

“ God Is My Father



Portrait of Elizabeth Seton in 1796 at age 22

At 4 years of age sitting alone on a step of the door looking at the clouds while my little sister Catherine 2 years old lay in her coffin they asked me did I not cry when little Kitty was dead?—no because Kitty is gone up to heaven I wish I could go too with Mamma (Collected Writings 3a:511).

Elizabeth Seton’s early years were often lived in loneliness and isolation. By the age of four, she had suffered the death of her mother and younger sister Catherine. Asking the inevitable question “Where did they go?” Elizabeth received the expected answer from the Episcopalian culture of her family: her mother and sister were in heaven, together.

Thirteen months after her mother’s death, her father, Richard Bayley, remarried. A much younger woman, Elizabeth’s stepmother proved to be very cold and distant to her and her older sister, Mary. Because Bayley’s ambitions as a doctor and medical researcher often took him far from home for extended periods of time, the girls were often left in the care of relatives, usually an uncle who lived in New Rochelle. Frequently alone, Elizabeth spent many hours outdoors, close to the shore of Long Island Sound. She described her experience as a

...delight to sit alone by the water side—wandering hours on the shore humming and gathering shells—every little leaf and flower or animal, insect, shades of clouds, or waving trees, objects of vacant unconnected thoughts of God and heaven (CW 3a:511).

Her father’s absence once lasted so long Elizabeth imagined him dead. Years later, Elizabeth would recognize how these early years of abandonment drew her deeper in relationship with the Lord:

In the year 1789 when my Father was in England I jumped in the wagon that was driving to the woods for brush about a mile from Home... [I] soon found an outlet in a Meadow, and a chestnut tree...here then was a sweet bed—the clovers and wild flowers I had got by the way, and a heart as innocent as a human heart could be was filled with even enthusiastic love to God and admiration of his works... I thought at the time that my Father did not care for me—well God was my Father—my All. I prayed—sung hymns—cried—laughed in talking to myself of how far He could place me above all Sorrow... I am sure in the two hours so enjoyed [I] grew ten years in my spiritual life (CW 1:264).

Despite such moments, Elizabeth’s deeply loving nature continued to suffer from the rejection of her stepmother, the abandonment of her father, and the tension in their marriage. The turmoil of these years built into a growing dissatisfaction with life, and a deepening longing for eternity:

Folly—sorrows—romance—miserable friendships—but all turned to good and thoughts of how silly to love any thing in this world (CW 3a: 512).

Elizabeth’s bleak view of human relationships grew into an anxiety about her future as she approached adulthood. At one of her lowest points of depression, she contemplated escaping the weight of life by taking laudanum. Years later, she reflected with horror at how close she had come:

My God!—horrid subversion of every good promise of God... God had created me—I was very miserable, he was too good to condemn so poor a creature made of dust, driven by misery, this the wretched reasoning—Laudanum—the praise and thanks of excessive joy not to have done the horrid deed the thousand promises of ETERNAL GRATITUDE... (CW 3a:512–513)

When Elizabeth’s sister married, she and her husband welcomed Elizabeth into perhaps the first stable home she had ever known, which gave her a place to rest as she began her young adult life.

Dear Remembrances — it would be such a happiness to see without nothing them

at 4 years of age sitting alone on a step of the door looking at the clouds while my little sister Catherine 2 years old lay in her coffin they asked me did I not cry when little Kitty was dead?—no because Kitty is gone up to heaven I wish I could go too with Mamma

at 6 taking my little sister Emma up to the garden window showing her the setting sun—told her God lived up in heaven and good children would go up there ... teaching her her prayers

my poor Mother in law then in great affliction learned me the 28th ps "the Lord is my Helper" and all life through it has been the promise to "thou shalt walk in the midst of the stones of death" "I will give no evil, for thou art with me."

16 years of age — family disagreement — I do not guess why when I spoke kind to relations they did not speak to me — I do not even guess how any one could be an enemy to another.

folly — sorrows — romance — miserable friendships — but all turned to good & thoughts of how silly to love any thing in this world

at 18 fine plans of a little country home, to gather all the little children round and teach them their prayers and keep them clean and lead them to be good ...

then passionate wishes that there were such places in America as I read of in books where people could be shut up from the world & pray, & be good always — many thoughts of recurring away to such a place over the sea, in disguise, working for living ... a strict abstinence care in dress, in the word &c

Excerpt from Elizabeth Seton’s Dear Remembrances

“ More Than Anyone Could Love on Earth



Portrait of Elizabeth Seton as a young mother by Joseph Dawley

Elizabeth married William Seton in 1794; she was nineteen and he was twenty-five. The couple was soon blessed with children: Annina (1795), William II (1796), Richard (1798), Catherine (1800), and Rebecca (1802).

Having had no real model of motherhood in her own life, she had some anxiety at being able to fill the role. However, she found herself in many ways through the experience of being a wife and mother.

She found a new purpose and meaning in life through these responsibilities. She found fulfillment in her profound love for her husband and the immense joy she received from caring for her children. Above all, she found an opportunity to pour out the deep compassion that characterized her heart. She wrote to a dear friend, Julia Scott:

Seton is quietly writing by my side... my chicks quiet in bed. For myself, I think the greatest happiness of this life is to be released from the cares and formalities of what is called the world — My world is my family... (CW 1:141)

The depth to which she had come to identify herself with her motherhood is evident even years later, in her response at being asked to found a religious order:

...The 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 (CW 2:181).

Elizabeth's romance and marriage was one of the happiest periods of her life. She found in her husband the first person who truly loved and was present to her. Their love for one another was very deep, and the only thing they did not share was Elizabeth's deep and serious faith. William's approach to his religion was more of a conventional practice; he attended services and supported Trinity Church financially, and little more. Elizabeth wrote in a letter to his sister:

Mr. Hobart's [sermon] this morning: language cannot express the comfort the Peace the Hope — but Willy did not understand]. T]hat happy hour is yet to come (CW 1:144).

That her husband's lack of faith weighed heavily upon her is evidenced most clearly at the first glimpses she found of a change in his perspective. After the death of his father, William inherited the family business, and he watched both the business and his health fall to pieces slowly. It was in the midst of the stress and worry of this period that he began to take religion seriously for the first time. Elizabeth describes in ecstasy the day he took communion with her at the Episcopal Church:

The last twenty four hours are the happiest I have ever seen or could ever expect, as the most earnest wish of my heart was fulfilled... Willy's heart seemed to be nearer to me for being nearer to his God (CW 1:239).

This experience proved to be the gradual beginning of the grace that would be fulfilled in his last days.

