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Margaret J. Kelly D.C.

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Her Doing Heart: Key Relationships in Elizabeth Seton's Life, 1809-1821

BY

MARGARET JOHN KELLY, D.C.

Introduction

As one seeks to narrow this very broad topic of key relationships in Elizabeth's life, 1809-1821, it becomes apparent that the first parameter of *Key* is not a strong restriction or qualifier because Elizabeth Seton had many key relationships if we define key as formative of personality or critical in the evolution of her community. Treating just the last twelve years of her life, Emmitsburg 1809-1821, does not reduce the challenge either because in addition to the sustained relations of her New York, Italy, and Baltimore days, Elizabeth established many new and many key relationships, particularly among the clergy, within her community and among her students. Those twelve years witnessed the organization of her new religious community and the extension of the ministry into Philadelphia and New York. That period included the loss of relationships as well because during those twelve years, Elizabeth herself buried two daughters, two sisters-in-law, seven of her religious sisters and mourned many others including Archbishop John Carroll and Filippo Filicchi.

The complexity of Elizabeth's personality and the dynamism of this particular period of history from the national and international perspective make the challenge even greater. Elizabeth grew up with the emerging republic and entered a cultural world seeking to reconcile the philosophical and creative expressions of romanticism with the dominant classical culture of Europe. While we think of Elizabeth as a daughter of the United States, and truly she was, the religious and philosophical currents forming her as a religious were strongly European. Her spiritual guides, the Sulpicians, were formed in the French school of spirituality and she, herself, quite competent in French, translated the lives of many saints including Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Francis de Sales, as well as Francis Xavier, and Theresa of

Avila.

The complexity of both Elizabeth's personhood and her historical period offers many possibilities in studying her relationships. First, one could consider Elizabeth's relations with the clergy and try to gain insights into that very contemporary issue. She had her share of successes and failures in her respectful docility to Archbishop Carroll, unflinching devotion to Père Pierre Babade, reluctant submission to Father John Baptist David, painful adjustments to the greatly divergent Louis William Dubourg and John Dubois, and mentoring of the erratic Simon Gabriel Bruté. However, to do justice to the clerical relationships, one would need to include a veritable full cast of characters and some very major figures in American church history including Dubourg, Dubois, Brute, Cheverus, Carroll, Flaget, David, Maréchal of Baltimore, Connolly of New York, Samuel Cooper in both his angelic and diabolic states, Nagot, Tisserant, Duhamel, Bishop Egan, Tessier, etc., etc.

One could profit from looking at her community relationships to seek some helpful assistance in that contemporary challenge. How did Elizabeth interact with the forty-six sisters who entered the Sisters of Charity during her lifetime? She referred to herself, in a letter to Simon Bruté, as a "torpedo among them for they [the sister novices] tell their superior I strike their very joints when I say a word."¹ Of these forty-six sisters, as far as we know, eight left the community before Mother Seton died, seven preceded Mother Seton to the grave, and two (Elizabeth Boyle and Margaret George) were foundresses in their own right (New York and the Cincinnati Charities). One is particularly drawn to study David's effort to replace Mother Seton with Rose White as community leader and to see how, after that conflict, Elizabeth and Rose managed to work so closely in developing the community. One also is drawn to probe Mother's relationships with Sister Susan Clossy because Elizabeth described Susan as one "who has lived in my very heart and been more than my own sister to me ever since I have been here" and advised Julia Scott that "If you have ever to find a piece of myself, it will be in this dear Susan Clossy."² And, how did Elizabeth

¹Elizabeth Seton to Simon Bruté August, 1814, *Mother Seton Notes by Rev. Simon Gabriel Brute* (Emmitsburg: 1884), 217. While the location of the original of the correspondence is identified in the notes here, typescript copies of all extant Elizabeth Seton's letters from Emmitsburg, 1809-1821, are available in the archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House in Emmitsburg.

²*Numerous Choirs: A Chronicle of Elizabeth Bayley Seton and Her Spiritual Daughters*, 1: *The Seton Years, 1774-1821*, ed. Ellin Kelly (Evansville, Indiana: 1981), 175.

relate with her local superiors? To Margaret George in 1819, she gave very sound advice on personal stewardship. "Take care of Margaret exactly as you would of E. A. S. Mind that, my last injunction."³ Again to Elizabeth Boyle whom she describes as "dearest old partner of my cares and bearer of my burdens" she wrote on 20 October 1820, "Write as often as you can. One thing I beg of you when you write to me, scribble without care, say much and never mind how it is written."⁴

Elizabeth's recruitment and formation relationships are also intriguing because she directly invited new members to the community. Even though her community was just beginning and was enduring upheavals, she assured Rose Stubbs "there will be a happy home ready for you in which you may enter without expenses or difficulty"⁵ and that "the rule is so easy that it is scarcely more than any regular religious person would do even in the world."⁶ However, in a letter to Archbishop Ambrose Maréchal in September 1817, Elizabeth described the challenge of forming "the little wild head of Mary Kelly" who "cannot be depended on a moment nor remain a half-hour in adoration without so much complaining and restlessness that we fear she should be seen by children or strangers."⁷

When resource development is such a necessary function today, Elizabeth's relationship with her donors invites attention. To Antonio Filicchi and Julia Scott, she was very blunt and direct with her requests, with no preliminary buildup. To the Harpers in a post-Christmas period, she wrote emotionally of stewardship: "Will a friendly hand assist us, become our guardian protector, plead our cause with the rich and the powerful, serve the cause of humanity, and be a father to the poor? . . . Tell your sweet nieces to look at the price of a shawl or vest and think of the poor family at St. Joseph's."⁸

In this day of the laity, it is inviting to trace Elizabeth's relationship with her many lay associates and friends. This brings forth a similar catalog of men and women from the sophisticated Catons and Harpers to the simple farmhand Joe as well as her faithful friends, Eliza Sadler and Catherine Duplex, who did become a Catholic as well. The fifty-seven letters Elizabeth wrote to Julia Scott from

³Ibid., 217.

