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Incarnational Spiritual Influences: Baptismal Covenant & the Life Styles / Stages of Elizabeth Seton

BY

FRANCES RYAN, D.C.

“One faith, one hope, one Baptism” – Elizabeth Seton¹

In Genesis 10:13, God says to Noah: “This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” Can one look at a rainbow and not be reminded of that covenant with God? Baptism is strongly allied to the initiation of the covenant. The Greek verb *baptizein*, from which we derive our term “baptism” means “taking the plunge.” “It is a “joining” that is so radical it has eternal consequences; we can never “un-join.” Baptism is never repeated.”² The metaphor of the rainbow, a multi-faceted prism, captures the baptismal covenant of Elizabeth Seton.

Elizabeth entered the lifestyles of stepchild, wife, mother, widow, convert, and foundress based on that baptismal covenant, ever seeking the common thread of the “will of God” for herself. In some ways, Elizabeth represents what may be the call of religious life in the new millennium. With the norm of life expectancy extending to 80 years will not ‘the call’ come to women at different times in their lives, as it happened in the young Seton community? Will not other lifestyles give a richness to the call of vocation? Elizabeth’s life suggests that it would, in a continuum and expression of the baptismal covenant.

Noted in her copy of the *Following of Christ* (1800) are the precious words:

October 5, 1818

Will not Jesus Christ be with me? Was I not signed
with the cross of salvation in Baptism, with the unction
of the Holy Ghost in Confirmation?

Do I not eat the Bread of the strong in the Holy Eucha-

¹ Katherine Burton, *His Dear Persuasion: The Life of Elizabeth Ann Seton* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1940), 12.

² T. Richstatter, “Sacraments of Invitation,” *Catholic Update* (March 2001): 1.



Holy Card of St. Elizabeth Seton.
Public domain

rist? Am I not washed in His Blood in the Sacrament of Penance and do I not hope to die prepared by the Sacred Unction which opens heaven to us as we quit the earth — ³

These words were particularly important because Elizabeth Seton may have been baptized at Trinity Episcopal Church in New York, some-

³ Jean Augustine, S.C., Sara Louise Reilly, S.C., M. Catherine Seli, S.C., et al., *Marginal Notes & Markings from Mother Seton's Copy of the Following of Christ* (Greensburg: Charles M. Henry Printing, 1999), 17.

time between 1774-1775, possibly by her grandfather, Reverend Richard Charlton.⁴ However, due to a fire in 1776, wherein the records were destroyed, the Sacred Congregation of Rites accepted the statement of Baptism as written in her copy of *The Following of Christ* (1800) to proceed with the process of canonization.

Elizabeth Seton reflected on Baptism in a journal when the last of her five children, Rebecca, was baptized. She wrote: "This day my little Rebecca was received in the Ark of our Lord. Oh, that she may receive the fullness of his Grace and remain in the number of his faithful children – that being steadfast in faith, joyful through hope and rooted in charity, she may so pass the waves of this troublesome world that finally she may enter the land of everlasting life."⁵ Elizabeth Seton made consistent spiritual referral to "his kingdom" and "God is God in it all," themes expressed throughout her life.

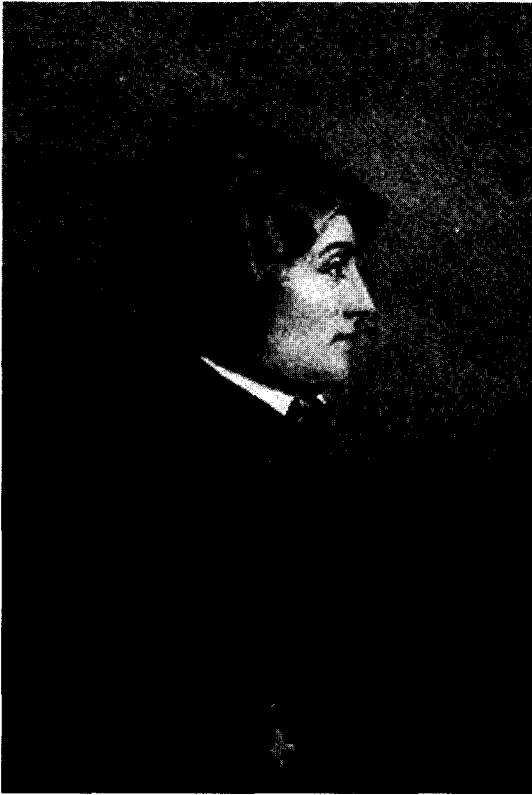
The Culture that Elizabeth was Born Into

"Elizabeth had the blood of French, English and Dutch colonial pioneers in her veins and was of 'rooted American stock'; both of her parents and two of her grandparents were born in the United States. When our great Republic was born, she became a charter citizen."⁶ Judith Metz, S.C., in "Elizabeth Seton: Her World and Her Church," points out five chief characteristics in colonial society that influenced Elizabeth Seton within the context of her political, economic and social times. The first influence was a budding democratic society with broad-based representation. Secondly, education was a priority, particularly demonstrated by the desire of fifty families to hire a schoolmaster. By the 18th century, most men and women could read and write. The third characteristic was the diversity of religious groups, ecumenical in nature. The fourth characteristic was the position of women in colonial society. Seventeenth-century Puritan women had proprietary and contractual rights under colonial laws far exceeding their rights under English law. Although excluded from office, they had more power in

⁴ Ellin M. Kelly, Ph.D., *Numerous Choirs: A Chronicle of Elizabeth Bayley Seton and Her Spiritual Daughters. Vol 1: The Seton Years (1774-1821)* (Evansville: Mater Dei Provincialate, 1981), 5; and Joseph Dirvin, C.M., *Mrs. Seton: Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 5.

