At last, God is mine and I am His. Elizabeth Ann Seton and the Eucharist

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By
MARY ANN DONOVAN, S.C.

Elizabeth Ann Seton's whole soul vibrates in this great cry marking her first communion: “At last — GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS — Now let all go its round — I HAVE RECEIVED HIM.” Love for what she typically calls her “dear Communion” shaped her spirituality. That spirituality anticipates the later insight of Vatican II. We read in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that the Eucharist is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed... the fountain from which all her power flows;” that the liturgy “inspires the faithful ‘to become of one heart in love.’” This means that Eucharist is the place where the Risen Christ empties Himself in a sacramental way into His People, so that we might become Christ for the continuation of His work. We participate in Eucharist to bring the pattern of our living into touch with the pattern of His life, death, and resurrection, so that He will live, die, and rise again through us. Indeed Eucharist is the summit toward which all the activity of the Church is directed! It is central to all Christian spirituality.

What did the Eucharist mean to Elizabeth Seton, and what might she say to us about Eucharist today? This article is designed to address these different but related questions. Our resources will be Scripture, Elizabeth’s writings, and contemporary Eucharistic

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1 Saint Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton (1774-1821) was New York born, a daughter, sister, wife, friend, mother of five, and widow. Episcopalian by birth and upbringing, Elizabeth was attracted to Catholicism in Italy, where her husband had traveled for his health in the fall of 1803, accompanied by Elizabeth and their eldest daughter, Anna. He died there 27 December 1803. Desire for the real presence in the Eucharist as her new Catholic acquaintances understood it marked her deeply. She returned to New York in June, 1804, and after a difficult struggle made her profession of faith as a Roman Catholic in March, 1805. Unable to support her family in her native city, she moved to Baltimore in 1808 to open a school. In 1809 she moved to Emmitsburg, about sixty miles from Baltimore, and founded the Sisters of Charity in America. She served as superior of the community (hence her title “Mother” Seton) until her death in 1821.


3 Sacrosanctum concilium #10.
theology. In each section I will put in conversation a New Testament passage, a selection of Elizabeth’s writings, and contemporary Eucharistic theology. Part One reflects on the presence of Christ: what it meant for Mother Seton, and its multiple meanings today. Part Two turns to recognizing that presence, or — in Saint Paul’s language — “discerning the body of the Lord,” an area both difficult and important when there is disagreement, as Elizabeth demonstrated. Finally, Part Three reflects with her on Eucharist as the food we become.

Part One: The Presence of Christ

We begin with the story of the miraculous feeding in John, chapter six. One day Jesus had fed the crowd with five loaves and two fish. Not surprisingly, the next day they came after him again. He himself warned them off: “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” In reply, they said: “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” The line of development takes us from an experience of bodily food to its symbolic meaning: real bread gives everlasting life; that bread is belief in Jesus. When the crowd puzzles over what this can mean, the Eucharistic concept is introduced. Jesus says: “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you .... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.”

Elizabeth Seton long hungered and thirsted for such nourishment. Already in September of 1802 the signs were there. A dying member of the Episcopalian parish to which the Setons belonged asked Elizabeth to help her prepare for communion. Reflecting on the experience, she remarked on the privilege that the Redeemer gives, when at the moment of death he “bids us to the feast – gives it to the departing Soul as its ‘Passport to its Home’ to use as the Seal of that Covenant which I trust will not be broken in life nor in death — in

4 Jn 6:26-27.
5 Jn 6:34-35.
6 Jn 6:53, 56.
time nor in eternity.7 Here is an expression of a lively faith, one that understands communion as a pledge of eternal life. (It is clear from the context that at this point she did not understand communion as “real presence” in the Roman Catholic sense.)

Be that as it may, her hunger for the sacrament casts a poignant light on Christmas morning, 1803. Elizabeth, her husband William, and their oldest child, Anna, had traveled to Italy for William’s health. On arrival they were quarantined for forty days. By the time the family group was released he was dying. Elizabeth records what happened just after midnight, 25 December 1803, in the rented house in Pisa:

He then awoke, and observed I had not laid down.
I said “no, love, for the sweetest reflections keep me awake. Christmas day is begun. The day of our dear Redeemer’s birth here, you know, is the day that opened to us the door of everlasting Life.” “Yes,” he said, “and how I wish we could have the Sacrament.”
Well, we must do all we can, and, putting a little wine in a glass, I said different portions of Psalms and Prayers which I had marked, hoping for a happy moment, and we took the cup of Thanksgiving.

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8 The Catholic Church teaches that “after the consecration of bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is truly, really and substantially contained in the August sacrament of the Holy Eucharist under the appearance of those sensible things.” Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Session 13, “Decree on the Eucharist,” c.1. As we will see, the notion of “real presence,” while retaining this meaning, has been extended liturgically by Vatican II.