*our dear eternity --
purest joy to see her released
from the thousand pains and
trials I must pass ^{through} not one
of which but she would have
made her own --
— Now my entrance with
my darlings in our little dear
humble dwelling -- their
dear tender doating loves
to their own Mothers --
My Anna, my William my Rich.
my kil and sweetest bec, at this
moment yet with what delight
I look at the hours of loves
around our fire, or little table
or at the piano, and stories
every evening, lively times,
and thousand ~~dearments~~ after
the lessons, and work of the*

*"hark the beating of his heart in
the garden of Gethsemane" --
See how they love him -- Oh my
Jesus I suffer with you" --
"Why will you not bring him to me
-- my Jesus you know that I believe
in you, I hope in you I love you
-- Gentle gentle death the 25th June
1810 -- her burial -- the children
gathering wild flowers --
— anniversary of St. Vincent 1811
Kempis -- 118th ps in the choir
— evening before Wm's death
— her singing "tho' all the powers"
— her "Jeux d'Amour Joseph toutela nuit"
the last clasp of her hands and
look to heaven when she was asked
if she was not grateful for all the
goodness of our God to her!"*

Excerpt from Elizabeth Seton's Dear Remembrances

“ Alone in the World with You



Portrait of Elizabeth Seton by Joseph Dawley

My poor high heart was in the clouds roving after my William's soul and repeating, 'My God, you are my God, and so I am now alone in the world with You and my little ones, but You are my Father, and doubly theirs' (CW I:289).

The Setons, with their eldest daughter Annina, sailed to Italy in search of a warmer climate. Arriving in Leghorn, however, the ship was refused entry for fear of carrying typhoid fever. The passengers were quarantined on an island offshore, in an old prison building called the lazaretto. In the face of her helplessness to relieve the one she loved most, Elizabeth found herself once more clinging to the only One left:

If the wind that now almost puts out my light and blows on my Willy thro[ugh] every crevice and over our chimney like loud Thunder could come from any but his command — or if the circumstances that has placed us in so forlorn a situation were not guided by his hand — miserable indeed would be our case[. Within the hour he has had a violent fit of coughing so as to bring up blood... What shall we say[? This is the hour of trial, the Lord support and strengthen us in it (CW I:254).

In her journal to Rebecca during the long, hard month, Elizabeth reflected on her earliest experiences of abandonment. She first came to know Him in loneliness and need; thus it was now possible for her to recognize Him in her emptiness. Clinging to the reality that the Lord's providence was present in every miserable circumstance, Elizabeth faced one agonizing day after another. She wrote that she

...looked round our Prison and found that its situation was beautiful... If I could forget my God one moment at these times I should go mad[. But He hushes all— Be still and know that I am God your Father (CW I:258).

Elizabeth realized it was precisely the harsh conditions that mysteriously made possible her husband's conversion in faith, and their deeper marital union within it. This discovery strengthened and confirmed her abandonment to the Will of God:

No sufferings, no weakness, no distress (and from these, he is never free in any degree,) can prevent his following me daily in prayer... he very often says this is the period of his life which, if he lives or dies, he will always consider as blessed — the only time which he has not lost...to wait on him[,] my Will[,] soul and body — to console and soothe these hours of affliction and pain, weariness and watching... to hear him in pronouncing the Name of his Redeemer and declare that I first taught him the sweetness of the sound — Oh, if I was in the dungeon of this lazaretto, I should bless and praise my God for these days of retirement and abstraction from the world which have afforded leisure and opportunity for such a work... (CW I:269-270)

After a month in the lazaretto, the Setons were welcomed into the care of the Fillicchis, who provided William Seton every comfort they could in his last days. He died peacefully in the arms of Elizabeth. His last words were cherished by his beloved wife:

My Christ Jesus have mercy! My dear wife, my dear little ones, tell all my dear friends not to weep for me that I die happy, and satisfied with the Almighty Will (CW I:277).

The reality of William's full conversion allowed those last months to be for Elizabeth, paradoxically, a finding of her husband on a deeper level even as she lost him to illness and death. Their union became more definitive than their earthly separation, because they experienced together a deeper encounter with the One who is the source of all communion.

“Give Me Their Faith

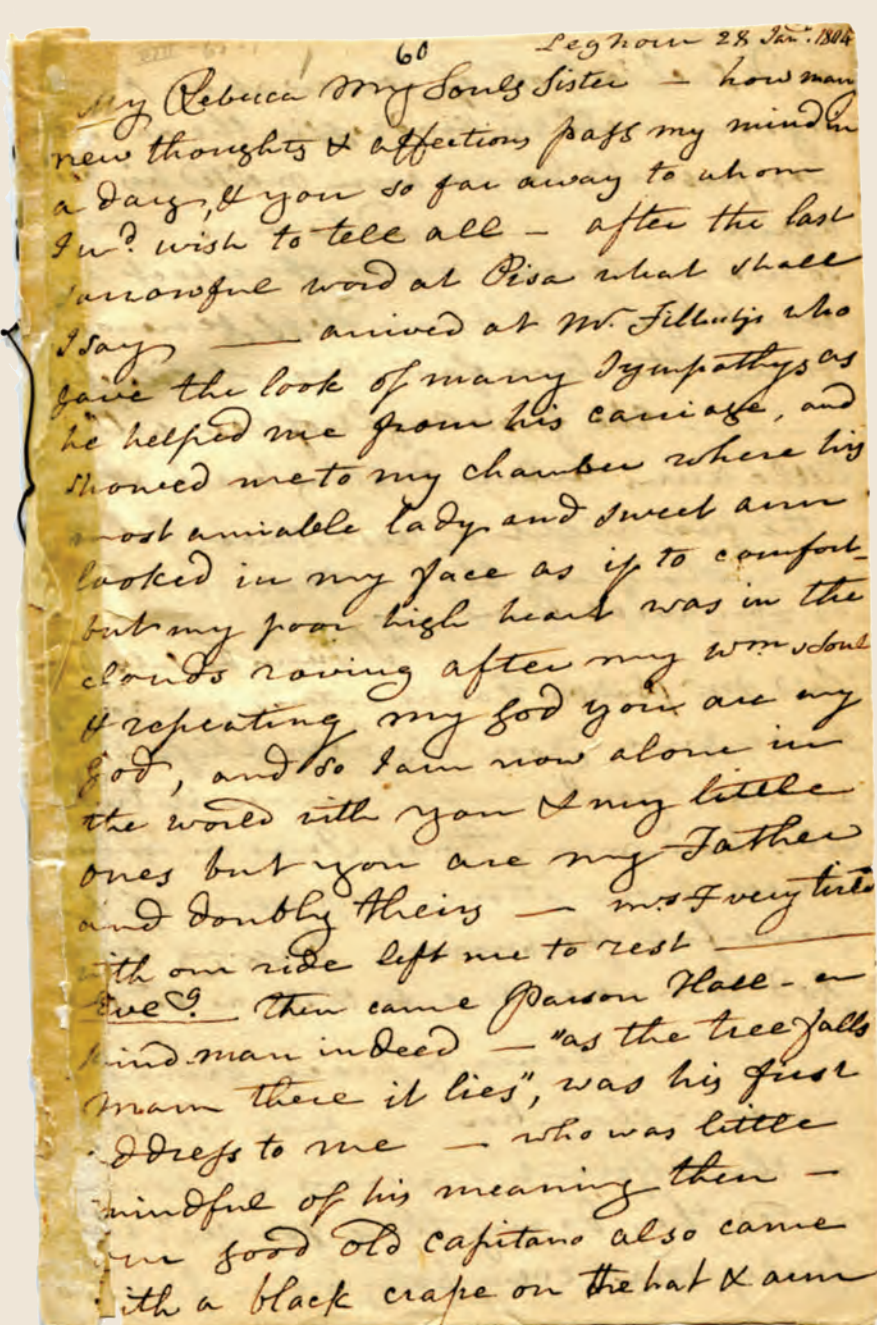
The patience and more than human kindness of these dear Filicchis for us! You would say it was our Saviour Himself they received in his poor and sick strangers (CW I:296).

