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The Key Role of Friendship in the Life of Elizabeth Bayley Seton

BY

JUDITH METZ, S.C.

Elizabeth Bayley Seton held friendship as a dear treasure. She told her lifelong friend Julia Scott: "You have a friend who would fly to you from any part of the World, leave children, everything, on the smallest intimation she could be useful to you."¹ Elizabeth's friendships energized her and helped to make her the person she was. From an early age she realized the importance of relationships and spent her life cultivating them. "You love me and yet call me dearest," Elizabeth wrote to Eliza Sadler. "The longer I live and the more I reflect and know how to value the realities of friendship, the more precious that distinction becomes."²

Called to love broadly and deeply, Elizabeth knew she needed others and she was especially attracted to relationships based on a mutual love of God. Regarding each person as a special gift, she cherished every friendship as a unique and valued relationship that required attentiveness and care.

All her adult life Elizabeth enjoyed the blessing of intimate friendships. Her warm personality naturally reached out to embrace others, and she opened herself to their embrace. If expressions of endearment, love, and support tumbled as easily from her lips as they did from her pen, people would have been attracted to her company for the affirmation and support she offered. Besides the many hours Elizabeth spent visiting, sitting with others in times of illness or bereavement, and engaging in her benevolent work, she sustained a voluminous and self-revealing correspondence. In addition she kept journals describing some of the most memorable periods in her life for her closest friends. Loving, loyal, and generous, she embraced both the joys and sufferings of her friends and was open to sharing her own with them. In her letters she often recounted everyday activities as well as philosophical musings. She excelled at creating a welcoming atmosphere. In one instance she promised her sister-in-law Rebecca Seton a "comfortable fire and everything in my power to make you happy,"³ and when anticipating the visit of

¹ *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings*, Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., Ellin M. Kelly, ms. ed., vols. 1-3a and 3b (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2000, 2002, and 2006), I, 497. Hereafter cited as *Collected Writings*. Punctuation and spelling has been changed to reflect contemporary usage.

² *Ibid.*, I, 10.

³ *Ibid.*, I, 51.

Catherine Duplex to Emmitsburg, she exuded that “the front door, the back, the side door which will lead her in[to] the chapel and all the windows up and down will open at her approach.”⁴



Elizabeth Seton with children. Drawing by Ruth Jonas, S.C.
 Courtesy, Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati Archives

Appreciating the importance of keeping in close contact with friends, Elizabeth was willing to pay a price to do so. She wrote late into the night, early in the morning, or whenever she could squeeze it into her busy day. In one letter she apologized to Julia Scott, telling her that she had “not been able to steal even an hour from sleep to write” due to her infant son’s illness, but now she took the first hour she could claim as her own to do so.⁵

Elizabeth formed friendships within a variety of contexts. Some developed from family connections, such as Julia Scott and Eliza Sadler. Others developed within the context of church and social activities. Sometimes her relatives became her friends. This is true especially of her Seton sisters-in-law, Rebecca, Harriet, and Cecilia whose relationships with Elizabeth blossomed into lifelong ties. She counted the Italians, Antonio, Amabilia, and Filippo Filicchi, as friends, as she did George Weis and Marie Chatard whom she met when she moved to Baltimore. She also formed friendships with many of the early Sisters of Charity, with her students at St. Joseph’s in Emmitsburg, and with some of the clergy with whom she worked.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 252.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 101.

Elizabeth's friendships often extended beyond the individual to include their family members as well. Likewise, she shared her own family with friends. In speaking of her children, she used language such as "your Anna" or "our boys" when describing the children's qualities or activities, and she encouraged her children to refer to her friends as aunts and uncles. The women who formed the early community took Elizabeth's children under their wings as well. They rejoiced in their triumphs, enjoyed their company, and with Elizabeth, worried over their health.

