

Elizabeth Ann Seton's Vision of Ecological Community

Sister Sung Hae Kim's Talk on Jubilee, July 8, 2017

It is a great privilege for me to have this time to share with you the highlights of the article I am writing for the *Vincentian Heritage* on "Elizabeth Seton's Vision of the Ecological Community." You will remember that two years ago I presented "The Ecological Spirituality of Elizabeth Ann Seton" based on Volume One of her *Collected Writings*. It was focused on Elizabeth's love for the beauty of nature and how she found consolation and strength from God's equity and ecological balance in nature. Our new theme, "ecological community," will focus on human ecology and be drawn from Volume Two of *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, which includes her correspondence and journals from 1808 to 1820, just before her death on January 4, 1821. It covers thirteen years of her public life (from age 34 to 46) as educator and founder of a religious congregation.

We presume that during this period Elizabeth was putting her entire energy in the formation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's Valley, but upon closer inspection she also continued to nurture her beloved five children, her sisters-in-law, her friendships, and her social relationships with students' parents, graduates, benefactors, pastors and the church leaders. I will try to describe these three communities that Elizabeth was forming simultaneously, that of apostolic religious life, that of family, and the social, ecclesial community. These three communities were interconnected as a "spider web of *earthly weaving*" to which Elizabeth referred in a letter to Rev. John Hickey, P.S.S. in 1818. (*Collected Writings* 2:536) Moreover, I propose that Elizabeth perceived these three communities through her innate ecological lens because her vision included the qualities of an ecological community as described by philosophers, particularly Henry Thoreau, Peter Kropotkin, and Murray Bookchin.

Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) is one of the first to use the concept of "the ecological community." Central in Kropotkin's theory are ideas of natural interdependence among humans and between humankind and the environment. He believed that a set of fundamental principles can be derived from nature: mutual aid, solidarity, cooperation, self-government, harmony, balance, and community. (Marius de Geus, *Ecological Utopias Envisioning the Sustainable Society*, 88.) These same ecological principles repeatedly appear in Elizabeth's writings in reference to her threefold community life with the sisters, her children, social acquaintances and beyond.

I. Elizabeth's Ecological Vision of the Apostolic Religious Community

The community Elizabeth was forming in St. Joseph's valley of Emmitsburg was surrounded by woods, meadows and mountains. Elizabeth described the surrounding nature to Julia with cheerful intimacy: "Our mountains are very black, but the scene below bright and gay, the meadows still green and my dear ones skipping upon them with the Sheep..." (CW 2: 95) Concerned for Eliza's health, Elizabeth described one Sunday picnic with her community and wished that Eliza could "breathe our mountain air and taste the repose of deep woods and streams. Yesterday we all – about twenty Sisters and children dined, that is eat our cold ham and cream pies in our Grotto in the mountain where we go on Sundays for the Divine Office...my heart feels as bright as the Sun now setting and wants to share with you." (CW 2:131-132) In beautiful nature Elizabeth always felt the presence of her friends and God. Now Elizabeth was forming an ecological community, playing the role of Mother or leader of the community.

a) Elizabeth described her role as a Mother in her letter to Catherine Duplex: "Your poor little shipwrecked friend is finishing her career under the strange and ill placed title of Abbess of a convent; ...the little community I have the charge of are ... united only with the view of schooling children, nursing the sick, and manufacturing for ourselves and the poor, which to my disposition you know is the sum of all earthly

happiness-” (CW 2:136-7) The Sisters of the Charity of St. Joseph’s were united by their apostolate as teaching and serving the poor, but what supported their works was the happiness of a loving community.

b) Elizabeth knew the value of the rules in safeguarding true freedom by providing the guidelines of common life: “-what an extravagant ideal it is that piety creates gloominess and disgust – unacquainted with the anticipation of a soul whose views are chiefly pointed to another existence it is inconceivable what liberty it enjoys –” (CW 2:86) Elizabeth wanted to preserve the liberty of every one living a life of faith and considered her role as a friend to the sisters.