⁴Ibid., 231.

⁵Ibid., 125.

⁶Ibid., 138.

⁷Elizabeth Seton to Bishop Maréchal, September, 1817, Baltimore Archdiocese Archives (hereinafter cited as BAA).

⁸Elizabeth Seton to Mr. Harper, 2 January 1810, BAA.

Emmitsburg, 1809 to 1821, reveal her as the playful friend as well as the tenacious preacher.

One also wants to consider the educator Elizabeth in her relationships with her students. Correspondence with her students and graduates, as well as with the families of her students, is replete with psychological insights and reveals the qualities that made Elizabeth so successful as an educator, a motivator, animator, and spiritual director. The fifteen letters to Ellen Wiseman, who as student, friend, directee, and confidant are very appealing as are the supportive letters written to parents. To Mr. Fox of New York who, incidentally, accompanied the sisters to New York on their first mission in 1817, Elizabeth frequently wrote very affirming letters about his three daughters, Eliza, Jane, and Mary. The famous Harpers of Baltimore were not as fortunate because little Mary's "proud little heart made her insupportable to her teachers."⁹

Elizabeth's relationships with her five children are also attractive. Each relationship was special and unique, full of understanding and support but also firm and reprimanding when necessary, especially with William and Richard. To stay near her sons while they were away, Elizabeth kept a globe showing France and Italy or a map of Boston. Her relationship with Anne Marie was deepened by the shared experiences in Italy. At her youngest daughter Rebecca's death in November 1816, she admitted to William that she had lost "the little friend of my heart who read every pain or joy of it and soothed by the most darling affection every daily care."¹⁰

This rapid review of possible emphases demonstrates that the task of describing Elizabeth's key relationships in this twelve-year period is indeed daunting. Yet, as one reads through her correspondence during this period, one is struck by the frequency with which the theme of "courage" appears. "Courage," the combination of the French "Coeur" and the Latin "agere," provides a clue and a special perspective on her relationship. Elizabeth seems most herself and relates most authentically when she is "acting with heart," when she converts her deep sense of God into activities for others. Her awareness of God must be expressed in service; her spirituality yields, better demands, a lived share in Jesus' mission. Elizabeth then seems to be most herself

⁹Elizabeth Seton to Mr. Harper. 15 October 1814, *ibid.*

¹⁰Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, 195.

in her two critical projects of this period, fulfilling her familial responsibilities to her children, particularly the boys, and in establishing her community. Relationships and projects merge in the creative, spontaneous, energetic, passionate, and productive Elizabeth.

Before looking at three specific relationships, it is helpful to consider Elizabeth's views on relationships. In a January 1815 letter to her son, William, as he was setting out for Italy with Bruté, she gave advice, which captured her own philosophy of interpersonal relationships. She urged him to practice respect for others, give gratitude for the favors received from others, be simple and appropriate in the use of material resources, have openness to different cultures and treat others as he would want to be treated. She also advised William to be prudent and cautious with strangers, to keep strict accounts of money, to remember that his mother, as his best friend, should know all and that, most importantly, God should not be offended. On the practical side, she advised, friendship is built by attention to the other and that parents are delighted when you notice their children.¹¹

Elizabeth was also aware of her relational weaknesses and admitted to her son William in 1818, "You and I are often too softhearted about our friendships and too condescending to circumstances of the moment." To Bruté, she noted her efforts at holding back the doing heart. "From the first moment of the morning, I am in one continual watch to keep down my eyebrows and wear the ready smile, if even it sometimes be ghastly."¹² She also compared her impetuosity with the patience of Dubourg who "could ever be found to unwind the ball as he does and stop to pick out every knot. Too happy I to break the knot and piece it again."¹³

As with all of us, in her weakness was her strength. Short-term gains had to be sacrificed for long-term benefits. Only a reflective but spontaneous heart could have lived so heroically and motivated such major accomplishments.

Therefore, it seems appropriate to use as the prism for her relationships her interactions with three men who were critical to her as natural mother and religious foundress. The first is with John Carroll where we gain insights into the simplicity and perseverance of Elizabeth as she worked through the very difficult, personally and commu-

¹¹Bruté, *Mother Seton Notes*, 76-80.

¹²*Ibid.*, 217.

¹³*Ibid.*

nally, situation of establishing her community. The second is with Simon Gabriel Bruté who was such a true friend as well as disciple. Elizabeth's relationship with Bruté, just a few years her junior, reveals her playful spirit, her spiritual maturity, and her personal suffering. There is a consistent freedom and spontaneity here that, while present in most of her correspondence, reaches its zenith as she teased and challenged the French priest. Her run-on, almost stream of consciousness style, as well as her creativity, can easily be studied in her letters to Bruté, who alternated between being her guide and her disciple. The third is with Antonio Filicchi who, while the contact was intermittent, served as a point of continuity and stability for Elizabeth. He had brought her through the loss of her husband, her conversion to the Catholic faith, the establishment of her community and provided her with both moral and financial support for her two families. There is in all three relationships a real sense of *simpatico* which only comes when persons have suffered and rejoiced together.

Through the three relationships, one sees Elizabeth gracefully alternating between being the one in charge and the one seeking assistance; the one who speaks and the one who listens. Her relationships, truly reciprocal and mutual, are marked by profound ideals and common sense; by high expectations and healthy realism; by open disclosure and prudent withholding; sensitive questioning and outspoken challenges. She appears to have effectively walked that narrow tightrope that allows for interest without intrusion, support without smothering, and which is woven of self-confidence, other-centeredness, practicality, and simplicity.