So far as I have been able to discover, while the Setons and their circle were members of Trinity Episcopal Church in New York, the position of that church, especially as represented by the Reverend Henry Hobart, appears to have been a stripe of Anglican Evangelicalism, a position described in Horton Davies, Worship and Theology in England: From Watts and Wesley to Maurice, 1690-1850 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1961), 225. Davies writes: “The evidence points to the fact that the earlier as well as the later Anglican evangelicals believed that the Lord’s supper was a communicating as well as a commemorating and covenanting ordinance. There is no doctrine of the ‘Real Absence’ here. Neither, of course, is there any trace of a doctrine of a transubstantiation of the elements, or of the ‘medicine of immortality.’ It is chiefly a ‘Receptionist’ doctrine that can be discovered in which Divine grace is received by faith, not in any ex opere operato or mechanical fashion.” The full discussion (pp.223-233) correlates well with Elizabeth’s description of her Episcopalian experience. See, for example, the narrative in Joseph L. Dirvin, Mrs. Seton: Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1962), chapter VIII, “A Fervent Protestant,” with extracts from her writings.
setting aside the sorrow of time, in the view of the joys of eternity – oh, so happy, to find that those joys were more strongly painted to him. 9

No sacrament, only the hunger for it, and the present comfort of faith.

It is not surprising, then, to see how deeply Elizabeth was touched by the evident faith in the real presence which she encountered during the months she and her daughter spent in Italy waiting for passage home after William’s death. Antonio and Amabilia Filicchi and their family welcomed the two mourners into their home. (They, together with the family of Antonio’s brother Filippo, were long time Seton family friends.) By February the new widow was willing to go out with her hostess. It is then, on 2 February 1804, that Catholic teaching on real presence made its first impression on Elizabeth. She writes: “This is some particular festival here – Mrs. F. took me with her to mass (as she calls it, and we say to church) – I don’t know how to say the awful effect at being where they told me God was present in the blessed Sacrament....” 10 Only a few days later the experience struck much deeper. The Filicchis had taken Anna and Elizabeth to visit another church. She tells us what happened:

There this poor young Englishman at the very moment the Priest was doing the most sacred action they call the elevation, (after the bread you know is blessed with the prayers as they do when we go to communion) just at the moment this wild young man said loud in my ear, “This is what they call their real PRESENCE.” 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....

Here we have the reaction of a well-bred woman to public rudeness. What immediately follows is of a different order: “Involuntarily I bent from him to the pavement and thought secretly on the word of Saint

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9 Bechtle, Metz, Collected Writings, Italian Journal, #2.7, 1:273, “Saturday.” During the Italian voyage Elizabeth kept this journal for her sister-in-law, Rebecca Seton, whom Elizabeth regarded as her “soul sister.”

10 Ibid., #2.11, 1:289, “2nd February 1804.”
Paul with starting tears 'they discern not the Lords 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." Grace is moving in her. She finishes: "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.''

That moment is the questioning moment. Grace invites; the initial response is prayerful, but the response that would forever change her life, and the lives of her children, would take time and the resolution of questions. Yet, in the Leghorn journal, the outcome is foreshadowed in the last reference to the Eucharist. She cries out to her sister-in-law Rebecca (for whom the journal is intended):

My Sister dear how happy would we be if we believed what these dear Souls believe, that they possess God in the Sacrament and that he remains in their churches and is carried to them when they are sick, oh my – when they carry the Blessed Sacrament under my Window while I face the full loneliness and sadness of my case I cannot stop the tears at the thought my

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11 Ibid., I:290, "10th February."
God how happy would I be even so far away from all so dear, if I could find you in the church as they do.... The other day in a moment of excessive distress I fell on my knees without thinking when the Blessed Sacrament passed by and cried in an agony to God to bless me if he was there, that my whole soul desired only him....

The trajectory of the next months was laid out. The hunger, the questions, the prayer, which climaxed with that great cry celebrating her First Communion: “At last - GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS - Now let all go its round - I HAVE RECEIVED HIM.” When Elizabeth left Italy, although she was strongly attracted to Catholicism, she had not yet the gift of faith. The little party, consisting of herself, Anna, and Antonio Filicchi, arrived in New York 4 June 1804, after a two-month voyage. The joyful reunion with the four children left behind was touched by sorrow. Her sister-in-law Rebecca lay dying. This unexpected loss added to the isolation Elizabeth experienced as she wrestled with her yearning for Catholicism. Months of struggle preceded her profession of faith on 14 March 1805, an event succeeded by that ecstatic first communion on 25 March.