c) Elizabeth appreciated the wisdom and experience that the life in religious community teaches, as well as the affectionate bond it nourishes among its members: “I assure you 6 years experience of our daily duties and way of life has made many of our good Sisters as much old women as I am, ...their care and attention to save me every trouble would appear even ridiculous to others who not living with us, do not know the tie of affection which is formed by living in Community. Perhaps you have no idea of the order and quiet which takes place in a regular way of life – every thing meets its place and time in such a manner that a thing once done, is understood by the simplest person as well as by the most intelligent.” (CW 2:378-9. To Julia Scott)

d) This strong tie of affection was demonstrated by the respectful care for each dying sister who usually asked for the presence of Elizabeth at this critical moment. Elizabeth wrote to Sister Cecilia O’Conway: “-she [Sister Mary Elizabeth Wagner] was struck with Death between 3 and 4 in the morning and cried out directly for ‘Mother,’ and I was with her till long after her last moments to give time for the Solemn Silence.” (CW 2:589)

e) Mother Seton’s community at St. Joseph’s Valley consisted not only of the sisters but also the boarding students taught by the sisters. The number of both

increased from 15 sisters and 30 boarders in 1811, to 60 and more children boarders besides the country children and triple the Sisters in 1816, then finally in 1818: "all I know is about my little world in St. Joseph house, of about 100 precious souls, which we cherish and prepare in silence...to go over our cities like a good leaven." (CW 2:573, To Antonio Filicchi)

f) In her letter to Eliza, Elizabeth vividly depicted the mutual aid in religious community: "Next May to look at our mountains you will find my plants in lovely order – the parent root to be sure is almost sapless and appears quite decayed but when the wind blows hard the little ones surround and bear it up –" (CW 2: 110) This beautiful image from nature describing young trees surrounding the old tree to preserve reflects how Elizabeth saw herself energized by the younger sisters around her.

g) Elizabeth's ecological vision found in religious community can be viewed in the light of Russian geologist and philosopher, Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), who first presented the image of an "ecological community." Through his geographical explorations in Siberia he found that among animals, mutual aid and support played a prominent role (*Mutual Aid*, p.6). The development of humankind is a direct result of the cooperative spirit that is inherent in human nature. Even though Kropotkin rejected the state as the triple alliance of the military chief, the judge and the priest, Elizabeth's apostolic religious community possessed all the ecological qualities that he presented: harmony, mutual aid, respect for freedom and free agreement, self-government, and equality without private property. One notable difference was that for Elizabeth ecological community was based and strengthened by faith in the Providence of God who works through creation and brings out good from the sufferings of life.

II. Elizabeth's Ecological Vision of the Family as Community

a) Simple Joy of Family Being Together: In her "Dear Remembrances" Elizabeth

recalled the first time she and her five children gathered in her beautiful little home at Paca Street, Baltimore: "My lovely good sweet Boys at Georgetown – after two years absence in their Mothers arms – let the children of prosperity rejoice, but they can never guess the least of our joys who possessed nothing but in each other-"(CW 3a:520) Elizabeth was well aware that her five children had neither father nor prosperity; yet she not only accepted this reality, but also found the value and joy that only a poor family could enjoy.

b) When Elizabeth sent her sick daughter Rebecca to Dr. Chatard in Baltimore for a remedy, she wrote to Mrs. Chatard: "Well she is yours and your sweet charity may overflow. The success is left to our adored with the most peaceful perfect confidence= ...she is poor you know and must not mind the wardrobe –"(CW 2:220) Elizabeth valued simplicity of life as the basis of ecological living for both family and religious community.

