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Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton and the Art of Embodied Presence

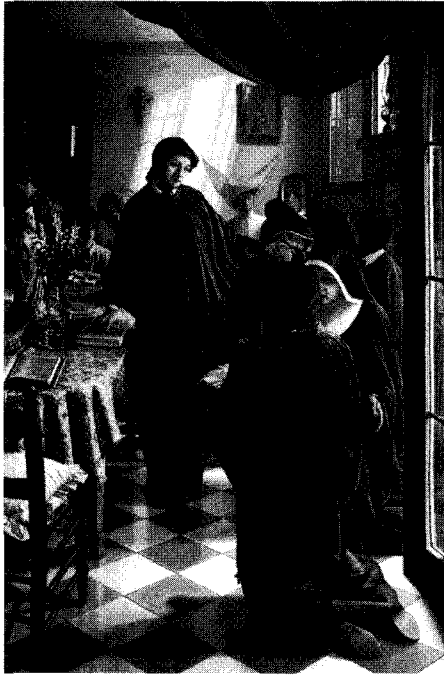
BY

WENDY M. WRIGHT

Saints lives are not always comfortable reading. Locust-eating ascetics may fascinate us, martyred virgins may elicit horror, robust missionaries inspire admiration. But we may also wonder what we learn about our own ordinary lives from the select few held up for us as companions in faith. Often we approach them as powerful intercessors. Occasionally we seek their company as guides to heroic living. Only infrequently do we consult the saints as teachers in the arts of intimate relationship so central to most of our lives.

There are some very good reasons for this. Our tradition is thickly populated with saints who saw human relationships at best as charitable but indifferent undertakings, at worst as actual hindrances to the real work of the spiritual life. Particular friendships, deep emotional attachments, marriage and family, these topics were not for much of our history the focus of saintly musing. If they were, they were scorned or warned against as distractions or undesirable evils in a life focused on things divine. Of course, there are exceptions to this. Aelred of Rievaulx and other twelfth century Cistercians wrote passionately about the spiritual benefits of monastic friendships forged from the mutual love of God. Francis de Sales in the seventeenth century asserted that intimate relationships centered on a shared love of God were necessary for lay persons struggling to live a devout life "in the world." Further, there are numerous examples of saintly friends whose relationships were central to their lives, whether they theorized about them or not. There are few canonized saints, however, whose lives and writings show us that the capacity for loving intimacy, with both other people and with God, is in itself a spiritual path. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton is one of those few.

A number of years ago, when first I encountered Elizabeth Ann as more than a name memorialized on the liturgical calendar, I found myself enamored because of her affectionate nature. Indelibly etched on my memory is the image of a fiercely maternal Elizabeth, arms half paralyzed from cradling her dying daughter, in a round-the-clock marathon of prayer and tearful good-byes. Etched too is the scene of



Elizabeth Ann Seton and her Spiritual Daughters. Painting by Gary Schumer, Saint Mary's Seminary, Perryville, Missouri.

Courtesy of the Association of the Miraculous Medal

Elizabeth the young wife in Italy, released mere days from the dank cell of the lazaretto, kneeling by the inert body of her just-deceased husband William — “the dear Body,” she called it, “Nature sunk into a settled sob.” These images captured my attention. Not only did they endear me to this saint. They impressed me with the way in which she effortlessly allowed her most intimate connections to be pathways through which she discovered God.

My more recent encounter with the first native born American saint has given me even deeper insight into her relational genius. I have become impressed by the way in which the fundamental loving relationship of her life — with God — was the ground out of which all her other relationships flowed and to which they returned. She was a woman who excelled equally in both human and divine intimacy. My impression is that Mother Seton reveals to us a spiritual path of loving relationship that is uniquely her own. It is, as well, a gift to the church today. I have called her gift the Art of Embodied Presence.

