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# **Elizabeth Ann Seton: Model of Contemplative Presence for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

BY

JEAN FLANNELLY, S.C.

## **Introduction**

Recently I attended a concert that was to benefit the newly revitalized music program in our parish elementary school. After hearing words of welcome, some of which indicated music's ability to take us into the realm of the transcendent, we were treated to an exquisitely performed Rachmaninoff piece for two pianos. In the middle of this I heard Elizabeth whisper, "Encourage them to be mystics, teach them my way of mysticism." I make no claim to having an extraordinary experience. The inner voice, I believe, was the result of walking with Elizabeth and reading her writings over the previous eight months.

I wonder how many of us, when we think of Elizabeth Ann Seton, think of her as a mystic? I doubt if many do. Initially, I was just interested in what she could tell us about being contemplative presences to our fractured world. But as I read, I fell into mysticism and concluded that Elizabeth Ann Seton was an "unsuspecting mystic." My next concern was whether Elizabeth, who lived in a different time in history (modern and Christian) and embraced a different piety, could teach us (who live in a time that is more and more frequently described as post-modern and post-Christian) about being mystics and living as contemplative presences in our world? We live in a pluralistic society that, if not mired in the quicksand of relativism, challenges a too ready assertion of universal truths. We are engaged in the process of developing new frameworks to perceive reality, and make sense of our world, since the ones that formed us from our youth have lost their power and effectiveness. Having read many of her letters, and knowing some of the details of her life, I am confident she was a mystic and can be our tutor in leading us to a contemplative presence. Why am I so confident?

## **Process of Mediation**

As Catholic Christians, we believe that we are involved in a dynamic relationship with God. We are confident that God's self revelation, and God's desires for us, is passed on through the community of

faith. But observation shows that each particular faith community's expression of God and God's revelation is partial and incomplete. Yet over our 2000 year history since Jesus' death, resurrection and exaltation we also observe certain pieces of the revelation "keep bubbling-up" to find expression in the symbols and categories of the age. It is these certain pieces that bubbled up in Elizabeth's life that make me confident. But a word of caution! She made sense of her world and herself, and expressed these through the symbols, concepts, and a world view given her and in which she was embedded. It was different from ours, and as partial and incomplete as ours is. But because of God's desire to communicate Godself to us, these symbols and concepts mediated for her the mystery of God and God's desires. Because of this mediation I am confident that if we take the time to dwell in some of her favorite places, we will encounter the same glorious Mystery she came to know on an intimate, personal level.

### Differing World Views

Before we begin our tutorial with Elizabeth, let us look more closely at the times in which she lived and some aspects of her religious imagination. Elizabeth was born, like many of us, in modern times, into a culture that was Christian. She, unlike us, lived out her 47 years in this modern Christian culture. We could say that Elizabeth was a thoroughly modern woman. Her letters reveal her unquestioning and uncritical acceptance of patriarchy as the natural order of things. She embraced a dualistic view of reality. Thus, she separated body and soul, human and divine, earth and heaven.

But the Spirit of God, at work in her, led her to other and newer horizons than those shaped by her culture. God's Spirit led her primarily through Scripture, Liturgy, friends and external trials. Unfortunately for Elizabeth, the convergence of the modern and the Christian left her without a way to *see* God acting in and through culture. Therefore, it is no surprise that she spoke of the world as a prison,<sup>1</sup> and saw it and God in a competitive relationship. In writing to Reverend John Hickey<sup>2</sup> she spoke of her conviction that the presence of human comfort is not only at odds with, but actually subtracts from, divine comfort. Her view of the world was decidedly negative by our standards.

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<sup>1</sup> Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., Ellin Kelly, mss. ed., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings, Volume II (draft copy)* (New York: New City Press, 2002), Seton to Matthias O'Conway, 5 June 1811. (Hereinafter cited as *CW II*)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Seton to John Hickey, 28 February 1820.

She described it as a “place of trial, testing and filled with ubiquitous danger.”<sup>3</sup>

Earlier, I indicated that the limitations of her culture did not equip her with eyes to *see* God acting. Elizabeth rejoices to see our day! Even though we struggle with the implications of not dichotomizing, we have the means from contemporary theological reflection to *see*. Our contemporary understanding of Incarnation expressed by theologians such as Rahner and Schillebeeckx, helps us to *see* that the human and divine are inextricably interwoven. We cannot separate the human from the divine. Furthermore, because of the Incarnation we need to take seriously the reality of God’s graciousness drawing near, and the presence of the Spirit in our world. However, the task of discerning where in the world God is drawing near, and where God’s Spirit is being poured out, is intensely difficult but it is a *sine qua non* for a hopeful appropriation of our world in all its complexity.