The New York years following Elizabeth’s conversion were touched by the sting of anti-Catholic prejudice, more especially so after her fourteen-year-old sister-in-law, Cecilia Seton, followed her into the Catholic church. Isolated socially, and sinking financially, this widow and mother with five children to support often found her principal comfort in the Eucharist. So long as she could keep a house within a few miles of church, she walked to Mass daily, except when

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12 Ibid., I:292, “24th.”
13 The story of these months is best read in the journal Elizabeth kept for Amabilia Filicchi from 19 June 1804 through 14 April 1805, in Ibid., #3.31, I:367-378.
14 In Ibid., see #4.24, I:414 for the immediate family reaction to Cecilia’s conversion, and #4.28, I:425 for the 1806 riot at Saint Peter’s church, two instances among many.
15 From many examples, I cite this passage from a letter to her friend Julia Scott, 6 May 1805, Ibid., #3.27, I:361: “My friends relatives etc who have been uniformly cool and composed in relation to all my concerns, are not less so in this instance, but as I shall take care to be distinct in all circumstances of contracts and agreements I cannot if the worst should happen be more their dependant than I am now - especially as I have so great a desire if only to taste a bit of bread of my own earning if it might be so - but in this I repeat the daily Prayer 'thy will be done.....’”
16 Ibid., #3.22, I:349; #3.23, I:352.
prevented by the children’s needs or the weather. At first her director permitted her to receive communion weekly; by November of 1807 – about a year and a half after becoming a Catholic – she received three times a week. By this point, for her the greatest mystery was not that Christ should be present in the Eucharist, but that those who receive the Eucharist should remain so little changed.

The difficult situation in New York, the more receptive religious climate in Baltimore, and the fact that her sons were then being educated at Georgetown, combined to make a move to Baltimore attractive. Her advisors, who now included John Cheverus, soon to be the first Bishop of Boston, encouraged the move. Elizabeth’s move to Baltimore in the spring of 1808 presented her a totally opposite religious climate. Can it be sheer accident that she arrived on the feast of Corpus Christi? She describes her life there as “a very happy one spent entirely between my school and the chapel, which joins our dwelling.” There, too, she enjoyed daily Mass and, at least for one short period, almost daily communion.

This brief respite must have given ease to her heart before the gathering of the first Sisters and the move to Emmitsburg in the summer of 1809. The community was in her mind from the start of

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18 Ibid., #3.30, I:365; #4.2, I:382. Matthew O’Brien was the pastor at Saint Peter’s, Barclay Street, then the only Catholic Church in New York City; it was he who received Elizabeth into the church, and guided her in her first months as a Catholic. Michael Hurley, an Augustinian priest, served as assistant at that church from July 1805, and also influenced her. See Annabelle M. Melville, Elizabeth Bayley Seton, 1774-1821 (New York: Scribner’s, 1951), 121.
19 Bechtle, Metz, Collected Writings, #4.56, I:480. According to the custom of the day, since changed, the permission of a pastor, spiritual advisor, or other legitimate superior was required for frequent communion. Either O’Brien or J.S. Tisserant could have given this permission. On a trip through New York in June 1805, Tisserant, a French émigré priest and friend of John Cheverus, met Elizabeth. They became friends and he served as her spiritual advisor for about a year, until he left for London on 9 June 1806. See Melville, Elizabeth Bayley Seton, 115.
20 Bechtle, Metz, Collected Writings, #4.55, I:477.
21 Elizabeth outlines her reasons for the move in a letter to Antonio Filicchi, 8 July 1808; see Ibid., #5.4, II:16-20.
22 Ibid., #5.1, II:6.
23 Ibid., #5.14, II:46.
24 Ibid., #5.7, II:28.
25 Ibid., #5.10, II:34.
26 A town in the mountains, Emmitsburg is about forty miles from Baltimore. The Sisters obtained property there not too far from the site of a Sulpician establishment.
the Baltimore year. In October she wrote to her sister-in-law Cecilia Seton:

It is expected I shall be the mother of many daughters. A letter received from Philadelphia where my blessed Father our Patriarch now is on a visit, tells me he has found two of the sweetest young women, who were going to Spain to seek a refuge from the world, tho they are both Americans, Cecilia and May, and now wait until my house is opened for them – next spring we hope. He applies to me the Psalms in our vespers “The barren woman shall be the joyful mother of children.”

Elizabeth Seton pronounced her vows on 25 March before Archbishop John Carroll. The gathering of the first group of Sisters accelerated, and the move to Emmitsburg followed in the summer of 1809.

Her letters from June 1809 through 1812 emphasize the continuing importance she attached to the Eucharist. The evidence is there in the centrality of daily Mass (sometimes heard more than once a day) and frequent, sometimes daily, communion in her life (combined with careful preparation and devout thanksgiving). Her lively faith was nourished by her participation in these rituals, as well as practices like Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and attendance at Benediction. One can trace fairly easily the witness to a parallel faith in the nascent Charity community, a faith incarnate in ritual participation and pious practices which were still part of the inheritance of the community in the years immediately before Vatican II.