⁵ Ellin M. Kelly, Ph.D., Annabelle Melville, eds., *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 36-7.

⁶ Judith Metz, S.C., "Elizabeth Seton: Her World and Her Church," *Vincentian Heritage* 14:2 (1993): 199.



Portrait of Elizabeth Seton
Public Domain

religious, economic and political life than did women anywhere else in the contemporary world. The fifth characteristic was the mobility of society, a lifestyle typical of small farmers. The chief value was self-sufficiency. It is to be noted that the Catholic Church was in the minority, and was a young church. John Carroll, the first Bishop of the United States, was appointed in 1789, the same year that George Washington became the first President of the United States.⁷

Daughter & Stepchild in the Bayley Family

Though little is known of Elizabeth's mother, Catherine Charlton, she came from a good family. Catherine's father was the Reverend

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

Richard Charlton, rector of Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, Staten Island, and his wife was Mary Bayeux. Catherine Charlton Bayley was to know long separations from her husband, Richard Bayley, who was immersed in medical education, research and service to others in medicine. He would travel to England to be mentored in anatomy by William Hunter, a famous surgeon. During the course of their eight year marriage, Catherine and Richard spent only four years together.⁸ Survival for this young mother of two girls may have been dependent on her relatives in the country.

Because of the strength in personality of Elizabeth Seton, one can only conjecture that her mother, Catherine, was a loving, affectionate mother. There certainly seemed to be an attachment, expressed in Elizabeth's fond remembrances of her. Today, in research studies of the brain, it is clear that the first three years of life are the most important in establishing the "first relationships" for the child and experiencing, through attachment, that passionate, focused bond that gives the child a sense of being loved and being special. Catherine, until her untimely death in 1777, seemed to provide that to Elizabeth.

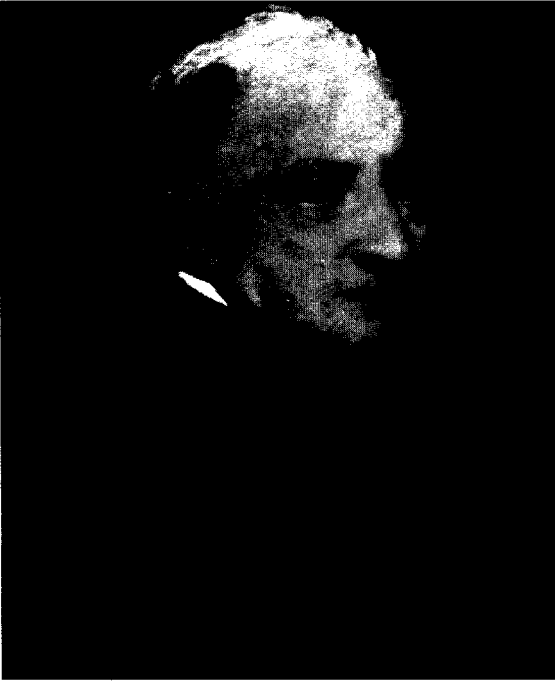
The impact of loss felt during her husband's long absences must have been a source of sadness for Catherine, perhaps something that was communicated to Elizabeth, who also dealt with loss and the sense of 'being abandoned' by her mother's death and the multiple, prolonged absences of her father.

Elizabeth's relationship with her father was, in my opinion, a central theme in her life. Joseph Dirvin, C.M., reflected that Richard was very attached to Elizabeth, as they had similar interests.⁹ After the loss of her mother in 1777, she dealt with a stepmother, Charlotte Barclay Bayley, who seemed to have little affect for Elizabeth and her older sister, Mary. Being moved several times to live with relatives, after the age of eight the only "constant" for Elizabeth was her father.

The struggles of her father, who seemed impervious to religion but not to charity and service of poor persons, seemed to revolve around the tension of "family" versus "education in medicine and service of others." This followed Elizabeth throughout her life. Though deeply religious, she constantly wrote about the tension of "family" as opposed to "the mission of education and service of others." Remembering the absence and eventual loss of her father, she struggled to place

⁸ Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.



John Carroll (1735-1815). The first Bishop of the United States.
Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, MD

“family” first so that her children would not experience what she felt in childhood. “The only reply I can make to every question is to say ‘I am a mother.’”¹⁰

Another noteworthy theme demonstrates how education came to be a priority for Elizabeth through three influences in her life: 1) the influence of her father; 2) the influence of Rousseau; and 3) the influence of reverie or fantasy in her life.