### **Elizabeth the Woman**

In the process of reading her correspondence and sifting through the details of her life, I have come to know Elizabeth on a new level. Paul’s third chapter, in his letter to the Philippians, seems an apt summary of the woman I encountered:

But what were once my assets I now through Christ Jesus count as losses. Yes, I will go further; because of the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, I count everything else as loss. For him I have accepted the loss of all other things, and look on them all as filth if only I can gain Christ and be given a place in him, with the uprightness I have gained not from the Law, but through faith in Christ, an uprightness from God, based on faith, that I may come to know him and the power of his resurrection, and partake of his sufferings by being molded to the pattern of his death, striving towards the goal of resurrection from the dead. Not that I have secured it already, nor yet reached my goal, but I am still pursuing it in an attempt to take hold of the prize for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. I do not reckon myself as having taken

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Seton to Ellen Wiseman, 20 February 1818.

hold of it; I can only say that forgetting all that lies behind me and straining forward to what lies in front, I am racing towards the finishing-point to win the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

### *Attachment to God*

Elizabeth was fascinated with God, and her primary attachment was to God and not to a particular religion<sup>5</sup> — though being brought into the Catholic Church, as she said on her deathbed, was the greatest blessing God had bestowed on her.<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth was a woman of strong passion, deep attachments and given to excesses of sentiment. She was fascinated with God and sought God's presence. She found God present in the Church, and especially in communion and benediction. She would describe these as moments of real presence. It is here she experienced her greatest sense of consolation and union with God.<sup>7</sup> If there was any time or place in her life where Elizabeth might be tempted to speak of herself as a mystic it would be in Holy Communion.

### *The Lens of the Cross*

Elizabeth found God in her trials and sufferings. On numerous occasions she spoke of a deep inner peace despite external trials, a deep inner peace that directly correlated with her external trials — as her trials increased so too the deep peace. The key, I believe, to understanding this is the centrality of the cross and calvary in her life. In a letter of encouragement<sup>8</sup> she reminded a friend of Christ's words, "Come follow me" and added that calvary is the rendezvous. At another time<sup>9</sup> she shared an experience of seeing Jesus before her with a reproachful look of love saying, "will you, can you desert my bloody footsteps?"

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<sup>4</sup> Phil 3:7-14. Cf. Ellin Kelly, *Elizabeth Seton's Two Bibles, Her Notes and Markings* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1977), 138. Though in her two Bibles — the Notre dame and the Vincennes — she only marked off three verses from chapter 3 (3:14 and 3:20-21), the manner of her life, and admonitions to others, points to the fact that these words of Paul guided and directed her life and her choices.

<sup>5</sup> *CW II*. In a letter to Simon Bruté, 6 January 1815, she recalled her struggle of 1805, and her resolve to remain without a religion, and stretch out her arms to God and cry out her desire to hold to God in life and in death, and hope and trust to the last breath.

<sup>6</sup> Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville, eds., *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 59.

<sup>7</sup> *CW II*. In a letter to Simon Bruté on the 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her first communion, dated 25 March 1817, she writes of the high consolation and singular peace that lasted the whole day from morning mass through evening Vespers.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Seton to George Weis, 13 May 1810.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Seton to Matthias O'Conway, 15 June 1811.

And in advising Sister Cecilia O'Conway,<sup>10</sup> who was struggling with an attraction to a cloistered life of prayer and solitude, the lens of calvary and the cross was central. Elizabeth in a burst of apostolic zeal, and keen awareness of the needs of the new nation, reminded Cecilia that her work for souls was the nails that affix her to the cross.

### *Meeting God in Other People*

Elizabeth saw God in other people. This was variously expressed, but could be summed up in God's providence and in treating others with kindness and love. God's providence was evident to her through the goodness and generosity of those many friends who helped her take care of her children, and ultimately in the needs of the new born religious congregation. Whether she was dealing with the tension resulting from David's proposing Rose White<sup>11</sup> as Mother to replace Elizabeth, or dealing with students, some of whom lacked amiability or congeniality,<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth saw God in these people and treated them with reverence and respect.