c) While she was forming her religious community in Emmitsburg, Elizabeth tried to gather her five children together at least once a week in the beautiful outdoors. Elizabeth described one bright spring day of their gathering to Julia: "What would I give if at this very moment you could see your own friend with the *five* playing all sorts of fancies and round her in a bright sun, and as merry as the larks skipping over the meadow before us... I sit on the porch, visit the young calves, pigs and chickens, etc, with as much interest as the children, who are wild with pleasure when the two Brothers, three sisters and old Mother set out together." (CW 2:176)

d) In her letter to Antonio, Elizabeth described her two sons: "they do not seem to have either talents or application 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." (CW 2:47)

e) The constant lesson that Elizabeth tried to impart to her children was that they

should see the world as it is. Elizabeth repeatedly asked her son William to see things as they are: "now as a man you will see things in their true light I trust knowing well that in every situation and place on earth we must find contradictions and difficulties – "(CW 2:314) Not only did she teach this maxim to her children, but also Elizabeth herself always saw everything as it is and as a great whole.

f) A good example of how she dealt with her family can be found in Elizabeth's advice to Father Hickey: "When you ask too much at first you often gain nothing at last – *and if the heart is lost all is lost*, if you use such language to your family they cannot love you, since they have not *our* Microscope to see things *as they are*. Your austere hard language was not understood by Ellen, gently gently my Father... " (CW 2:536)

g) Thoreau's Ultimate Simplicity and Elizabeth's Ecological Family:

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) lived alone in the woods from July 1845 to September 1847, in a self-constructed cabin on the shore of Walden Pond, near Concord. He wanted to discover how the ultimately individual way of life can lead to a higher form of personal happiness. The crux of his argument is simplicity: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!...Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion." (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 2004 edition, 91-92) What is noteworthy here is that Thoreau connected simplicity of life with elevation of human purpose. While Thoreau searched for the simplicity of life alone and Elizabeth found joy and contentment in the community of 100 people, both lives were ecological because they lived well aware that they were a part of larger nature and found harmony in it.

III. Elizabeth's Ecological Vision of the Social Community and Beyond

Elizabeth's "spider web of earthly weaving" was much wider than St. Joseph's

Valley in Emmitsburg, reaching out to the following three groups and beyond. The first group consisted of her friends such as the Filicchi family in Italy, Matthias O'Conway, the father of Sister Cecilia O'Conway in Philadelphia, and George Weis, the carpenter and constructor in Baltimore. Her three lifelong friends, Julia, Eliza and Dué belong to this group. The second group consisted of the leaders of the Catholic Church at that time, such as Archbishop John Carroll, Simon Bruté, John Hickey, and the other Sulpicians. The third group was comprised of the graduates of St. Joseph's Academy and parents of the students, notably the Harper Family with whom Catherine Seton went to live after Elizabeth's death. Elizabeth continued to nurture these three-fold relationships which were mutually enriching. They maintained their ecological character with increased sensibilities toward each other without domination like the 'ecological society' that Murray Bookchin described.

a) Elizabeth Seton met her husband William's business friends Filippo Filicchi, his younger brother Antonio Filicchi and Amabilia in Leghorn, Italy. Since Antonio not only encouraged her conversion to Catholicism, but also accompanied Elizabeth and Anna in their return journey to the United States and her entrance to the Catholic Church, Elizabeth was convinced that their relationship was ordered by Divine Providence: "- how great that attachment is, and with how much reason can only be known by one who once was what I have been, and can conceive how great the contrast of past and present is – this is understood by him alone who gave you to me and us to you – for which I trust we will love, praise and adore thro' eternity." (CW 2:130)

b) Another lay person with whom Elizabeth built a firm, mutual and spiritual relationship, was Matthias O'Conway who worked as a Spanish and French interpreter. His daughter Cecilia became the first woman to join Elizabeth in forming the Sisters of Charity. It is obvious Sister Cecelia was the bond between her father Matthias and Elizabeth. But their trust in each other was much deeper than in an ordinary relationship because Elizabeth confided to Matthias her deepest feeling caused by the

conflict with Father David: "You will laugh at me when I tell you I have seen more real affliction and sorrow here in the ten months since our removal than in all the 35 years of my past life which was all marked by affliction – You will laugh, I repeat, because you will know that the fruit will not be lost – at least I hope not, tho' indeed sometimes I tremble. It is not needful to tell you *this is SACRED.*" (CW 2:140)