First, Elizabeth’s relationship with her father was a primary factor. Charles White points out that Richard Bayley saw American youth as given to a “spirit of independence,” and that he wanted to impress upon Elizabeth that “a brilliant character is not always a solid one.” There was the necessity for “self-restraint, reflection, and curtailment of pleasure” which led to happiness in mature years.¹¹ He encouraged

¹⁰ Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., “Elizabeth Ann Seton: A Woman of Mission, Part Two: Seton Legacy,” *Echoes of the Company* 11 (November 2000): 547.

¹¹ Charles White, *Mother Seton: Mother of Many Daughters* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1949), 3.

her in the study of French, history, literature and probably had a library where Elizabeth could read and develop her education.

Richard Bayley's life impacted Elizabeth. Dirvin notes that Richard Bayley was a man of his times, idealistic, and that his higher motivations were not devotion to God so much as the worth and dignity of the human person. "Intellectually, he was exceptional. As a medical researcher, Bayley had the touch of genius," particularly in his research in croup, diphtheria and yellow fever. With little material to work with, although he did not pinpoint the mosquito as a carrier of disease, he intuitively recognized the swamps surrounding New York were "trouble spots" and fought to have them drained and the land filled. His research, medical theory and skill at surgery, entitled him to be considered 'the best' at 30 years of age. In 1792 he was offered the Chair of Anatomy, and later, the Chair of Surgery, by Columbia University.¹²

Above all, Dr. Richard Bayley was a "completely self-sacrificing physician who gave himself to the poor as to the rich. He died as a result of ministering to the immigrants by contracting typhus."¹³ He was conflicted between education and research; dedicated service, and family. It is this dilemma that he "passed down" to Elizabeth.

A second major influence was Jean-Jacques Rousseau and *Emile*,¹⁴ Rousseau's treatise on education written in the 18th century. In 1799 Elizabeth wrote to Eliza Sadler: "Your Jean-Jacques Rousseau has awakened many ideas which have long since been at rest, indeed he is the writer I shall always refer to in a season of sorrow for he makes me forget myself whilst reading, but leaves the most consoling impression on every thought."¹⁵ Though Rousseau pointed out in his five books of *Emile* that he had "little use" for the Bible and, in her later years, Elizabeth probably abandoned his spiritual thought, there are some central concepts in the five books that must have directed her future in education.¹⁶

¹² Annabelle Melville, *Elizabeth Seton* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 11.

¹³ Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton*, 3.

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or, on Education* (1762), ed. A. Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 501 pp.

¹⁵ Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings, Volume One, (1793-1808)* (New York: New City Press, 2000), 99.

¹⁶ Marilyn Thie, S.C., "The Woman, Elizabeth Bayley Seton: 1793-1803," *Vincentian Heritage* 14:2 (1993): 236.

Rousseau was not a methodologist. He was a philosopher. He gave the reader ideas. Elizabeth was not the only one struck by Rousseau, others included Frederick Froebel and Pestalozzi, founders of the elementary school and kindergarten in Germany. In the 18th century, Rousseau pointed out in his "Discourse on the Origins of Inequality" that a human person was "born free, equal, self-sufficient, unprejudiced and whole."¹⁷ Long before slavery was ended this was startling, and Elizabeth believed in this as illustrated by her later education, particularly in the sacraments, of black children caught in slavery.¹⁸

Rousseau, in his tutelage, was "child-centered" and fostered in Emile the development of faculties grounded in the experience of his senses, with learning as a natural outcome. "The tutor's responsibility is to let the senses develop in relationship to their proper objects."¹⁹ Elizabeth, whether in Baltimore on Paca Street, in the Stone House, or in the White House in Emmitsburg, would probably have been inclined to let children use the five senses in education.

Another key element was Rousseau's concept of "Compassion." "Rousseau singlehandedly invented the category of the disadvantaged" in terms related to civil society.²⁰ He wrote of man's imaginative sensibility awakened to the concerns of others, particularly the poor, the sick, the oppressed and the unfortunate. Elizabeth saw this value lived in the life of her father and she, too, began integrating it into her own life.

Third of all for Elizabeth, education provided an outlet and became something she could hold onto seeking balance and self-regulation in a life that had much upheaval. There were the long absences of her father, and her stepmother, who remained devoted to her own children and had little time for Elizabeth and her sister. When Elizabeth was eight, her father moved the two sisters to live with his brother William in New Rochelle, New York. They spent long periods of time with their Uncle Will.

Indeed, until her marriage in 1794, Elizabeth's life was spent at her father's home in New York, at Uncle Will's in New Rochelle, and then,

¹⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 5.

¹⁸ Metz, "Elizabeth Seton," 210.