### *The Very Human Elizabeth*

Earlier I said I met a woman who was passionate, held strong attachments<sup>13</sup> to those she loved and was given to excesses of sentimentality. If these had remained untouched or untutored by the discipline of religion,<sup>14</sup> they, no doubt, would have been obstacles on that "profound human journey into the mystery of God which is at the same time the mystery of human life transformed into the divine."<sup>15</sup> It is my suspicion that Elizabeth like many of us, initially used her religious insight as a defense against those aspects of her personality that were not in conformity with her God aspirations. But as God's Spirit took greater possession of her, she was led to hear and to see the deeper and fuller truth of these religious insights that eventually led her on her unique journey.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 August 1817.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Seton to Archbishop John Carroll, 16 March 1811.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Seton to Eliza Sadler, 3 August 1811.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 20 November 1815. "Pity and pray for a poor mother attached to her children through such peculiar motives as I am to mine. I purify it as much as I can and God knows that it is their souls alone I look at."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Elizabeth on more than one occasion spoke of the tempering effects of religion on one's passions and dispositions: Seton to Mary Harvey, 9 December 1817; Seton to Ann Tilghman, 1 January 1820.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Fink, "Liturgy and Spirituality: a Timely Intersection" in Eleanor Bernstein, ed., *Liturgy and Spirituality in Context* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990).

I think that her favorite aspirations and admonitions might be a good example of her use of defensive maneuvers against her deeply felt emotions. But that was in the earlier part of her journey, where she was walking the purgative way. By way of demonstration, “look up”<sup>16</sup> can sound like a spiritualizing tactic we use so that we need not get caught up in the nitty gritty of working things through, coming face to face with the reality that, indeed, we are creatures, limited and imperfect. More than likely this admonition to herself and others was simply and profoundly a means of distancing herself from pain and struggle, and a reminder that she was indeed in God’s hands. But as a woman who thirsted for her God and was imbued with Scripture, this simple expression developed deeper meaning and associations.

*“Look Up!”*

We need only look at her notes and underlinings in her two Bibles to see that the stories of Abraham, the paradigm of biblical faith, were very familiar to her. In both her Bibles<sup>17</sup> she marked numerous passages from the stories of Abraham. Two passages relevant to “look up” are in Genesis 15:5-6 and 22:13. In the first instance Yahweh assured Abram of the covenant and instructed him to “look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can.” In the latter passage, the heir who was key to the fulfillment of the covenant had been born and Abraham was now instructed to take him out to sacrifice him. Abraham was stopped from doing this by the angel of God, and “looking up he saw a ram.” Thus, “look up” is pregnant with meanings — an act of faith-hope in the God who guides history, and in God’s holy people to their fulfillment, and a bed-rock conviction that God will always provide. We do not have to look far in Elizabeth’s writings to find her expression of these same sentiments.<sup>18</sup> It is clear that Elizabeth followed the Spirit of God on her journey to God, and in service to others. But a question remains, “Who and what were the voices of God’s Spirit?”

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<sup>16</sup> CW II. Some examples of her use of “look up” occur when she wrote “looking straight upward” to Cecilia Seton on 9 June 1808; to Eliza Sadler on 14 September 1812, “gazing upwards as usual”; to Julia Scott in May 1820, “Repeat again and again look up, oh yes look up with your own friend. If I did not life would be a burden indeed.”

<sup>17</sup> Kelly, *Two Bibles*, 54-56, 156-157.

<sup>18</sup> CW II. Seton to Filippo Filicchi, 29 July 1815, “One thing only I am sure of that our God will turn all for the best.” She wrote to Julia Scott, 16 February 1816, “Our God is God — all as he pleases — I am the happiest creature in the thought that not the least thing can happen but by his will or permission and all that for the best.”

## Voices of God's Spirit

To understand Elizabeth's religious imagination and thus gain deeper insight into her words, admonitions, and interiority, it is enlightening to look at the nourishment she took for her spiritual journey. Four staples of her diet were the Scriptures, *Imitation of Christ* (à Kempis), the Liturgy, and the writings of Saint Francis De Sales.

### *Scripture*

Even if we did not know that she spent two hours a day with her Bible,<sup>19</sup> we know that from an early age she spent much time praying with and reading the Scriptures. The Psalms were a prayer book for her, with Psalm 23 being a favorite. The Journal<sup>20</sup> she kept for her sister-in-law, Rebecca, while she, William and little Anna were in the Lazzaretto, makes frequent reference to consolations the three of them received from the Psalms and the prophet, Isaiah. Her religious imagination was so infused with Scripture that images and allusions to Biblical texts color her letters and journals. A curious but explainable companion to her love for the Scriptures was her attachment to the *Imitation of Christ*. The dominant understanding of holiness in Elizabeth's day was the perfection of Christian virtues. They did not see as we see today that holiness, being like God, is an outcome or by-product of giving oneself over to the on-going mission of Jesus. That is, through our engagement in ministry, we die to self-centeredness and learn obedience to the Father as Jesus did.

### *The Imitation of Christ*

The *Imitation*, which is largely ascriptural, is a practical guide to the moral spiritual life, the emphasis on the moral. Thomas à Kempis (whom most agree is the author) consistently urged humility, lowliness, unworthiness, etc. and suggested practices and disciplines which came from the categories of piety and devotion rather than from Scripture. Though it is titled the *Imitation of Christ*, only selected sayings of Jesus are presented, and then used only as jumping-off points for the moral lesson. Noticeably absent are the parables and deeds of Jesus.