With several attempts to return to America ending in vain due to storms at sea, political conflicts, an illness of Anina's, Elizabeth found herself for four months within the love and care of the Filicchi family, immersed in the rhythm of their Catholic home. Once the reflective little girl who had basked for hours alone with God in the silence of the woods of America, Elizabeth now found Him with delight in the gold and stained glass of Italy's basilicas. The sensitive woman who loved the lyrical beauty of the Psalms was speechless before the richness of imagery in the Catholic Liturgy. Continually, Elizabeth's encounter with the various elements of the Catholic Faith became an experience of finding herself, of finding the longings of her heart fulfilled in a concrete people, place, and way of life. She describes these moments to Rebecca:

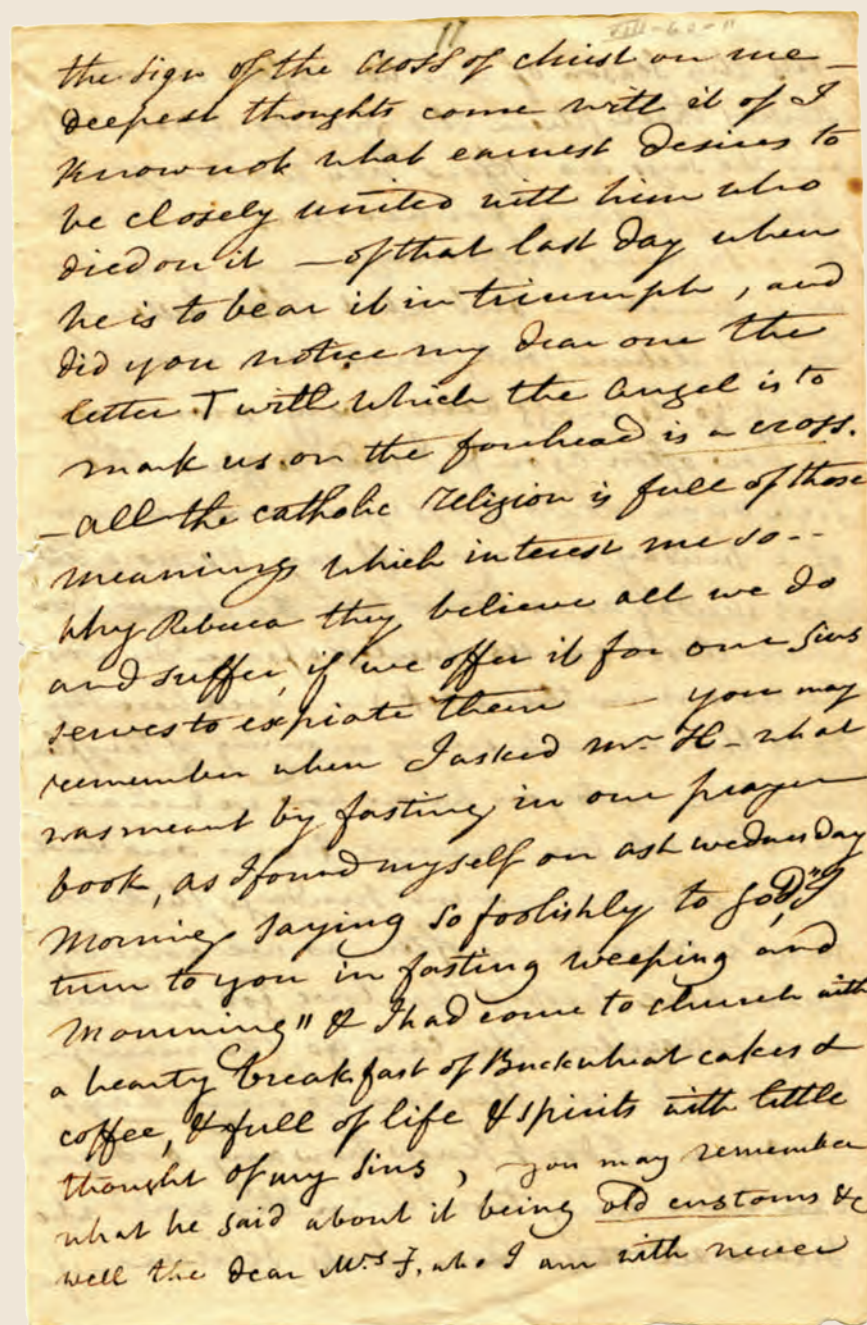
All the Catholic Religion is full of those meanings which interest me so... Why Rebecca, they believe all we do and suffer, if we offer it for our sins, serves to expiate them!... I found myself on Ash Wednesday Morning saying so foolishly to God, "I turn to you in fasting weeping and mourning" and I had come to church with a hearty breakfast of Buckwheat cakes and coffee... Mrs. Filicchi, who I am with, never eats this Season of Lent till after the clock strikes three... and she offers her weakness and pain of fasting for her sins united with our Saviour's sufferings—I like that very much...

[Antonio Filicchi] showed me how to make the Sign of the CROSS[:] dearest Rebecca, I was cold with the awful impression my first making it gave me. The Sign of the CROSS of Christ on me!...what earnest desires to be closely united with him who died on it...