But the mode of ritual participation has changed, and many of the pious practices have died as well. In addition, in all too many places the very opportunity for participation in Eucharist is either wholly absent, or severely limited. Here in North America we are beginning

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\(^{27}\) Ibid., #5.10, II:34. “Patriarch” is Elizabeth’s name for Pierre Babade, a Sulpician and French emigré priest, who was to become a beloved friend and her confessor.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., e.g., #6.10, II:89; #6.25, II:108; #6.52, II:150; #6.79, II:189-90.

\(^{29}\) The community practice around reception of Communion illustrated in some of the texts previously noted is outlined in Ibid., II:108, note 2: “According to the sisters’ regulations, ‘the days appointed for Communion will be Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday, unless there occur some particular feasts in the week which may determine to alter them or to grant an extraordinary Communion. None shall be allowed to receive oftener.’"
to experience the deprivations known in the Latin American Church for many, many years. Such deprivation is a matter for grief. It must be said strongly that nothing can replace the centrality of the Eucharist in the Catholic Church. Nothing. Key to Catholicism is nourishment by the Eucharistic bread. The early Christians had it right when they cried: “Without the Eucharist we cannot exist.” Vatican II expanded our understanding of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist and also stressed His presence in communal prayer, particularly the Liturgy of the Hours. These changes can deepen our experience of Eucharist along lines Elizabeth Seton would appreciate, and also offer pathways for exploration by anyone hungering for Christ’s real presence and deprived of Eucharist.

A real shift in eucharistic celebration since the Council is the heightened attention to Scripture. Do you remember the way the principal parts of the Mass were once taught? We used to name them as the Offertory, Consecration, and Communion. These were the parts one “had” to attend to “fulfill the Sunday obligation.” The new Catechism makes no mention of such things. While retaining the Sunday obligation, it presents that obligation as participation in the Eucharist. A particularly beautiful passage reads:

Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to his Church. The faithful give witness by this to their communion in faith and charity. Together they testify to God’s holiness and their hope of salvation. They strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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31 Vatican II teaches that “Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass not only in the person of his minister... but especially in the eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. Lastly, he is present when the Church prays and sings, for he has promised ‘where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them’ (Mt 18:20),” Sacrosanctum Concilium #7.

31 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2182. The whole section (#s 2168-2195) repays study.
Such is the description of what Sunday Eucharist is meant to be. (One could spend a long time on that passage. The entire section of the *Catechism* on the Lord’s Day repays careful attention.) The Eucharist in which we participate is structured with *two* (not three) principal parts: the Liturgy of the Word, and the Liturgy of the Table. The ritual, in which our attention is clearly directed first to the ambo and then to the table, underlines the distinction between the parts. It belongs to the task of the homilist to draw attention to the relation between the two parts.

This shift in the Church’s understanding of the Word of God is deep and far-reaching. It is founded on a renewed recognition of God’s presence in Scripture. In the document on Revelation we read: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the liturgy.”

Just as she venerates the *body of Christ*? As a child I was taught multiple ways to reverence the Sacrament of the Altar – but *nothing* parallel in terms of reverence for the Scriptures. Kissing the book or incensing the book were not attended to as acts of reverence in my upbringing, and processing with the book entered Catholic practice comparatively recently. To proclaim the Scriptures, to hear them proclaimed – this is to be in Christ’s real presence? The public rituals did not make that clear. But if the Scriptures are the Word of God – and indeed they are! – how could this not be so? It seems to me that when Elizabeth Seton is present with us at Eucharist, she must be cheering our renewed reverence for the Word of God.

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32 *Dei verbum*, #7.
As to the private use of Scripture, in a journal written for her spiritual director, then Reverend Simon Gabriel Bruté, S.S., in 1815, her notes for Trinity Sunday are marvelous: "7 in the morning half hours thanksgiving amidst the heights and depths - God and his creature! We lost in him! ... our 2 divine Psalms 102 and 103 read - tears mixed on the Bible - and now would say a word but not one can speak but God! This is the feast of sky gazers." These two great Psalms of praise - in the Authorized Version, Psalms 103 and 104 - shaped Elizabeth's Eucharistic thanksgiving on this wonderful, challenging feast of the Trinity which she so well names the "feast of sky gazers." All her life Elizabeth retained from her Episcopal upbringing a deep devotion to the private use of Scripture. Bruté, of all her directors the one most truly the confidante of her soul, understood well what the Bible meant to Elizabeth. The words he addressed to her daughter Catherine Josephine after her mother's death are words each of us can take to heart:

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33 Bechtle, Metz, Collected Writings, #6.195, II.325, "Trinity day."
Take sometimes your psalms, her psalms! in her Bible, and one verse or other you will find her whole soul still warm to her God in yours – But what do I say? She is in the better place of love. I only mean to remind her Josephine what must have been the impressions, even while upon earth, and teach you humbly to seek for the same.  

Listen again: “I only mean to remind you, Elizabeth’s daughter, that in the psalms, in one verse or another, you will find her soul still warm to her God in your own soul.” What a marvelous exercise: to encounter the Word of God together with Elizabeth! Such a practice can feed the soul hungering for Christ’s presence and unable to participate in Eucharist.