Several friends, each unique yet extremely important to her, demonstrate the depth of these relationships. One of these, Julia Scott, was probably known through family connections. Another was her sister-in-law, Rebecca Seton, six years younger than Elizabeth. The two came to know each other as friends only after shifting family circumstances thrust them together. A third was Cecilia O'Conway, the first woman to join Elizabeth in the founding of the Sisters of Charity, and another was Reverend Simon Bruté, a priest with whom she worked at Emmitsburg. Elizabeth was energized by these relationships, especially the one-to-one sharing they involved. Each represented a strong bond founded on a unique congruence of outlook and values.

These relationships were manifested through their deep and emotional expressions of affection. Physical separation was no deterrent as these friends maintained their ties over long periods of time. Their correspondence is replete with language expressive of great warmth. Elizabeth spoke of melancholy and pain over the bitterness of separation from Julia⁶ but concluded that "absence does not shake Affection, and Friendship Make[,] it strengthens [it]."⁷ In return Julia told Elizabeth that "in the midst of bustle... your image constantly presented itself – and often I heard the words 'Julia where are you going? what are you doing?'"⁸

Julia Scott – "the dearest friend of my heart"

Julia Sitgreaves Scott was a friend from Elizabeth's youth. A member of a prominent Pennsylvania family, Julia moved to New York to marry in 1785 when Elizabeth was only 11 years old. Her husband, Lewis Allaire Scott, was also from a prominent family and served at one time as the secretary of state of New York. Although nearly a decade separated the two women in age they shared many intimate moments visiting, taking walks, and horseback riding.⁹ As a young woman Elizabeth "raced up" the steps of Julia's home, and on one occasion, before her marriage, visited Julia at her family home in

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 26, 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 57.

⁸ Archives Saint Joseph Provincial House (hereafter cited as ASJPH) 1-3-3-11:B25.

⁹ *Collected Writings*, I, 29.

Easton, Pennsylvania.¹⁰ After Elizabeth's marriage the two saw each other at least weekly and "often shared the cheerfulness of the blazing fire and feeling tones of [Elizabeth's] sweet Piano."¹¹

Visits were anticipated events during which these women could savor the pleasure of sharing each other's company. Any opportunity to be together was enjoyed, and Elizabeth recalled with great happiness the possibility that she could stop at Julia's door when she took her first-born Anna Maria for a walk in the neighborhood.¹²

These women shared the experience of death too. Elizabeth spent many hours with Julia when her husband was stricken and died during the 1798 yellow fever epidemic, not leaving her friend "night or day during the excess of her Sorrows."¹³ Years later Julia remembered this act of friendship when helping to support Elizabeth and her family: "Hesitate not, my friend, to receive what God enables me to send you; it is also a debt strictly your due, for when I was in distress – were you not my friend, and the friend of my little ones? and were I now again in distress would you not do all that heaven gave you power to do?"¹⁴ At another time she commented on Elizabeth's role as "the death Bed comforter of so many," adding, "do you know I have often wished that when my last hour arrives I might behold you at my Bedside."¹⁵

When Julia returned to Philadelphia with her two small children after her husband's death, the two friends had relatively few opportunities for visits. Elizabeth's letters are filled with pleas encouraging her friend to visit in New York: "I have marked your room, and Heaven grant that I may receive you there – with tranquility, and Health."¹⁶ When Julia did come in the summer of 1799, Elizabeth assured her: "[P]ease is here, dear Julia, that is Something and I hope the Affection and attentions of a friend will in some degree make up the rest."¹⁷

Elizabeth's relationships were often expressed within the context of family events. At the time of her daughter Catherine's birth in 1800, Elizabeth encouraged Julia to come and visit, assuring her "if [she] were here [Elizabeth] would agree to be only [the baby's] wet nurse."¹⁸ Their love for each other extended to the other's children. Julia told Elizabeth: "Very often you are the subject of our conversations... my children love you – so does their mother

¹⁰ ASJPH 1-3-3-6:69, and 1-3-3-8:86.

¹¹ ASJPH 1-3-3-6:15, and 1-3-3-11:B27.