My dearest Rebecca (only think what a comfort) they go to mass here every morning!—Ah, how often you and I used to... say, "no more till next Sunday," as we turned from the church door which closed on us... (CW I: 296-297)



My dearest Rebecca my dear sister - how many new thoughts & affections pass my mind in a day, if you do you are to whom I wish to tell all - after the last melancholic word at Pisa what shall I say - arrived at Mr. Filicchi's who gave the look of many Sympetras as he helped me from the carriage, and showed me to my chamber where his most amiable lady and sweet aunt looked in my face as if to comfort me - the rain after my wonderful respecting my God you are my God, and so I am now alone in the world with you my little ones but you are my Father and doubly theirs - most very true with our ride left me to rest - then came Parson Place - a kind man indeed - as the tree falls man there it lies, was his first grief to me - who was little mindful of his meaning then - our God's Captains also came with a black crape on the hat & am



the sign of the cross of Christ on me - deep thoughts come with it of I know not what earnest desires to be closely united with him who died on it - of that last day when he is to bear it in triumph, and did you notice my dear one the letter I will which the Angel is to mark us on the forehead is a cross - all the Catholic Religion is full of those meanings which interest me so - Why Rebecca they believe all we do and suffer, if we offer it for our sins serves to expiate them - you may remember when I asked Mr. Filicchi what was meant by fasting in our proper book, as I found myself on Ash Wednesday Morning saying so foolishly to God, "I turn to you in fasting weeping and mourning" & had come to church with a hearty breakfast of Buckwheat cakes & coffee, full of life & spirit with little thoughts of my sins, you may remember what he said about it being old customs he well the dear Mrs. Filicchi was with never

First and second pages of Mother Seton's letter to Rebecca



Basilica of San Lorenzo, Florence, Italy

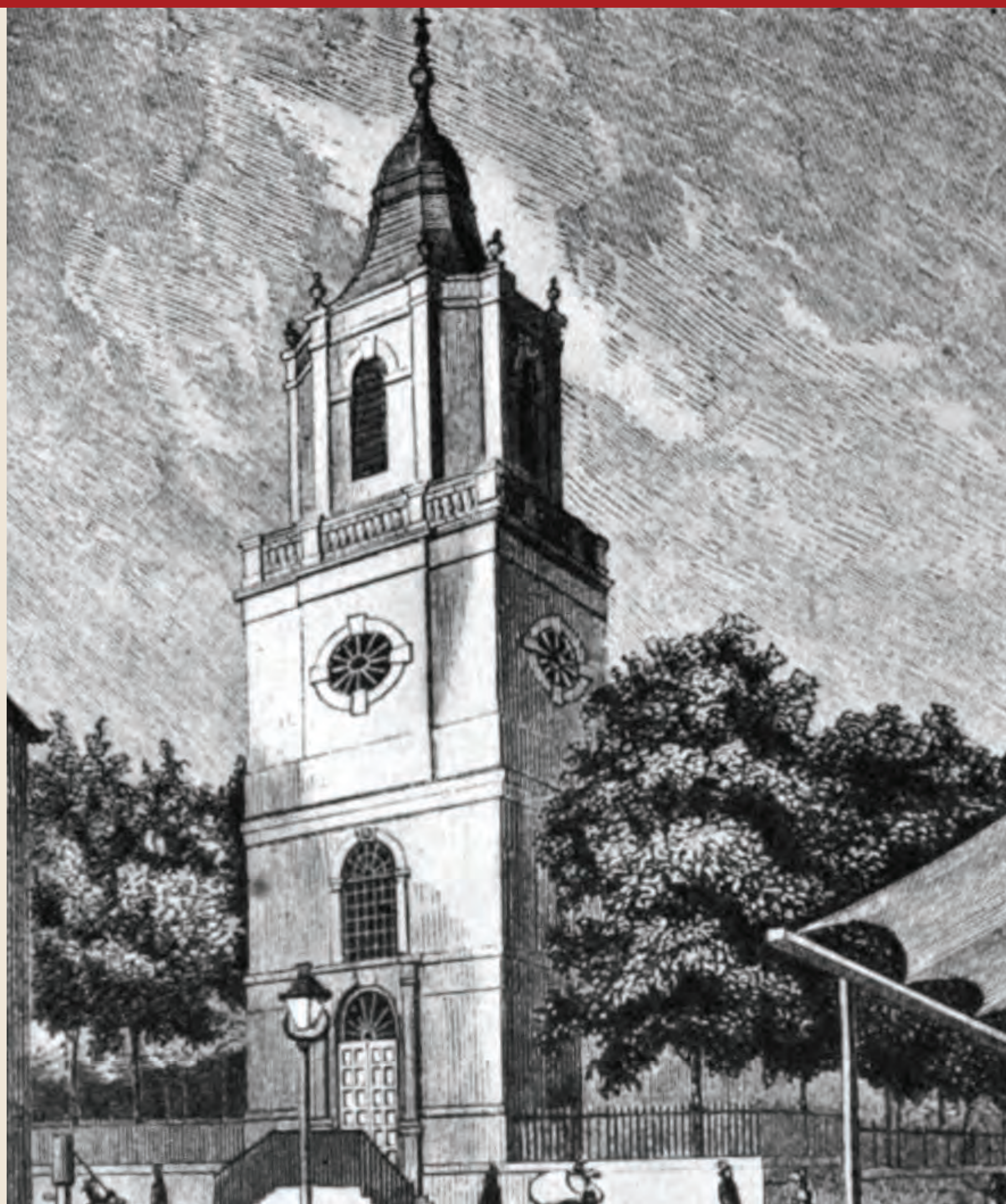
Elizabeth needed a faith that spoke to her real circumstances and experiences: a Christ Who was intimately present to her in her loneliness. It was the reality of the Eucharist, then, that corresponded to this need more than anything else. She explained to Rebecca:

...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... 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 (CW I: 292).

Elizabeth's intense need for communion with people, stronger than ever after the loss of her husband, was no less a factor within the drama of her encounter with Catholicism. Elizabeth was deeply struck by the union that Antonio Filicchi and his wife Amabilia experienced within the Eucharist: a depth of union she knew she did not have with William. She described her feelings at the last Mass she attended with the Filicchis, before Antonio would leave his family to accompany her to America:

MY SAVIOUR, MY GOD—Antonio and his wife, their separation, [held] in God and Communion... Little Anna and I had only strange tears of Joy and grief: we leave but dear ashes... [I] would gladly encounter all the sorrows before us to be partakers of that Blessed Body and Blood. O my God, spare and pity me (CW I: 298).