¹⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

after Mary's marriage to Dr. Wright Post, in Mary's house. From eight years old to nineteen years old, Elizabeth was shifted from place to place.²¹ Learning and education captured the imagination of Elizabeth, and her reverie or reflection of ideas gave her the necessary tools for what was ahead in life. We know today that when reality is painful for a child, the child turns to fantasy. Elizabeth wrote to Julia Scott, "so I have all my pretty library and my music to myself."²²

During this turbulent period of adolescence Elizabeth seemed to struggle with depression and "melancholy." Her father had gone to England for a year and she had no idea when or if he would return. About her later youth she wrote in "Dear Remembrances," "God had created me. I was very miserable. He was too good to condemn a creature made of dust – driven by misery (this the wretched reasoning). Laudanum (drugs).²³ The praise and thanks of excessive joy not to have done the horrid deed. The thousand promises of eternal gratitude."²⁴ Annabelle Melville comments that "some biographers interpret this passage to indicate that Elizabeth Bayley contemplated suicide. The present writer finds the horrid deed 'an insufficient description to serve as conclusive evidence of such an intention!'" Melville concluded "The melancholy moods did not persist. Elizabeth was too young and New York too gay, to allow a permanent gloom."²⁵ Elizabeth wrote in her journal: "There is a certain temper I am sometimes subject to – it is not sullenness or absolute discontent, 'tis a kind of melancholy; still I like it better than those effusions of cheerfulness – I prefer the sadness because I know it may be removed; it may change to cheerfulness."²⁶ Depression has cycles, a good illustration being a persistent sadness that lasts no longer than two years.²⁷ What is interesting is that with or without medication this cycle ends, "and it changes to cheerfulness," but it can return to the person's life. Often referred to

²¹ Daughters of Saint Paul, *The Saints: Icons of Light and Love, Elizabeth Ann Seton* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), 13.

²² Joseph B. Code, *Letters of Mother Seton to Mrs. Julianna Scott* (Emmitsburg: Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, 1935), 100.

²³ Laudanum is an opiate, and was sometimes used to calm infants stricken with colic.

²⁴ Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, I: 37.

²⁵ Melville, *Elizabeth Seton*, 15.

²⁶ White, *Mother Seton*, 4-5.

²⁷ "Dystemic Depression" in *DSMIV-TR* (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), pp. 376-381.

as “melancholy,” Elizabeth seemed to suffer this cyclic sadness in different periods of her life.

Spiritually, Elizabeth, rooted in the Episcopal church, grew in her love of God. In “Dear Remembrances” she saw God in nature, in the love of friendship. She learned the 23rd psalm from her stepmother, Charlotte, which gave her much peace throughout her life. The Bible was a source of comfort to her, and an inspiration for her prayer and unfolding spirituality.

As mentioned, this period of Elizabeth’s life as a child was characterized by a strong relationship to her father, but a difficult relationship with her stepmother (until a reconciliation on Charlotte Bayley’s deathbed). In living between a variety of households Elizabeth experienced mobility. Similar to foster home children, Elizabeth had to adapt to a variety of family systems. She learned coping and resilient skills, though apparently plagued with periodic sadness. Her piety grew to a strong Faith, under the influence of Henry Hobart, and her growing spirituality gave her constancy.

In building a rainbow of the baptismal covenant, the color of purple appears for Elizabeth as stepchild.

Wife: Marriage to William Seton (1794-1803)

In the baptismal covenant, Elizabeth entered into the lifestyle of marriage as wife. Although Elizabeth did not travel prior to her marriage, William was educated in England and had visited Italy where he apprenticed in banking with the Filicchi firm of Leghorn, while also enjoying opera and Florentine society. In England, he developed a taste for the theater which he refined when back in the United States. Elizabeth, in courtship, joined him in his love for theater and music. She embraced dancing and considered it an expression of fun.

Following their courtship Elizabeth married William in 1794, at the age of nineteen. Elizabeth and William were deeply in love. Elizabeth was one who kept up with the times! Sister Marilyn Thie notes the connection between the 1796 Saint Memin engraving of Elizabeth Seton and her “side-curl prominently on one side of the neck” as representative of the fashionable hair-style of 1789.²⁸ The first years of marriage, when Elizabeth was nineteen to twenty-three years old, flourished; Elizabeth was a part of the social life of the New York aristoc-

²⁸ Thie, “The Woman,” 233.

racy.²⁹ She helped found the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children under the spiritual influence of Henry Hobart, and performed works of charity for the poor and sick.³⁰ The Widows Society was the first organized, charitable organization established and managed by women in the United States.

Marilyn Thie's study of these years reflected on the advice that Elizabeth gave her daughter, Kit, when she was emerging into society. "Elizabeth warns her 'Kit' especially when interacting with men to 'mind your first impressions, my darling, and resist them until you can examine a little what may be their consequences.'"³¹ Here, Elizabeth gives advice about social relationships to her daughter, thereby embracing her own sexuality as a woman, wife, and mother.

Elizabeth was in a good marriage. The relationship with her husband was in keeping with the mores of the times matching an "older, wiser, mentor husband"; and "darling little wife," though William Magee may have been describing Elizabeth in reference to her size.³² William was attentive to Elizabeth at the births of their five children: Anna Maria, born 1795; William, born 1796; Richard, born 1798; Catherine, born 1800; and Rebecca, born 1802. With the birth of Rebecca, the youngest, William even scripted a letter to Julia Scott, announcing the arrival of the baby.³³

As time passed, William traveled more frequently. By 1796, his health began to deteriorate. In 1798 his father died and, with the onset of financial problems and business crises, this proved a turning point for William Magee. Elizabeth wrote to Julia Scott that she was helping him with arrangements "for he has no friend or confidant now on Earth but his little wife."³⁴

When Elizabeth was only 24 years old, she described to Julia Scott, "you may imagine that eighteen in a family, in a house containing only five small rooms is rather more than enough."³⁵ The household included Elizabeth's own family and William's younger brothers and

²⁹ *Daughters of Saint Paul, The Saints*, 15.

