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“I Felt I Had a Mother”: Elizabeth Seton and the Virgin Mary

Judith Metz, S.C.

BIO

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“The other day in a moment of excessive distress...—a little prayer book of Mrs. Filicchi’s was on the table and I opened a little prayer [the Memorare] of St. Bernard to the Blessed Virgin begging her to be our Mother, and I said to her with such a certainty that God would surely refuse nothing to his Mother... I felt really I had a Mother, which you know my foolish heart so often lamented to have lost in early days,—from the first remembrance of infancy I have looked in all the plays of childhood and wildness of youth to the clouds for my Mother, and at that moment it seemed as if I had found more than her, even in the tenderness and pity of a Mother—so I cried myself to sleep in her heart.”

Written by Elizabeth Seton during her sojourn in Italy after her husband’s death, the passage above expresses the young widow’s heartfelt yearning for comfort, security, and support. It was a longing for interior peace and assurance in a time of loss, turmoil, and uncertainty about the future. Hearkening back to her early life in this passage, she laid bare an essential chapter in her life’s journey. From her youngest days, she keenly felt the loss of her mother. This sorrow haunted her through her early life and into adulthood. In her journal “Dear Remembrances,” a mature Elizabeth recounted her first memory, at age four, of wishing she could join her deceased mother and baby sister in heaven. Here was a young child yearning for love and affection in a home that seemed to provide neither. Yet, as her life unfolded, Elizabeth’s own maternal instincts proved to be an integral part of her personality. She loved and cared for her half-brothers and sisters, “sing[ing] little hymns over the cradle” and teaching them their prayers. These early bonds matured into affectionate lifelong relationships.

Elizabeth delighted in her marriage to William Magee Seton and, when their children arrived, she devoted her life to them. Perhaps she plunged so enthusiastically into her role as mother because she wanted to give her children what she had been denied. Over the years nothing diminished her dedication to her children, as she adamantly stated: “[T]he only word I have to say to every question is, I am a Mother, whatever providence awaits me consistent with that plea I say Amen to it.”

However, for all of Elizabeth’s joy and fulfillment in being a mother herself, she still longed for a mother’s warmth, encouragement, and unconditional love. She did not find it in the Enlightenment thought and Rationalism of her father, or in the Romantic poets and

3 Ibid., 3a:511.
4 6.74, “To George Weis,” 27 April 1811, Ibid., 2:181.
writers she enjoyed as a youth. Familiarity with the various forms of Protestantism were of interest, but young Elizabeth found more satisfaction in nature and “transports of first pure Enthusiasm.” 5 The young woman regularly read the Bible and participated in the worship services of the Episcopal Church. However, it was not until the arrival of Rev. Henry Hobart at Trinity Church that she became more invested in religious practice. Her prayers and spiritual reflections focused on a belief in God’s boundless mercy and longing for “celestial peace.” Devotion to the reception of the Eucharist became central to her prayer life. For Elizabeth it represented a tangible expression of her relationship with Christ. She often wrote of her yearning for the Sacrament, and of how she and Rebecca Seton, her sister-in-law, “were laughed at for running from one church to another [on] Sacrament Sundays, that [they] might receive as often as [they] could.” 6

Loss and Searching
By the late 1790s Elizabeth’s early married life of tranquility and prosperity was disappearing. Carefree time spent with her children, summers away from the heat, filth, and disease of the city, and the joys of an active social life were becoming sweet memories. Beginning in 1798, her world began to erode into a litany of woes. The first blow was the death of William Seton, Sr., her affectionate and supportive father-in-law, who was the “soul of [their] existence.” 7 His death necessitated Elizabeth and William Magee giving up their family home to move into the Seton family residence. She “bec[a]me at once the mother of six [additional] children and the Head of so large a number,” that she considered it “a very great change.” 8 Simultaneously, William began to suffer declining health, the family business went into decline, ultimately resulting in bankruptcy, and Elizabeth’s father, Dr. Richard Bayley, contracted a fever and died. Amid these unfolding events, she bore three additional children. The stress of these difficult years manifested itself in her spiritual reflections. By 1802, she wrote, “the Journey is long, the burden is heavy;” and in another passage, “My soul is sorrowful – my spirit weighed down even to the dust, cannot utter a word to Thee my Heavenly Father.” 9