“ I Have Received Him!



Old St. Peter's Church in Lower Manhattan

[T]ruly I say with David[,] Save me Lord[,] for the waters go over my Soul... I never knew till now what prayer is... never knew how to give up all and send my spirit to mount calvary... (CW I: 339)

Returning to Protestant America with the vivid memories of Catholic Italy engraved in her heart, Elizabeth faced the greatest trial of her life. It is a weighty choice to abandon the traditions and beliefs of one's family, culture, and community. To do so as a widow, with no sure alternate means of support, is even harder. For Elizabeth, who had an accentuated need for fidelity in relationships, it could seem humanly impossible. Furthermore, Antonio Filicchi, a Catholic himself and thus the only friend she could reasonably expect to remain with her, was kept out of reach by his business concerns.

Elizabeth was left more alone than ever in the face of a decision that threatened to leave her more so. Her year-long agony over the decision to join the Catholic Church, however, was due ultimately to her intense need to be true to the Person of Christ, and her doubts and turmoil over where the Truth, Christ Himself, was to be found. Her conversion thus became the ultimate test of her love and obedience in the concrete circumstances of her life.

Elizabeth describes the painful drama in letters to Amabilia in Italy, and to Antonio on his business tour:

...On my knees beseeching God to enlighten me to see the truth, unmixed with doubts and hesitations[.] I read the promises given to St Peter and the 6th chapter of John' every day and then ask God[:.] can I offend him by believing those express words[?] (CW I: 317)

Mr. H[obart] says how can you believe that there are as many gods as there are... tens of millions of blessed hosts all over the world... [my] thought is, it is GOD who does it[:.] the same God who fed so many thousands with the little barley loaves and little fishes...

They tell me I must worship him now in spirit and truth, but my poor spirit very often goes to sleep, or roves about like an idler for want of something to fix its attention[.] And for the truth... I think I feel more true Union of heart and soul with him over a picture of the Crucifixion... (CW I: 370-371)

Gradually, Elizabeth's longing for the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist overcame all doubts. When going to pray in the Episcopal church, she would sit

...in a side pew which turned my face towards the Catholic Church in the next street, and found myself twenty times speaking to the Blessed Sacrament there instead of looking at the naked altar where I was or minding the routine of prayers... (CW I: 370)



Detail of the stained glass window behind the altar of Saint Elizabeth Seton Shrine, NYC

In the end, Elizabeth's childlike abandonment to the Lord allowed her to hand over all of her very real fears of abandonment, destitution, failure, and loss to the One for Whom she was sacrificing everything:

...begging our Lord to wrap my heart deep in that opened side so well described in the beautiful Crucifixion, or lock it up in his little tabernacle where I shall now rest forever (CW I: 376).

She professed her faith on March 14th and received her first Communion on March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation, writing to Amabilia:

At last Amabilia—at last—GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS... I HAVE RECIEVED HIM...instead of the humble[,] tender welcome I had expected to give him, it was but a triumph of joy and gladness that the deliverer was come... truly I feel all the powers of my soul held fast by him who came with so much Majesty to take possession of this poor little kingdom (CW I: 376-377).

“ You Have a Friend Who Would Fly to You



Trinity Church where Elizabeth and Rebecca worshipped and worked for the relief of poor widows and orphans

Do you not know that there is not an hour of my Life in which I do not want either the advice or soothing of Friendship... (CW 1:18)

While her childhood was characterized by a familiarity with loss that continued into her adult life, Elizabeth was blessed with several deep, lasting relationships that stand out as lamps through her darkest years. For Elizabeth, it was absolutely necessary to have companions, “to whom I could commit the guidance of my conduct in preference to the impulse of my own Judgement” (CW 1:18).

She also firmly believed that each individual person accompanying her through the various seasons of her life was a direct and unique gift from God, such that it was “...utterly impossible that anyone else should fill that place in my estimation which affection and experience has assigned to you” (CW 1:18).

Two relationships particularly illuminate Elizabeth’s value of the gift of friendship.

Julia Scott, a socialite married to a prominent Pennsylvanian politician, became a friend to Elizabeth early on in her marriage. She shared Elizabeth’s intellectual curiosity. The two supported each other throughout their lives, being faithful companions in good times and bad. Elizabeth’s letters to Julia reflect a freedom in self-communication for both women that led to deep intimacy. They did not share the same religious worldview or intensity of devotion, yet that difference did not divide them. Julia was one of the few friends who remained steadfast after Elizabeth’s conversion to Roman Catholicism despite remaining a firm Protestant herself. She provided financial support for Elizabeth and her children without being asked. Elizabeth’s gratitude for such loyalty is reflected in a letter written in 1807:

If I did not feel my heart full and overflowing with tenderest, truest love to my Julia, I should be sure it was no longer in my bosom—dear dear Friend, can it be that I have so faithful, so dear a heart, still left from the wreck of past blessings—while mine retains one throb of life it cannot forget to love you (CW 1:437).

Elizabeth’s friendship with her sister-in-law Rebecca Seton provides a second example. This relationship, however, involved a shared enthusiasm for living the fullness of the Christian life, not just the intellectual and practical affinity Elizabeth shared with Julia.

Elizabeth and Rebecca became close after the unfortunate death of Elizabeth’s father-in-law. The oldest of the minor siblings left in the care of Elizabeth and William, Elizabeth thought the young Rebecca immature at first impression, but quickly found in her the depth of spirit and love of the faith that would lead Elizabeth to call her, “My soul’s sister.” The two women encouraged each other’s religious formation, including studying the sermons of their pastor, Henry Hobart. They were instrumental as well in the formation and work of The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children.

When the Setons made their fateful voyage to Italy, they left their youngest children in Rebecca’s care, and it was to Rebecca that Elizabeth addressed her deepest thoughts about the daily experiences of that journey in her “Laghorn Journal.” Tragically, upon Elizabeth’s return from Italy, she found that her “soul’s sister” was at the point of death from the same illness to which she had just lost her husband. She arrived just in time to say goodbye:

She suffered extremely for about an hour, on Friday night so much, that we thought all was over... On Sunday she was delighted with the beauty of the morning... and said—Ah, my Sister, that this might be my day of rest—shut the windows and I will sleep’... immediately without the least strain she gave her last sigh (CW 1:311-312).

The deeply religious companionship and support Elizabeth had shared with Rebecca would prepare her for her future role as mother and companion within her religious community.



House on State Street in lower Manhattan where William and Elizabeth Seton lived as a newly married couple. It is currently the site of the Shrine of Elizabeth Ann Seton.