We turn now to another form of communal prayer. That Christ should be present when the Church prays and sings is a direct consequence of his promise: “Where two or three are gathered together for my sake, there am I in the midst of them.” Morning adoration and night prayer, recitation of the Rosary in common – these were part of Mother Seton’s experience of gathering for prayer. Such forms of common prayer have been proper to the Vincentian tradition, rather than recitation of the Divine Office. Yet, since Vatican II encouraged all Christians to participate in the Church’s own morning and night prayer, some of the Charity congregations have adopted this practice. This form of communal prayer, which gathers the whole Church throughout the world, is a form with which the Council particularly associates the real presence of Jesus. It thus offers another pathway for those hungering for the real presence of Christ and unable to participate in Eucharist.

Elizabeth would scarcely expect of contemporary believers a less lively faith response to Vatican II’s teaching on the real presence of Christ than she herself gave to the Tridentine teaching. Her very devotion to that presence challenges us to reflect on our own faith in His presence, examining questions like: to what extent are we aware

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34 In Ellin M. Kelly, Ph.D., *Elizabeth Seton’s Two Bibles* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1977), 30.
35 *Mt* 18:20; see *Sessio*/xx crucum concilium #7.
36 *Sessio*/xx crucum concilium #98 encourages such adoption, and #100 extends that encouragement to the laity.
37 See *Sessio*/xx crucum concilium #s 83-84.
of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist?; Of Christ’s real presence in the Scriptures?; Of Christ’s real presence when we gather to pray in His name?

Part Two: Recognizing the Presence:
“Discern the Body of the Lord”

While we may agree on the reality of Christ’s presence in the liturgy, there are many areas connected with liturgy where disagreements can and do arise. Unfortunately, dissension around the Eucharist is a recurring problem. Saint Paul encountered it at Corinth. He wrote: “When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.... What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!” How Paul handled the dissension is instructive. First he recalls the tradition of the institution:

I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

For Paul this teaching includes implications for believers. They are meant, in eating and drinking at the Eucharist, to “discern the body of the Lord.” Not to recognize Christ’s body is to court judgment. Here “body” carries multiple meanings: it is the physical body of Jesus Christ, which was delivered to death. It is the risen body of Christ, with which he feeds us in the Eucharistic species. And it is the body which we are – the body for whose sake He died, the body of those baptized.

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8 1 Cor 11:18-19, 22.
79 1 Cor 11:23-26.
into his life, the body of the faithful who feed on His very body and blood. The union of the body fed by Christ is the sign Eucharist is meant to give to the world. Thus, both when we fail to recognize His body and when we break its union we court judgment. As Paul writes in 1 Cor. 11:29: “All who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.” Do we “discern the body of the Lord?” The test rests finally with how we Christians treat one another. It is, of course, not so much a matter of those we like, of those with whom we agree. It is our relation with those who rub us the wrong way, those whom we dislike, those with whom we do not agree, and those who do us wrong which we need to consider.

As head of a small community which included a fair number of her own relatives, Mother Seton had early and sharp experience of all these vagaries of human nature. The move from Baltimore to Emmitsburg was made in stages. She herself made the trip on 21 June 1809. In the group with her were Sister Maria Murphy, Elizabeth’s eldest daughter Anna, and her sisters-in-law Cecilia and Harriet Seton. Her younger daughters followed soon after. The rest of the party did not arrive until 29 July. In that group were five Sisters – Cecilia O’Conway, Mary Ann Butler, Susan Clossy, Rose White, and Catherine Mullen – in addition to the Seton boys, and two students from the Paca Street school. A little later when the boys went off to Mount Saint Mary’s, a nearby school, Mother Seton’s small stone house – an old farm house in Saint Joseph’s Valley – sheltered a household including herself, eight Sisters, her three daughters, two of her sisters-in-law, and two students – in all sixteen.
Immediately there was confusion about whether William Dubourg, S.S., the first superior, would permit the Sisters to continue to have access to Father Babade, S.S., the director and confessor most of them preferred. Shortly after she arrived, Dubourg told Elizabeth to stop writing to Babade, and in addition, she says, “to eradicate as far as possible from the minds of the Sisters that confidence and attachment they all have for him.” In a letter to Archbishop Carroll of 6 August 1809, just a week after the whole group came together, Elizabeth continues:

Sister Rose [White] and Kathy Mullen are the only persons in the community who have an interest in any other director and as all the rest are of one heart and voice with respect to Father Babade it seemed a severe regulation and with respect to myself it was cutting me off from the advice of the only one, of nine different Priests I have confessed to from necessity, to whom I ever yet had opened my heart or been able to draw the consolation and instruction so necessary in my situation – but accustomed as I am almost habitually to sacrifice every thing I most value in this life I should have acquiesced quietly tho my heart was torn to pieces but the others could not bear it in the same way, and the idea so difficult to conceal that our Superior was acting like a tyrant – all this has been the source of a thousand temptations.