³⁰ Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton*, 86.

³¹ Thie, "The Woman," 231.

³² *Ibid.*, 238.

³³ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁴ Bechtle, Metz, *Collected Writings*, 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

sisters. At one point, Elizabeth, in 1799, wrote Scott that “the very best of these men are so unruly and perplexing that nothing could induce a reasonable woman to wear the chains of two of them, and that’s the plain English of Matrimony, Julia.”³⁶

Elizabeth, happily married, seemed to view the man-woman relationship realistically rather than idealistically. It is a lesson that carried her through future male-female relationships in subsequent life styles. As her husband’s health deteriorated, a period began wherein Elizabeth faced multiple losses. From 1801 to 1804, Elizabeth lost her father, her husband, and her closest friend, her sister-in-law and soul-sister, Rebecca Seton.

The death of her father was difficult as “after her marriage, Elizabeth’s relationship with her father improved and deepened dramatically. He assisted her in the difficult birth of Richard; he became closer to the family after the birth of Catherine. He died contracting typhus from his patients on Staten Island on August 17, 1801.”³⁷ Elizabeth had little time to grieve her father because of the crisis emerging in her own family with the illness of her husband.

William’s health worsened and a trip to Leghorn, Italy, was planned to allow him recuperation time with the Filicchi family. The crossing by boat took about seven weeks with William Magee, Elizabeth and Anna Maria aboard, but, unexpectedly, ended in quarantine in the Lazzaretto due to a fear of yellow fever.³⁸ William died 27 December 1803, at the age of 35. Elizabeth was 29 years old. Elizabeth’s husband, a humanitarian, with death approaching, religiously converted through her influence.

During this time, Elizabeth wrote her sister-in-law, Rebecca Seton, and in a journal was able to express her feelings of grief. Upon her return from Leghorn, Italy, on 4 June 1804, Elizabeth found that Rebecca was near death; Rebecca died 8 July 1804.³⁹

For Elizabeth, in her lifestyle as wife, the color of green appears in the rainbow of the baptismal covenant. She now entered a new stage as widow and convert.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁷ Ellin M. Kelly, Ph.D., “Elizabeth Ann Seton: Key Relationships in Her Life: (1774-1809),” *Vincentian Heritage* 14:2 (1993): 308.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 310.

Widow and Convert

The Filicchi family was a strong influence on Elizabeth. From the time the Setons set sail from America, they were gone nine months. Elizabeth and Anna Maria were planning to return to America, setting sail immediately with Captain O'Brien on the ship *Shepherdess*, however a series of events, including Anna Maria and Elizabeth contracting scarlet fever, lengthened their stay in Italy.⁴⁰

While in Italy, Elizabeth suffered from her losses and needed time to grieve. In receiving the warm hospitality of the Filicchi family, she was impressed by their reverence. The Filicchi family gave her the writings of Saint Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and Filippo Filicchi prepared a 56 page manuscript entitled "Brief Exposition to the Catholic Faith."⁴¹ Elizabeth was also struck by the reverence for the Eucharist, devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, and the beauty of the Eucharistic Liturgy.⁴² The return voyage with Antonio, and the growth of their friendship, gave Elizabeth the support she needed to travel, and not alone, the journey of grief. With the loss of her father and her husband, she turned not only to Antonio for support, but spiritually, toward her desire for an ever deepening relationship with God in a search for the true faith.

The process of loss and the fragility of life became, for Elizabeth, "tender ground" for metanoia and conversion. Cardinal Francis George, in his retreat notes for Pope John Paul II, recently remarked that "metanoia," or "conversion," brings about a change in attitude in such a way that demonstrates interior change. It is freedom from selfishness that allows discovery of one's true self. It implies a freedom to give, a rediscovered ability to give and give generously; it is the freedom of the Gospel.⁴³ For Elizabeth the journey of metanoia burned deeply, she could not turn back.

When Elizabeth returned to America, she returned to a new lifestyle endowed with the heart of a Roman Catholic. She was poor in many ways. As an Episcopalian Elizabeth was a part of the major religion of the 1800's; in her period of discernment to be a Catholic she would

⁴⁰ Melville, *Elizabeth Seton*, 75-6.

⁴¹ Kelly, "Elizabeth," 323-4.

⁴² Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., "Elizabeth Ann Seton: A Woman of Mission, Part One: Citizen of the World," *Echoes of the Company* 9-10 (September-October 2000): 490.

⁴³ Cardinal Francis George, OMI, Vatican City (CNS), *The Catholic New World* 109 (2001): 11.

find herself in the minority. As a widow and mother of five children, she was without resources. She sought discernment with her Episcopalian Spiritual Director, Henry Hobart, who prepared a 75 page rejoinder.⁴⁴ She wrote Amabilia Filicchi, in January, 1805, "I will go peaceably and firmly to the Catholic Church."⁴⁵ "She made her profession of faith on 14 March, and on 25 March received the Holy Eucharist for the first time, then declared, 'God is mine and I am His.'"⁴⁶

Two interesting themes developed from Elizabeth Seton's lifestyle as widow. First, she learned to count on the strength of a supportive community around her, such as lifelong friends Julia Scott, Eliza Sadler, and Catherine Duplex. She relied on Antonio Filicchi and the Filicchi family to assist her in the transition. The education of her boys, William and Richard, for example, was financially supported by Antonio Filicchi and Archbishop John Carroll.