¹² *Collected Writings*, I, 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 21.

¹⁴ ASJPH 1-3-3-11:B28.

¹⁵ ASJPH 1-3-3-11:B25.

¹⁶ *Collected Writings*, I, 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 145.

most tenderly.”¹⁹ Reciprocally, Elizabeth wrote Julia: “A little drop of Aunt Scott’s Lavender on the little H[and]k[erchie]f or a short story about [your children] John and Maria will delight my Anna for an hour and keep her quiet as a mouse – Will listens too very attentively and every now and then calls out Anté-ca.”²⁰



Elizabeth attends to her dying daughter. Drawing by Ruth Jonas, S.C.
Courtesy, Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati Archives

After Elizabeth’s journey to Italy and her return to New York as a widow in June 1804, Julia invited her bereaved friend and five children to move to Philadelphia and share her home. When Elizabeth declined this offer, Julia came herself that summer to determine how she could best assist her. She offered Anna Maria, Elizabeth’s nine year old daughter, a home with her in Philadelphia to ease the burden on the single mother. Elizabeth declined this offer, not feeling she could lose the company of her eldest child. Julia

¹⁹ ASJPH 1-3-3-11:B25.

²⁰ *Collected Writings*, I, 31.

then began the practice of sending money to help Elizabeth support Anna Maria's expenses.²¹ The Philadelphia matron always felt a special bond with this child, and she made sure that resources were available for her to have advantages Julia felt Elizabeth could not afford. In a letter describing Anna Maria's last illness and death from tuberculosis at age seventeen, Elizabeth told Julia: "Your letter containing your boundless bounty came at a moment I would have given that and much more if in possession – to have had you at my side...."²²

With Elizabeth's 1805 conversion to Catholicism came a longing to share her deepening faith with Julia, assuring her that "religion does not limit the power of affections... but Religion alone can bind that cord over which neither circumstance, time, or death can have no power."²³ Julia, in turn, continued to offer emotional and financial assistance to Elizabeth when other family members and friends turned away.

These two friends met only once after Elizabeth left New York City in June 1808. In September 1815, as Elizabeth's daughter Rebecca's health worsened, it was decided that she should go to Philadelphia for treatment. Julia herself came to Emmitsburg in her private coach, hoping to transport Rebecca and have the girl stay at her home while receiving treatments. Upon her arrival, however, she found that Rebecca had left an hour earlier and that Elizabeth had made arrangements for her to stay with the Sisters in the city. Recounting the incident in a letter to her daughter, Elizabeth wrote: "[T]hey stayed but an hour – and then perhaps to meet no more till Eternity."²⁴

From the time of Julia's departure from New York in 1798 until Elizabeth's death in 1821, the two maintained a lively correspondence. Elizabeth placed a high value on this, often reading Julia's letters multiple times to savor not only the news they contained, but their tone and sentiment. The two women shared their joys and insights, their trials and sorrows, feeling keenly the burdens of the other, the strains of separation from loved ones, and family illnesses and deaths. On one occasion while still in New York, Elizabeth wrote: "Seton is poking the fire scolding me for writing nonsense to Julia,"²⁵ and in another: "My William lectured me for half an hour last Sunday for sending you so short a letter as I wrote you on that day – he said it was not worth its postage, but I would give something at this moment to have one from you if it contained only half the number of lines."²⁶

²¹ Annabelle M. Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton 1774-1821* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 84-85.

²² *Collected Writings*, II, 210.

²³ *Ibid.*, I, 212.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 343.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 150.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 49. At this time the recipient paid the postage on a letter.

These friends' letters were laced with messages to each other's family members as well as inquiries for news of their latest activities. But more than that, they are a testimony to the mutual and undying affection they felt for each other. There was no reservation in the openness and candor of their exchange. Elizabeth told Julia: "[O]ne of the pleasures of my attachment to you has always been that I might speak my mind to you with freedom."²⁷ A spirit of lighthearted bantering encouraged their insightful sharing of observations on any subject. No topic seemed too personal as they offered each other both solicited and unsolicited advice. A sense of mutual trust and unfailing support accompanied an assumption of interest in the minute details of their daily life.

