

Elizabeth Bayley Seton's Spirituality of the Cross

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In the back flyleaf of her prayer book, Elizabeth Seton wrote a modification of the *Anima Christi*:

Soul of Jesus sanctify me
 Blood of Jesus wash me
 Passion of Jesus comfort me
 Wounds of Jesus hide me
 Heart of Jesus receive me
 Spirit of Jesus enliven me
 Goodness of Jesus pardon me
 Beauty of Jesus draw me
 Humility of Jesus humble me
 Peace of Jesus pacify me
 Love of Jesus inflame me
 Kingdom of Jesus come to me
 Grace of Jesus replenish me
 Mercy of Jesus pity me
 Sanctity of Jesus sanctify me
 Purity of Jesus purify me
 Cross of Jesus support me
 Nails of Jesus hold me
 Mouth of Jesus bless me

in life, in death – in time and Eternity – in the hour of Death defend
 Me, call me to come to thee, receive me with thy Saints in glory
 everlasting.¹

Elizabeth loved this prayer, writing several paraphrases of it as she contemplated at various times, the outpouring of Jesus' love in his suffering

¹ Regina Bechtel, S.C. and Judith Metz, S.C., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings*, 4 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2000, 2002, 2006) hereafter cited as *Collected Writings*, 3b: 74-75.

and death. From the time she was a young person, part of her spirituality centered on how Jesus showed his love through his gift of himself in his willingness to suffer for us – and how she wished to return this love. The symbol of the cross served as a reminder to Elizabeth of this love and her burning desire to reciprocate it. Her father gave her a cross which she often wore, remarking that she loved it "as the mark of my Captain and Master whom I was to follow so valiantly."²

There are many references in her letters and journals to this cross, such as: "looked at my crucifix;" "Calvary is the rendezvous;" "We must be crucified." As she was nursing her dying husband in the Leghorn lazaretto, she wrote: "Not only willing to take up my cross but kissed it too."³ During a tumultuous time after her return to New York, Elizabeth observed: when people say 'so much trouble has turned her brain.' – "Well, I kiss my crucifix, which I have loved for so many years, and say they are only mistaken."⁴

Occasionally people have commented that they find little affinity with Elizabeth Seton because her spirituality seems too focused on the negative. For them she dwells so much on suffering and the cross, seemingly expressing joy at the idea of embracing hardship and imitating Jesus' suffering, that her spirituality does not attract them.

Yet, the imitation of Christ must be the center of every Christian life. Holy people through the ages have shown us by their lives that the more a person is focused on God's outpouring love, demonstrated by Christ's ultimate sacrifice on the cross, the more their need to imitate the self-

² Ibid., 3a: 514.

³ Ibid., 1: 257.

⁴ Ibid., 1: 401.

giving love of Jesus. "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."⁵

Although Ignatius Loyola didn't write the *Anima Christi* which we have already reflected on, he did place it at the beginning of his *Spiritual Exercises* and often referred to it. He did, however, write his *Sucipe* with which most of us are familiar: "Take Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my entire will; all that I have and possess."

In spiritual classic *The Interior Castle*, Teresa of Avila observed: "His Majesty couldn't grant us a greater favor than to give us a life that would be an imitation of the life His beloved Son lived. Thus I hold for certain that these favors are meant to fortify our weakness, . . . that we may be able to imitate Him in His great sufferings."

Elizabeth Seton was also committed to living in imitation of Jesus. She wrote in her Journal: "The cup which Our Father has given us, shall we not drink it? Blessed Savior, by the bitterness of Thy pains we may estimate the force of Thy love. . . . and therefore if thou so ordainest it, welcome disappointment and Poverty; welcome sickness and pain – welcome even shame, and contempt, and calumny. If this be a rough and thorny path it is one which thou hast gone before us. Where we see thy footsteps we cannot repine."⁶

Elizabeth was able to enter into Jesus' life, to experience his outpouring love in the events of the passion narratives, in a way that made them very

⁵ Mark 8: 34-35.

⁶ *Collected Writings*, 3b: 21

real and relevant to her life. She recognized that Christ's story was her story! – and her part was to enter into her own life and joyfully embrace the cross as a way of being in union with her beloved. She experienced overwhelming gratitude at what he had done for her, and knew that her response must be to "drink the cup" and be "baptized with the baptism" of which Jesus spoke.