The second theme was her resulting understanding of widows and their needs in a more profound and sympathetic way. Elizabeth's friend Julia Scott lost her husband; and later, two major figures in the Sisters of Charity, Rose White and Margaret George would join her, both as widows.

Therefore the colors of black, for grief as a widow, and blue, for conversion to the Catholic Faith, join the rainbow of the baptismal covenant for Elizabeth Seton.

Sole Mother to Five Children (1803-1821)

Of foremost importance for Elizabeth was her relationship with her children. With Annina and Willy, her two first-born, she had time to enjoy and deepen her attachment. Both demonstrated independence of thought and behavior, such as Annina's interest in Charles as her first boyfriend at Baltimore and, after his apprenticeship in Italy, Wilham's assertion of independence to leave the Valley. Richard was a difficult birth in 1798 and, since many women and children died in childbirth, it was a concern for Elizabeth. Richard had difficulty in school and in his career, eventually leaving the Filicchi family to serve with the Navy as a civil servant. Much of the turmoil resulting from losses in Elizabeth's life came at an impressionable time, Richard's early childhood. Like his mother before, Richard knew mobility in extended family and friends. He remained with his brother, Willy, and received

⁴⁴ Kelly, "Elizabeth," 325.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁴⁶ Kelly, "Elizabeth," 327; Bechtel, Metz, *Collected Writings*, 346-348.

his early education from his mother, later studying at Georgetown, Saint Mary's College in Baltimore, and Mount Saint Mary's College, Emmitsburg. Catherine, born in 1800, and her sister, Rebecca, born in 1802, also arrived during a period of immediate crisis for Elizabeth and the family.

Poverty played a central role for Elizabeth in raising the children alone. Survival and resiliency skills that Elizabeth had learned in childhood came back. She was a fierce protector of her children. The spiritual dilemma was how to live out her conversion to the Catholic Faith in the light of so many obstacles.

The years of 1805-1808 were a painful struggle for Elizabeth. In leaving the Episcopalian faith, she was ostracized from the community and her effort to begin a school was thwarted. This was not an easy period for the children.

One of the skills Elizabeth relied upon was maintaining relationships with others. She communicated frequently with friends and family for support. The focus of her letters to Julia Scott and Eliza Sadler was common interests and friends as well as the physical, developmental and emotional events in her life, and her relationship with the children. In her correspondence with Antonio and Amabilia Filicchi, Elizabeth discussed her spiritual development as well as the financial protection and future of the children and schools. The reflection and response from those that supported her provided Elizabeth strength and love to share with the children.

There are several internal conflicts that troubled Elizabeth throughout the rest of her life. The first was inherited from her father; that sense of mission and the battle for education and service to others versus time and commitment to her family. The second was being a mother while also foundress of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's. This dichotomy, particularly up to 1812, was a major trial for Elizabeth. When three French Daughters of Charity were to come to America in 1810, Elizabeth wrote to Archbishop Carroll with many questions and concluded "How can they allow me the limitless privileges of a Mother to my five darlings? – Or how can I in conscience, or in accordance with your fatherly heart, give up so sacred a right?"⁴⁷ Later, Elizabeth

⁴⁷ Seton to Carroll, 13 May 1811, in McNeil, "Elizabeth Ann Seton . . . Part Two," 546-7.

wrote to Catherine Dupleix, "the thought of living out of our valley would seem impossible if I belonged to myself; but the dear ones have first claim on me and this must always be inviolable."⁴⁸ Elizabeth eventually concluded, "The only reply I can make to every question is to say I am a mother. Whatever Providence expects of me, I say "Amen" to it."⁴⁹ In the ways of Providence, Elizabeth never had to face that decision as the French Daughters of Charity were unable to come to America due to Napoleonic policies in France.

The losses of her two daughters, Anna Maria and Rebecca, were marked by sharp contrast. Ellin Kelly stresses Annina's death in 1812 as a major trauma in the life of Elizabeth. Though Annina and Elizabeth talked about being united in eternity, and Annina, on her deathbed, took the vows as a Sister of Charity, Elizabeth's grief turned to depression for a period. Kelly notes two of Elizabeth's reflections that are quite telling about the serious nature of this time. "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 of what I did or what I left undone." Elizabeth also reflected, "The separation from my angel has left so new and deep an impression on my mind, that if I was not obliged to live in these dear ones I should unconsciously die in her."⁵⁰

The Reverend Simon Bruté was involved in Elizabeth's life at this time as her confidant and spiritual director, and he supported her during Annina's last illness, and later, Rebecca's death. Rebecca's death, though difficult for Elizabeth, was met with more strength and peace. Bruté was present when Elizabeth spent months in the child's room, where she remained throughout the dying process. Yet, Elizabeth maintained her own good health and seemed more resigned to what Providence held for her and for Becky. After her death, Elizabeth wrote, "You must give me up, as I do myself, into His hands Who has done so much for us both."⁵¹

Interestingly, Elizabeth "let go" of her three remaining children after 1816. What helped ease her struggle was the adolescence of the children and their need to leave the Valley after their education. Will-

⁴⁸ Seton to Catherine Dupleix, 4 February 1810, in McNeil, "Elizabeth Ann Seton . . . Part Two," 547.

