

The Ecological Meaning of the Presence of God in Elizabeth Seton's Reflections and Translations (Volume III)

Sister Sung Hae Kim's Talk on Jubilee Day, July 14, 2018

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 "The Ecological Meaning of the Presence of God in Elizabeth Seton's *Collected Writings* III." You will remember that I have written two articles, "The Ecological Spirituality of Elizabeth Ann Seton," and "Elizabeth Ann Seton's Vision of Ecological Community," based on Volumes One and Two of her *Collected Writings*. This is my third attempt to interpret Elizabeth Seton's spirituality from the perspective of contemporary ecology. While both Volumes One and Two of her *Collected Writings* include her correspondence and journals divided by her early life as a wife/widow in New York/Italy and her later life as a religious in Baltimore and Emmitsburg, Volume Three contains her reflections, meditations, copied materials from various spiritual writers, and her selected translations, such as *Life of Vincent de Paul* and *Life of Louise de Marillac*. Since Volume Three begins with her notes at age 17 and continues until her "Dear Remembrances," which she wrote not long before her death, Volume Three covers practically her entire life.

The most challenging factor for me in my attempt to grasp the ecological thought of Elizabeth in Volume Three was, unlike in Volume One and Volume Two where her letters and journals clearly reflect her original thoughts, in Volume Three it was hard to distinguish in many places which parts are Elizabeth's own words and which parts are selections from other spiritual authors. For example, for "Pyamingo Reflections," which Elizabeth wrote on the boat *Pyamingo* during her return journey from Leghorn (Livorno), Italy, to New York in 1804, the editors of the *Collected Writings* added the footnotes: "Internal evidence suggests that the material was probably copied from spiritual writers of the period, ...perhaps original, perhaps copied..." (*Collected Writings* IIIa:173, footnote 5.) After some conversations with the editors, I agreed with their conclusion: "Even if Elizabeth copied the content into

her own papers, she thought the material was important and wanted to reflect further on it. Therefore even if it is not her original writing, the content reflects her values and thinking.” (The email response of Judy Metz, S.C.) The same standard will apply when we approach her selection of translations, which occupies 22% of the material contained in Volume III.

While reading 1,230 pages of Volume III, I realized that I gradually was drawn to and focused on one central theme, the “Presence of God” in the life of Elizabeth as the mystery that not only sustained her throughout her life, but also united her vision of the entire universe of natural creation and humanity into one. Elizabeth was convinced that the divine presence is the very source of life, vitality, beauty, and harmony of all living material beings. Moreover, Elizabeth was in one accord with Vincent de Paul that the Presence of God sustains life not only in its flourishing but also in its suffering and death. I was amazed to read how close Elizabeth felt to Vincent in her meditations during the retreats. She repeatedly called him ‘our dear father St. Vincent’ or ‘our blessed father St. Vincent,’ and sometimes ‘O second father St. Vincent most precious to every heart here,’ following the first father, St. Joseph. Also Elizabeth gave Vincent the title of the ‘chief patron and founder’ in the beginning of the Constitutions of her congregation. Just as Vincent recognized the power of the divine presence in both the beauty and suffering of life, Elizabeth also embraced the Presence of God at times of wonder and happiness, and at times of anguish, suffering, and death.

I. The Presence of God in Creation as the Source of Life and Vitality

It was in the “Pyamingo Reflection” where Elizabeth elaborated most clearly her vision of the Presence of God in the entire universe:

Of all the exercises in a Christian Life there are none more strongly recommended or more carefully practiced by the Saints of God, than that of a constant sense of his presence – Our obligation for this practice is founded on two principles of faith – God is everywhere, and sees everything - ... - The Majesty of his presence consecrates every part of the universe, and wherever I

am, I may say with Jacob "This place is holy" and I knew it not, or rather I do not consider – thus the recollection of God's presence is the lawful homage and faith I owe to his immensity – (CW IIIa:189)