With the family’s financial future uncertain and her husband’s health precarious, Elizabeth, William, and their oldest daughter, Anna Maria (age eight), sailed for what they

6 2.14, “To Rebecca Seton,” 18 April 1804, Ibid., 1:297. In the Episcopal Church, Sacrament Sundays were held about six times a year at this time.
8 1.22, “To Julia Scott,” 5 July 1798, Ibid., 1:36. Elizabeth and William took on the responsibility of raising William’s six young siblings. At this time, Elizabeth had just delivered her third child, Richard.
9 8.10, “My peace I leave with you...,” May 1802, Ibid., 3a:24; and 8.11, “Solemnly in the Presence of my Judge...,” 1 August 1802, Ibid., 3a:25.
hoped would be a milder climate and an improvement in William’s health. Instead, upon
their arrival in Livorno, Italy, in November 1803, the little party was confined in a damp,
cold, prison-like quarantine that aggravated William’s tuberculosis. He barely survived a
month, and died several days after their release. In the midst of her physical and emotional
stress she spent long hours with her Bible and spiritual books, and wrote of singing hymns,
praying, and crying heartily.¹⁰ She accepted her sufferings as an opportunity for spiritual
growth. For Elizabeth it was a time of grief, loneliness, and fear of what lay ahead; it was
also a time of openness, waiting, and deep listening to God.

At the time of William’s death, the families of Antonio and Filippo Filicchi took the
bereaved widow and her young daughter under their care. For the grieving woman, scarcely
recovered from her month in quarantine, her husband’s death, and her separation from her
children, “it seemed [the Filicchis] could not do enough.”¹¹ Long-time business associates
of the Setons, these generous families provided safe haven and warm care. Elizabeth was in
awe to find that she and her young daughter were embraced with such kindness, solicitude,
and true friendship by people she barely knew, but soon came to love. After so long a period
of caring for others, she now found herself the recipient of others’ devoted care. The burdens
of responsibility she had been carrying were removed, at least for the present, and there
were neither physical nor emotional demands on her time and attention. The months she
and Anna Maria spent in the homes of these generous Catholics were a period of rest and
recovery. Now there was time and space to release pent-up emotions, and an interlude that
provided an opportunity for breakthrough. It proved to be a turning point in her life.

¹⁰  6.154, “To Eliza Sadler,” 23 March 1814, Ibid., 2:265. Besides her Bible, Elizabeth’s spiritual books included scriptural
commentaries, The Following of Christ by Thomas à Kempis, and a small booklet of Rev. Henry Hobart’s sermons.
¹¹  2.8, “To Rebecca Seton,” 3 January 1804, Ibid., 1:278.
Inquiry and Discovery

Eager to show the Americans the beauties of their homeland, the Filicchis introduced their visitors to the scenic and historic treasures of Tuscany with its full range of sensory delights. Elizabeth enjoyed “the mild softness of the air and warmth of the sun,” fine cuisine, music, art, and a culture permeated by Catholicism. Visiting Pisa, Florence, and Livorno, the visitors were surrounded by the visual splendor of great palaces, majestic churches, and luxurious gardens, as well as some of the finest art of the Italian Renaissance. One Sunday morning she accompanied Amabilia Filicchi to La SS. Annunziata (the Church of the Annunciation) in Florence. Enraptured by the “ceilings carved in gold, altar loaded with gold, silver and precious ornaments, pictures of every sacred subject and the dome a continued representation of different parts of Scripture,” Elizabeth mused that “all this [could] never be conceived by description.” She was “struck with hundreds of people kneeling” in the darkened nave “lighted only by wax tapers” and a “kind of soft and distant musick which lift[ed] the mind to a foretaste of heavenly pleasure.” In response she “sunk to [her] knees... and shed a torrent of tears at how long [she] had been a stranger in the house of [her] God, and the accumulated sorrow that had separated [her] from it.”