Elizabeth is angry, and with good reason. She will personally suffer; her Sisters will suffer; and what does one do with a tyrannical superior! Nor is this the whole of the matter. In the same letter she says: “There have been some very busy persons making exaggerations to our Superior about my writing large packages to Father Babade....” Accusations and misrepresentation were another part of the picture. As Elizabeth points out, there had only been two packages, and they contained letters from half a dozen others in addition to her own. Yet before the letter closes, possibly to balance her earlier remark about Rose and Kitty, she adds: “Our dear Rose is my Treasure – she is truly

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87 Bechtle, Metz, Collected Writings, #6.4, II:77-78.
excellent – Kitty too is all goodness they lay their very heart at your feet united with that of their unworthy Mother...." 

While she is clear-sighted about their faults, loyalty to her Sisters remained one of Mother Seton’s strongest qualities. The second superior, John Baptist David, S.S., also proved problematic. In another letter to Carroll, this one written in January of 1810, a bare six months after the arrival in Emmitsburg, she mentions her reluctance to speak of the issue. Still, she continues: “As the good our Almighty God may intend to do by means of this community may be very much impeded by the present state of things it is absolutely necessary You as the head of it and to whom of course the Spirit of discernment for its good is given should be made acquainted with it before the evil is irreparable.”

The situation with the Sulpician superiors remained difficult well into the following year. By March of 1811 Father David had proposed to make Rose mother in Elizabeth’s place. Her comments to Archbishop Carroll are significant: “Believe me nothing has ever taken place (notwithstanding this cloud and dust) but what would have comforted and edified you through out – every one is so much bent on serving our Lord that the most our Enemy could obtain has been a moment of reserve, but the Communion or confession of the next day has been sure to mend all again.” While it is evident from the context that at least one Sister has taken Rose’s part, the group as a whole appears to have made astonishing efforts to preserve their union of heart. This is hardly surprising when one reads what Elizabeth says of her own attitude toward Rose: “My conduct to her is, as I wish it ever to be, founded on that love for him who loved us both so much; and to this moment I have always shown her more attention and affection than any one in the house, and our reserve is of the mind not of the heart, her affectionate kindness to my children binds me by gratitude, independent of our Spiritual connection.”

While there is, inevitably, reserve between the two women, there also remains real affection between them. A high tribute to both!

Simultaneously, Elizabeth fought for what she thought right—and clung to the union she recognized as established in Communion,

41 Ibid., II:79.
42 Ibid., #6.23, II:106.
43 Ibid., Seton to Carroll, 16 March 1811, #6.73, II:179.
44 Ibid.
seeking to incarnate it more effectively. Clearly she grasped the Pauline lessons: united in the Body of the Lord, Christians are meant to discern His body in one another, and to cherish the bonds of their union. A constant motif of her Eucharistic piety is union through communion with all her dear ones, as she remarked at one point: “What is distance or separation when our soul plunged in the ocean of infinity sees all in his own bosom – there is no Europe or America there.”

It is this insight that drives her insistence on communions offered for others. Today, perhaps unfortunately, there is less stress on offering communion for others. However, we share with Elizabeth a sense of union with one another strengthened by Eucharist. Let me draw attention to three elements in the ritual which are meant to help us realize the kind of union that Eucharist enables.

First, throughout the Eucharistic liturgy the prayers refer to “our Lord.” The use of “our” carries specific meaning. In his recent book, Models of the Eucharist, Father Kevin Irwin observes:

The repeated use of our here is most important; it is a pronoun of relationship – of our relationship to each other as well as to the Triune God through Christ. The simple repetition of the pronoun “our” reiterates the uncommon assumption that we dare to call and claim God as “ours” and that in so doing we are committing ourselves once more to covenant relationships and commitments.

The choice of pronouns articulates that the prayer being offered is not the prayer of isolated individuals, but the prayer of a people.

Second, in the prayer over the cup the eucharistic prayers assert what is found only in Matthew’s account, namely that Christ’s blood is ‘shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.” Well before we approach the Kiss of Peace the very words of the ritual stress the unifying aspect of Eucharist. The reconciliation established is between Christ and us. It is empty unless we reconcile with one another.

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46 Kevin W. Irwin, Models of the Eucharist (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 170-171. My debt to him in what follows is apparent.
47 cf. Matt 26:28; Also, see Irwin, Models, 178.
Third, the present formula for distribution is “Body of Christ” to which the communicant responds “Amen.” Christ – not Jesus. What is included is everything we believe about Him: the preexistent Word of the Father, the historical Jesus, the resurrected Lord. That’s who is given in communion. When we say “Amen” not only do we affirm belief in Christ’s presence, we also affirm that we are part of the Body, that we accept the Body for the building up of the body of Christ which is the Church.40

Others could be added to these three elements in the ritual affirming the union Eucharist effects. The point here is to become aware of how we can be strengthened to deal with dissension through the very Eucharist we celebrate.41 Ultimately, it is through our union with one another that we manifest the Body of Christ. How very important, then, it becomes to heed Paul’s injunction: “Discern the body of the Lord.” First and foremost, all the baptized are called, women equally with men, to discern the body of the Lord. And where?