The emotional range of their correspondence spanned from profound tenderness to humor, the heights of joy to the depths of anguish. In the midst of a letter, Elizabeth interrupted her narrative to ask: "Why do I tell you all this? How is it that I never can preserve any consistency in a letter to you, but always involuntarily express thoughts as they arise? I write some letters where the words drop so heavily that I can scarcely form them at all, but when I begin 'Dear Julia' they flow faster than the pen can write them."²⁸ In another she commented: "I have two letters to write, one to My Sister and one to Richard, but I cannot take hold of my Pen, but my thoughts fly to you, and to you they shall go, tho' without any new occurrences to give rise to them."²⁹

On one occasion Elizabeth wrote: "I would think the distance between us but a speck if I might hold your dear head when it ached or banish one hour of sorrow – ...of all the many attachments I have had you are the only one on Earth who my heart turns to in the simple unrepressed warmth of confiding love."³⁰ Julia reciprocated this sentiment telling Elizabeth, "You are, as you have long been – the dearest friend of my heart – and certainly you are the friend of my soul which I commend at all times to your prayers."³¹

Many times this familiarity with each other played out in a chiding or humorous way, as when Julia told Elizabeth to get some longer paper so she would write more,³² or Elizabeth's accusation that Julia must have "a lazy pen" or a sore finger since she did not write more often.³³ Julia bantered about the quiet life she led, contrary to Elizabeth's image of her as someone participating in all the pleasures of society. She told Elizabeth she was sporting a "huge pair of spectacles on my nose without which I can neither read nor write... and besides which I have grown all out of shape and am as

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 210.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 48.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 497.

³¹ ASJPH 1-3-3-11:B28.

³² ASJPH 1-3-3-11:B23.

³³ *Collected Writings*, I, 57, 58.

broad as long.”³⁴ In like manner Elizabeth’s letters are filled with humorous comments and kidding. Early in her marriage, when her husband William visited Philadelphia on a business trip, Elizabeth wrote to Julia: “I charge you to send me a kiss by my Husband – one mind you no more or you will be putting notions in the man’s head.”³⁵

In good times and difficult ones, these two women maintained a friendship that would be the envy of many. They offered each other a listening ear, a sympathetic heart, and sure support over a lifetime.

Rebecca Seton – “my soul’s sister”

Elizabeth’s friendship with her sister-in-law, Rebecca, was more intense and more spiritual, although not as long in duration as her relationship with Julia Scott. She referred to her as her “soul’s sister,”³⁶ an affectionate reference which captures the intimacy, psychological support, and spiritual sharing that these kindred spirits enjoyed. Elizabeth knew Rebecca, frequently called Bec, from her courtship by William Seton in 1794, but the two women did not come in close contact until the death of the elder William Seton in 1798. While Elizabeth initially thought Rebecca “uninformed,” once they were thrown together, she soon responded to her as a “truly amiable, estimable young woman” and found her “society a source of pleasure.”³⁷ Although Rebecca was six years younger than Elizabeth, the two formed a bond of friendship which intensified over the years until Rebecca’s death from tuberculosis in 1804.

These relatives-by-marriage shared a keen interest in their prayer life and in being of service to others. Each possessed a great devotion to the Eucharist and, as Episcopalians, went from church to church together on Sacrament Sundays in order to receive Communion as often as they could. And when, in Italy, Elizabeth became aware of the Catholic belief in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, she yearned to share that with Rebecca. The two women worshiped together at Trinity Church and its chapels, and dreamed of doing so when it was not possible for them to be together.³⁸ They delighted in the sermons of Reverend Henry Hobart, feeling that “language [could] not express the comfort the Peace the Hope” he communicated.³⁹

Frequently they exchanged notes expressing their yearning for God. “Come come ‘Souls Sister,’” Elizabeth wrote, “let us bless the day together

³⁴ ASJPH 1-3-3-11:B27.