The next day their little party visited the Church of San Lorenzo. As Elizabeth approached the great Altar, “a sensation of delight struck [her] so forcibly” that the opening

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13 Ibid., 1:283.
words of Mary’s Magnificat, “My Soul magnified the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,”

14 came to her “with a fervor which absorbed every other feeling.”

15 Tuesday she went to the Church of Santa Maria Novella where she viewed a painting of the descent from the Cross, “nearly as large as life [that] engaged [her] whole soul.” She, who had so recently held her dying husband in her arms, identified with the scene. She reflected: “Mary at the foot of [the cross] expressed well that the iron had entered into her—and the shades of death over her agonized countenance so strongly contrasted the heavenly Peace of the dear Redeemers that it seemed as if his pains had fallen on her. How hard it was to leave that picture and how often even in the few hours interval since I have seen it, I shut my eyes and recall it in imagination.”

16 These experiences were Elizabeth’s introduction to Italian Catholicism—monumental buildings, beautiful art, classical music, richly embroidered vestments, and the use of Latin in liturgical ritual. It appealed to her every sense; it brought prayer and worship alive in a new way that made God’s presence imminent. Bells ringing during liturgy, holy water, genuflections, and congregants making the sign of the cross were new to her. “All of the Catholic Religion is full of those meanings which interest me so,” she commented. It presented a stark contrast to the Protestantism she was familiar with: the “naked altar[s],”

18 unadorned liturgical services, simple hymns, and bare walls.

In each of the churches as well as the museums she visited, Elizabeth encountered the honored place the Virgin Mary held in Catholicism. She had entered a space where Mary and the saints were an integral part of peoples’ religious practice. As she passed many happy evenings of “silence and peace” in her rooms, she had time and space to soak in all that she was experiencing.

The devotion exhibited in the Filicchi family’s practice of their religion further reinforced Elizabeth’s impressions of Catholicism. She noted that while staying with “these charitable Romans” she received “many tender marks of respect and compassion and boundless generosity.”

20 Often accompanying them to Mass, she was increasingly struck by the “awful effect at being where they told [her] God was present in the blessed Sacrament,” and had cause to admire Amabilia Filicchi’s practice of fasting during Lent, and of stopping to pray in neighborhood churches when they went out for walks.

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16 Ibid., 1:287.
After her time in Florence, Elizabeth and Anna Maria went to the Filicchi home in the port city of Livorno. From there they visited the Marian shrine of Our Lady of Montenero, an important focus of devotional life for people in this region. Situated in the hills above the city and offering a sweeping panorama of the Mediterranean Sea, the site became a pilgrimage destination in the fourteenth century after a shepherd encountered a miraculous image of the Madonna. Miraculous cures, recoveries from accidents, and rescues from shipwrecks, rough seas, and pirates, were attributed to the Virgin. In thanksgiving for answered prayers, pilgrims adorned the shrine with remembrances, known as *ex-votos*. With each visit to a church, shrine, or museum, Elizabeth was further introduced to the deeply embedded Marian culture of the Catholic Church.

One day while Elizabeth was alone in her room, a priest carrying the Eucharist passed beneath her window. Deeply moved, she felt “anguish of heart” at the thought, “was I the only one he did not bless?” “Prostrate on the floor,” she wrote, “I looked up to the blessed Virgin appealing to her that as the Mother of God she must pity me, and obtain from him that blessed Faith of these happy Souls around me—rising after many sighs and tears—the little prayer book Mrs. Amabilia [Filicchi] had given Anina [Anna Maria] was under my eye which fell on St. Bernards prayer to the blessed Virgin [the *Memorare*]—how earnestly I said it.”\(^23\) She felt the comfort and assurance that “really I had a Mother”\(^24\)—the mother she had been missing all her life.

