the second has to do with everyday life — living a life of daily discernment. We have sometimes called this "living in the presence of God" ...The third face of discernment has to do with making choices in social areas, in our outreach to our brothers and sisters.<sup>7</sup>

There is a difference between looking only occasionally for God's will and being open every day and in every way to God's intervention in our lives. Both for Elizabeth and for us, it is not usually a question of right and wrong, but of a new understanding to which God is

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hinnebusch, O.P., *Prayer, the Search for Authenticity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 31.

<sup>5</sup> O'Donnell, "Vincentian Discernment," 12.

<sup>6</sup> "Elizabeth was greatly impressed by the sufferings of Pius VII, and his prayer of submission to the will of God became her favorite prayer for the rest of her life. 'May the most just, the most high and the most amiable will of God be in all things fulfilled, praised and exalted above all forever.'" Annabelle Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton* (A Jove Book: New York, 1985): 255; 443, n. 60.

<sup>7</sup> O'Donnell, "Vincentian Discernment," 14–15.

leading us in the process of decision making.

Ignatian discernment is recognized as the classic pattern for discernment. One of the qualities which Ignatius requires as a pre-requisite is indifference. In his article on "Vincentian Discernment," Hugh O'Donnell, C.M. says:

*Indifference* is a poor word in English. It has negative connotations. It has overtones of not caring, of capitulation, of being a door mat, of being passive and depersonalized...The French have a great word for it — *disponibilité*...Positively it means "readiness" — to be really ready to do what God calls us to do...It is to be open in an unrestricted way to the fullness of God's presence, not just to one part of it. Such an attitude is at the heart of our lives...we are no longer talking about a technique or a process, but we are talking about our deepest way of being. "Unrestricted readiness" is not only a corner stone of discernment, it is at the heart of our being. Our vocation, our way, is to be people of unrestricted readiness.<sup>8</sup>

How does one find the Will of God? When we look at Elizabeth Seton and see her constant fidelity in the various roles she filled in the course of her life, I suggest that she was a woman of "unrestricted readiness." Elizabeth was a unique individual who was able to function well in both a man's world of thinking, analyzing, deducing, concluding etc., and in a woman's world of intuiting, valuing and choosing — sometimes without a clear intellectual sense, but from a no less real and deeply felt absolute conviction. While both men and women are capable of both modes of knowing, it is the male way — or the first source that has predominated in both government and church. The second source or the woman's way has always been considered weak or inferior simply because it was not abstract, reasoned, and intellectual.

Carol Gilligan's work, *In a Different Voice*, was one of the first to enlighten us about the different modes of taking in information and different modes of making judgements or drawing conclusions from that information.<sup>9</sup> Significantly for our purposes today, her conclusions reveal that men (and boys) make judgements about the rightness or wrongness of an action based on the *rules*, whether these be the rules of the game — was it or was it not a foul ball?; the rules of corporate takeovers — what is legal not to disclose?; or the rules or

<sup>8</sup> O'Donnell, "Vincentian Discernment," 19.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).



Portrait of Elizabeth Seton. Undated engraving.  
Corbis/Bettmann Archive

war — how many civilians can be killed and still call the objective military? The tendency is to see life in terms of winning and losing.

The study shows that women (and girls) tend to make judgements about the rightness or wrongness of an action based on *its effect* — what did it do to people?; what will it do to people? Women tend to achieve a *relationship* — even when dealing in theory or in dealing with those they do not actually know. That relationship, that human bonding which puts me immediately into the shoes of those who will be affected by my actions, is reflective *not* of weakness and sentimentality, but of the deepest, intuitive ways of human knowing.

More clearly than ever before, people have recognized that Christian theology always draws on two sources and that these sources need to be held together, correlated as it were, by the one making the decision.<sup>10</sup> The tension between these two sources has existed since the early church. There is a need for both to exist — each respectful of the other's role in the process of decision making.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Schillebeeck, O.P., *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), 3.

The first source — is the whole heritage of Judeo-Christian faith — scripture, doctrine, tradition. The second source is human experience, either the experience of an individual or of a group. In either case it represents the actual, real situation in which God is revealed and God's will for us, or for each individual, can be sensed and in the process of discernment can be known as a deep, non-verbal conviction.

Religious conversion, as an on-going process, may be described as the assumption of a personal, individual obligation to respond appropriately to the self-revelation of God. Elizabeth felt this many times, but notably when she was making the decision about becoming a Catholic. What we now know of Elizabeth's experience in that year of decision seems to reflect the concept of unrestricted readiness to do God's will.

In general, we live in an atmosphere where we know we believe, what we expect, where we belong, etc. And then, either suddenly like Paul being blinded, or gradually like Elizabeth, we start to question what we formerly accepted. The old interpretation is challenged or we discover certain needs, or a new situation develops. In some cases, there is the call to a deeper reality such as religious conversion. In this process, we come to a sense of loss, perhaps even a sense of grief, because the usual pattern does not work, the old trusted answers are no longer a solution. God is gently or powerfully moving me to a new place where I have never been before and in this movement, I have to leave behind the familiar and choose a path which is not only unfamiliar, but is potentially disastrous.