⁴⁹ Seton to George Weis, in McNeil, "Elizabeth Ann Seton . . . Part Two," 547.

⁵⁰ Kelly, Melville, *Selected Writings*, 36.

⁵¹ Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton*, 386.

iam left for the Navy; Richard went to Baltimore, then to Italy with the Filicchi family; and Catherine visited with Julia Scott in New York for a period of time. All three children returned to the Valley to visit Elizabeth, and her thoughts and concerns were constantly with them. Elizabeth also turned to the "mission," the deepening of community life and the receptivity to the "the calls of the church and the cries of the poor" in the form of requests for the Sisters in Philadelphia (1814) and New York (1817).

The color of rose, for everlasting love as a mother, joins the rainbow of the baptismal covenant for Elizabeth Seton.

Religious Foundress (Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's)

In 1808 Bishop Carroll and the Sulpicians in Baltimore gave Elizabeth the financial and community support that she needed to run her small boarding school beside Saint Mary's College.⁵² [Influenced possibly by her readings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, Elizabeth's ideas about education developed into an approach that was child-centered. Starting with the five senses of the child and the experience of their daily lives, but advanced in a "team approach" towards teaching.⁵³] Elizabeth was holistic in her methods, including learning music, art, sewing and recreation in a greater whole. She developed what is thought today excellent curriculum planning, but in simple terms.

In late 1808 and early 1809, the Sulpicians sent six candidates to be the first Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's; by 31 December 1809, there were thirteen candidates.⁵⁴ Starting out with a simple rule, they adopted the way of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac with modifications for America, namely prioritizing the education of young girls.⁵⁵ In 1812, Elizabeth was elected the first Mother of the Sisters of Charity, serving until her death in 1821. Samuel Sutherland Cooper purchased Emmitsburg property for the small community. John Dubois and John Carroll recruited tuition paying students to fund the school.

In the beginning, life in Saint Joseph's Valley, Emmitsburg, was hard. The harsh winters and scarce food and supplies made it difficult

⁵² McNeil, "Elizabeth Ann Seton . . . Part One," 493.

⁵³ Daughters of Saint Paul, *The Saints*, 40.

⁵⁴ McNeil, "Elizabeth Ann Seton...Part One," 493.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 494.

for the community. It brought Elizabeth to a new stage in her spirituality. Even ritual and symbol were scarce in the form of poverty. Elizabeth meditated and prayed inwardly. The Community relied on the Sulpicians, mainly under the direction of Dubois, and later Bruté, for Eucharist and prayer. Bruté introduced Elizabeth to Nicholas Gobillon's *Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, and she translated Saint Louise de Marillac's life into English.⁵⁶ The parallel Elizabeth found in Louise, being motherless, the close attachment to her father, her role as wife, widow, mother and foundress, must have been a source of comfort.

The Community bonded under such everyday pressures. As many of the journals and correspondence of the first sisters are still being examined for future publication, it is hard to conjecture what Elizabeth's relationship with her community truly was like. But, Elizabeth, because of her life, was adaptable to the many different personalities.

Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., told me the story of Mother Rose White, noting that she was an organizer and more inclined to administrative detail than Elizabeth. When Sister Cecilia Seton was very ill, and Elizabeth accompanied her to Baltimore in 1810, Mother Rose White wrote:

We took occasion of their absence to clean the yard round the house which was covered with the shavings and chips from the building and the only steps to the entrance of the front and back doors was on piles of these shavings which were filled with fleas as the hogs rested on them and surrounded the house. What with the shavings and the hair which was prepared for the plasters and which was put for safe keeping in the garret, we were literally eaten with fleas. So, we determined to try and get rid of them, if we could and set to work with pick axes, spades, wheelbarrows and a cart and in a few days we had the greatest part of the rubbish removed, and rolled some large blocks to the front and back door for steps.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 497.

⁵⁷ Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., "The Journal of Mother Rose White: The Earliest History of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, Emmitsburg, Maryland," *Vincentian Heritage* 18:1 (1997): 42.

One can picture how Mother Rose White wanted to “clean up” and organize that area, and how she waited for the “golden moment” to take action!

However, community brings together a constellation of talents in women striving for holiness. In service of others Elizabeth was continually amongst her community, first in the Stone House and then in the White House. Initially, in 1814, Sisters were sent to Philadelphia to an orphanage. In 1818, after her sons left the Valley and her own health began to deteriorate, Elizabeth turned her energies primarily to the young community and the mission of education in Saint Joseph’s Valley. The service of poor persons was the heart of this mission, with paid boarders and sixty day schoolers coming from the rural area surrounding Emmitsburg for an education.