³⁵ *Collected Writings*, I, 170.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 232.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 54.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 156.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 144.

one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one God. The Father of All.”⁴⁰ Bec responded to the debt she felt she owed Elizabeth with gratitude: “Dear dear sister, when my thoughts turn to the hour that you first taught me to look up to Him who alone can Comfort the weary soul – I may well love you my Sister more than is possible to express.”⁴¹

As the bonds of religion deepened, these two friends often participated together in benevolent activities. They were both active in programs sponsored by Trinity Church, and spent many hours assisting the poor as members of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children. “[H]appy happy hours when we were joined in the sweet employment,” Elizabeth told Bec. “Thankful for even the remembrance of them[.] [T]he greatest pleasure I can anticipate in this world is that they will again be enjoyed in the same Society.”⁴²

Later, caring for Bec on her deathbed, Elizabeth remembered “how often [they] nursed up the little fire at night together”⁴³ where they shared their hopes and plans. When they were together, Bec participated in the intimacy of Elizabeth’s immediate family, forming close bonds with Elizabeth’s young children who knew her as “God-ma.”

When they were apart, they felt it acutely. When Bec was away on “her usual errand” of caring for the sick among her extensive family, or spending time away for her own health, Elizabeth felt her “circle had lost its key.”⁴⁴ Once, while Bec was gone for an extended period, Elizabeth wrote: “I never sweep the hall, or dress the flower pots, or walk around the pear-tree walk, but you are as much my companion as if you were actually near me.”⁴⁵

Effusive nineteenth-century language appears in the notes and letters between the two. Elizabeth told the younger woman that she was like a “limb or part of [her]self,”⁴⁶ and that it seemed her affection sometimes went “beyond the bounds of moderation.”⁴⁷ In turn Rebecca confessed to Elizabeth: “I almost begin to think (especially as we are commanded to put away all Idols) that I love you more than I ought.”⁴⁸ Their notes underline an intense caring for each other, expressed in such phrases as “how much I value your society and affection,” or “how I long to see you,” and “I knew my Rebecca w[ould] wish for a little word.”⁴⁹

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 232.

⁴¹ ASJPH 1-3-3-8:61.

⁴² *Collected Writings*, I, 155.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, I, 266.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 149.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 83.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 91.

⁴⁸ ASJPH 1-3-3-8:63.

⁴⁹ *Collected Writings*, I, 134, 157, 199.

Typical of women's correspondence at the time, they spoke of physical expressions of friendship such as caresses, sighs of the bosom, pinches, and wishing to hold the other in her arms.⁵⁰ Rebecca, in lamenting Elizabeth's absence told her, "I shall look at the moon and think of those I love – recollect at 9 every evening – my thoughts will be traveling towards you and my darlings – a kiss for each from dear Godmother."⁵¹ During Elizabeth's eight-month trip to Italy with her husband and oldest daughter it was Rebecca, as Godmother and main support, who assumed charge of three of the children. She brought them down to the Battery to see Elizabeth's departing ship, and then burst into tears as she contemplated the separation from her dearest friend.⁵²

During her time away Elizabeth kept a detailed journal for Rebecca describing both the physical trials and spiritual turmoil of her experience in Italy. Elizabeth's daily entries describe the intimacies of caring for her husband in his last illness, the depths of her spiritual journey, and her deep longing to be with loved ones at home. There is no more intimate record of the workings of Elizabeth's mind and heart than this journal.