This spirituality that Elizabeth embraced was the strong foundation that permeated her prayer and supported her through many difficult times. One of these was the month she spent in the Lazaretto with her desperately ill husband and young daughter upon their arrival at Leghorn, Italy, in November 1803. She described the experience to her beloved sister-in-law, Rebecca Seton: "[Y]ou could not rest in your bed if you saw [me] as [I am] sitting in one corner of an immense Prison bolted in and barred with as much ceremony as any monster of mischief might be – a single window double grated with iron thro' which, if I should want anything, I am to call a sentinel, with a fierce cocked hat, and long raffle gun." "[O]n the ship mattresses spread on the cool floor my Willy and Anna are sound asleep, and I trust that God who has given him strength through a day of such exertion will carry us on – He is our all indeed – . . . God is with us – and if sufferings abound in us, his Consolations also greatly abound, and far exceed all utterance." "What shall we say – this is the hour of trial, the Lord support and strengthen us in it. Retrospections being anguish – press forward toward the mark and prize."⁷

As the Setons passed their weeks of quarantine, Elizabeth strove to keep her equilibrium by prayer and her "hidden Treasures" – her Bible, commentaries, sermons, and *The Imitation of Christ* that she had carried with

⁷ Ibid., 1: 251 (entry for November 19, the day of their arrival), 253, 254.

her from New York. She poured out her heart in her Journal where she lamented time and again how she, "read, prayed, wept and prayed again."⁸ But as she contemplated her situation she was also able to note: "Not only willing to take up my cross but kissed it too. . . . I find my present opportunity a Treasure – and my confinement of Body a liberty of Soul which I may never again enjoy whilst they are united. . . . If I could forget my God one moment at these time I should go mad – but He hushes all – Be still and know that I am God your Father."⁹

With the progressing days, William Seton's health continued to worsen so that by December 5th a doctor was called. He feared that Elizabeth's beloved husband "might be gone in a few hours," but he continued to hold on. On the 14th Elizabeth wrote: "The dampness about us would be thought dangerous for a person in health, and my W's sufferings – Oh well I know that God is above. Capitano, . . . if I thought our condition the Providence of man, instead of the 'weeping Magdalene' as you so graciously call me, you would find me a lioness willing to burn your Lazaretto about your ears. . . . But O my Heavenly Father I know that these contradictory events are permitted and guided by thy Wisdom, which only is *light*."¹⁰

Released from their confinement December 19, the little family travelled to lodgings in Pisa. On Christmas Day Elizabeth put a little wine in a glass and said different portions of Psalms and Prayers which she had marked in her books hoping for a happy moment. "[W]e took the cup of Thanksgiving

⁸ Ibid., 1: 256, 257, 265.

⁹ Ibid., 1: 257, 258 – entries for November 24 and 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1: 270, 271.

setting aside the sorrow of time, in the views of the joy of Eternity," she noted.¹¹

Elizabeth then began her deathbed vigil which ended two days later. She recorded: "[O]n Tuesday morning 27th December – his soul was released – and mine from a struggle next to death." She continued: "In all this it is not necessary to dwell on the mercy and consoling presence of my dear Redeemer, for no mortal strength could support what I experienced."¹² The tears, prayers and anguish Elizabeth suffered during her long watch with her sick and dying husband honed her trust in God and led her to a deeper identification with her suffering Savior. Her experiences became a building block of her spirituality as her openness to Divine Providence during her remaining time in Italy led her down paths she could not have imagined.

Impressed with the Catholic faith and practices of her Italian hosts, Elizabeth entered into a long and anguished discernment process over whether to remain in the church of her birth or to join to Catholic Church. For nearly a year she considered the arguments on each side, trying to listen to the voice of God. Longing for support and advice, she wrote to Antonio Filicchi: "[J]udge of my disappointment when only a few lines [from you] rewarded my anxious anticipations – however at the foot of my cross I found consolation, and kissing it over and over I repeated and repeat, there only I am never disappointed."¹³

¹¹ Ibid., 1: 273.

¹² Ibid., 1; 274, 275.

¹³ Ibid., 1: 326.

Elizabeth's uncertainty seemed to grow through the months, and she wrote of being "half dead with the inward struggle."¹⁴ Yet, she confided to Antonio: "when some hours of consolation come, I think hard as the trial is, yet it is sweet – I never knew till now what prayer is – never thought of fasting – though now it is more a habit than eating, never knew how to give up all, and send my spirit to mount Calvary, nor how to console and delight it in the Society of Angels – Patience, says my soul, He will not let you and your little ones perish, and if yet your life is given in the conflict, at the last he will nail all to his cross and receive you to his mercy –"¹⁵

Elizabeth's choice to join the Catholic Church gained her inner peace and certitude, but led, as she later recorded, to "[m]ost painful remembrances now – yet grateful for *the order of our Grace*, so evident through all."¹⁶ Her choice also opened a Pandora's Box when her two youngest Seton sisters-in-law Harriet and Cecilia, and their cousin Eliza Farquhar, became taken up with Elizabeth's Catholic fervor. When family members expressed disapproval, Cecilia's enthusiasm only grew stronger.