In one another....

in brothers, as well as in sisters....

in those with whom we disagree, as well as in those who support us....

in the sacramental species, as well as in Scriptures – and....

Return again to Paul’s words in recounting the story of the institution of the Eucharist cited earlier: “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.” According to Paul, we enter into Eucharist for no other reason than to proclaim Christ. We do it because Christ asks it of us. In the last hours of his earthly life, Jesus Christ said over the bread and wine: “Do this in memory of me.” Participation is not about our choice, but his. Unfortunately, the fact is, as Jesuit Father Walter J. Burghardt has noted:

The Eucharist, which has traditionally been our supreme demonstration of oneness, now divides us, at times mortally. Shall we stand or kneel, sing Bach

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40 See Irwin, Models, 191.
41 See Ibid., 194.
or the St. Louis Jesuits, blast heaven wide-open from an organ or strum a pop song on a guitar, greet one another with a hug or a handshake (or not at all), receive our Lord in the hand or on the tongue? For all too many these are not liturgical accidentals, of small moment; they are at the core and heart of community worship, so much so that some Catholics refuse to worship with other Catholics save on their own narrow terms.

The result? Instead of a gathering of the whole contentious family around one table, we have “Liberal” and “Conservative” parishes, Latin language and New Age Masses. But it remains true that in our one same Baptism all are invited by our one Lord to “Take and eat.” We are meant to enter into Eucharist because Christ asks it of us. We are asked to do it because he asks us, who loves us, and has loved us unto death, the death of the cross.

Such is Elizabeth Seton’s approach. It is the approach of the Church. What is incumbent on us as Christians is to discern the body of the Lord in the sacramental species. What is incumbent on us is to receive the body of the Lord as a family, united not necessarily in opinions, but in the common life we share. We are called to recognize that life, to discern the body of the Lord in one another, in the attractive and in the repulsive, in the weak and in the strong, in our supporters and in our opponents. It is in actively doing this, as Elizabeth did, that we work to preserve unbroken the unity of the Body of Christ. So, in fact, we become the Body of Christ. This being so we are faced with the questions: to what extent do we discern the Body of Christ across disagreement? What are the issues in trying to celebrate Eucharist with those with whom we disagree? Who are our Dubourgs? Our Roses? Faced with them, to what are we called?

Part 3: The Food We Become

Each Easter new Christians come to the altar to hear: “This is my body, which is given for you.”

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Body of Christ—*for you*. What did He think in saying that? Did He think: “For you—whose feet I have washed? For you—whom I have called and taught? You—whom I have loved as the Father has loved me?” When Christ said, “This is my body that is for you,” did He recall “Once I told you, ‘You give them something to eat,’” and then think, “But tonight I say, ‘Do this to remember me? Do *this*—tell the story, bless, and eat.’”

Saint Augustine reminds us how this food is different from all other food we eat. All that other food becomes us, lingering perhaps too long on hips or paunch. If we dine at this table, we will become this food. Body of Christ. Our bodies become the body of Christ, so we can continue His service, suffering, and love.

Elizabeth was well aware of the transformative power of Eucharist. Sometimes she mourned over how slow the process seemed to her. In a journal kept for Cecilia Seton as early as 1807, an entry from mid-September reads: “So many Communions and confessions with so little fruit often suggest the idea of lessening them— to fly from the fountain while in danger of dying with thirst.”

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52 See, for example, Augustine's Sermon 57.7: “So, then, the Eucharist is our daily bread: but let us receive it so that we are not refreshed in our bodies only but also in our souls. For the virtue received there is unity, that gathered together into his body, and made his members, we may be what we receive. Then will it indeed be your daily bread.”

Regular sacramental practice, yet little if any observable change in oneself. Perhaps it would be better to receive the sacraments less often? Such an analysis was not new in Elizabeth’s time, nor has it gone away. But she was wise. She recognized the analysis for what it is: temptation. To use her metaphor, one ought not to stop drinking when “dying of thirst.” She drank, and she ate—and she became food and drink for others. The evidence is pronounced in the years from 1815 to her death. Then Elizabeth’s writings sound a stronger note of calling others to the table. Emphasis on preparing children for first communion, expressions of her concern for the sacramental lives of her own children, and her motherly concern for the growth of the young Charity community: all these elements recur in her later years. She had become bread for others.