Years later Elizabeth wrote two modified versions of this prayer that moved her so deeply. One version is undated, the other written on 19 July 1818, the feast of St. Vincent de Paul. The undated version reads:

Remember O most pious Virgin no one ever had recourse to your protection, implored your help or sought your mediation without obtaining relief—confiding then on Your goodness and mercy O Mother of the Eternal word I cast myself at thy sacred feet and do most humbly supplicate you to adopt me as your child and take upon Yourself the care of my Salvation.

—O let it not be said my dearest MOTHER that I have perished where no one ever found but Grace and Salvation—\(^25\)

Influenced by the faith of the Filicchis, as well as the rituals, sacraments, and devotions of the Catholic Church, Elizabeth was inclined to become a Catholic by the time

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she left Italy. Communicating her new beliefs to Rebecca Seton, she was eager for the two to explore her newfound faith when she returned to New York. This was not to be; upon her arrival home, she found Rebecca in the last stages of tuberculosis.²⁶

Within a month, Rebecca died, and Elizabeth was on her own and faced with a decision. Filippo Filicchi had written a lengthy exposition defending the Catholic faith,²⁷ to which Rev. Henry Hobart wrote a response—each defending their church as the true one. At the same time Antonio Filicchi, who had accompanied her on the return voyage, was marshalling his resources to advocate for Catholicism. Elizabeth was torn and indecisive, telling Antonio that she was “on [her] knees beseeching God to enlighten her to see the truth, unmixed with doubts and hesitations.”²⁸

When her little family gathered for night prayers and Anna Maria asked to pray the Hail Mary, Elizabeth had to overcome a fear of idolatry ingrained by her Protestant background. She wrote to Antonio confiding her hesitation, when “Nina [Anna Maria] said oh Ma let us say hail Mary, do ma said Willy, and hail Mary we all said.”²⁹ “Why should we not say it,” she thought, “if anyone is in heaven his Mother must be there ...so I begged her with the confidence and tenderness of her child to pity us, and guide us to the true faith ... [and] to obtain peace for my poor Soul.” She was torn. Feeling the bond of motherhood with Mary she prayed, “that I may be a good mother to my poor darlings ...so I kiss her picture...

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²⁶ Elizabeth arrived on June 4, 1804; Rebecca died July 8.
²⁷ The texts of the Filicchi and Hobart manuscripts are found in the appendix of CW 3a.
and beg her to be a Mother to us.”30 Yet her nagging fear continued: “I have tryed to sanctify [praying to Mary],” she told Antonio, “begging God to look in my Soul and see how gladly I would kiss her feet because she was his Mother... if I could do it with that freedom of Soul which flowed from the knowledge of his Will.”31 She wondered, were prayers and litanies addressed to Mary acceptable to God since they were not commanded by Scripture? Yet, remembering how these prayers had delighted her in Livorno, she yearned to “cast [her] Sorrows on the Bosom of the Blessed Mary.”32

The tortured woman spent the next months under a “cloud of doubts.”33 Finally, in January 1805, she resolved to go to the Episcopal church, but when she received Communion, “half dead with the inward struggle,” she realized that her faith now resided in the Catholic sacrament. “If I left the house a Protestant, I returned to it a Catholick,” she told Antonio. “O my God that day—but it finished calmly at last abandoning all to God, and a renewed confidence in the blessed Virgin whose mild and peaceful love reproached my bold excesses and reminded me to fix my heart above with better hopes—”34 At last Elizabeth felt the confidence to address Mary as a daughter in need of reassurance, and as a mother certain she had chosen correctly for her children.