The depth of Elizabeth's love is poured out poignantly in the final journal entries. She returned to New York to find Rebecca at death's door. Elizabeth's heart-wrenching task of nursing Rebecca through her last illness was amplified in that she had anticipated a sympathetic and supportive companion with whom she could share her new life, both as widow and as one exploring new religious ideas. Instead, Bec's spirit "now seemed only to wait the consoling love and tenderness of her beloved Sister to accompany it in its passage to eternity." Elizabeth, recalling all the experiences they shared together, as well as their tender and faithful love for each other,⁵³ wrote: "A thousand pages c[oul]d not tell the sweet hours now with my departing Rebecca — the wonder at the few lines I could point out... of the true faith and service of our God — she c[oul]d only repeat 'Your people are my people, Your God my God,' ...purest joy to see her released from the thousand pains and trials." These two soul friends spent Rebecca's final days sharing their "tender and faithful love for each other."⁵⁴

Upon Bec's death Elizabeth recounted their blessed times together: "the Society of Sisters united by prayer and divine affections – the Evening hymns, the daily lectures, the sunset contemplations, the Service of holy days, the Kiss of Peace, the widows visits – all – all – gone – forever," concluding with

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 19, 10, 16, 31, 173.

⁵¹ ASJPH 1-3-3-8:62.

⁵² Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 65.

⁵³ *Collected Writings*, I, 308.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, IIIa, 518.

the reflection, "He who searches the heart and knows the spring of each secret affection – He only knows what I lost at that moment."⁵⁵

Cecilia O'Conway – "the angel of the Community"

A friendship of another type began when Elizabeth first met Cecilia O'Conway in late 1808. This young woman, interested in becoming a nun, was encouraged to join Elizabeth at her Paca Street school in Baltimore. Cecilia, who had a fine education and knowledge of several languages, was of great assistance in the school and her presence became a catalyst in the formation of the Sisters of Charity congregation.

Though their backgrounds were quite different, and Elizabeth was fifteen years older than Cecilia, the two shared many of the same spiritual goals and became close friends almost at once. Elizabeth came to know the entire O'Conway family, even standing as Godmother for the youngest son, Peter. Cecilia's sister, Isabella, was one of the earliest students at Elizabeth's school in Baltimore and moved to Emmitsburg with the first Sisters. Her brothers were educated at Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, and Elizabeth engaged in a long-term correspondence with her father, Matthias.

Cecilia was enthusiastic about the evolving plans of establishing a religious community, being among the first to don the black dress, black cape, and white muslin cap that became the habit of the early community. From their first days together, Elizabeth and Cecilia shared the desire to be of service in a spirit of simplicity to those in need. This vision engendered a rapport which allowed them to share the burdens and joy, the hopes and uncertainties of their new venture with deep faith and good humor. Together they participated in the physical and organizational struggles of the beginning days at Emmitsburg, where the Motherhouse of the community was located, and supported each other when times were difficult.

When Reverend William Dubourg resigned as priest-superior within months of the new community's founding, Cecilia encouraged Elizabeth. Some time later tensions ran high within the community due to rumors that Reverend John David, then the superior, was planning to appoint Rose White as Mother in Elizabeth's place. Through this crisis Cecilia's loving support buoyed Elizabeth, who wrote to Cecilia's father, telling him that his daughter was "the angel of the Community, ...a true and solid comfort."⁵⁶

When Elizabeth expressed fears of inadequacy and unworthiness in her role as Mother, Cecilia wrote her a wise and affectionate letter assuring her that all would work out. "Be a mild, patient but firm MAMA," she told Elizabeth, "and you need not tremble under the burden of superiority."

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 308, 310.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 141.

Elizabeth kept this letter and wrote on the back of it, "Cecilia's admirable lesson to me."⁵⁷

Cecilia did not stop there in her devotion to her friend and religious mother, often exhorting her to greater heights of holiness. In 1815 Elizabeth wrote to Reverend Simon Bruté, telling him, "Cecilia has taken my soul in hand, and declares it shall be perfected.... Every Communion and prayer for that until her Mother is a true Mother. She says these things with such awful emphasis, it makes me cold; yet how precious the prayers of such a soul!"⁵⁸



Elizabeth Seton portrait, Marillac Provincial House, Saint Louis, Missouri.
Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Archives, Emmitsburg, Maryland