In this brief presentation I would like to describe the nature of Elizabeth Ann Seton's relational genius as I have come to understand it, focusing especially on the way in which her human loves and her love of God intertwined over a lifetime. The overarching motif that guided Elizabeth's spiritual journey seems to have been her search for an enduring and ever-more-intimate experience of Embodied Presence. She ached to be present, to experience presence, to literally be close to others. Her relentless desire to be intimate played itself out in her relationships with father, husband, children, friends and, most significantly, with God. But let me chart her relational spiritual itinerary to make this clear.

By nature, young Betty Bayley was ardent, expressive, affectionate, and somewhat impulsive. She seems to have come into the world with the sort of buoyant, generous zest for life with which some people are gifted. She loved those closest to her with great passion. And she was never shy about expressing it, as she was never shy about expressing any of her heartfelt feelings. Her letters and private papers are florid with exclamation points, bold-faced and capitalized phrases which make the reader privy to her breathless, impassioned way of being in the world. Indeed, the journals from her adult years, as those from her adolescence, are filled with uttered ohs! and ahs! And they are even more impressionistic and spontaneous. She never lost that gift of unselfconscious expression. Just as she never lost the ardor with which she loved those dearest to her.

But from an early age, her experience of deep attachment was tempered by the experience of loss — of her mother's and baby sister's presence to death and of her father's constant presence to the demands of his medical profession. Later, her losses were many and painful — husband, children, dearest friends. For many people, such losses can wound the heart and make it incapable of further affection or cause affection to be buried and shared hesitantly with only a few. But Elizabeth's experience of the delight of human presence denied led her in a relentless search of another kind of presence — the intimate presence of an embodied God. We have hints of this in her journals as she recalls herself at the age of fifteen. Her father was in England at the time and she had been left with relatives in the country.

The air still, a clear blue vault above, the numberless sounds of spring melody and joy, the sweet clovers and wild flowers...Still can I 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 — sung hymns — cried — laughed in talking to myself of how far He could place me above all sorrow then layed still to enjoy the Heavenly Peace that came over my soul.¹

This pattern, of deeply engaged affection, followed by an experience of the loss of presence, followed by a subsequent experience of an even more sustaining presence was to be the pattern of Elizabeth's relational life for the rest of her days. Never, however, did she cease to love her family and friends less ardently. In fact, she seems to have deepened her capacity for human affection as she plunged deeper into intimacy with God.

One can only be charmed and touched by the evidence left of her affection for her husband William and for his younger sisters, Rebecca and Cecelia, her "dearest friend" and her "inseparable friend," whose care and then companionship Elizabeth came to cherish during her courtship and early married years. Her capacity for playful affectionate intimacy is echoed in a little note she penned to William during their courtship.

Your Eliza is well and would be perfectly happy if she could enjoy the society of her friend. I have wished very much to see you, and knew that indisposition only could have prevented my wish. Tomorrow I will wait in anxious expectation. Believe me,
Your Own²

Another later note penned to Rebecca Seton gives us a characteristic glimpse into the busy life of the young wife and mother, surrounded by the warmth of her loved ones, longing for those who are absent, gathering all together into her generous presence, giving advice, imploring, soliciting.

¹Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville, eds., *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, Classics of American Spirituality series (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 41.

²Joseph I. Dirvin, C. M., *Mrs. Seton: Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1962; rev. ed. 1975), 42.

My own Rebecca how much I wish you were here to enjoy this beautiful sunset at the corner of the Piazza. Father is visiting vessels, Willy and Charles are gone to see poor Richard safe to his lodgings — Cate is asleep and the three chicks running below... My Father scolds most terribly at yours and Mary's absence, indeed I don't know what account Charles will give of it...He calls Cate Aunt Rebecca and all the family have found out that she is your image — I pray that she may be both in the interior as well as the exterior. Indeed she is the sweetest little soul you can imagine and laughs continually when I am nursing her as if she knew who she ought to love best...My best love to [Mary] — and also to Eliza. I'm very glad Aunty is in the country for Charles gave a sad account of her. Will says sister James and all are well....³