**The Embrace of a Mother**

Elizabeth was received into the Catholic Church on 14 March 1805, and two weeks later received the Eucharist. The following year when she received the sacrament of Confirmation she took the name Mary, which added to Elizabeth and Ann “present[ed] the three most endearing ideas in the World—and contain[ed] the moments of the Mysteries of Salvation.”35 This trio of mothers, Ann the mother of Mary, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary the mother of Jesus were instrumental in God’s plan of salvation, and each represented a model of discipleship that was meaningful to her.36 Signifying the importance she placed on the name Mary, Elizabeth began to sign her letters “MEAS,” while Bishop Carroll addressed his letters to her “Mrs. M.E.A. Seton.”

As Elizabeth immersed herself in Catholic New York’s liturgical and devotional life, she embraced the pervasive role Mary played in Catholic history, tradition, and prayer life.

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33 Ibid.
From Christianity’s earliest days, Mary was a revered figure, and by the fourth century, churches were dedicated to her and feasts honoring her multiplied. In the Middle Ages influential preachers such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Dominic promoted devotion to her. Shrines, pilgrimages, and miracles attributed to Mary were ubiquitous; antiphons, litanies, and Angelus bells were widespread and popular expressions of devotion.  

These writings and liturgical practices became part of her new culture. She took special notice of Marian feast days such as the Annunciation and the Nativity of Mary; praying, “Blessed Lord grant me that Humility and Love which has crowned [Mary] for Eternity,” while reflecting on “Her whose pattern has been so often set before me—her Humble, Meek and Faithful heart.”

When Elizabeth moved to Baltimore in 1808, she further realized how deeply Mary was woven into Catholic culture. She became familiar with the traditions of the Society of Jesus, the Sulpicians, and the Vincentians. Former Jesuit, Bishop John Carroll was a sounding board, confidant, and spiritual “Father” to whom she looked for guidance. Deep devotion to Mary was an important part of the bishop’s prayer life and, influenced by the life

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and writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola, he often wrote and preached about the Blessed Virgin.\(^{39}\)
He even oversaw the beginnings of a magnificent basilica dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In his last days, Carroll confided to a friend, “One of those things that gives me most consolation at the present moment is that I have been attached to the practice of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and that I have established it among the people under my care, and placed my diocese under her protection.”\(^{40}\)

Likewise the Sulpician priests, with whom Elizabeth had deep connections, were deeply devoted to Mary. Their founder, Jean-Jacques Olier, adopted the motto “Under the Auspices of Mary” for his foundation. He articulated what is sometimes interpreted to be “the richest vein of Marian spirituality in the French School of Spirituality.” He taught that Mary, in her submissive response to God, played a key role in the work of the Incarnation and became the model of discipleship.\(^{41}\) Olier’s followers in the United States adopted this theology and honored Mary by naming their institutions in Baltimore and Emmitsburg in her honor. From the time she met Rev. William Dubourg in New York, she was deeply influenced by Sulpician priests, including Pierre Babade, John Dubois, and Simon Bruté, with whom she enjoyed a deep spiritual friendship. She wrote to Bruté, “I place Mary in her leather case on the heart with earnest beggings that she will keep that eye on [God] for us till our Octave in Eternity.”\(^{42}\)

When Elizabeth moved to Emmitsburg in 1809, she and her companions lived in the shadow of St. Mary’s Mountain with its church and grotto perched above Mount St. Mary’s School. Rev. John Dubois built the church and, several hundred yards up the mountain built a shrine, the oldest in the United States honoring Mary. Elizabeth, her Sisters, and the students at St. Joseph’s fell in love with and frequented this grotto. In later years, she described how “we walked to the Mountain Church every Sunday” and after Mass would “ramble for a time around the Grotto.” Seated on what would become known as “Mother Seton’s rock,” she taught catechism to the children. Once they had settled into their new home they adapted the charism and mission of the Daughters of Charity, taking the name Sisters of Charity.