“ Meeting His Adored Will



Archbishop John Carroll, first bishop in the United States

...it appears to me... that a cave or a desert would best satisfy my Natural desire but God has given me a great deal to do... (CW 1:313)

After her conversion, Elizabeth's external circumstances proved as fraught with uncertainty as she had feared. The personal objections to Elizabeth's conversion from family and friends reflected the general hostility to Catholicism rampant in New York. Even with the support of Julia Scott, and the continual generosity of the Fillichis, Elizabeth needed a lasting means to provide security to her family. Her attempts at teaching in a number of boarding schools failed precisely due to her Catholicism. Antonio encouraged Elizabeth to move to Montreal, where she could live with religious sisters and provide her children with a Catholic community and education.

At the same time, however, Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore took an interest in Elizabeth. The first U.S. bishop wanted Catholics to engage all levels of civic life, and education was vital to that end. He had been unable to recruit established orders from Europe to set up American schools, and so the impetus emerged to establish a home-grown order of religious women. While small in number, the Catholic community extended over a large geographical expanse, and the handful of priests remained in close communication with one another and with Carroll. They began to look for possible candidates to realize the bishop's dream of an American religious order of women.

In this context, Elizabeth's conversion and the needs of the Catholic community converged. Elizabeth possessed a fine education and had observed at close hand the challenging operation of her father's quarantine hospitals. Her work to aid widows and children and the home schooling of her children and sisters-in-law had honed her organizational skills. The assistance she had provided her husband as the family business dissolved had taught her much about accounting and business correspondence. The failed attempts at start-up schools in New York had further promoted a sense of resilience.

Elizabeth was invited to Baltimore, where she would begin the first Catholic school in the United States. Once more, she risked everything to uproot her family and begin again among a community of strangers. However, she knew that the one thing she had in common with the people of Baltimore was all that mattered:

Tomorrow, do I go among strangers? No. Has an anxious thought or fear passed my mind? No. Can I be disappointed? No. One sweet Sacrifice will reunite my soul with all who offer it... There can be no disappointment where the soul's only desire and expectation is to meet His Adored Will and fulfill it (CW 2:5).

The generous welcome she received from the Catholic families of Baltimore proved a greater grace than she could have imagined, and her abandoned family had a real home in which to rest.

The new school began with four boarding students and Elizabeth's three daughters. She often remained only a lesson ahead of her charges, writing to Julia Scott:

...what would amuse you... would be to see your old lady at five in the afternoon... seated gravely with a slate and pencil... going over the studies both in grammar and figures which are suited to the scholar better than the mistress... (CW 2:41-242)

And yet Elizabeth thrived in her new role, devoting herself to developing an education which formed the whole person, really preparing the girls for a well-rounded life spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually.

The Paca Street School was the beginning. Elizabeth wrote to her sister-in-law, Cecilia:

...it is expected I shall be the Mother of many daughters... Our Patriarch (Dubourg) who 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...and now wait until my house is opened for them—Next Spring we hope... (CW 2:42)



Mother Seton instructing pupils, stained glass Saint Elizabeth Seton Shrine, NYC

“Poverty and Sorrow Have Become Friends

When we have a difficult affair in hand...we always take an advocate on whom we rely—Our Lord Jesus desires to be ours—either we should refuse his ministry—or give him all our CONFIDENCE (CW 3a:478).



The White House in Emmitsburg

In light of her new responsibilities, Elizabeth took private vows on the Feast of the Annunciation in 1809 and welcomed the women sent by various priests across the country. In June, the community of twenty sisters traveled forty miles west to a more permanent location at Emmitsburg, Maryland. The Sulpician priests recruited most of these women and took responsibility for their spiritual formation. Father John Dubois gave up his house for them until the convent was completed.

The beginnings of the order were not without difficulties. Within their first year, the sisters were under the guidance of three different Sulpician priests: Fr. Dubourg, Fr. Babade, and Fr. David. Most of the sisters had a particular affection for Father Pierre Babade, which displeased Dubourg. He decided peremptorily to dismiss Babade as their confessor. Elizabeth appealed to Bishop Carroll to reinstate Babade, which led Dubourg to resign his position as their superior. His successor, Father Jean Baptiste David, governed without consulting Elizabeth even in matters of school curriculum and instruction. This rigidity engendered stiff resistance from Elizabeth, who wrote to Carroll in January of 1810:

...circumstances have all so combined as to create in my mind a confusion and want of confidence in my Superiors which is indescribable. If my own happiness was only in question, I should say: “How good is the cross for me; this is my opportunity to ground myself in patience and perseverance.”... really I have endeavored, to do everything in my power to meet the last appointed Superior in every way; but after continual reflection on the necessity of absolute conformity with him and constant prayer to Our Lord to help me, yet the heart is closed: and when the pen should freely give him the necessary detail and information he requires, it stops... (CW 2:106-107)