Elizabeth's relationships in this period of maturity (age thirty-five forward) were spiritual, passionate, and constructive. They carried two characteristics which I think are also captured in that title "The Doing Heart," and in her famous quotation to George Weiss of Baltimore: "If only we keep courage, we will go to heaven on horseback instead of idling and creeping along."¹⁴ She combines well the affective and effective sides of love which Saint Vincent de Paul wrote so much about. Love without expression of that love in service is not love at all. Relating eternal salvation to transportation modalities "going to heaven on horseback" captures Elizabeth's personal orientation of being heaven-directed but earth-related in a wholistic, non-dualistic

¹⁴Ibid., 127.

sense. Today, we speak of the integrated, balanced, inner-directed person, the mature stage of ego-integrity that Erik Erikson described. The only truly human, and thus truly Christian, stance in a relationship on this earth is that of mutuality, when one stands not in a subordinate or superior position but in one of equality of personhood under God. These three reveal that posture.

Elizabeth's Relationship With John Carroll

Elizabeth's correspondence with John Carroll (Bishop/Archbishop of Baltimore 1790-1815) provides many insights into the developing community and the growing Church as well as into the psyche of Elizabeth Seton. In her correspondence with Carroll, Elizabeth was extremely free, not only about the events within the community, but more importantly about her own mental states as a result of those developments. This is not surprising because a close bond had been formed when Bishop Carroll gave her a week of instruction and then confirmed her in New York in May 1806. A point of interest here is that Elizabeth took Mary for her confirmation name and wrote to Antonio Filicchi that Mary added to Elizabeth and Ann presents "the three most endearing ideas in the world."¹⁵ Elizabeth Ann Seton signed her letters to Carroll M. E. A. S. In regard to Elizabeth's reliance on Bishop Carroll, it is helpful to remember that he also helped to educate her sons and did, in fact, become a major referral source for students, including his own relatives.

In the eighteen letters Elizabeth wrote to Carroll from 6 August 1809 to 9 October 1815, which have been reviewed for this paper, half of them are directly related to the government of the new community. There is a general unrest and, at times, even a bit of depression which surfaces as Elizabeth expresses her strong concern about the prohibition against Father Babade's serving as confessor to the sisters, the varying styles of Dubois and Dubourg, the serious conflict with Rose White and the friction between herself and Father David. The delicacy of these relationships is captured as Elizabeth requested Carroll in August of 1809, "Promise that you will not speak of the contents of this or any other letter I may write to you, that without restraint I may speak to you as to our Lord."¹⁶

¹⁵Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, 102.

¹⁶Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 6 August 1809, BAA.

In the Rose White—Elizabeth Ann situation, as in most difficult situations, the motivations are complex and the factors are many but it does appear that the problem arose when Rose White and Kitty Mullen wanted to maintain loyalties to Father David, while the other sisters were devoted to Father Babade. “Sister Rose and Kitty Mullen are the only persons in the community who have an interest in any other director and all the rest are of one heart and voice with respect to Father Babade it seems.”¹⁷

These differences appear in the Seton-Carroll correspondence from 1809 through 1811. The letters reveal a great deal about the importance of Carroll to the resolution but also of the tenor of life within the infant community. It is helpful to remember that because Carroll had instructed and confirmed Elizabeth Ann, he was close to her, but he had also officiated at the wedding of Rose Landry and Captain White in Baltimore when Rose was just fourteen.

At the end of the above referenced letter, Mother Seton writes, “Our dear Rose is my treasure—she is truly excellent—Kitty too is all goodness.” One is hard pressed to know if that praise comes from guilt for the early part of the letter or the ability of Mother Seton to separate personal animosity from the objective evaluation of a person’s contribution to the work. Just a month later on this issue of Father Babade, Elizabeth wrote revealing that the divisions continued, and speaks of “my girls.” “How many times have I begged our Lord to direct me what to do—on one hand I know it may displease you if I say any more on the subject, and on the other side *my dear girls* are continually begging me ‘Oh, dear Mother, do write to the Bishop, he is a Father to us and will not deny your request,’ but I have put them off . . . for my part I assure you that if it is not granted to me, you will leave a soul so dear to you in a cloud of uneasiness which can be dissipated in no other way.”¹⁸

It may be an unwarranted judgment but the manner in which Elizabeth referred to Rose and Kitty together suggests that Elizabeth may have perceived them as the other camp. In a December letter, she noted, “your favorite Rose and Kitty,” are very well.¹⁹ Awareness of the potential for division appeared in the first council meeting (12

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 8 September 1809, *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

¹⁹Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 14 December 1809, *ibid.*

August 1809), when after the election the sisters took among their resolutions the following: "Resolved, to unite in repressing the too natural propensity to form private parties; and to watch over the natural good."²⁰

Again, a letter of 19 January 1810 ended with a brief report of the condition of Cecilia and Anna and with "Rose and Kitty are very well, except for colds." On 5 December Elizabeth made a cryptic statement to the bishop: "It will grieve you to hear of our Rose's indisposition—of which both herself and I have written the Superior hoping some remedy may be applied in time."²¹ A letter of 16 March 1811 is very explicit and focuses on Rose.

Poor Rose had been a great sufferer of late and more from the mind than body—her anxiety to get to Baltimore has been a source of perpetual agitation, and Rev. Superior repeated letters for her coming at every risk (even of a waggon, if she could find a Christian waggoner) had determined Mr. Dubois to send her on horseback, but we find a better opportunity offers—I ventured to reason with her, and she replied *she would go* and from that time, there has been some reserve between us. . . .

Rose's virtues are truly valued by me and by us all, but from the time she knew she was proposed as Mother of this house in my place and that everyone in it should prepare themselves for the change (which I was directed myself to inform them by special letter immediately after my return from Baltimore) her conduct has undergone an entire change and has been very unfavorable to her happiness and ours. . . .

You surely will not communicate this little letter to the Superior or Rose, as you value peace above all—blessings—my conduct to her is, as I wish it ever to be, founded on that love for him who loved us both so much; to this moment I have always shown her more attention and affection than anyone in the house and our reserve is of the mind not of the heart, her affectionate kindness to my children binds me by gratitude independent of our spiritual connection.²²

There is no question that the difficulty of this relationship was brought to the Lord frequently, and Elizabeth confided in the Bishop in a way that is both therapeutic and self-assuring for her. However, the same intensity of feeling appears in a letter to the archbishop written two months later:

Yet do not imagine, my dear Father, that I accuse Rose of insincerity, but it is very certain that she had blinded herself on this subject—anyone in

²⁰[Anonymous] *Mother Rose White* (Emmitsburg: Maryland, 1936), 11.