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Dirvin, C.M., *Mrs. Seton* (New York: Avon Books, 1962), 24, 92.

<sup>20</sup> Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., Ellin Kelly, mss. ed., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings, Volume I* (New York: New City Press, 2000), 251-276.



I suspect that Elizabeth would be confounded if we suggested to her that she was a mystic. This would be due in part to her attachment to the *Imitation of Christ*. Allow me to explain. Thomas à Kempis<sup>21</sup> was a “Brother of the Common Life”; a group which came into existence in the late fourteenth century in order to promote reform and give clarity and direction to a confused Church. You may recall that at that time three alleged popes were calling for loyalty and allegiance, resulting in divisions among the people, in convents and monasteries. The Brothers urged what they called “*Devotia Moderna*” as a way of forming and reforming one’s life. In this they were very careful to distinguish themselves from those who were delving too much, they thought, into a pretentious mysticism. It is my conclusion that because she embraced à Kempis’ mind set and categories, she would be incapable of seeing herself as a mystic.

### *Liturgy*

Through the influence of Henry Hobart,<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth was drawn to the liturgical life of the church. We all know of her attraction to Communion and benediction, but she was also drawn by what she referred to as Confession and Extreme Unction.<sup>23</sup> When we read her letters and journals, her manner of speaking about these three sacraments and the liturgy can strike our contemporary ears as somewhat mechanical and, perhaps, magical. For example, if one prepares well by stirring up the appropriate pious sentiments and in the case of confession, itemizing all of one’s sins, then one receives or gets the sacraments. Absent are references to encountering the healing, forgiving, nurturing Christ, because her way of talking was limited by the understanding and the categories available to her; these were more mechanical than relational. The language surrounding the Sacraments was largely “thing” language. For example, you get Communion, you receive Extreme Unction and you get “grace.” Yet despite her categories, her openness to God’s lead mediated for her the deeper truth — the presence and activity of Jesus Christ.

<sup>21</sup> Harold Gardiner, ed., *The Imitation of Christ* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Flanagan, S.C., “Some Aspects of Elizabeth Seton’s Spiritual / Theological World” in *Vincentian Heritage* 14:2 (1993): 219.

<sup>23</sup> With its revisions of the liturgical rites following the Second Vatican Council, the Church has recaptured and given expression to the fuller meaning of sacraments, and helped us to move beyond the narrow understanding that was taught for almost 400 years. Thus, confession and Extreme Unction are now, more appropriately, called the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick — the two Sacraments of Healing.

*Francis De Sales*

Elizabeth's translations of Francis De Sales' letters and sermons introduced her to his thinking and his advocacy of the "ecstasy of work and life." She understood, through him, that the extraordinary living out of the ordinary life was the deeper and quieter dimension of all authentic living. She would concur with him that mystics are important for us not because of their extraordinary psychological raptures and ecstasies, but because of the depth at which they live out their daily lives in faith, hope and love.<sup>24</sup> What better way to sum up the life of Elizabeth Ann Seton than to point to the depths of her faith, hope and love, as she lived out her responsibilities as mother to her five children, a friend, guide, educator and mother of a newly born community of women?

**Elizabeth Rejoices to See Our Day***Scripture*

Elizabeth rejoices to see our day! As Catholic Christians we are discovering the Bible, and our numerous ancestors of faith who experienced and spoke boldly of God and God's creative deeds. Every three years in the Church's Liturgical Cycle we hear all four Gospels, many New Testament Letters, and numerous passages from the Old Testament which shed greater light on Christ and his meaning in salvation history. We have available some excellent translations of the Bible that are based on the ancient texts, along with well-developed scholarship which can help us penetrate the veils draped by vastly different cultures and languages. She would encourage us to read God's word so as to meet God, and to allow the stories of our ancestors in the faith and their encounters with God to shape our imagination, our hope, and our identity.

*Liturgy*

Elizabeth rejoices to see our day! Contemporary theological reflection on the sacraments, grace and liturgy avoids all "thing" language and employs the language of "relationship." Thus, sacraments are encounters with Christ — who is the human face of God. Grace is not so

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<sup>24</sup> Harvey Egan, *What are They Saying About Mysticism?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 2.

much something we get, but the gracious drawing near of God who offers us life and growth. Liturgy is not something we go to, but something we do. Liturgy which requires full, active, conscious participation challenges us in new ways of imagining prayer, and in developing new skills in surrendering to the dynamic movement of ritual where God is to be encountered. We will return to the Liturgy later when we tease out some suggestions for ourselves and our journey into mysticism.