In 1817 Cecilia left with Sisters Rose White and Felicita Brady to begin the work of the Sisters of Charity in New York. It was difficult for Cecilia to leave Elizabeth and the secluded life at Emmitsburg she preferred. During the years spent in New York, she and Elizabeth kept up a lively correspondence focused on challenging each other spiritually, Elizabeth referring to her friend as the "child of my Soul."⁵⁹ In many of 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

⁵⁷ Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M., *Mrs. Seton. Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), 373.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*

⁵⁹ Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville, eds., *Elizabeth Seton Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 298-299.

writes. "I would not pull the smallest nail out for a thousand worlds."⁶⁰

After two years in New York, Cecilia was back in Emmitsburg where she could again share her days with her beloved friend and spiritual mother. By this time Elizabeth's health was declining, and Cecilia seized the opportunity to become one of her nurses while continuing to look after Elizabeth's soul. One day Cecilia asked the dying woman whether she would like a crucifix or picture before her eyes, to keep her thoughts on God. "No dear," Elizabeth answered, "I have a crucifix I keep on my breast" – and then, not being able to resist teasing, added, "besides, my eyes are generally closed." The next day, thinking she might have offended Cecilia or given her scandal, Elizabeth said gently, "Cessy dear, you are uneasy that I don't have something to remind me of our Dearest. Don't be afraid, my dear one, I do try to keep as close as I can to His Presence."⁶¹

The two friends were together during Elizabeth's last days, and even though Cecilia left the Sisters of Charity two-and-a-half years after Elizabeth's death to join the cloistered Ursuline Sisters in Quebec, she retained a deep affection for Elizabeth and her Sister of Charity companions. Twenty years later Cecilia wrote to Sister Margaret George telling her, "I shall never think of the Valley of St. Joseph and its holy inmates, but with sentiments of love and profound veneration."⁶²

Reverend Simon Bruté – "the Angel of the Mountain"

One of the great blessings of Elizabeth's mature years was the spiritual friendship she enjoyed with Reverend Simon Bruté, her "angel of the Mountain." This young French missionary first came to Emmitsburg for a brief stay in the summer of 1811. From their first meeting he and Elizabeth enjoyed a lively friendship at the heart of which was a deep, shared spirituality. Though Bruté was not continually in the Emmitsburg area, he and Elizabeth became mentors and spiritual directors to each other.⁶³ During one of his absences Elizabeth referred to herself as "an old black stump" without the "live coal which used to give it the Blaze in a moment."⁶⁴

Bruté's presence in Emmitsburg during the last several years of Elizabeth's life was a joy to them both. The two friends continued their spiritual journeys together, encouraging each other in deepening their relationship with God. The priest's unbounded zeal captivated and inspired the woman

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁶¹ Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton*, 488.

⁶² Cecilia O'Conway to Margaret George, 1 October 1843, Ursuline Archives, Quebec.

⁶³ Bruté lived in Baltimore when he served as President of St. Mary's. He went to Europe for much of 1815, and, even when living in Emmitsburg, was often away on business or performing missionary work.

⁶⁴ *Collected Writings*, II, 316.

he considered his spiritual mother. When he talked restlessly of leaving America to do missionary work abroad, she understood his yearnings. She tempered his strong emotions and desires, reminding him: "You made the lesson of the grace of 'the moment' so very plain to me I owe you perhaps my very salvation... yet Physician you will not heal yourself."⁶⁵ While Elizabeth offered her friend sobering advice, she also helped him soar toward his mystical inclinations. At the same time he understood the depth of her spiritual hunger and was able to guide her during trying times. Each possessed a purity of heart that attracted the other and spurred them to deeper holiness.



Simon Gabriel Bruté (1779-1839). Portrait.
Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Archives, Ennitsburg, Maryland

At the time of Anna Maria Seton's death in 1812, Elizabeth fell into a state of near despair. While others sought in vain to counsel and comfort her, it was Bruté who brought her out of her terrible trial and led her to a greater acceptance of God's will and sense of eternity.⁶⁶ From this point on Elizabeth was so deeply rooted in this attitude that no future trial affected her with the same intensity.