Elizabeth spent long hours translating the lives of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, founders of the Daughters of Charity, for the Sisters. Both of these saints were imbued with devotion to Mary, and Louise, like Elizabeth, identified with Mary in the experiences of motherhood. Both Vincent and Louise encouraged devotional practices and reflection on Mary’s life, urging the Sisters to imitate Mary’s virtues, particularly humility and purity.\(^43\)

As the early Sisters began their life together Elizabeth often appealed for assistance in the name of the Blessed Virgin. Writing for guidance to Archbishop Carroll, she assured him that she was “committing the success of our requests to our dear Virgin Mother.”\(^44\) Several months later, she wrote to Antonio Filicchi apprising him of the progress of the community, and reminding him of his “command to draw on [him] in necessity…. Antonio, Antonio,” she continued, “do not be angry with me, it is for the family of the blessed Virgin and St. Joseph I act and in their name.”\(^45\) Later, she described how the Sisters were asked to take on the care of an ailing woman from the area. Elizabeth was interested, yet hesitant, as she listened “with hands crossed on Marys picture and the crucifix under the shawl,” and wondered if this “may be the moment” for the hospital the Sisters had dreamed of opening.\(^46\)


The Sisters’ daily prayer included the rosary and the litany to the Blessed Mother. Objects such as rosaries, crucifixes, and art were close-at-hand as reminders of God’s presence. A large painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe hung in the chapel of the White House.\[47\] In 1816 Elizabeth wrote to her sister, Mary Bayley Post, how, on a stormy night, she dropped asleep “with [her] crucifix under [her] pillow and the blessed Virgin’s picture pressed on the heart.... [H]ow tight I held my little picture as a mark of confidence in her prayers, who must be tenderly interested for Souls so dearly purchased by her Son.”\[48\]

As Elizabeth’s prayer life deepened and her responsibilities as Mother of the community and director of the Sisters’ school grew, so too did her devotion to Mary. As already noted, her initial link was forged by St. Bernard’s *Memorare*, which expressed confidence that Mary would always respond with care and protection. She found comfort in looking upon Mary as the mother she had always longed for—a mother who would hold, comfort, protect, and care for her, a mother who would serve as a refuge in time of distress or doubt. In one of her reflections, she imagined Mary as a watchful and protective mother bird. “Mary Queen and Virgin pure!” she wrote, “—as poor unfledged Birds uncovered in our cold and hard nests on this Earth we cry to her for her sheltering outspread wings—little hearts not yet knowing sorrow—but poor tired older ones pressed with pains and cares seek peace and rest—O our Mother! and find it in thee.— ”\[49\]

As a complement to Mary as comforting mother, Elizabeth felt a bond of motherhood with Mary. She saw her own experience as a mother reflected in that of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. In a Christmas letter to Rev. Pierre Babade, she reflected, “let all be hushed as the darling Babe when he first laid his dear mouth to the sweet breast of his Mother.”\[50\] In a sweeping reflection on the feast of the Assumption in 1813, she traced the special blessings Mary received through the stages of motherhood:

...her flesh, the very flesh of Jesus O’ O’ O’

...Jesus nine months in Mary feeding on her blood O Mary! These nine months—

...—Jesus on the Breast of Mary feeding on her milk how long she must have delayed the weaning of such a child!!!!

...the infancy of Jesus—in her lap—on her knees as on his throne, while the rolling Earth within its sphere adorned with mountains, trees and flowers is the throne of Mary and her blessed infant carrissing (sic), playing in her arms—O Mary—how weak these words—

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\[47\] This painting was a gift of Matthias O’Conway, father of Sister Cecilia and friend of Elizabeth.