What is Elizabeth's bequest to us? Elizabeth would have us share a deep love of Scripture and Liturgy with her. She would have us imitate Christ, perhaps suggesting that instead of à Kempis we go to the source and accompany Jesus as he journeys through the Gospels, and sit at his feet like the disciple, Mary, ready and eager to hear what Jesus wants us to know of Abba and Abba's desires for all creation. Elizabeth would have us be mystics.

### Mysticism

For many of us, formed in the categories of classical ascetical theology, the words "mystic" and "contemplative" might suggest two different realities. The "mystic" is thought to be a person gifted with "infused contemplation," frequently experiencing extraordinary phenomena like visions, ecstasies, locutions, and levitations. Whereas the "contemplative" often conjures up images of prayer (acquired contemplation), detachment, cloister, silence, a particular life-style, etc. If we are to appreciate Elizabeth as mystic, and her legacy to us, we need to probe deeper and use more contemporary reflection.

#### *Contemporary Theological Reflection*

Louis Boyer<sup>25</sup> retrieved the work and insights of the Church Fathers, and described mysticism as an experience of an invisible objective world: the world whose coming the Scriptures reveal to us in Jesus Christ, the world into which we enter ontologically, through the liturgy, through the same Jesus Christ ever present in the Church.

The centrality of the Scriptures and the Liturgy should not go unnoticed. For the Church Fathers, for Boyer, and for Elizabeth we encounter God in Scripture and Liturgy in so far as we approach with loving openness and receptivity.

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<sup>25</sup> Louis Boyer, "Mysticism, an Essay on the History of the Word," Richard Woods, ed., *Understanding Mysticism* (New York: Image Books, 1980), 53.

Jack Welch<sup>26</sup> distinguishes between mysticism as an *experience* and mysticism as a *process*. As an experience mysticism is aptly described as a loving knowledge of God, given birth in a personal encounter with God. The encounter with God includes both an awareness of the presence of God and an experience of being drawn into union with God. As a process, mysticism refers to a *way of life*, which is built on one's direct experience of God, a way of life which continues to unfold as one is led ever more deeply into the reality of life and into a loving union with the Mystery who is the core of life.

Today, most theologians, speak of mysticism and contemplation in the same breath. They do not find the older distinction helpful, but do offer other descriptions which can enable us to see Elizabeth's mysticism in sharper focus: mysticism in a broad sense vis à vis mysticism in a narrow sense, and servant vis à vis bridal mysticism.

*Mysticism: Broad vis à vis Narrow*

In the broad sense mysticism is understood largely, though not exclusively, as referring to a way of life. Whereas, in the narrow sense mysticism is understood as a type of prayer and an experience of God which unfolds in a journey to God and true self.

The mystic, broadly speaking, has an implicit or explicit experience of faith, hope, and love (that is, the Mystery of life is trustworthy, is for-me and a future to hope in<sup>27</sup>). The mystic, in the broad sense, is radically faithful to the demands of daily life and surrenders herself to the Mystery that haunts her life. There is no doubt in my mind that Elizabeth's indefatigable faithfulness to the care and rearing of her children, and later to the nurturing of the adults and children on the mountain, and then of the women who joined their dreams with hers, was the expression of her radical faith, hope and love. But it is also possible to make the case for her being a mystic in the narrow sense.

In this type of mysticism the person, under God's discernible initiative and direction, falls explicitly in love with God and thus begins a journey. In the process of being awakened by God, the incipient mystic becomes sensitized to her own sinfulness and vileness. She also experiences her own creaturehood, and the incredible distance that sepa-

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<sup>26</sup> Jack Welch, "Mysticism" in Joseph Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot Lane, eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier / Liturgical Press, 1987), 694-695.

<sup>27</sup> Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 41. Recalls her experience of God as father when she was 15 years of age.

rates her from her Creator.<sup>28</sup> At this early step in her journey, the mystic's love of God is colored more by self-seeking than God-seeking. That is, despite having tasted something of God's goodness and love the experience of her own sinfulness predominates, and she (through an ego-orientation) seeks out ways of doing penance instead of allowing God to be in control.<sup>29</sup> But as God eradicates her disordered desiring, attachments, and self-love, she grows in virtue, integrity and the ability to surrender to God's healing and transforming love.<sup>30</sup> Persons who are united with God may have very different ways of experiencing and giving expression to this union. The distinction between servant and bridal mysticism will shed further light.

