

CHARITY CONNECTIONS Number 39, Winter 2009

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Exploring Contemporary Implications of our Vincentian–Setonian Heritage

REFLECTIONS ON THE BICENTENNIAL YEAR: A MOSAIC

As we conclude the "Charity Connection" series on Wise Women and the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Charity in the U.S., we offer some reflections on aspects of Elizabeth Ann Seton's spirituality. We believe that her spirituality is both relevant and challenging to all who strive to live the charism of charity today. We invite you to ponder with us a simple mosaic of quotations from her letters and other writings.

Providence

Think, Julia, how many we have outlived, whose lives we calculated upon as certain to be of longer duration than our own! And how unable we are to judge future events! ... remember the never-failing Protector we have...

Scripture

December 4th—my Bible, commentaries, Kempis, visible, and in continual enjoyment—When I cannot get hours, I take minutes—Invisible, oh the company is numberless—sometimes I feel so assured that the guardian angel is immediately present that I look up from my Book and can hardly persuade myself I am not touched.



Eucharist

Most precious Communion, preceded by alarm and thoughts of fear—but all settled in one thought: how He loves and welcomes the poor and desolate.

Presence

Do I realize it, the protecting presence, the consoling grace of my redeemer and God ... He is my guide, my friend, and supporter—with such a guide can I fear, with such a friend shall I not be satisfied, with such a supporter can I fall?

Communion of the Cross

We never receive him in the communion of the cross without being called by Himself; it is a mandate from heaven... but to this high mystery of our eternal union with Him we should bring the burning love and gratitude.

Source

*Elizabeth Ann Seton
Collected Writings
Volume 1*

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Elizabeth Ann Seton

August 28, 1774
Birth

January 25, 1794
Marriage to
William Magee Seton

December 27, 1803
Death of
Elizabeth's husband

March 14, 1805
Entrance into the
Catholic Church

March 25, 1809
Profession
of first vows

July 31, 1809
First American
community for
religious women in the
United States
founded by Elizabeth
and her companions

January 21, 1821
Death

September 14, 1975
Canonization

Five Sisters of Charity from different branches of the Federation gather in late November at the Jersey Shore with questions (un-voiced) but awaiting them in the hours ahead. A mosaic to be created of words, phrases, and symbols like puzzle pieces, drawn from Elizabeth's writings takes form, a mix of the experiences of life and spirit.

How do we angle the lens? Are we looking at what Elizabeth would do today? Or are we trying to identify the characteristics of soul that link us as sisters? Can we take the time to have a cup of tea and a late into the night discussion about what inspires and challenges us, what surprises us and brings us joy? We search in Elizabeth's writings for her responses to these questions; we have questions of our own.

In examining the opposites of inspiration and challenge, surprise and joy, we come upon a first strength of Elizabeth's spirituality. She is able to hold both love and sacrifice at the same moment, suffering and union. She accepts the consequences of a life of commitment to a mature spiritual life that is as expansive as it is deep. Suffering is attendant to love; the fullness of humanity for her, for us as embodied in the Seton family motto "at any cost, yet go forward."

The Eucharist keeps central for Elizabeth Christ's invitation to the poor and desolate. Echoes of the Beatitudes... echoes of the phrasing of our own vows—to serve those who for shame would conceal their need. And our own moments of confusion or frustration are close to the surface. Just as she recounts the guardian angel's "touch" as she reads, we are aware of those moments when even the whispers of those Beatitudes are undeniable in our understanding and practice of our faith. A sensuality of religious practice that is non-cerebral, but real, though never fully realized in our individual or our communal lives.

This is the courage we see in her to not only continue the difficult, the paradox of the cross, but in the dailyness of life to speak up and stand her ground. She may do it in a subtle way with familiar analogies of nature and home, but this is but a practical way to move towards the conversion of hearts. Her discipline, tenacity and steadfast expressions of providence are clear-eyed. "This is what I was meant to do." She hurts, she grieves, but she is not a victim. Ultimately she feels happy in the moment, hopeful, reframing obstacles to be but a reality of our humanity.

We cannot know the mind of God, our predictions are just that. It is almost an ironic tone that Elizabeth uses to say that we cannot predict the future. Our endeavors, our institutions, our present form of religious life. And what if religious life changes, might this be the will of God, though not our own. Does this mean our mission is finished? Isn't this what we are meant to do—the joy of the present, willingness to stand our ground, and the faith that we carry in our Creator and Protector.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What words, phrases, or symbols from Elizabeth's writings resonate with your experience?

What insights and challenges from this reflection call you to ongoing conversion of heart?



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