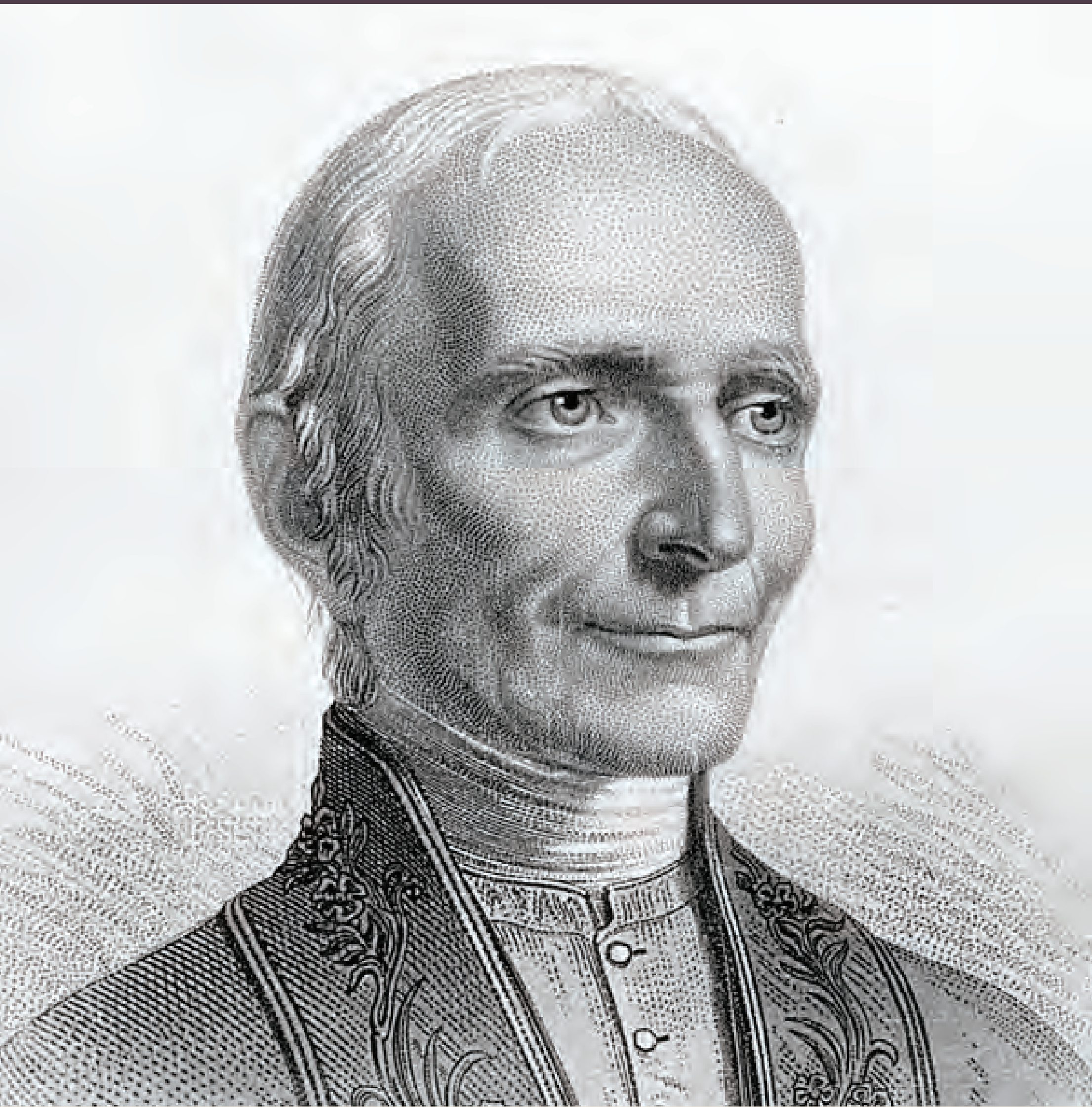
In spite of such candor, Carroll denied Elizabeth’s petition. She endured the arrangement, yet continued to oppose David’s policies whenever she thought them detrimental to the health and happiness of the community.

By July 1811, rumors circulated that David planned to elevate Sister Rose to superior of the community, placing Elizabeth in charge of the school only. In response to Elizabeth’s letter of concern, Carroll resisted David’s proposal vigorously, believing that Elizabeth’s demotion would reflect badly on the mission. With an uneasy peace between her and David, Elizabeth continued to see herself as subject to God’s will, placed her trust in his providence, and saw the Sisters of Charity grow in strength as well as in service.

Struggles in the formation and structure of the new order were not the only test of Elizabeth’s obedience to Christ in these years. Two of her sisters-in-law, Harriet and Cecilia, were finally allowed by their relatives to join Elizabeth, and they converted to Catholicism. Within a few years of their coming, Elizabeth would lose both of them and her own daughter Rebecca to tuberculosis, the “Seton family curse” that had claimed her husband and sister-in-law Rebecca. Elizabeth’s intense desire to find Christ everywhere allowed her to embrace these moments with the conviction that even here, in the midst of her continual encounters with death, Christ could meet her in her suffering loved ones. The woman who had rejoiced with grateful tears in the face of her husband’s last days, “to wait on Him in my William’s soul and body,” found Him again in the dying days of her adopted daughters.

...Poverty and sorrow—well with Gods blessing you too shall be changed into dearest friends... you discover to my Soul the palm of victory[,] the triumph of Faith and the sweet footsteps of my Redeemer leading direct to his Kingdom (CW 1:308).

“ Like a Bird Finding No Rest



Bishop Bruté of Vincennes, Indiana

Drive a bird from one branch and he hops to another, then a little higher... till at last by continuing to disturb him you drive him away... He takes wings and soars. So when we are followed up with trial after trial, driven from our stays and props, our desires by degrees take a nobler aim like the bird finding no rest, we take our flight to those regions of liberty where the free mind moves secure and finds independence in its God (CW 3:495).

Elizabeth from her infancy was no stranger to loss and death. Though she faced so many of these moments with a piercing faith and hope in the midst of pain, it never became easy. Even after years of maturing in her walk with the Lord, her eldest daughter Anina's death shook her to the core in a way that no previous loss had done. This event, however, provides another clear example of God's providence for Elizabeth in the companionship of her spiritual director, Fr. Bruté, who was given to her in this moment as an indispensable support.

Besides being her firstborn, Anina shared Elizabeth's spiritual affinities. Anina had been her one companion through the trying months of William's death and her discovery of Catholicism. All of this had forged a unique bond between mother and daughter. Thus, Anina's death left Elizabeth in the most debilitating grief she had ever experienced. She admitted to a friend:

...for three months after Nina was taken I was so often expecting to lose my senses and my head was so disordered that unless for the daily duties always before me I did not know how much what I did or what I left undone... (CW 2:224)

She was unable to draw strength from the thought of reunion in eternity, a conviction that had provided so much solace in every other death she had endured. Weeks and months passed without relief despite her return to practical duties as Mother Superior. Her spiritual director, Father Dubois, could not console her, as he admitted in a letter to Father Bruté:

God grant that you may someday know this soul. What character!... I have been tempted a hundred times to give up this charge. What a soul it would take, it needs a saint of the first caliber... (Melville 255)

Whether or not Dubois thought his confrère saintly, Bruté was charged with shepherding Elizabeth. Bruté displayed genius in his patient compassion for her. A few years younger than she, he met Elizabeth only months before Anina's death and had shown deep regard for her daughter's piety. Others saw Elizabeth's adulation of Anina as an impediment to the mother's spiritual growth, but Bruté did not. Rather, he encouraged Elizabeth to imagine Anina's response to her mother's despair. He studied the various things Anina had written in her spiritual diaries and helped Elizabeth to see that Anina's life continued, that she was still with her. He directed her attention to spiritual masters, among them Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Ambrose.

Eventually Elizabeth was able to comprehend that sorrow itself directed our hopes to heaven. He wrote, "O mother that for our tears! What would be this earth if faith (were) everywhere in its splendor and charity in its fervour?" (Melville 313) These insights helped to further develop Elizabeth's understanding of human experience in light of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus. Anina's death had brought Elizabeth to the foot of the Cross. Bruté's friendship brought her to the empty Tomb.