*Mysticism: Servant vis à vis Bride*

The servant mystic is one whose felt union with God finds expression in generous service to others and engagement with the world. Ignatius of Loyola and Vincent de Paul are good examples of a servant mystic. Bridal mysticism is associated with intense experiences of interiority and of being in deep union with God. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross are examples of bridal mysticism, and through their writings they have enriched our understanding of this form. Though it is relatively easy to distinguish between these two types in analysis, it is evident when one knows the details of the lives of Ignatius, Teresa and John, that bridal and servant are not mutually exclusive categories. We find this with Elizabeth. In some of her writings she does speak of intense interior experiences,<sup>31</sup> but these revelations are not extensive. The lack of references might be explained by the fact that self-consciousness and self-reflection were not highly prized in her times. It would take another 100 or so years before the value of self-consciousness would burst onto the scene. Elizabeth's mysticism was that of a servant. But what about the typical images or ideas that we associate with

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<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth frequently referred to herself as a poor sinner, the worst of sinners.

<sup>29</sup> *CW II*. Elizabeth Seton to Rebecca Seton, 26 October 1815. "O if I did not see our Lord is all and trust it to him what an aching heart I should have – but not so, I look all the while to our purification and then our eternity."

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*. Seton to Filippo Fillichi, 29 July 1815. "One thing only I am sure of that our God will turn all for the best."

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*. In her *Journal* for Simon Bruté, 25 April 1815, she spoke of being wordless while her "heart flows and overflows." In a letter to Bruté, 2 September 1816, she spoke of her prayer in the following way, "Peace – our God never my soul in the quiet as now – long as he pleases to look down on his poor one poor and in misery. Our God – Our God, two hours could only say that."

mystics or contemplatives? Earlier we alluded to the fact that these terms often can conjure up images of a particular life-style, one that is characterized by prayer, detachment and silence.

Attentive reflection on life experiences teaches us that a particular life-style is not necessary to mysticism, but prayer, detachment, and silence are essential. Contemplation or mysticism is a manner of knowing, which results from gazing lovingly on the Other (other). The particular shape or form one's life takes as a result of this loving union depends, to a large extent, on one's image or understanding of God. In our Christian tradition there have been discernible shifts in mysticism's shape and form.

### **The God Who Is Contemplated**

During the first flowering of monasticism with our desert mothers (ammās) and desert fathers (abbas), the God contemplated was God whose transcendence and Otherness were primary; an image more influenced by Hellenistic philosophy than by the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Thus, it made sense to flee the city, cloister oneself in the desert away from all the noise and attachment that would distract from maintaining a loving gaze on the Other.

A shift of paradigmatic proportions occurred with Ignatius of Loyola and his understanding and expression of contemplation or mysticism. He insisted that one ought to seek and find God in all things. In his *Spiritual Exercises* the main source material is the Scriptures. Thus, the God who is lovingly sought and gazed upon is the God of Judeo-Christian Scriptures, deeply committed to and immanent in creation. But more than this, the God of Scriptures is a dynamic God, a God of the promise, a God who, from the future, calls us and empowers us to create that future.<sup>32</sup> Contemplation or mysticism involving the Judeo-Christian God will express its prayer in meditation and contemplation of God, whose face is known to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as in the quiet wordless presence of God. Detachment in the life of a contemplative is a life lived in conformity to God's will, opening one's life to the activity of God. The cloister may be found amidst the everydayness of life (city streets), and silence in receptivity to the More and to the Other. In contemplating the God of the future

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<sup>32</sup> Donald Buggert, "God and Contemplation" in *New Theology Review* 8:3 (1995): 40-52.

we relinquish our images and concepts of God, and shatter those idols that enslave society and prevent the reign of God from becoming a reality within us and within creation.

At this point I hope we are all in agreement that Elizabeth Ann Seton was a mystic, and part of her legacy to us is that we open our selves to God's gift of intimacy with us. We believe God is at the center of our existence and as God is approached, or better still, as we leave ourselves open to God, we grow in self-knowledge and enter more fully into the reality of existence. God is met and the true self is born on this journey. The individual does not collapse into an Absolute but is differentiated and stands forth as a union with God deepens.<sup>33</sup> This having been said, we still need to explore the meaning and rationale for being contemplative presences to our fractured world — a world that still awaits the full coming of the kingdom of God.

### **Contemplative Presence**

One who is contemplatively present to life is first of all convinced, if only on an intuitive level, that the present moment — just the way it is — is in its deepest meaning a manifestation of the divine. Do we not hear echoes of Elizabeth saying "Go out to meet your grace."<sup>34</sup> Gabriel Marcel suggested that as children we possess this ability, but as we are socialized into roles, and into society, we gradually lose touch with this ability to wonder at the mystery of the present moment. Instead we strive to gain mastery or control over our world through analysis and distance. So many people, for at least a part of life, live in ignorance of the divinity of what is, and typically express this ignorance by attempting to rise above and leave behind the domain of the ordinary in order to meet the divine in the realm of the extraordinary. Once reawakened to the present moment and its gift of divine presence, the task is to take the path of home-coming, or the path of contemplative transformation, by which we rediscover the divinity of what just is.<sup>35</sup>

When we are present to the mystery within which life is lived, we are alert to and wait for manifestations of the divine within the ordinary. In our attentiveness to mystery, we uncover traces of the divine presence in joy, absurdity and pain. In short, we not only meet and praise God in and through relationships, ministry, encounters, crises

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<sup>33</sup> Welch, "Mysticism," 696.