Male-female relationships for Elizabeth, as foundress and Mother, particularly with authority figures, from Reverend Louis William Dubourg, Reverend Jean-Baptiste David, Reverend John Dubois, to Reverend Simon Bruté, reflected her past experience with men. Her history of a loved but often absent father, a loving husband, a trusted confidante in Antonio Filicchi, and bond with Archbishop Carroll, helped Elizabeth to not fixate upon an idealized or romanticized notion of men. She was level headed and, focused upon the great needs of her small community, had the vision of a leader.

Two other factors played a role in Elizabeth’s relationship with men. First, she was an American woman who held dear the values of education and independence, including proprietary rights, at the time qualities not generally acceptable in women throughout the rest of the world. Consider the vast differences between French and American culture. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: “In France, women commonly receive a reserved, retired and almost conventual education, as they did in aristocratic times. But in America, they are taught to be independent, to think for themselves, to speak with freedom, and to act on their own impulses.”⁵⁸ Elizabeth held her poise through some difficult times. For example, in conflicts with Father Dubourg (1809) and Father David (1810), she was respectful but not deferential to principles that violated her vision for her children, the community of young Sisters and the mission of education.

⁵⁸ Metz, “Elizabeth Seton,” 201.

Secondly, Elizabeth was a convert. She knew of the diversity of religious groups in colonial society and the common expectation of being the "servant," rather than "triumphalistic," in these denominations. The role of the laity was a major influence. "Lay trustees or elders constituted the ruling body of the church and had the power to hire and fire the minister."⁵⁹

Elizabeth had a perception of authority based upon prayer and lived experience, which led to valuable insight. She had a way of focusing Archbishop Carroll and his priests on the mission and the care of others, rather than on internal power struggles and negative relationships.

Sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not. When she met with conflict or a dispute that seemed unresolvable she would write to Bishop Carroll, trusting upon a higher form of spiritual relationship to decide the matter. In the final analysis, on-going correspondence proved Elizabeth's great reliance on Providence and God's Will in many matters.

What remains a mystery is how this 'dialectical tension,' as in the case of the Vincentian Rule (the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity) brought by the Sulpicians, the intended foundation of the French Daughters of Charity in America, and her prizing of motherhood and children, came together to produce the great legacy of all of us gathered in her name today.

The color of gold, for Religious Foundress, joins the rainbow of the baptismal covenant for Elizabeth Seton.

Reflection:

Bernard Lonergan details five imperatives describing theology in the life of each person. "Be attentive!" "Be intelligent!" "Be reasonable!" "Be responsible!" And, "Be in Love!"⁶⁰ "Be in Love" was an imperative that Elizabeth Seton embraced. In her love for others and her honesty about her own feelings, she had remarkable insight.

Incarnational Spirituality grew in Elizabeth. She was unconsciously ready to live out the Incarnational Theology expressed in the Vincentian Way because of two other preceding means of spirituality. The First

⁵⁹ Ibid., 200.

⁶⁰ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 346.

Way was scripture, and the western tradition of the word imparting knowledge for spirituality. As seen in notations in her Bible, Elizabeth studied scripture closely with a fondness for the psalms and her loved *Te Deum*. In her conversion to Catholicism she found a Second Way not unlike the Eastern tradition of meditation and centering prayer; a way that was close to her natural personality. She found God within herself in trying circumstances and poverty. With her children she learned to pray “without time,” “in moments,” and with an expression of habitual gratitude to God.

Vincentian Spirituality has its roots in Incarnational Spirituality. It is based on Matthew 5:1–2 (Beatitudes) and Matthew 25:35–46 (“I was hungry and you gave me food”). It is not Redemptive Theology, a line of thought that considers sin, death, and redemption. It does not focus on unworthiness, guilt and atonement. Rather it views the principal end to “honor our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity, serving Him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor.”⁶¹

Incarnational Spirituality comprises an unfolding in human consciousness, pronounced in the life of Christ who sought the will of His Father. It is developmental, following a person’s journey in faith to God. Through the continual unfolding of events and human consciousness a person is led to the will, for them, of God. Christ is seen in the person of another. Incarnational Spirituality respects and references events and relationships with others in the “person of Jesus Christ.”

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac wanted the sisters to be contemplatives in the marketplace. God was in the event. “To Leave God for God.” Yet, Vincent did not call us to “Activism”; he called us to “Reflection.” “What did Christ say to you in the person of the poor today?”

Elizabeth Seton was ready to meet Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and live the Vincentian Way. She lived it faithfully throughout her life in her fidelity to others, and in seeing God in them. She stated to Simon 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.” Later, she wrote to Cecilia O’Conway, “The only fear I have is that you let the old string pull too hard for solitude and silence.” “Look to the Kingdom of Souls’ ... to

⁶¹ Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, I: 129-30.

go out 'over our cities like a good leaven.'"⁶² Elizabeth never abandoned the marketplace for a life of isolated contemplation; she became immersed through an Incarnational Spirituality and absorbed herself in the person of Jesus Christ. The Baptismal Covenant between Elizabeth and her God knew the full expression of the love of Christ in her family, her community, her students, and the poor. In the new millennium, perhaps Elizabeth points to the variety of lifestyles rooted in the rainbow of the baptismal covenant, the rainbow of colors, the way, the conduit to continue our Setonian and Vincentian Legacy.

⁶² Kelly, Melville, *Selected Writings*, 35.