What is striking is how Elizabeth is compelled to account for all those she loves. There is a marvelous maternal solicitude to her affections. When all the loved ones are gathered, or at least their happiness accounted for, then she is at peace. This maternal quality marked so many of her relationships. That quality is worth remarking upon. A mother's love can never be generic, can never be equated with the impartial, "universal" love that was encouraged in Catholic religious life for so many centuries. A mother loves very particularly. Indeed, maternal love is not gestated in some romantic or idealistic realm of abstraction, it is forged out of caring for a specific child or specific children. Those fingers, that head of hair, that special smile. Spousal love has much of the same quality and Elizabeth was an ardent spouse. The point is that motherly love is attentive to individual difference and adapts itself to the specific needs of unique individuals. All of Elizabeth Seton's charity had the mark of maternal tenderness.

But the tender presences that so enchanted Mother Seton were not to last. She was eventually to lose both Rebecca and Cecelia to consumption. Even before that, after nine years of companionship and the birth of five children, her husband William succumbed to the same illness. The dramatic story of the couple's journey to Italy in search of a health cure, their incarceration in the dank lazaretto, and William's last days is well known. Elizabeth's profound affection, her intense physical presence to her dying husband is captured in the picture of the young wife on her knees at his bedside.

³ *Selected Writings*, 76-77.

...at four the hard struggle ceased nature sank into a settled sob, "My dear wife and little ones and my Christ Jesus have mercy and receive me," was all I could distinguish and again repeated "my Christ Jesus" until a quarter past seven when the dear Soul took its flight to the blessed exchange it so much longed for —

...I took my little Ann in my arms and made her kneel with me again by the dear Body, and thanked our Heavenly Father for relieving him from his misery, for the joyful assurance...he had entered into Life eternal....

Now opening the door to let the people know it was finished...I took two women who had washed and sometimes assisted me and again shutting the door with their assistance did the last duties; and felt I had done it all — all that tenderest love and duty could do. My head had not rested for a week — three days and nights the fatigue had been incessant and one meal in 24 hours — oh, oh, oh, what a day. Close his eyes, lay him out, ride a journey...O My Father, and my God.⁴

Elizabeth's cry for a deeper, more sustaining presence at this sorrowful moment was characteristic. In Italy, surrounded by the concerned Filicchi family, Elizabeth found herself once again in search of intimate human presence. To an extent, the family, especially her late husband's friend, Antonio, provided what was needed. Her affection for him and his warm hospitable relations went beyond gratitude and formed the foundation of a relationship that would last a lifetime. But it was in Italy that another relationship began which would provide the young widow with the profound intimacy she would need to sustain her in all that was to come. Elizabeth fell in love with the Catholic Church. Under the tutelage of her foreign friends she entered a Catholic sanctuary for the first time and attended her first mass. It was the intense beauty, the sensuous corporeality of Italy's faith, that overwhelmed the widow. Of her initiating visit to La Santissima Annunziata, she wrote:

Passing through a curtain my eye was struck with hundreds of persons kneeling...forgetting...[my] companions...I sank on my knees in the first place I found vacant, and shed a torrent of tears...the elegance of the ceilings in carved gold, altars loaded with gold, silver and other precious ornaments, pictures of every sacred subject, and the dome a continued representation of different parts of Scripture — all this can never be conceived by description...⁵

⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁵ Dirvin, 131.

The grieving widow catalogued her awestruck apprehensions of sumptuous Italian Catholicism to her companions back home. That religion's visual and sensory expressiveness impressed itself upon her. But it was more than that. At the heart of Catholic dogma was the belief in the Real Presence. Every fibre of Elizabeth's being yearned toward grasping that mysterious affirmation. In the monastery church at the shrine of La Madonna del Grazie on Monte Nero, at the point of the elevation of the host during the mass, a skeptical English tourist turned to Elizabeth and whispered, "This is what they call their Real Presence." Stunned, something stirred inside her:

My very heart trembled with shame and sorrow for his unfeeling interruption of their sacred adoration, for all around was dead silence and many were prostrated. Involuntarily, I bent from him to the pavement, and thought secretly on the words of Saint Paul, with starting tears, "They discern not the Lord's Body" and the next thought was, how should they eat and drink their very damnation for not discerning it, if indeed it is not there? Yet how should it be there? And how did He breathe my soul in me? And how, and how a hundred other things I know nothing about?...⁶

Mrs. Seton may have "known nothing" but she sensed a momentous truth that struck her to the core. God, really present. Tangible, unimaginably intimate. The Body taken into, and feeding our bodies.

Elizabeth carried her enthrallment back to America. There, her hunger for this intimate embodied presence enabled her to withstand the astonished opposition to her conversion that family and friends leveled against her. There were these obstacles to overcome. And there were innumerable intellectual stumbling blocks to the final embrace of her new religion. But always it was that Presence that compelled her, her desire for concrete intimacy with her God. A few days before her first communion, she wrote to her Italian friend Amabilia Filicchi:

My God what new scenes for my Soul — ANNUNCIATION DAY
I shall be made one with him who said unless you eat my flesh and
drink my blood you can have no part of ME — I count the days
and hours.⁷

⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷ *Selected Writings*, 166.

Then when the day occurred:

At last Amabilia — at last — GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS — Now let all go its round. I HAVE RECEIVED HIM...MY GOD — to the last breath of life I will [not] remember this night of watching for morning dawn — the fearful beating heart so pressing to be gone — the long walk to town, but every step counted nearer the street — then nearer the tabernacle, then nearer the moment he would enter the poor little dwelling so all his own.⁸

Sustaining her rapturous intimate encounters were her much loved friends, the Filicchis, her sister-in-laws Rebecca, then Cecelia Seton, both of whom eventually followed her into the faith. These horizontal relationships increased in depth as her intimacy with the eucharistic God grew. For Elizabeth intuited that human and divine loves are profoundly intertwined. It is especially in her many friendships that she makes this clear. Like Francis de Sales before her, whose *Introduction to the Devout Life* she knew well, Elizabeth understood that the bonds of friendship forged from a mutual love of God are in themselves bonds that bind us more closely to the divine life. For friendship is a special form of love that is both mutual and equal, which encourages shared growth while it offers support, and which respects the dignity and distinctiveness of the partners while celebrating their interdependence with one another.

Elizabeth would have carried everyone she loved along into her awe struck discovery of God truly with us. Such were the ties that bound her in love to others that even those who opposed her conversion or who cut off contact with her because of it, were still cherished. The losses stung but they only increased her reliance on God. To Henry Hobart, her Anglican pastor and long time spiritual advisor, she wrote:

You have certainly...been dearer to me than God: for Whom, my reason, my judgement and my conviction used their combined forces against the value of your esteem. The combat was in vain. Still, if you will not be my brother, if your dear friendship and esteem must be the price of my fidelity to what I believe to be the truth, I cannot doubt the mercy of God who, by depriving me of my dearest tie on earth, will certainly draw me nearer to Him...⁹

⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁹ Dirvin, 146.

Elizabeth Ann was asked in the next years to give up more than Hobart's companionship, more than the support of family and friends. She was asked to relinquish the presence of those dearest to her mother's heart, her own children. How tightly bound Elizabeth's heart was to her children! Throughout the letters of her early married years, her delight in "her darlings" is constantly evident. Their cheering presence, in arms, scurrying about the house, at their schoolwork, gathered around their little table for dinner, pervades her world. When she left New York as a new convert and launched on her teaching activities as a Sister of Charity in Maryland, she took her children with her — the boys eventually attended the nearly Sulpician academy, the girls continued their education alongside their mother in their school house-home. And it was the loss of one of them, Anna, her eldest, that presented the greatest challenge to Elizabeth's faith. That tortuously painful death almost broke the cycle of lost human presence giving way to a deeper apprehension of divine presence. Anna was a mere seventeen and though her mother endured heroically up to the point of her death, immediately afterward she was plunged into desolation.