<sup>34</sup> CW II.

<sup>35</sup> James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2000).

etc., but we also bring a faith, hope, and love that has the ability to transform and to help usher in God's reign.

### *Our Mysticism*

What would Elizabeth have us be? We should become mystics who are contemplatively present to the "here and now" and recognize and greet the Divine in the everydayness of our lives. For most of us this mysticism will be that of the "servant mystic," the one who finds God in all things and dramatizes the mystery of God's love for the world. And, as Richard Woods observes, contemporary mysticism will be characterized by a deeper relationship with the ordinary, with integrity, sociality, science and technology, humanism, ecology, ecumenism and transformation.<sup>36</sup>

This is who she would desire us to be, but how would she suggest we do this?

## **Elizabeth the Tutor**

### *Disciples of Christ Even to Calvary*

Quite simply, Elizabeth would direct us to the following of Christ, being nurtured by the Scriptures and contemplatively participating in liturgy, especially the Eucharist. Elizabeth knew the centrality of calvary and the cross in the life of a serious Christian. Elizabeth would counsel that if we are to follow Christ, we can be no stranger to his passion and shameful death, his disgrace, his being misunderstood and rejected, his loneliness and isolation on the cross, and his entombment. These were all part of our healing, redemption, and transformation.

The validity and timelessness of this call to discipleship, even to calvary, was dramatically and poignantly brought home to me, to the Sisters of Charity of New York, and to all who share the Seton Legacy. On the fifth of May, 2001, as this paper was being given for the first time. Sister Bobbie Ford was gunned down in Guatemala. It was not nails but bullets which affixed her to the cross. On the eleventh of September, 2001, we again experienced the call to calvary and the mystery of the cross — out of suffering and death, new life. Few, if any of us, will be crucified but we will suffer setbacks, rejection and misunder-

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<sup>36</sup> Egan, *What Are They Saying about Mysticism?*, 117.



standing as we strive to humanize our world, promote social justice and develop our talents for the service of the community.



*Cinco de Mayo* by Sr. Joy Pellegrino, S.C. [Dedicated to Sr. Barbara Ann Ford, S.C. 1938-2001.] 18x30 cut glass mosaic. Elizabeth Seton spoke of the centrality of the cross and calvary in her life. On 5 May 2001, Sr. Barbara Ann Ford, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, paid the ultimate price of discipleship: "This was not just any death. The poor of Guatemala have lost an advocate and a mother, for she gave her life selflessly for them." (*Letter from a Mayan Guatemalan who worked with Sr. Barbara.*) The cross is the focal point of the panel. The *Child and Bird* represent life in Guatemala, the *Artist's Palette* represents Sr. Barbara's use of art therapy in the mental health clinics, and the *Flowers* are indicative of the new life that will emerge from suffering.  
*Courtesy of the artist*

### *Scripture*

Elizabeth's imagination, her hopes and desires were honed by the people, events and deeds recorded in Scripture. She would want us to dwell in this world so as to cast light on our problems and concerns and to renew the hope that is in the marrow of our bones. Imagine what would happen if Abraham and Sarah were our guides as we face the seeming barrenness of our congregational wombs in looking to the

future? What if Isaiah were our mentor? Like him we would discover that God is deeply at work doing something new in our midst!

Chapter four and part of chapter five in the *Book of Revelation* contains a symbolic description of the heavenly throne room where we find the four living creatures (representing the four Evangelists), angels, 24 elders representing the people of the old and new covenant, and the crowds of people too large to number standing before the throne of God. All are gathered to worship God in spirit and in truth, a worship which never ceases. We discover that only the Lamb, Jesus Christ, and those who are knit to him, can offer true praise and thanks to God. What we do in Eucharist, especially in the Eucharistic Prayer, is intimately connected to this eternal worship of God. Heaven and earth cannot be separated! Imagine what our participation would be like if we allowed this symbolic scene to shape what it is we are doing when we are gathered to do Eucharist. These are only examples of how the Scripture can form our imaginations and hearts to see more deeply the mystery of God at work in our midst.

The last illustration from the *Book of Revelation* has a second purpose, to underscore the fact that if we are to participate consciously, actively and fully in all Liturgies of the Church a scriptural imagination is essential, not only to understand the readings but also to give ourselves over to the dynamic unfolding of the Liturgy be it Eucharist, Reconciliation, or Anointing of the Sick.