What does it mean, “to become bread?” The flour must be mixed with liquid. Augustine tells us that the liquid needed to make us bread is the water of baptism. Then the dough must be kneaded and baked. Elizabeth was pummeled by the agony surrounding her conversion, and repeatedly passed through the fire of suffering. Each of us has her own parallel stories. Once baked, bread is meant to be eaten. The experience of being nourishment for others, while not without cost to Elizabeth, seems to have shared qualities with a good, plain meal: it was a simple and refreshing experience. In a note to Bruté written in June, 1816, she describes herself as “going... to meet every body in the grace of the moment, which we never can know till we find the humour and temper of the one we are to meet with – the many mistakes all swallowed and comforted by intention intention intention.” A similar cry will echo in one of her letters to Cecilia O’Conway, where she remarks “We must be so careful to meet our grace.” In the same period she speaks of keeping her knitting on the table with her pen, so that visitors need not feel unwelcome. If someone came in, she would simply put down her pen and pick up her needles. To live now, open to what the moment brings, with open

54 Three of Augustine’s Eucharistic catecheses develop the metaphor variouly; see sermons 227, 272, and Wolfenbüttel 7.
57 “Writing and translating, my ever darling passtime [sic] now as ever, with the knitting always on the small table with the pen to show the visitors they are not unwelcome, for one of the sinews of my left leg is contracted by so long sitting with my sweet Bec [her youngest daughter, dying of tuberculosis of the bone], and of course I go but little and slowly.” *Ibid.* #7.72, II:463.
door and open heart – such is the sanctity of everyday life, the sanctity of common sense.

Such sanctity becomes the foundress of a community which she herself described to her friend Eliza Sadler like this:

- the different reports you may perhaps hear of our situation will make you doubtful what it really is, but if you recollect the System of the Sisters of Charity before and since the Revolution in France, you will know the rule of our community in a Word, which amounts only to that regularity necessary for order and no more – You may conceive my content in such a situation, it is almost inconceivable to myself that I possess it. – now our chief object is Spinning Knitting etc to obtain clothing for ourselves and the Children in our charge who are Educated with the care the principle inspires on which our good Sisters act. they are truly good Sisters – you would be delighted with their Simplicity and sincerity. every Occasion to visit the sick is embraced but the Villages round us are not very extensive. our mountain serves the limits of the world to us, but beyond them, dearest Eliza, you know I have many most dear interests and truly none more solid and sincere than that for my Sad, who comes in my mind a thousand times oftener than many others from the nature of my Occupations so congenial with her mind –

The life of a Sister of Charity is governed by few and simple rules. Her work is to teach. To care for the sick. All is done in a spirit that trusts to the grace of the moment.Parsed for every Christian, this means fidelity to the duties of one's state of life together with the responsible performing of one's work, all done in the spirit of loving trust. Yes, this sets the agenda for a life's work – but it is an agenda which can be easily summarized. “Go out to meet your grace. Become bread for others.”

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58 *Ibid.*, #6.18, II.98-99, Letter to Eliza Sadlier, 9 January 1810, to whom Elizabeth referred both as Eliza and as Sad.
Easily summarized, yes. But how does one accomplish this agenda? Recall earlier how we reflected on the Eucharist as our prayer. The Eucharist is the work of the Church. As such it supports us in going out to meet our grace. At Eucharist what is in question is more than one’s personal relationship with God. Think about the poor you serve. Think about your sisters in the community of Charity. Now, in this context, let me paraphrase what a Cistercian monk wrote about the challenge of community living. ‘If you in the community of Charity can participate in Eucharist as a solitary act, then...

Whose feet do you wash?
Whose burdens do you help carry?
Whose hunger do you feed?
Whose thirst do you slake?
Whose wounds do you bind up?”

Liturgy is the work of the Church. It is not a private devotion. It is about communal conversion and communal self-transcendence as, through it, we enter into the Paschal mystery of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, I would argue together with Father Irvin:

Liturgy is not a refuge from the world so much as it is an intense moment in time that refocuses our lives and reminds us that what we celebrate in liturgy should be borne out in the way we live our lives.59

We pray together as Body of Christ – to become the Body of Christ – to feed the Body of Christ in the world. Thus we go out to meet our grace.

Conclusion

Today those called to the life of the community of Charity are equally called to become bread. Not cake – just good bread! The pattern of such a life is Eucharistic. We enter into the presence of Christ – Christ in the bread and wine, Christ in the Book, Christ in

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., II:92.
the praying community. We learn to discern the body of the Lord, in sisters and brothers, the lovely and the unlovely; at the altar and in the praying community. We feed on the Body of Christ – that we might become Christ, that we might be bread for a hungry world, we, made fluid by Baptism, kneaded and baked in the tribulations life spares no one. So we live the Paschal Mystery, the life, death, and resurrection. We come to Eucharist to give ourselves over to the Father’s will. We leave Eucharist to become the Body of Christ for our sisters and brothers. Elizabeth says: Come to the table. Christ says: Take and eat. This is my body. Let all who share in Elizabeth Seton’s spirit say: “Amen.”