For three months after Nina was taken I was so often expecting to lose my senses, and my head was so disordered, that unless for the daily duties always before me, I did not know much what I did or what I left undone.¹⁰

She was brought to the brink of despair. Praying in the small graveyard where Anna lay buried next to others Elizabeth had loved and lost, a grim scene presented itself to her.

At this moment in the silence of the all around [there was] a rattling sound making towards — along Anna's grave. A snake stretched itself on the dried grass — so large and ugly; and the little gate tied — but Nature was able to drag to the place and strong enough to tie and untie, saying inwardly, my darling shall not be rooted out by the hogs for you — then put up the bars and safely walked away — oh my dear ones companion of worms and reptiles? And the beautiful soul where?¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

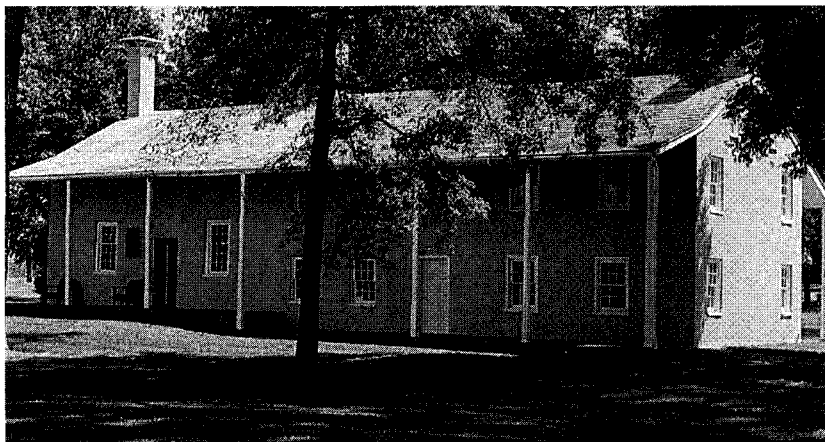
It was another intimate human presence who was able to help Elizabeth find her way through the dark interior valley into which her daughter's death had plunged her. Father Bruté, a Sulpician priest and her spiritual friend, succeeded in dispelling her gloom and restoring to her the conviction that she would be reunited with those she loved after death. It was this assurance that they all would in the end find themselves present to one another that pierced through her engulfing grief. And it was that vision — of never-ending embodied intimacy — that sustained her to the end. In the years following Anna's death she could write to her longtime friend Julia Scott:

I sit by the window, opposite my darling darling's little wood. The white palings appear thru the trees. Oh Julia, My Julia, if we may not pass our dear eternity together! Are you good? Do you try to be good? I try with my whole heart. I long so to get above this blue horizon. Oh my Anna, the child of my soul! All, all dear ones so many years gone before! ETERNAL REUNION!¹²

The assurance of being reunited with those she loved consoled Elizabeth, but her hope was founded not simply on someone else's word. It was founded as well on her own experience of God-present — in the eucharist and in the very experience of suffering itself. Father Bruté and the other Sulpicians who advised the mother-foundress, indeed, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, founders of the Parisian Daughters of Charity and the Italian Catholicism of the Filicchis, were steeped in a spirituality whose core was identification with the Crucified. Early in her Catholic years she had recommended to her sister-in-law the book that had taken the place of all her other reading, *The Sufferings of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by Thomas of Jesus (de Andrade).¹³ It, like so many devotional books of the time, instilled a deep sense that the Lord's sufferings were a special sign of divine love and invited the reader to find her own sufferings mirrored and transfigured there. It was the divine presence, in the embodied form of the Crucified discovered in her own pain, that sustained Elizabeth Seton through a lifetime of loss and which fueled her faith in the ultimate triumph of love. How natural that she should imagine, in her dreams of final intimacy with God, the presence of those whom she had been given to love in her lifetime.