²¹Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 5 December 1810. BAA.

²²Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 16 March 1811, *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

this house and Mr. Dubois, himself, though in so delicate a situation with respect to her, would candidly tell you that from the period of her being informed that she was to take my place, her behavior to the whole community took such a turn as to impress everyone with the idea that if she did not assume the whole authority of Mother, she fully expected to assume it, and often has so disheartened us all that after her departure, it seemed as if our spirits were all set at liberty. I tell you this from the same motive I have written the above, and even by the request of Mr. Dubois who has witnessed much more than I can ever tell you, but she has much to excuse her.²³

It is a tribute to the deep spirituality and sense of mission which inspired both women that subsequent to all this, Elizabeth and Rose worked very closely together to establish the works of the emerging community.

One also finds in Elizabeth's correspondence with Bishop Carroll the tracing of the stormy clerical history of the early years of the community. While every community must experience growing pains, the Sisters of Charity seemed to have had an undue share of suffering imposed by the clergy who, while motivated by good purposes, seemed to be divisive forces in their fervor to be involved with or in control of the community. There is no question that the value of the new community was recognized by the clergy. In fact, Elizabeth wrote of this on several occasions. However, that very interest among priests created some painful times for Elizabeth who confided very freely to Bishop Carroll. Again, the dictate that prevented Babade from confessing the sisters caused great pain. "But accustomed as I am almost habitually to sacrifice everything I most value in this life, I should have acquiesced quietly though my heart was torn to pieces but the others could not bear it in the same way and the idea so difficult to conceal that our Superior was acting like a tyrant." Later in this same letter, after she acknowledged that the superior had given the sisters a copy of the rule which did permit free correspondence for direction, she noted defensively, "There have been some very busy persons making exaggerations to our Superior about my writing large packages to Father Babade which packages sent only twice I truly explained to contain letters from Cecilia, Harriet, my Anna, Maria Burke. . . . The packages he twice sent us contained the life of Clotilde of France and the manner of regular meditation and mental prayer."²⁴

²³Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 13 May 1811, *ibid.*

²⁴Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 6 August 1809, *ibid.*

In a letter of 2 November 1809, Elizabeth expressed her desire that Father Dubourg become superior again and reminded Carroll that, if David traveled to Kentucky with Flaget, “we shall have three changes in one year.” She had written to Dubourg herself, saying “you have given your children to our Father-in-law while their real father still lives—and why? The mother is worthless.” She also requested that the temporal and spiritual management be placed in one person and noted that she regretted greatly having offended “our first superior.” But “the truth is that I have been made Mother before being initiated.”²⁵ In another letter, Elizabeth referred to the great many very hard trials and her healthy determination to accept them by laughing at herself before the Lord. “Dry and hard as my daily bread is, to take it with as good a grace as possible, when I carry it before our Lord sometimes he makes me laugh at myself and asks me what other kind I would choose in the Valley of tears than that which himself and all his followers make use of.”²⁶

A letter of 25 January 1810 is, perhaps, the most revealing of the great personal pain Elizabeth was suffering in community but also of her total freedom with and trust in Carroll. She was deeply disturbed and full of self doubts and even of symptoms which might well signal a serious depression. This long quotation, including her emphases, provides many insights:

St. Joseph’s House is almost ready, in a very short time we expect to be settled in it—you know our rules have hitherto been very imperfectly observed but now the moment approaches when *order must be the foundation of all the good we can hope to do*, and as so much depends on the Mother of the Community, I beg you to take her first in hand for I must candidly tell you she is all in the wrong—not *from discontent with the place* I am in since every corner of the world is the same to me if I may but serve our Lord, *nor with the intention of our institution* for I long to be in the fullest exercise of it—but circumstances have all so combined as to create in my mind a confusion & 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 & perseverance, and *my reluctance to speak* on a subject which I know will give you uneasiness is so great that I would certainly be silent; but as the good our Almighty God may intend to do by means of this community may be very much impeded by the present state of things, it is absolutely necessary you, as the head of it and to whom, of course, the Spirit of discernment for its good is given, should

²⁵Elizabeth Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 2 November 1809, *ibid.*

²⁶Elizabeth Ann Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 14 December 1809, *ibid.*

be made acquainted with it before the evil is irreparable. Sincerely I promised you & really *I have endeavored to do everything in my power to bend myself 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, & when the pen should freely give him the necessary detail & information he requires it stops, & he remains now as uninformed in the essential points as if he had nothing to do with us, an unconquerable reluctance & diffidence takes place of those dispositions which ought to influence every action and with every desire to serve God & these excellent beings who surround me I remain motionless and inactive. . . . You still think things must remain as they are, whatever you dictate, I will abide by through every difficulty, continuing at all times and in every situation your most affectionate Daughter in Xst. M., Mary, E. A. Seton.*²⁷

In an undated letter which must have been written in mid-1810, Elizabeth again raised up all her concerns about the effect of David's conducting a retreat for the sisters when the constitutions were not settled and he would be leaving. She expressed herself very directly.

And a new set of examinations in those dear hearts now quiet and tranquil will be the consequence of a retreat whenever it takes place and why should it be agitated before the regulations are made which are hereafter to bind them and why should they be made by a Superior on the point of leaving us to be revised and probably new molded by his successor and thereby subjecting us to a new change . . . the great disappointment it will cause when they will find there are no more regulations after the retreat than before—and certainly, if there are any proposed to us without going through the necessary discussion and approbation, I can never give the example of accepting them. The messenger who takes this letter will also take one to Mr. David suggesting the inconvenience attending this plan.²⁸

However, in the end, despite her straightforwardness and her plea for dialogue and subsidiarity, Elizabeth, as always, ends the letter: "If afterwards, it [the retreat] takes place, I must refer it to the Almighty ruler."