...the youth—the Obscure life—the public life of Jesus, Mary always everywhere in every moment day and night conscious she was his Mother—O glorious happy Mother even through the sufferings and ignominies of her son—her full conformity to him—What continual inexpressible improvement and increase of Grace in her—O Virtues of Mary infinitely perfect the constant delight of the Blessed Trinity she alone giving them more glory than all heaven together—Mother of God! Mary! oh the purity of Mary, the humility, patience, love of Mary—to imitate at humblest distance—

...Mary at the foot of the cross—the piercing sword—the last look—last word of Jesus to Mary—

As she endured the sufferings and deaths of her children Elizabeth identified with Mary’s suffering through the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Almost in despair after her daughter Anna Maria’s death in 1812, she wrote to Rev. Bruté: “on the grave of Anina—begging crying to Mary to behold her son and plead for us, and to Jesus to behold his Mother—to pity a mother—a poor poor Mother—so uncertain of reunion—then the Soul quieted even by the desolation of the falling leaves around began to cry out from Eternity to Eternity thou art God.”

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Several years later, with her daughter Rebecca nearing death, Elizabeth again recalled Mary’s motherhood: “My Rebecca we will at last, at last unite in his eternal praise, lost in him, You and I closer still than in the nine months so dear when as I told you I carried you in my bosom as he in our Virgin Mothers—then no more Separation—”\textsuperscript{53} She reminded her daughter of “the love of her Mother in heaven—the delight of her good angel presenting every moment of the suffering darling to her crucified Saviour who counts her pains with his—”\textsuperscript{54}

For her remaining daughter, Catherine, and her two sons, William and Richard, Elizabeth was a loyal and steadfast presence through their struggles and disappointments. In addition, she served as a surrogate parent to the children at St. Joseph’s Academy, free school, and orphan class. Writing to a friend, she observed, “I am as a mother encompassed by many children of different dispositions—not all equally amiable or congenial, but bound to love, instruct, and provide for the happiness of all.”\textsuperscript{55} She told Antonio Filicchi that her hope was for St. Joseph’s “to have been a nursery only for our Saviours poor country children, but it seems it is to be the means of forming city girls to Faith and piety as wives and mothers.”\textsuperscript{56} Even the boys who visited weekly from Mount St. Mary’s developed confiding relationships with her. So much did her maternal presence mean to these young people that they turned to her with confidence, and all came to call her Mother Seton.

Elizabeth recognized Mary as an integral part of salvation history, an intercessor with Jesus, a fellow pilgrim, and a model of virtue. She wrote, “how sweet it is to entreat her who bore Him in the bosom of Peace to take our own case in hand—If she is not heard, who shall be?”\textsuperscript{57} At another time, again emphasizing Mary as intercessor, she wrote of “Mary returning our love to Jesus for us—our prayer through her heart with reflected love and excellence as from the heart of a friend... Jesus delighting to receive our love embellished and purified through the heart of Mary— ...Jesus in Mary, Mary in Jesus.”\textsuperscript{58}

Often citing Mary as a model of virtue, Elizabeth held her up for all to imitate. The Blessed Mother is most honored by imitation. She wrote, “—her life a model for all conditions of life; her poverty, humility, purity, love—and sufferings—”\textsuperscript{59} In another meditation for Holy Week on the “Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin,” she reflected that Mary was justly called the Queen of Martyrs since from the time of Simeon’s prophecy she anticipated what her

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] 7.28, “To Rebecca Seton,” May 1816, \textit{Ibid.}, 2:399.
\item[56] 7.87, “To Antonio Filicchi,” 1 June 1817, \textit{Ibid.}, 2:479.
\item[57] Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville, eds., \textit{Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings} (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 56.
\item[58] 10.1, “St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi Notebook,” n.d., CW, 3a:463.
\item[59] \textit{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
Son would endure. “O Mary our Mother,” she prayed, “lead us with you the way of Sorrow our Jesus has traced out, keep our hearts united with your pains, that at last we may share your glory.” And after considering Mary’s visit to the Sepulchre and her return to Jerusalem after the crucifixion, she concluded: “O Mother of tenderest mercy... I cast myself with confidence in your arms—you are also My Mother I your child left to you by your Jesus unworthy as I am.”