c) Another lay person whom Elizabeth not only trusted but to whom she gave spiritual direction was George Weis, a carpenter who lived in Baltimore and constructed the chapel of St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore and Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg. When Elizabeth left for Emmitsburg in 1809, she formed a deep friendship with his family. When George's business failed and he faced financial difficulties, Elizabeth accompanied him in every trial: "I can never forget the kindness you have shown us but my mind and body have both suffered what God alone can tell since I left you but he knows how truly I am attached to you and how fervently I beg His blessings may be with you forever. If in this world he gives them to you as to me in crosses and contradictions let us live by faith since we know it is much better to suffer for a time that we may afterwards partake of His glory-" (CW 2:80)

d) We see the ecological quality of her social relationships when we consider how Elizabeth nurtured both John Hickey and Simon Bruté until her death. Rev. John Francis Hickey, S.S. (1789-1869) was the first priest ordained at Mount St. Mary's and the first American member of the Sulpicians. When he was a young priest, Elizabeth reprimanded him because of a careless sermon. Elizabeth's motherly heart nurtured, sometimes with admonition, but always with gentleness and sensitivity. Born in France, Rev. Simon Gabriel Bruté de Remur, S.S. (1779-1839) became a physician and then was ordained to the priesthood. Then in 1810 he came to the United States, bringing an extensive library of several thousand volumes which he shared with Elizabeth. In Emmitsburg he developed a deep spiritual bond with Elizabeth, becoming her spiritual director for the last ten years of her life. Not only did Father Bruté help Elizabeth to

reach the height of spirituality, but also Elizabeth helped him to grow in his priestly vocation by her appreciation of his sacrifice as a missionary: "You would never believe...the good *Your return* does to this soul of your little mother – to see you *again* tearing yourself from all that is dearest – giving up *again* the full liberty you lawfully and justly possessed – exchanging for a truly heavy chain, and the endless labyrinth of discussions and wearisome details..." (CW 2:365) They encouraged each other in the progress of their spiritual path: "- do you read well your Mothers *whole* heart in the Resignation –but you know the only Security and heavenly Peace in that point so dear rests all on this essential abandon – so at least you taught me..." (CW 2:421)

e) Elizabeth kept her relationship with the graduates of St. Joseph's Academy through her letters, which shows her interest and deep concern for the evolving life of each graduate, offering them appropriate advice. Regarding married life, Elizabeth advised Ellen Gottsberger: "I wish very much to know if you make a *good obedient wife* studying the happiness of your husband, and you wish him to study yours, and as a *true Christian* setting him the first example of a humble heart and forbearing temper, if you take care of the Soul As well as the body of your servant who must find a Mother as well as a mistress in you-" (CW 2:501) It is noteworthy that Elizabeth's first lesson was that husband and wife must concern themselves with what constitutes the happiness of each other. Then humility and even temper would serve to realize their happiness. Also Elizabeth focused on the whole household, asking Ellen to take care of the physical and spiritual needs of the servants who worked for the house. Always seeing the whole picture, Elizabeth was concerned with the happiness of everyone involved.

f) Robert Goodloe Harper was the parent of three students and served as financial and legal advisor to Elizabeth. As a lawyer he helped the incorporation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's in the State of Maryland. When Harper's first daughter, Mary Diana, died in France, Elizabeth consoled him and his family as a family member.