Relating to each other affectionately as mother and son, Bruté addressed Elizabeth as "You whom I like to call a mother here, as I call one in France... you have so well helped me better to know... my happiness and desire."⁶⁷ Elizabeth encouraged him, "my Son – be most careful to find the Will [of

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 607. Bruté was a medical doctor.

⁶⁶ Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 229-230.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 229.

God], not by the dear coaxing your Mother charged you with, but by a prayer full of confidence.”⁶⁸

This dear friend became a companion and brother to Elizabeth’s children, interceding for one of her sons to help him obtain a post in Baltimore and accompanying the other to Europe in 1815. While Bruté was gone Elizabeth kept a journal for him. In it she recounted how her youngest daughter Rebecca told her longingly, “If he was but my real brother as well as my spiritual one!” In passing this remark on to the priest, Elizabeth added, “Poor darling, she does not know it is the only real... Oh yes, the only real.”⁶⁹ And it was during this same daughter’s lingering final illness that Bruté stood by Elizabeth, offering her spiritual support and physical solace.

Possibly no one knew Elizabeth’s inner soul better than Bruté. While other priests found her difficult to direct, he was able to guide her in sure ways. They enjoyed discussing Scripture and the spiritual classics, and Bruté encouraged Elizabeth to broaden her Catholic background by reading and translating some of the books that were part of his library. She, in turn, helped him to improve his English and to compose his sermons and lectures at Mount St. Mary’s. When Elizabeth died, Bruté wrote long and stirring accounts of the holiness she manifested during her last days. He told her daughter Catherine, “O, such a mother! Such faith, such love! Such a spirit of true prayer, of true humility, of true self denial in all, of true charity to all – truest charity! Such a mother!”⁷⁰

Conclusion

Elizabeth and her friends served each other in a variety of capacities: as role models and mentors, as substitute mothers, sisters, and as loving peers.

For Elizabeth, who did not have the benefit of a mother’s tender love, her close friends created a network of people who offered her physical, psychological, and spiritual support. Each of her friendships was unique and held a special place in her life. Elizabeth and Julia Scott offered each other unquestioning acceptance and unwavering support through all the vagaries of life. Elizabeth and Rebecca were “soul’s sisters” who shared both family and spiritual ties. Elizabeth and Cecilia O’Conway shared their journeys as Sisters of Charity and spurred each other to greater heights in their quest for God. Finally, Elizabeth and Reverend Simon Bruté were soul friends and spiritual directors to one another. All of these relationships encompassed the totality of life from the mundane to the sublime. The partners in these

⁶⁸ *Ibid* , 240.

⁶⁹ *Ibid* , 234-35.

⁷⁰ Simon Bruté to Catherine Seton, n.d., quoted in “The Story of the Mountain,” *The Weekly Chronicle* (Emmitsburg, Md.), 1911, p. 97.

friendships were important to each other, and their relationships were characterized by honesty, candor, spontaneity, and absolute trust. The richness these friendships brought to their participants enhanced the quality of their lives and enabled them to grow immeasurably in their love of God and of others.

The effects of these friendships were deep and fertile. Sharing and appreciating each other's experiences illuminated a value, depth, and importance they might not have otherwise realized.⁷¹ In recognizing the significance of others, they recognized the validity of their own stories.⁷² They became more self-reflective and grew in self-esteem and inner security.⁷³ They were sources of personal support for each other, and knowing that their friend cared for them affirmed their caring about themselves. In the course of their relationships, Elizabeth and her friends developed an equality, reciprocity, and solidarity which gave them identity, dignity, and power.⁷⁴ They shared that which was most precious with openness and freedom, and for each other they were truly a mirror of God's love.

⁷¹ Edith B. Gelles, *Portia. The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992), 124.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 125.

⁷³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs* 1 (1975): 14.

⁷⁴ Gelles, *Portia*, 123.