¹² Ibid., 335.

¹³ Marie Celeste, S.C., *The Intimate Friendships of Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton: First Native-born American Saint (1774-1821)* (New York: Alba House, 1989), 124.



The Stone House (c. 1750), Birthplace of the American Sisters of Charity.
National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emmitsburg, Maryland

There is a marvelous freshness to Elizabeth Ann Seton's writings, with their exclamation points and bold capitalizations. They reveal a woman unashamed to abandon herself unselfconsciously to love. They reveal a woman gifted with transparency of heart. She loved passionately — father, husband, children, friends and, above all, God. She was not afraid to express that love in all its tenderness, ferocity, pathos, and delight. Throughout her life the pattern of searching for an increasingly intimate experience of embodied presence was predominant. Her human loves were transparent windows through which she viewed God, her love of God the foundation of all her other loves. But neither of those loves was ever abstract or ideational. Both were specific, concrete, and experienced as intensely present. The two interconnected arms of embodied love — human and divine — embraced and met in her.

She is a most attractive saint. I find her gifts to us today to be these. She models for us the art of relationship with its full range of emotional expressiveness: nothing cramped, nothing stilted, nothing restrained. Her loves *were* her life. They *were* her spiritual pathway. In a tradition of saintly folks who often mistrusted human love, who cultivated indifference to intimacy, who sometimes abandoned children and parents in search of some higher, truer love, Elizabeth Seton gives us a refreshing glimpse into a profound sanctity which honors the human face of love.

She shows us the ardor of maternal love and the beauty of spousal love, and baptizes them both for us as avenues for genuine spiritual

transformation. It is especially her maternal gifts — the way she practiced attentiveness to the *particular* persons in her care, her flexibility and kindness in leading them, her recognition of their unique qualities — that are wonderful gifts to us. They find a happy home today with feminist theories in the fields of theology, philosophy, and psychology in which an ethics of care that is responsive to particular needs and circumstances, is contrasted with an ethics based on abstract principles that take precedence over the concrete complexities of human experience.¹⁴

Mother Seton reveals to us as well the spiritual gift of friendship in all its modalities. It was not only her husband and children who commanded her affection. She cultivated friendships with vigor. With today's renewed interdisciplinary interest in friendship as a paradigm for right and just relations with God and others, and with today's concern for models of relationship that foster mutuality and adult responsibility, Elizabeth's many friendships should be of interest to us.¹⁵

Finally, she gifts us with her open-hearted abandon to her God, whose tender intimacy she experienced in the eucharist and whose compassionate embodied presence she encountered in the deepest sufferings of her life. Elizabeth loved the God she ate, who entered her, the God whose flesh was pierced, who she encountered inside the most ecstatic and pain-filled experiences of her own life. Theological reflection has suggested that the pendulum in the human-divine love debate may have swung so far to the other side that many people today equate the love of God with the love and care of others.¹⁶ In some respect this is a common sense equation. But Mother Seton reminds us that running parallel to, or better, undergirding our love of others is the primal love of God. Not only God's love for us — but our love of God. A reciprocal celebration of desire and delight.

Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton showed us the way these great and compelling loves intertwine — how we are brought to God through one another, and how we are brought more intimately to one another through God. It was her relentless quest for intimate presence, her need to be close, to experience closeness in all of its fleshy fullness, that is so distinctively her own. She is indeed the saint par excellence who teaches us the Art of Embodied Presence.

¹⁴ Although there is a growing literature on this, I think especially of the work of Carol Gilligan and Nell Noddings on the Ethics of Care.

¹⁵ Margaret Farley and Edward Vacek lead the theologians in this endeavor.

¹⁶ Edward Vacek's current work on love of God explores this topic.