In May 1811 Elizabeth again unburdened herself to Carroll: "And now after two years' trial, experience has too well proved how ill I am qualified to meet the views of the Reverend gentlemen who have the government of this house—who require a pliancy of character I would for some reasons wish to possess and may eventually be the fruit of

²⁷Elizabeth Ann Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 25 January 1810, *ibid.*

²⁸Elizabeth Ann Seton to Archbishop Carroll, undated, *ibid.*

divine grace, but as yet is far from being attained." She then subtly pointed out that it is better to be ruled by someone who is nearby than by someone at a distance. She also observed that Dubois, economical, detailed, and prudent, contrasts greatly with Dubourg "all liberality and schemes from a long custom of expending." She noted as well that the two were very different in spiritual issues and conceded to the bishop that it is "a delicate point for you to decide," but "I open my heart on the subject only because I believe Our Lord requires me to be explicit on it." She then very directly expressed her preference for Dubois saying that "he always and invariably has recommended me to refer constantly to you." She did not make any counter reference in regard to Dubourg.²⁹

In August 1811 Elizabeth wrote that "poor Mr. Dubois is truly discouraged, he will do all he can without displeasing you to quit all, *even the direction*. . . . Mr. Brute in the purity of his heart is doing his very best, and much more than it could possibly be supposed so young a man would venture. . . . Sometimes I am tempted to tell him all; but it seems to me Our Lord says every moment, trust all to me; to him and to my venerated Father, I trust all indeed."³⁰ Not only did she trust all, but she was willing to give up all for her children. "Surely, an individual is not to be considered where a public good is in question—and you know I would gladly make every sacrifice you think consistent with my first and inseparable obligations as a Mother."³¹

In addition to all these weighty matters of community organization and clerical conflicts, Elizabeth at a different level shared with Bishop Carroll many ordinary issues: the reasons for accepting and rejecting students, responding to a complaining parent whom she "must answer in justice to them but my heart sickens at every word of it." She also requested Carroll to check out an insurance policy on Anne Marie which she thought she could use to pay for William's trip to Italy.³² She also delegated to the bishop the unpleasant task of seeking payment from the delinquent guardian of student, Fanny Wheeler, because Elizabeth was certain he would prefer to settle "in peace" with the help of the bishop rather than have the debt given to

²⁹Elizabeth Ann Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 13 May 1811, *ibid.*

³⁰Elizabeth Ann Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 9 August 1811, *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

³¹Elizabeth Ann Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 5 September 1811, *ibid.*

³²Elizabeth Ann Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 28 December 1814, *ibid.*

one of the creditors.³³

As one probes the relationship of Elizabeth with Carroll, one recalls that he was a man in his seventies when she first met him and their friendship extended over nine years. One suspects that he took on a paternal role on two levels, on the human level of an older, mature friend and on the Church level as the bishop who confirmed her community as he had confirmed her in 1806. They were kindred souls; Bruté noted that they shared a gentility, kindness, and amiability, "a delicate politeness and deep kindness."³⁴ Their correspondence also reveals that the political realities of this clerical world of the early nineteenth century prove the birth and growth of the community was truly an act of divine inspiration as well as human perseverance.

There is no doubt that Archbishop Carroll was grateful for the work of Elizabeth Seton in advancing the Church through her community. Carroll frequently expressed his gratitude for the sisters, but his letter of 29 March 1814 is typical and prophetic as well. "How many reasons have I to thank divine providence for affording such a protection and shield for my diocese against the inroads of irreligion and impiety as the prayers and example your blessed Society offers."³⁵

Mother Seton's Relationship with Simon Gabriel Bruté

Simon Gabriel Bruté and Elizabeth were, indeed, kindred spirits, despite their distinctive personality types. His determination to leave the medical profession where he was eminently successful and to resist his mother's ambitions for him is not unlike Elizabeth's struggle in moving into the Catholic Faith and establishing the community. Suffering purified both of them; Simon, in maintaining his Catholic faith despite oppression and then seeking ordination, and she, maintaining hers despite contradiction and opposition. Both were creative, expressive personalities and both were extremely intellectual and spiritual. The pen was important to both as Simon sketched his experiences and Elizabeth poured hers out in words. Elizabeth's fluency in French must have created an immediate bond with the priest struggling to gain proficiency in English so that he could preach and teach. We are fortunate in that the two exchanged so many notes and en-

³³Elizabeth Ann Seton to Archbishop Carroll, 7 September 1815, *ibid.*

³⁴Simon Bruté to Antonio Filicchi, 5 May 1821 from Emmitsburg, Lehigh Archives, Italy.

³⁵Archbishop Carroll to Elizabeth Ann Seton, 29 March 1814 from Baltimore, *ibid.*

riched books by their marginal notes. Although Bruté was wrong when he concluded that Elizabeth might have been a saint if she had been placed in circumstances like a Saint Theresa or Jane Frances de Chantal, he did recognize that Elizabeth was “a true pattern to her sisters” and the one who made him understand his priesthood. “In the first place I will say as the result of my long and intimate acquaintance with her, that I believe her to have been one of those truly chosen souls (ames d’elite) who, if placed in circumstances similar to those of St. Theresa, or St. Frances de Chantal, would be equally remarkable in the scale of sanctity. For it seems to me impossible that there could be a greater elevation, purity, and love for God, for heaven, and for supernatural and eternal things.”³⁶

Bruté claimed his intimacy, “I have known her from 1811 to 1821. I have seen her habitually, during my sojourn at Mount Saint Mary’s from 1812-1815, besides the continual correspondence which the Superior of St. Joseph’s, believing that good resulted from it, permitted us. This correspondence continued after my return from France and whilst I was President of the College in Baltimore from 1815 to 1818. From August 1818 to 1821, January 4, the day of her death, I was confessor at St. Joseph’s and her own.”³⁷