### *Liturgical Spirituality*

Elizabeth would urge us to take Liturgy seriously, not only the ritual celebration but also the dynamics of the Liturgical Year wherein we spend almost a third of the time preparing for and celebrating the two mysteries central to our faith — Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery. In the remainder of the Liturgical Year we give ourselves over to contemplating and accompanying Jesus Christ as He went about His mission.

### *Eucharist*

I would like to add some to the already extensive reflections that have been done on Elizabeth and Eucharist. For Elizabeth, the most

immediate meaning of communion or Eucharist was real presence.<sup>37</sup> But real presence was not her only meaning. Let us recall the numerous separations she endured during her mature years: from the Filicchis, John Carroll, Eliza Sadler and Julia Scott, to Catherine Dupleix, Kit, and her sons William and Richard. Receiving Holy Communion, which she did quite frequently, was for her a real way of overcoming the separation of physical space. In Holy Communion she was once again united with those whom she loved. All separations were surmounted, and for her this was a foretaste of that uninterrupted union that would take place in heaven. The piece, then, that bubbled up for her was the intensification of already existing bonds when she received Eucharist.

In our time we recognize our bonds being intensified when we receive Eucharist. You may recall, Augustine was fond of saying that our "Amen" in Eucharist is saying "Yes" to three different but interconnected realities/mysteries. Our "Amen" to the consecrated bread is our saying "Yes, I believe this bread to be the body of Jesus Christ." "Yes, I am a member of Christ's body." "Yes, I am more deeply and truly united with my sisters and brothers through this doing and eating." What would happen to us, individually and as communities of faith, if we were to bring to the center of our consciousness this insight? One thing, at least, we would no longer be able to exclude from our love and concern those folks who are different from us or who make our lives difficult and painful.

During the past century we have witnessed a burgeoning of theological reflection on the Eucharist that has taken us beyond the confines imposed by the dynamics of the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent. We have come to understand that the doing of Eucharist in our daily lives and the doing of Eucharist in the liturgy is the privileged place for discovering who we truly are, and becoming more fully our true selves.

Each of us has a false self that was born out of the human drive for survival and security, affection and esteem, power and control, and the over-identification with a particular role or group.<sup>38</sup> This false self is maintained by a poor memory. Mary Collins has rightly observed

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<sup>37</sup> *CWII*. In a letter to Simon Bruté on 16 September 1816, she described the process of her being led to believe in the real presence in the following way, "the impossibility for a poor Protestant to see our meaning without being led step by step and the veil lifted little by little." She recognized that her faith was pure gift, and was not based on any prior experience she had.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Keating, *The Better Part: Stages of Contemplative Living* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 22.

that “at the level of our spiritual identity we do not remember for long who we really are. Those ultimate relationships that give us our spiritual identity slip from consciousness all too easily, and we lapse into non-comprehension about our deepest identity.”<sup>39</sup> In the worship of all Liturgy where we encounter the living Christ, but especially in Eucharist, we are confronted with these distortions of our false self, offered alternative scripts for the meaning of our lives, and furnished with possibilities for growth into greater knowledge and possession of our true self.<sup>40</sup>

God does not need our worship, we do! We need the ecstatic movement of worship where we leave ourselves and are caught up in the praise and thanks of God! This of course, does not happen automatically. We need to be contemplatively present to our lives and to the liturgy. Imagine for a moment what it would be like if we addressed the Father from our hearts in the words of the Eucharistic Prayer. Or can you envision what would happen if we allowed our belief — that God is addressing us anew as we hear the Scriptures — to move to the center of our consciousness?

Elizabeth rejoices to see our day! Her words to us are “be mystics. You will do this by coming to know Christ more fully, by loving him more tenderly and being with him more totally. As you walk on the profound human journey into the mystery of God, take as your food the *Scriptures* and the Liturgy. You will become more fully yourself, and in this way be contemplatively present to our world fractured by violence, oppression and disoriented by shifts in views and lack of meaning.”

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Collins, *Contemplative Participation: Sacrosanctum Concilium Twenty Five Years Later* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 55.

<sup>40</sup> Jean Flannelly, S.C., “Eucharist as Worship: Journey to Identity” in *New Theology Review* 10:1 (1997): 58-69.



*Graced Encounter* by Sr. Joy Pellegrino, S.C. 18x30 cut glass mosaic. The two stylized figures represent *True* and *False Self*. Each figure is sustained by the presence of the Transcendent. The symbol of Eucharist is depicted at the core of their being. Once internalized, this presence flows out of them into a fractured world.

*Courtesy of the artist*