The basic idea of the above quotation is from St. Francis de Sales, but instead of introducing the four chief considerations of practicing the Presence of God as the preparation for meditation, Elizabeth focused on the first point, namely that God is in all things and all places. Therefore, Elizabeth did not follow the conclusion in this part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* that "God is indeed here." Rather enlarging the scope of the vision to the entire universe, Elizabeth said that the Majesty of God's presence consecrates every part of the universe. Elizabeth's conviction that God is everywhere throughout the whole universe is restated in her reflection on the "Exercise of the Presence of God":

God is everywhere – on the throne of his glory among the blessed indeed, but also throughout the whole universe which he fills governs and preserves, ruling it by his wisdom and power...as birds in changing their places find the air wherever they fly, and fish who live in the water are surrounded by their element wherever they swim, so wherever we go we must find God everywhere, he is more within us, than we are in ourselves, - (CW IIIa:392)

The examples of the birds of the air and the fish of the sea enjoying the immensity of the sky and the ocean, yet never reaching their limit and boundary are used again in Elizabeth's later reflections.

Because the life of the natural world and that of human beings is so closely interconnected and harmonized, Elizabeth was not hesitant to see nature as the metaphor for our life. For instance, Elizabeth loved to use the sun as the symbol of God's constant presence and integrity. In her advice to her daughter Catherine, Elizabeth used the righteous sun as a metaphor for integrity: "*I would be kind to everybody but admit a few within my heart, and I would have the pride to do what I knew to be right as quietly and calmly as the sun rides on the heavens and let the world go on at its pleasure.*" (CW IIIa:491)

When Elizabeth was translating the French original of *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul* by Louis Abelly, she did not translate it in its entirety, but with a clear purpose she selected what she thought worth translating to provide spiritual reading for the formation of the early Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg. Elizabeth chose one interesting episode that happened in the Motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission between Vincent and a brother, who caught birds in a cage to present as a gift to the superior general. Elizabeth translated all the details Abelly described, signifying that in the end obedience means submission to God who loves and supports all forms of life:

One of the Brothers of the house of St. Lazare having found a pa[r]tridge [pheasant] nest in its enclosures and set the eggs under a hen that he might have the pleasure of presenting the little pa[r]tridges to Mr. Vincent, received no other answer when he brought them to him in triumph but "Well my brother let us see if they can run yet" and setting out quietly with the Brother to reach a field of plowed ground, he bade him open the door of the cage, and enjoyed the pleasure of seeing them all escape...then turning kindly to the Brother who had expected quite another kind of pleasure he said "You know his Majesty has forbid us taking pa[r]tridges, so of course he did not mean that we should take their eggs, and the least disobedience to our King in temporal matters is always more or less displeasing to God." (CW IIIb:221)

Similarly, Elizabeth released a young robin from a cage (CW 1:164), and for both of them care for birds as well as for the poor is an act of obedience to the Creator.

Elizabeth looked forward to the day when the whole of creation would be glorified because the complete transformation of the earth will include not only the salvation of human beings but also the glory of the natural world: "yes I will look forward to the Arch-angels Voice to the transformation of the heavens, the renovation of the earth, the liberty of the elements Universal natures change, then Shall I behold my A[nnina] and R[ebecca] no longer shrouded in the tomb... NO LONGER DEPLORED, NO LONGER WEPT, RESPLENDENT, GLORIFIED" (CW IIIa:494)

II. The Presence of God in the midst of Humanity

Even though Elizabeth's vision of creation is filled with the divine presence which resides in every atom of the natural world, she was convinced that human beings are especially destined to be brightened by the splendor of the divine presence by preserving integrity and simplicity in our words and actions. Elizabeth confessed repeatedly that "Divine presence is the most precious treasure to me" and also proclaimed that "In thy presence is the fullness of Joy."