Elizabeth, who described herself as “your little, silly woman in the fields,”³⁸ was the teacher and adviser to the young Bruté who had difficulty with the English language and American customs. She was not hesitant to point out to him areas for improvement. “Indeed, the preacher was very, very warm, too deep at first for his homespun people, but the abundant heart poured itself admirably as with all authority, love, etc., very, very few faults of English. . . . You take such a hard countenance when preaching of late; not only when a Son of Thunder, as today, but as the Angel of peace last week, what is the reason? I wanted you to call the past year more to account, and the threatenings of the present if abused.”³⁹

When Bruté was named president of Saint Mary’s in Baltimore in 1815, Elizabeth observed: “I see a zealous, driving man without experience put in a Seminary where he will save none because he cannot wait to gain a heart, or unfold a temper, and his zeal, instead of bedding the plant in the thirsty ground crushes it underfoot. . . . Alas

³⁶Bruté, *Mother Seton Notes*, 81.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 82.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 234.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 218.

well, if he does not root it out forever."⁴⁰

In the same dialogue format which Bruté often adopted in his correspondence, Elizabeth continued to warn him of the challenges and difficulties facing him. She warned that the devil would seduce him to thinking that he could improve on those who had preceded him, that he would have many opinions, and "plunged in the labyrinth of science," would "grow fat as a Doctor." At that point, the devil would have him cut short prayer and thanksgiving. But the good angel taking up the opposite approach warned that there would be suffering and ultimately Bruté would return to "more simple and heavenly delights." Then in her own voice, Elizabeth expressed her edification at his quick response to the new duty. She ended by giving advice about American parents' inability to accept the faults of their children.⁴¹ This admonition to Bruté cast in a dramatic format still serves as a good warning to curb the excesses of self-importance and activism.

Elizabeth also spoke very directly about Bruté's erratic temperament and the weaknesses revealed in his actions. "All is a true mystery to me in your disposition . . . I seldom see you but in such wild enthusiasm of your own particular impression of the moment that you can see nothing, hear nothing but that one object; or else quite reserved, hurt and anxious because you have not been consulted in things which spoke for themselves, or others which we would not dare take your advice about, without knowing the Superior's will."⁴² Elizabeth knew this trait well because impetuosity and spirit were part of her own nature.

Elizabeth also tried to help Father Bruté in his relationships with Dubois, superior of the sisters as well as of Bruté. In these words, she shows her own wisdom in leadership, particularly in the value of holy delay. "You ought to know our Rev. Superior by this time and see that he is not to be pushed anywhere, and your urging him cannot but keep him away. When anything essential happens, I always inform him of it, and if the thing is not essential, his absence often hinders a fuss about nothing, and suffers pets and little passions to drop in silence."⁴³

⁴⁰Ibid., 237.

⁴¹Ibid., 238-41.

⁴²Ibid., 262.

⁴³Ibid., 263.

Again Elizabeth challenged Bruté to be his own physician and to live in the present moment. "Again, your restless thoughts strike me to the soul. You made the lesson of the grace of the moment so very plain to me I owe you perhaps my very salvation by the faults and sins it has saved me from, yet, Physician, you will not heal yourself."⁴⁴

Elizabeth had written earlier, "Going as you know to meet everybody in the grace of the moment, which we can never know till we find the humor and temper of the one we are to meet with."⁴⁵ Advice was reciprocal as Gabriel wrote frequently encouraging Elizabeth "to support and cherish each sister" and make your service in "a resolute, peaceful manner . . . with that blessed simplicity so much at heart to your holy father, St. Vincent. God is all." Bruté was truly an insider with the community and Elizabeth could write to him with humor about Father Jamison's anxiety with the manner in which Sister Betsy decorated the altar. "He is so droll; everything must be done by the book; We call him the Rubric."⁴⁶

Indeed, each monitored the health of the other, physical as well as spiritual. Elizabeth frequently assured Simon Gabriel that he need not worry about her physical health because her spiritual health was constant. "Mind not my health, Death grins broader in the pot every morning and I grin at him and show him his master."⁴⁷ A genuine mysticism appears in the mature Elizabeth. "I see nothing in this world but the blue sky and altars; all the rest is so plainly not to be looked at, but all left to Him with tears only for sin." Earlier, she had written of the harmony that comes when the spirit of the law is internalized. "I am so in love now with rules that I see the bit of the bridle all gold, and the reins all of silk."⁴⁸ One sees in both Elizabeth and Gabriel a Scotist tendency to become absorbed in the essential, the present reality which is simultaneously of eternity. Bruté described it as "how grand and overwhelming the least glance at the immense display each object presents continually to the mind."⁴⁹ It is that "dearest freshness deep down things" the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins spoke of or in terms of spirituality, it is awareness of the presence of

⁴⁴Ibid., 261.

⁴⁵Ibid., 235.

⁴⁶Ibid., 298.

⁴⁷Ibid., 264.

⁴⁸Ibid., 221.

⁴⁹[Anonymous] *Rev. Simon Gabriel Brute, In His Connection with the Community, 1812-1839* (Emmitsburg, Maryland: 186), 40.

This peaceful conformity to God's will contrasts with the younger Elizabeth who had shared with Bruté her anguished experience at the grave of Annina. The scene evoked the British graveyard poets whom Mother Seton admired as she described "the soul quieted even by the desolation of the falling leaves around" and the "rattling sound" of a snake "so large and ugly" on the grave and the "gate tied." The imagery is vivid and the passion deep, a letter which could only be written to one who was indeed a soul-friend.⁵⁰ The tone here is far less restrained than in her revelations to the archbishop.

Throughout Elizabeth's correspondence, there is almost a photographic quality which mimics the scientific, artistic bent of Bruté, physician-priest, and captures Elizabeth's penetrating sensitivity and keen powers of observation. Both were very visual, Bruté to the point where he illustrated the rules for the sisters and added visuals to many of his letters. Their holistic vision, simultaneously concrete and abstract, focuses on eternity and allows God to peek through even the most prosaic observation.