Having been raised by Elizabeth since she was seven years old, this young woman felt close bonds that were only strengthened by their mutual attraction to a devout living of their Christian faith. As she was departing for Italy, Elizabeth had cautioned her young protégé: "[I]f you find that here are any obstacles in your way, and doubtless you will find many as every Christian does in the fulfillment of his duty, still Persevere with yet more

¹⁴ Ibid., 1: 372.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1: 339.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3a: 519. Dear Remembrances

earnestness, and rejoice to bear your share in the *Cross* which is Our Passport and Seal to the Kingdom of our Redeemer."¹⁷

Now, as Cecilia adamantly pursued the course of following Elizabeth into the Catholic Church, the younger woman met with severe opposition and even threats from her family. Elizabeth tried to support her as best she could, writing on Christmas Eve 1805: "[M]y dear dear child I beg, beseech, implore you, to offer up all your pains, your Sorrows, and vexations to God that he will unite them with the Sorrows, the pangs and anguish which Our adored Redeemer bore for us on the Cross – place yourself in spirit at the foot of that cross, and entreat that a drop of that precious blood there shed may fall on you to enlighten strengthen and support your Soul in this life and ensure its eternal Salvation in the next."¹⁸

When Cecilia joined the Catholic Church, a violent storm broke. For a time she was confined to her room, threats were made to send her to the West Indies, and even to burn Elizabeth's house down over her head. Eventually the new convert tied her clothes up in a bundle and went to live with Elizabeth for a time.¹⁹ During Cecilia's period of trial Elizabeth kept a daily spiritual journal. In it she shared her own prayer experiences, along with offering counsel and encouragement. In one entry she noted: "[P]ain and Resignation instead of the Treasure [Eucharist] this day – but He is then most near – while Weeping under his Cross we are there content to stay."²⁰ In another, Elizabeth encouraged her young relative: "May we never leave the sheltering wing, but dwelling under the Shadow of His Cross we will

¹⁷ Ibid., 1: 224.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1: 398.

¹⁹ Annabelle Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 119.

²⁰ *Collected Writings*, 1: 470.

cheerfully gather the thorns which will be turned hereafter into a joyful crown."²¹

When Elizabeth Seton made the decision to move her family to Baltimore in Spring 1808, her only hesitation was leaving her dear friend and confidant behind in New York. Cecilia wanted to accompany Elizabeth but also felt an obligation to care for her brother James' children.

Elizabeth missed Cecilia terribly and buoyed herself with the thought that "there is no distance for souls united as ours."²² During the year the two were separated, Cecilia continued to face difficulties and obstacles to her hopes of joining her beloved "Sister" as she referred to Elizabeth, while Elizabeth was peaceful and delighted with her new situation. In this light Elizabeth wrote to her "most precious child": "it is poor Sister who must beg you to pray for her – I am at rest my darling while you are mounting the heights of Sion – often too I sleep in the Garden, while you are sharing the bitter cup, but it is not to be so for long, his mercies are endless and I shall not be left without my portion."²³

The two were joyfully reunited in June 1809 when Cecilia arrived in Maryland with plans to join the newly forming community of the Sisters of Charity. She enthusiastically plunged into this new role, but her delicate health continued to decline. By early 1810 Elizabeth wrote to her friend, Eliza Sadler: "[M]y heart faints when I think of this separation. No one can

²¹ Ibid., 1: 473.

²² Ibid., 2: 6.

²³ Ibid., 2: 21

conceive of what she is to me – but – but – *fiat*."²⁴ Cecilia died within several months.

As Cecilia Seton passed from Elizabeth's life, another Cecilia became an intimate companion. Cecilia O'Conway, a young woman from Philadelphia, was planning to travel to Europe to become a nun. Instead, on the recommendation of her priest-director, she became the first woman to join Elizabeth at her Paca Street House in Baltimore. These two women shared many of the same spiritual goals and became friends almost at once. Cecilia was enthusiastic about becoming a Sister of Charity and through the trials of the early years offered loving support to Elizabeth, who referred to her friend as "the angel of the Community, . . . a true and solid comfort."²⁵

In August 1817, Cecilia was among the first Sisters sent to take charge of the Catholic orphan asylum in New York City. She was not anxious to be separated from Elizabeth or to be thrust into the bustle of city life. But her spiritual mother challenged her: "My own Cecilia – going on her heavenly errand and to crucify *Self* – . . . if you suffer, so much the better for our high journey above – the only fear I have is that you will let the old string pull too hard for solitude and silence, but look to the Kingdom of souls – . . . this is not a country, my dear one, for Solitude and Silence, but of warfare and crucifixion – You are not to stay in his silent agonies of the garden at night, but go from post to pillar to the very fastening on the cross and mind, my lady, how you dare glance a thought at pulling out a nail which he put in with my hand, while his own so dear will hammer it up to

²⁴ Ibid., 2: 111.