Finally, Elizabeth held Mary up to her Sisters as a model. In translating portions of Louis Abelly’s biography of St. Vincent de Paul she chose the section on “the devotion and service we owe to the Blessed Virgin Mother of God, first by daily offering her some particular devotion and duty... 2nd by imitating her virtues as far as we can, especially her humility and purity 3rd by exhorting others to serve and love her whenever we have the opportunity of doing it.”

In “A Plan of life for Religious after a Retreat,” Elizabeth offered a list of nine practices a Sister should consider in honoring and imitating Mary, which closely mirrored St. Vincent’s recommendations. Her “Instructions on Religious Life,” present Mary as a “model of a religious soul,” and conclude: “Thus does Mary present to the world the first pattern, the first rough draft of a religious life, which cannot be praised for any remarkable virtue, because it is the union of all virtues.” In another reflection, “Mary our Mother,” she concluded with this tribute: “Mary teaching Patience with life—its commonest offices—daily miseries—a heart of Mary for all duty—above all in communion—Mary the first Sister of Charity on Earth.”

As Elizabeth’s health deteriorated, she accepted her condition with equanimity and sometimes eagerness, always focusing on God’s presence, Mary’s comfort and support, and the happiness that would be hers when she joined them in heaven. Writing to one of the Sisters, she said:

I do not suffer, I am weak, it is true; but how happy and quiet the day passes! If this be the way of death, nothing can be more peaceful and happy; and if I am to recover, still, how sweet to rest in the arms of our Lord! I never felt more sensibly the presence of our Dearest than since I have been sick; it seems as if

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61 8.26 “Pyamigo Reflections,” 1804, CW, 3a:205; Ibid., 3a:208.
our Lord or his blessed Mother stood continually by me in a corporeal form, to comfort, cheer and encourage me, in the different weary and tedious hours of pain. But you will laugh at my imaginations; still, our All has many ways of comforting his little atoms.  

Elizabeth approached death peacefully, surrounded by those she loved. The Sisters waited with her, praying words that were familiar and comforting—the Magnificat, the Memorare, and the Litany of the Blessed Virgin—until she slipped away into the loving arms of that tender Mother she had discovered so long ago, and her beloved Lord whom she had been so faithful in serving.

Conclusion
As Elizabeth immersed herself in Catholicism, she welcomed new forms of prayer and ritual, and fully embraced the high esteem with which the Blessed Virgin Mary was held. Her prayer and spirituality remained centered in God, especially focused on Jesus Christ and the sacrament of Eucharist. She continued to be devoted to reading and meditating on the Scriptures, especially the life of Christ. But the new, important component of her mature spiritual life was her relationship with Mary. The profound spiritual encounter Elizabeth experienced in Livorno in 1804 when she prayed the words of the Memorare reached deeply into her soul and had a transformative effect on her life.

When Elizabeth “discovered” Mary as the mother she had never had she filled a void in her life. Perceiving the Blessed Mother as offering her unconditional love, warmth, nurturance, and strength she dissolved into tears. She felt a profound sense of presence, of release, and of discovery. It reached into the depths of her soul and remained with her. Her encounter with Mary served as a precious touchstone of her spirituality. In her own words: “I felt really I had a mother... and at that moment it seemed as if I had found more than her, even in the tenderness and pity of a Mother—so I cried myself to sleep in her heart.”67

Once Elizabeth embraced this connection with Mary, it became a rich part of her prayer life and spirituality. She relied on Mary’s intercession and strove to imitate her virtue. Her own children, her students, and the Sisters of Charity were beneficiaries of her “discovery” of this mother. It was a discovery that continues to enrich our lives as Elizabeth’s story is told and retold.

67 2.11, “To Rebecca Seton,” 28 January 1804, Ibid., 1:292–93
The lavish interior of the Santissima Annunziata, Florence, Italy.

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Portraits in later life of Richard Seton (by Constantina Coltellini, ca. 1819); and Catherine Seton (who became a Sister of Mercy).

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Basilica of the National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, which includes her tomb, Emmitsburg, Maryland.

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