Elizabeth in almost a Dutch genre painting style describes to Bruté this humble scene of April, 1818: "What life indeed. A grey-headed carpenter whittling over the plank he measures for Ellen's coffin, just beyond the ground ploughing to plant potatoes—just beyond again good Joe, I believe, making the pit to plant Ellen for her glorious resurrection, beautiful life—the whole delight in God, O what relish in that word."⁵¹

Indeed, Elizabeth and Gabriel were kindred souls who punctuated their conversations and their correspondence with thoughts or sketches of eternity, a concept and word precious to both of them. While Bruté lamented that Elizabeth did not share with him fully her pre-Emmitsburg life, it appears that he was privy to her most intimate thoughts in later years. She takes on almost a childlike simplicity and openness in this relationship; there is no artifice, just utter simplicity. Theirs is the kind of friendship which allows the giving and receiving of compliments and admonitions with equal grace and gratitude. They were mutually developed through their friendship. The notes written by Bruté on 5 January 1821, the day after Mother Seton's death, reveal the concreteness and the simplicity of the relationship.

⁵⁰Bruté, *Mother Seton Notes*, 210-12.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 259.

Bruté begins in a style that is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's funeral poetry as he creates a dialogue for Elizabeth. The interplay begins with Elizabeth asking, "What is the long plank painted black that stands along the wall against our dear father Saint Vincent's picture and it has holes and screws all around, pray what is it" and carries us through the funeral preparations, the mass and the interment.⁵² It is appropriate that the imaginative, creative Frenchman could draw therapy from engaging in such dramatic dialogue across the death barrier into eternity. On successive days, he wrote other dialogues engaging Mother Seton's children, the students, and himself. These emotional, sentimental pieces which involve the entire Emmitsburg community end with the word "eternity" which animated her doing heart in their relationship.

Elizabeth's Relationship With Antonio Filicchi

Perhaps the most celebrated relationship of Elizabeth is that with Antonio Filicchi which began with her husband's business contacts and spanned over two decades. While Antonio is associated with Elizabeth's conversion to the Catholic faith, their correspondence reveals that Antonio continued to be the trusted adviser, the financial backer, the surrogate father to Elizabeth's sons and, most importantly, a soul-friend until her death. The friendship was not free of comment, and its nature was frequently challenged. Even as late as April 1816, Elizabeth wrote to Antonio that people still think "that you have bought me, a reproach which can only make you smile at their thinking you so zealous."⁵³

Despite some long gaps between letters, their correspondence provides a wonderful history of the Seton family, the community beginnings, Church developments in the United States, European political events, commercial enterprises on both sides of the Atlantic as well as a treatise on lived friendship. Elizabeth had often assured Antonio that time and distance are not barriers to genuine friendship based on shared faith. Expressions of such gratitude as well as straightforward progress reports and requests for material and spiritual support are woven into almost all of Elizabeth's letters to Antonio. Sim-

⁵²Ibid., 147-62.

⁵³Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 22 April 1816. Leghorn Archives.

plicity and trust allowed Elizabeth to share her accomplishments and her hopes with this man who had helped to shepherd her into the Church. "Our blessed bishop is so fond of our establishment that it seems to be the darling part of his charge and this consoles me for every difficulty and embarrassment. All the clergy in America support it by their prayers and there is every hope that it is the seed of an immensity of future good." In this same letter, spanning six months and several pages, Elizabeth speaks gratefully of the progress of the fledgling community in Emmitsburg, even as she requests more financial support and reveals her own state of affairs.

Now then you will laugh when I tell you that your wicked little sister is placed at the head of a Community of Saints, ten of the most pious Souls you could wish, considering that some of them are young and all under thirty. Six more postulants are daily waiting till we move in a larger place to receive them, and we might be a very large family if I received half who desire to come, but your Reverend Mother is obliged to be very cautious for fear we should not have the means of earning our living during the winter. Yet, as Sisters of Charity we should fear nothing.⁵⁴

In May she continued:

Since the above was written, my Brother, I have never been able to hear of a good occasion to write; and have besides been so beset with difficulties that having but a few moments and nothing but trouble to tell you of, was not very anxious to write. Yet do I speak of trouble before the boundless joy of having received another most dear Sister in our holy Church. Perhaps you may remember Harriet Seton who was engaged to marry my Brother, the Doctor Bayley. . . . We are now twelve, and as many again are waiting for admission. I have a very, very large school to superintend every day, and the entire charge of the religious instruction of all the country round. All happy to the Sisters of Charity who are night and day devoted to the sick and ignorant. Our blessed Bishop intends removing a detachment of us to Baltimore to perform the same duties there.⁵⁵

Later in this long letter started in November 1809 and completed with three installments in May 1810, Elizabeth seems to have become conscious that her letter was too much in the first person so she delicately and warmly moves into the second person and underlines the pronouns. "How are *you*, *Tonino*, what are *you* doing. Do *you* ever

⁵⁴Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 8 November 1809, *ibid.*

⁵⁵Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 20 May 1810, *ibid.*

think of the *povertina* of America. Yes you do, and she thinks of you as of her daily bread."⁵⁶

Elizabeth's letters to Antonio abound in terms of endearment as well as in self-deprecating images which show that their relationship was deep, comfortable, mutual and, in a sense, therapeutic. "O my dear Antonio, this world is nothing, but if I had it all, I could give it to see you and Filippo and your precious family and to lay my whole heart before you, and yet it would be to say what is unutterable—my love, gratitude and thousands of desires of your best happiness."⁵⁷ A year later in July 1815, she wrote expressing concern for William:

Antonio, my brother—friend of my soul, and instrument so dear of its salvation, and mine of so many more than you even can guess, be in this point so extremely tender to my most weak mind, broken down by so many hard trials as you know, and by so many more you never can know while this great Ocean divides us. Be my true brother and tell me all your heart, scold me if you are angry (but gently) and tell me all if anything can be done in any way to alter what I could so little foresee for bad as it is to have him [William] struggling with the hundred disadvantages and dangers our country so miserable for young men.⁵⁸