Paul could say to the Phillipians: "I am quite certain that the One who has begun this good work in you will see that it is completed when the day of Jesus comes." This speaks to me of ongoing conversion, of a constant openness to the will of God in my life. Sometimes the need for discernment comes from outside us — some event, some call, some changes that others have made. Sometimes the need comes from the inside. That sense of "dis-ease" is the key into the need for discernment. I listen to my feelings, I am in touch with myself in my deepest center, and I am able to examine some objective criteria in a process of discernment.

The year following William's death was filled with the most profound spiritual suffering for Elizabeth who was being drawn by God to the Catholic Church. As an adult Christian, she was very much in touch with her responsibilities to the Christian community. Her prayer



reflected a deep and meaningful relationship with God. She studied diligently what Phillip Filicchi gave her including his own hand-written defense of the faith — and she studied what Henry Hobart gave her, including his own hand-written explanation of the fallacies of the Roman church. This process alone, to say nothing of the economic and emotional traumas which were part of her life, only led to more pain. At one point, she decided she would go to neither church since she could not decide on one or the other.

Certainly there are converts who are brought to Catholicism because of their pursuit of “truth,” i.e., the first source, but Elizabeth Seton was not one of these. On 15 October 1804 she wrote to Antonio, “Far different is my situation from those uninstructed, but my hard case is to have a head turned with instruction without the light in my soul to direct it.” She ultimately became a Catholic because *God* wanted it so.<sup>11</sup>

### *Discernment Guidelines*

In group discernment, the following points are generally agreed on:

- The gathering of data — access to information, background history and the resources to help grasp the issues...also the time to do this....
- The ability to sift through the issues.
- The explicit willingness to go beyond argument and debate to seek participation with God’s leadership.
- A forthright presentation of those biases, fears, and personal desires — which antecedent to the discernment process, influence the emotions and judgements of the participants. The *mutuality* of the discerning community — should invite a corporate awareness that the discerners will need to support and challenge one another when they begin to consider the arguments for and against the discernment proposal.
- *On-going asceticism* is needed to keep the focus on finding how God leads the group. In the midst of the discernment process, people may want to reconstruct the proposition or to redefine the terms in order to avoid the decision which has to be made.

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 9th October 1804, Archives of Mount Saint Joseph, Cincinnati A 111 022.

In personal discernment, I must:

- Look at ALL that should be considered: Not just *my* place in this situation, but stretch *my* mind and broaden *my* horizons to see the full implications of my judgement/decision on all who are part of my world. The true role of authority is to help me broaden my horizons and to remind me to look at all that should be considered. Authority calls the individual to refer back to the “story” (anamnesis) on which our judgements are grounded.
- I must consider the FULL REALITY present in the *current situation itself*. I shift the focus to the decision and away from myself. To what am I being called by this situation? In what way is God being manifested to me in the decision I am about to make. In this process I must consider the total direction of my life (fundamental option). Finally, I must consider the whole evolution present in what is today considered a norm or a standard and realize that I may be called to move beyond the present scope of acceptable responses.
- The third dimension relates to a kind of IMPARTIALITY in regard to this specific decision. There must be a stability in the good, i.e. the presence of virtue, which provides us the ground out of which to operate. Different spiritual traditions describe this state differently:
  - Ignatius Loyola speaks of indifference
  - Teresa of Avila of humility
  - Francis of Assisi calls for a poverty of spirit
  - John of the Cross desires detachment
  - The author of the *Cloud of the Unknowing* searches for a single-mindedness; and
  - Elizabeth Seton searches for the Will of God.

All of these traits relate to an openness to whatever God may be revealing. It presumes a willingness to respond even if what is discerned may be less attractive. A lack of need for image and esteem and the presence of a type of humility and simplicity are the *sine qua non* of discernment.



Catholic Chapel. Bancroft Hall — U.S. Naval Academy.

When Elizabeth said, at the time of her conversion, “At all events, happen what will, I rest in God,”<sup>12</sup> she was declaring a relationship which was intrinsically pledged to openness to the will of God, for, she continues, “there can be no disappointment where the soul’s only desire and expectation is to meet his adored will and fulfill it...”<sup>13</sup> for “...one day will show every dark and mysterious event in the most perfect concord of harmony and wisdom.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Seton, Journal to Amabilia Filicchi, April 14, [1805] entry, Archives of Saint Joseph’s Provincial House, 1-3-3-10:3a.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Seton to Cecilia Seton, 9 June 1808, Archives of Saint Joseph’s Provincial House 1-3-3-8: 149.

<sup>14</sup> The actual words of Elizabeth are: “one day shew every apparently dark and mysterious event in the most beautiful and perfect perspective of Wisdom and Harmony —” Elizabeth Seton to Juliana Sitegreaves Scott, 20th July 1807, Archives of Saint Joseph’s Provincial House 1-3-3-6: 67.