In Elizabeth's letter to Julia we find that Elizabeth confided the close relationship between herself and the Harper family who invited Catherine Seton to stay with them if her mother should not recover: "You know my own beloved friend I see all in the order of Providence, and wish only to use the generosity of others as far as it enters in that beautiful order, therefore we have never yet in any way taken advantage of the goodness of Mr. and Mrs. H to us." (CW 2: 642) In her relationship with the Harpers, as well as with all other friendships she nurtured in her life, Elizabeth saw the beautiful order of Providence. Because her social relationships were always rooted in this order and harmony, we recognize the ecological character of Elizabeth's social community.

g) The concept of 'social ecology' constitutes the basis of Murry Bookchin's (1921-2006) theory and is the starting point of *The Ecology of Freedom*. The direct goal of social ecology is to provide us with a holistic analysis of relationships in nature and society: "Hierarchy, in effect, would be replaced by interdependence, and consociation would imply the existence of an organic core that meets the deeply felt biological needs for care, cooperation, security, and love. Freedom would no longer be placed in opposition to nature, individuality to society, choice to necessity, or personality to the needs of social coherence." (*The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, 2005, 414)

It is very interesting to find an example very close to Bookchin's social ecocommunity woven by face-to-face relationships of interdependence, care, equality and freedom in the social network of Elizabeth Seton, for Bookchin was opposed to religious institutions: "But rarely, as the history of all the great world religions attests, have they created an ecologically humanistic society." (*Ibid.*, 63) Contrary to Bookchin's judgment, Elizabeth, as a Catholic religious woman and the founder of the congregation, nurtured her social relationships, which were deepened by honest dialogue, healthy interdependence, mutual appreciation, and trust in the order of God's Providence all of which fostered social ecology.

Conclusion

Learning from nature, Elizabeth lived her community life ecologically based on her insight that "All must take its course in this world," (CW 2:345) because "the hand that allots always proportions." (CW 2:378) Elizabeth knew when enough was enough, an ecological virtue, and was grateful to her friends as she once wrote to Julia: "do not think of me dearest but under the line of my beautiful Providence, which has done so well for us so many years – you keep me *out of debt*..." (CW 2:586) The social network that Elizabeth fostered provided the basis for an ecologically rounded and balanced community.

Finally, we see how these three communities Elizabeth was nurturing - her apostolic religious community, her family, and her social community - were interwoven as a spider web. Elizabeth helped her children to interact with students in St. Joseph's Academy in various ways. Through a letter, Elizabeth introduced Mr. and Mrs. Harper, who were travelling in Italy, to Antonio and Amabilia. Elizabeth connected Sister Margaret George with her friend Dué in New York. Elizabeth remained at the center of the spider web, connecting different corners of the three communities she nourished by caring, freeing and being responsible to each other.

To a former student Elizabeth wrote about her failing physical condition: "Three wheels of the old carriage are broken down, the fourth very near gone; then with the wings of a dove will my soul fly and be rest." (CW 2: 710) Elizabeth had the conviction that death is the common lot for all human beings: "-as to sickness and death itself if it comes to us again we know that they are the common attendants of human life they are our certain portion at one period or other." (CW 2:95) Elizabeth saw two sides of death, the darkness of the grave and the bright fields of everlasting verdure which promises the fresh, life-giving. Through a natural image, Elizabeth described her peaceful acceptance of death to Father Bruté: "-now near death – O our Jesus – All as quiet as the still breeze over the little lake..." (CW 2:683)

Perhaps the following quotation from her letter portrays the mature personality of Elizabeth Seton who lived as the loving mother of her three-fold ecological communities, religious, family, and social:

Alone on a rock this afternoon, surrounded by the most beautiful scenery, adoring and praising Him for his magnificence and glory,...the soul cried out, O God! O God! Give me yourself. What is all the rest? A Silent voice of love answered, *I am yours*. Then, dearest Lord! Keep me as I am while I live; for this is true content, - to hope for nothing, to desire nothing, expect nothing, fear nothing. Death! Eternity! Oh, how small are all objects of busy, striving, restless, blind, mistaken beings, when at the foot of the cross these two prospects are viewed! (CW 2:707-708)

In order to keep Elizabeth's example living the three-fold ecological community alive in us, I want to urge you to study and practice Pope Francis's Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si' on Care for our Common Home*. Our interprovincial Laudato Si' Committee will recommend concrete ways we as a congregation and as individuals can live out both natural and human ecology in our present world. Through this ecological living we will follow Elizabeth Seton whom we admire, love, and treasure in our hearts.