The friendship born in this suffering continued to deepen in the remaining years of Elizabeth's life. Unlike her other spiritual directors, Elizabeth's relationship with Bruté was one of equality in spiritual maturity. Elizabeth's eminent common sense and Bruté's mystical tendencies blended powerfully, resulting in growing sanctity for each of them. A pair of Bibles they shared alternately, writing notes and reflections for each other, leaves a legacy of spiritual correspondence that serves today as a guide for others.



Elizabeth's annotated Bible which she shared with Bishop Bruté

“ Streams of the Fountain



Portrait of Mother Seton, gift of Antonio Filicchi

I ought only to thank God that by depriving me of confidence in any human affection he draws my Soul more near to its only center of rest (CW 1:329).

One hallmark of Elizabeth's life is the intensity and depth with which she lived her relationships. This need for communion became the context in which the Lord continually met her on her journey with Him. It was precisely the innumerable losses of those she loved that intensified her awareness of and appreciation for lasting human relationships. At the same time, these losses continually reinforced for her the reality that even deep human communion can become untrue, stifling, and self-referential apart from Christ. Elizabeth's friendship with Antonio Filicchi provides a particular example of her journey into a deepening understanding of the need for detachment in order to fully possess communion with others in Christ.

During the turmoil of her conversion, at one of the neediest points in her life, Elizabeth looked desperately to Antonio for support. Time and again, however, in spite of his loving concern, she found that his friendship was not enough to satisfy her and ultimately left her disappointed. After not hearing from him for three months during her most trying time, Elizabeth wrote to Antonio:

When those moments spent in writing to or thinking of my Brother are given to my J[esus,] He never disappoints me but repays every instant with hours of sweet Peace and unfailing contentment, and the tenderest interest you ever can bestow on me is only a stream of which he is the fountain (CW 1:329).

It was particularly in this experience that her heart became aware that all relationships are received from the Lord as a gift. Because even our love for others is given us by Him, it finds itself most true, most complete, when surrendered to Him. This reality allowed her to love people more deeply, and at the same time, have a deep respect for the mystery of the other's journey with the Lord, that remained, in a certain sense, always beyond her. Thus, the same one who had wrote of her undying love for Julia, could say to the same friend:

Could I relieve [your sorrow], was it my lot to speak Peace to your Afflicted Heart—but I am fulfilling my destiny, and I fear will never be permitted to share yours (CW 1:69).

The fruit of this lesson is evident in the relationships throughout the rest of her life, particularly in regards to her own children, and her ongoing role as mother to her students.

Both of her sons caused her much fear and worry throughout her life, but particularly her son William. Pursuing a career at sea, he wandered away from the faith, and Elizabeth struggled deeply with fear for his eternal salvation. Yet even amidst this trial, she consistently and agonizingly surrendered him to the Lord, writing to him:

My head and heart is so full of you... if I wake in the night, I think it is your angel wakes me to pray for you. And last night I found myself actually dropping asleep, repeating your name over and over, and appealing to Our Lord with the agony of a mother's love for our long and dear and everlasting reunion (Dirvin 32).

Similarly, Elizabeth kept up correspondence with many of the girls she taught for years after they had moved away. A continual support and advisor to them, she remained intimately involved in their struggles:

Oh My God, what a hard world to steer through with innocence! My Ellen... I must leave you to our God. You are as far out of my reach as my soul's William is... How can I even guess your trials, circumstances, affairs of the heart, temptations of all kinds? But my God will protect and save my beloved ones, I trust (Dirvin 137-138).



Antonio Filicchi, close friend of Elizabeth Ann Seton

“ This is the Day...And Then Eternity!



Original grave of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton



Saint Joseph's Valley, Emmitsburg

The dear, dear, dear adored Will be done through every moment of [my life]! And may it control, regulate, and perfect us; and when all is over, how we will rejoice that it was done! (Dirvin 40)

Elizabeth had an unshakeable affection for God's will and a firm conviction in its manifestation in every detail and circumstance of her life. She truly saw everything as a gift given her for further union with Him. Even in her early married years, she wrote to Julia:

...when Existence is the Gift of Heaven in order that certain duties may be fulfilled, and the path that leads to a state of Immortality and perfection—in this point of view I am Grateful for the gifts, and wait with cheerful Hope (CW I:55).

The intensity with which she pursued Him is evident in every person, in every event, in every suffering and circumstance she encountered in her life. We see it in the lazaretto prison, in her unshakeable reverence before the mystery of God's providence in her husband's fatal illness. It is the driving force that brought her into the Catholic Church. It is present in her abandonment to Him in the move to Baltimore. It is evident in her confidence and entrustment of herself to Bishop Carroll and Fr. Dubourg, as the concrete expression of God's will.

...The harassed mind, wearied with continual contradiction to all it would most covet—solitude! Silence! Peace!—sighs for a change; but five minutes' recollection procures an immediate act of resignation, convinced that this is the day of salvation for me. And if, like a coward, I should run away from the field of battle, I am sure the very peace I seek would fly from me, and...the Will of God would be again wished for as the safest and surest road (CW I:444).

In this light, sufferings cease to be indignities that we must bear and become rather gifts of God that bear us closer to Him. Elizabeth saw suffering as the most powerful place in which Christ meets us after the Eucharist, calling it the "Communion of the Cross":

We are never strong enough to bear our cross, it is the cross which carries us, nor so weak as to be unable to bear it, since the weakest become strong by its virtue (Dirvin 103).

Elizabeth lived deeply the full weight of the present moment precisely because she understood that the present is indeed infused with the world to come:

Eternity, Oh how near it often seems to me (Dirvin 33).

Elizabeth understood that Eternity is no abstract concept of a future time or place, but something radically present and real within everyday life: it is lived communion in the Life of the Trinity. She understood intimately the mystery of the Mystical Body: that within Christ, we participate already here on earth in the life of heaven, in the communion of the Trinity and the communion of saints. This awareness was a central part of her conversion, and it undergirds her entire spiritual journey with Christ. This awareness of the foretaste of Eternity in the life of the Church only served to increase her longing for the fullness of eternal communion:

surely the next blessing in our future existence to that of being near the source of Perfection, will be the enjoyment of each other's Society without dread of interruption...no separation, but free communication of affection unshackled by the why's and wherefores of this World... (CW I:49)

Elizabeth's life is a beautiful example of a realistic embrace of the complexities of the present simultaneously grounded in the reality of Eternity. She came to find herself in union with Christ in the concrete communion of her relationships. The legacy of her life is summed up beautifully in her words to her sisters on her deathbed:

One Communion more—and then eternity! (Dirvin 33)