²⁵ Ibid., 2: 141.

the very head I expect – I beg him with a mother's agony to do it softly and tenderly – would wish so to hold your dear head while he does it, but he answers no one held his . . . but yet he will hold himself supporting with one hand, and *fastening* with the other."²⁶

During Cecilia's years in New York, she and Elizabeth kept up a lively correspondence focused on challenging each other to every greater heights of union with their Redeemer. In their notes they exhorted each other to accept the sufferings, both physical and emotional, that they were experiencing, and to receive them in the spirit of participating in the Lord's passion. "May you enjoy true peace in Him who has nailed us," Elizabeth wrote, "I would not pull the smallest nail out for a thousand worlds."²⁷

In her newsy letters, Elizabeth kept Cecilia apprised of her declining health, telling her in July 1818, "I have no symptoms now of hastening Death as when I wrote you [earlier] – slow, slow and sure –"²⁸ A few months later Elizabeth reminded her spiritual daughter of "how little is all that passes with this life – . . . therefore we must be so careful to meet our grace –" She then continued: "Isaac come forth – the wood and fire are here, let not the Victim be wanting."²⁹ And the following month Elizabeth urged the younger woman to "take the abundant sweet heavenly grace from day to day, only seeking and seeing him in all our little duties . . . and taking from the hands of all around us every daily cross and trial as if he gave it himself."³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., 2: 498 -499.

²⁷ Ibid., 2: 682.

²⁸ Ibid., 2: 569.

²⁹ Ibid., 2: 595.

³⁰ Ibid., 2: 600.

After two years in New York, Cecilia was back in Emmitsburg where she could again share her days with her beloved friend. With Elizabeth's health continuing to decline, Cecilia seized the opportunity to become one of her nurses. Staying close by her bed, she made sure Elizabeth had a crucifix available to assist her prayer, and she was present among the mourners when Elizabeth's last hour arrived.

Among Elizabeth's writings is a meditation on "the communion of the cross." In it she speaks of "the happiness of receiving Our Lord and Savior in the holy Eucharist," yet points out that "we also receive Him by the communion of His cross." "So," she continues, "when He invites us to come and receive Him in afflictions and sufferings, we should receive His chalice with the same ardor, and drink His Blood by Faith. . . . The great advantage of the communion of the cross is that we receive it when Our Lord Himself pleases and at the time He sees best." "Unhappily," she reflects, "we are apt to think the very least suffering is too much, because we are lovers with our lips rather than our heart, while the true lover of Christ can never have enough of his cross." "All he asks of us is our good will," but we also "should bring the burning fire of love and gratitude."³¹

The spirituality of the cross has been part of the Christian message from the time Jesus taught on this earth. Great saints, theologians, and spiritual guides through the centuries have stressed this same message. Today's Christian leaders continue to stress, as an essential of our spirituality, the importance of our participation in Jesus' self-giving love. German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, sees a kind of alchemy of love, where all the

³¹ Ibid., 3a: 419-422.

negativity and suffering of the world is touched by God and transformed into the victory of life.³² While Johannes Metz, in his classic, *Poverty of Spirit*, writes: "The legacy of God's total commitment to humankind, the proof of God's fidelity to our poverty is the cross. . . . [and] no one is exempted from the poverty of the cross."³³

To conclude, I invite you to listen prayerfully to another voice of our time: Jessica Powers in her poem, "The Sign of the Cross."

The lovers of Christ lift out their hands to the great gift of suffering.
 For how could they seek to be warmed and clothed and delicately fed,
 to wallow in praise and drink deep draughts of an undeserved affection,
 have castle for home and a silken couch for bed,
 when He the worthy went forth, wounded and hated, and grudged of even a place to lay his head?

This is the badge of the friends of the Man of Sorrow:
 the mark of the cross, faint replica of His,
 become ubiquitous now; it spreads like a wild blossom on the mountains of time and in each of the crevices.
 Oh, seek the land where it grows in rich abundance with its thorny stem and its scent like bitter wine,
 for wherever Christ walks He casts its seed and he scatters its purple petals.
 It is the flower of His marked elect, and the fruit it bears is divine.

Choose it, my heart. It is a beautiful sign.³⁴

³² Jürgen Motlmann, *The Crucified God*, as described in Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 121.

³³ Johannes B. Metz, *Poverty of Spirit* (New York, Paulist, 1968) 19-20.

³⁴ Regina Siegfried, ASC and Robert F. Morneau, *Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 150.