Much of the Elizabeth-Antonio correspondence deals with the boys who "do not seem to have either talents or applications which is a great cross to me but they are innocent in their conduct and do not show any bad dispositions in other respects and I must be patient." That same concern was expressed in July 1814 when she wrote, "boys, being less solid in piety than girls can be more easily led astray." Elizabeth also had to consider ways to keep the boys out of the army. Her comments in this July 1814 letter echo earlier concerns about William and Richard. "They are so far children of exemplary conduct as it relates to common behavior, and the simple discharge of pious duties, but they have no striking talents, no remarkable qualifications, nor are their dispositions even unfolded, in many points they can never be brought to express any decided wish, but the only desire to please Mother and do what she thinks best—how much I wished they might have the high calling to the sanctuary if such a favor could have been bestowed."⁵⁹

⁵⁶Ibid. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁷Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 1 July 1814, *ibid.*

*Erikson: **Holistic Development** comes as a result of successfully negotiating the **crisis** of human life.

⁵⁸Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 29 July 1815, *ibid.*

⁵⁹Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 1 July 1814, *ibid.*

Indeed, Elizabeth had reason to be concerned and was fortunate in having Antonio to whom she could unburden herself but also who could take the boys in turn, but unsuccessfully, as apprentices in Leghorn.

But Elizabeth had to accept the fact that Antonio could not help either son earn success while in Leghorn just as Louise de Marillac under Vincent's guidance had to give up her hope for her son Michel to be a priest. This is one of many parallels in the lives of the two foundresses and saints. In February 1817, Elizabeth wrote desperately about Richard, "Who on earth can I ask, but yourself, what to do with him." In her letter of 16 September to Antonio, Elizabeth introduced her Richard: "Here is my Richard, you said a good will and good handwriting, would be enough. I hope he will soon show you he has both and also a heart burning with desire to represent the love and gratitude of us all for you."⁶⁰ Later in the same letter, Elizabeth gave tentative endorsement of Richard and praises William faintly because he now seemed settled in the navy:

Richard's disposition is quite different from William's if he does not fall into bad company, I am sure he will do well, for all the turn of his mind is for business and activity, but with his quick temper and want of experience, he is in continual dangers which his Brother escapes—Oh with what a deep heart of sorrow & hope I commit them to God who so far has so well protected us,—

We find William so improved, and with such excellent dispositions that we can have no uneasiness for him, he has set his heart on the sea life, and I can now put no more obstacle but trust it all to God, if He is not offended I will be satisfied, but there is the point the Navy is so dangerous for soul and body—the president of the Navy Department has promised him an appointment before Xst mass—Alas.⁶¹

In letters written almost two years apart and long after Elizabeth and Antonio had become fast friends, she described the event which initially drew her to Antonio and which really captures their relationship and Antonio's protective role. That event and Antonio's words seem to have been indelibly traced in Elizabeth's consciousness so that she could conjure up years later both the context and the conversation with relative ease. "The first word I believe you ever said to me after the first salute was to trust all to him who fed the fowls of the air and

⁶⁰Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 16 September 1817, *ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

made the lilies grow—and I have trusted and he has fed and with your own hand in great measure.”⁶² “The first words you ever told me was to trust in God who took care of the young ravens and made the lilies grow—I could show you the spot at Filippo’s where you told me that, and then declared the *one way* to get to His kingdom.”⁶³

Elizabeth’s letters to Antonio, while heavily objective about events in the new community and very focused on her material needs and the guidance of her sons, also included personal reports of her spiritual and physical situations. She kept Antonio aware of her serious illness in 1818. “It is suspected that I, your poor little sister, am about to go and meet your Filippo.”⁶⁴

Her last two letters (shorter than usual) could serve as a reprise of her correspondence with Antonio because they carry the same themes of affection, gratitude, and progress in the community. In her letter of April 1820, she began with her great love for Antonio, offered a brief spiritual commentary, forwarded greetings to the entire Filicchi family, and cited the enclosed copy of Dubourg’s Louisiana Lenten regulations which she thought Amabilia, Antonio’s wife, would consider a “miserable idea of penance.” She ended with the image she had used so often to describe the apostolic work of her community. “Our poor little *mustard* seed spreads its branches well, they have written us from New York to come and take a [or 8] hundred children of the State School beside our orphan asylum.”⁶⁵

In the last and brief letter of 19 October 1820, just three months before her death she begins with “this then is the earthly fruits of your goodness and patience with us these 20 years.” Elizabeth reported that Richard was in difficulty in Norfolk and that she had sought the help of General Harper “to have the kindness to see about him, not dearest Antonio, for his relief but for a Mother’s duty.” The formerly anxious mother ends that section with a peaceful and resigned “He will save their souls.” Parenthetically, Richard visited his mother briefly two weeks before she died and himself entered eternity just two and a half years later. Elizabeth then concluded her letter very simply but powerfully, “the reason of this writing, I received the last sacraments three weeks ago, ever yours and God’s.” E. A. Seton.⁶⁶

⁶²Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 1 July 1814, *ibid.*

⁶³Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 22 April 1816, *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 8 August 1818, *ibid.*

⁶⁵Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 18 April 1820, *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶Elizabeth Ann Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 19 October 1820, *ibid.*

Perhaps that closing is the best way to conclude this commentary on three of Elizabeth's many productive, generous, and reciprocal relationships. Indeed, in her key relationships, she was "ever yours and God's." She lived Léon Bloy's observation: "The more of a saint a woman is, the more of a woman she is."⁶⁷ She did, indeed, "ride horseback into heaven" using the many opportunities of mutuality to find that Christ within and the Christ without. Her courage allowed "no creeping or idling" as she journeyed toward eternity even though the ride took her over difficult roads and offered challenging experiences. Courage, her "doing heart," made "the bit of the bridle all gold, and the reins all of silk."⁶⁸

⁶⁷Léon Bloy, *The Woman Who was Poor*, trans. I. J. Collins (New York: 1939), 63..

⁶⁸Bruté, *Mother Seton Notes*, 221.