For Elizabeth creatures are God's image and mirror, representing God's perfection in their diversity. Reflecting on her religious life in the quiet valley of the small village Emmitsburg, Elizabeth found the ecological meaning and mission of human life in her intimate connection with its natural environment:

Silence, and retirement, regular hours of communion with God and separation from the tumult of the world. Order in action, doing nothing but in the spirit of obedience to God and the accomplishment of his good will and pleasure seeking God in things the most indifferent, <and> considering the creature *only* his image and mirrors to represent to us his perfections – the heavens as the throne of his glory, the earth as his footstool, mankind as the ministers of his providence, prosperities as the effects of his liberality, and adversities as the chastisement of his justice. – this is the secret of finding God in all things and everywhere. (CW IIIa:191)

In Elizabeth's reflection above, humanity forms the triad of material creation with heaven and earth, and is regarded as "the ministers of God's providence." While recognizing that all other creatures are also the images of God reflecting the divine perfection, she admitted that humans have a special mission to fulfill. In order to realize this mission we must know God's mandate for each of us through the cultivation of our sense of the divine presence.

In her "Dear Remembrances" Elizabeth recalled different times when she vividly experienced the Presence of God: at age 6 when she learned Psalm 22, "I will fear no evil for thou are with me"; at age 8 when she

tried to bring bird eggs to life; at age 14 in New Rochelle during spring how she found joy in God glazing at the stars and walking among cedars surrounded by lambs and sheep; at age 29 how she delighted in packing up all her valuables to be sold, enjoying the *adieu* to each article, and – liberty and enjoyment of her Soul at sea through every pain and Sorrow; her anguish when the Blessed Sacrament would pass the street as she wondered if she was the only one *he* did not bless?; how she felt Supreme happiness at her first communion when she exclaimed: “At last admit so poor a creature to HIMSELF *forever* –” (CW IIIa: 519)

Elizabeth’s remembrances continue in Emmitsburg with her intimate feelings of connection with woods, rocks, the bright moonlight walks to the church, and people meeting each other and departing: “- Cecilias [Seton] gentle death the 29th April 1810 – her burial – the children gathering wild flowers -...- Evening before Nina’s [Anna Maria] Death - ... - this world passes away – *Eternity!*” (CW IIIa:523) Eternity is the end of Dear Remembrances of her life, for Elizabeth understood that eternity is the completion of human’s mission to become “the ministers of God’s providence.”

Even though Elizabeth agreed that our soul is God’s palace and our free will is the noblest gift of God, she took seriously our body, the instrument of our loss or our glory: “- this body to last but a moment – a mass of matter to be destroyed in the distruction[sic] of all nature which is all to disappear – to be dissolved – and tho’ by Faith we know that our body shall be restored yet it will be as by a new creation – this body the envelopment of a pure spirit destined to share its bliss of eternity –” (CW IIIa:450-451)

When Elizabeth translated the *Life of Louise de Marillac* by Nicolas Gobillon, she also selected the parts that she felt beneficial to the Sisters’ spiritual and communal life. After a short introduction to Louise’s life and ministry to the poor, which led to the formation of her little company in 1633, Elizabeth translated St. Vincent’s advice to St. Louise to be moderate in all things: “Be not afraid to do the present good in your power, but fear your desires to do more than you can, and more than God means you to do... I tremble at the thought of going *beyond the*

means he gives, because it seems to me a crime in the children of his Providence.” (CW IIIb:363) Moderation is an ecological value, and recognizing its importance Elizabeth chose to translate this advice, so that her companions would also learn this virtue of moderation.

It is well known that Elizabeth held a special devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, which evolved her appreciation of the Body of Christ as the Presence of God in the universe. The Body of Christ present in the Holy Eucharist is not only the holy of holies on this earth, but the focus of the divine presence in the midst of human community. Jesus’ indwelling in us moderates our passions, heals our maladies, closes our wounds, and renews in us the royal image which God imprinted on us. (CM IIIa:541-542)

III. The Presence of God in Death and Suffering

Elizabeth knew that death and suffering are essential parts of life, both human and natural. She regarded death as the time of harvest when the divine presence is most vividly experienced. (CW IIIa:417) Perceiving suffering and death as the common lot connecting all living bodies in the material world, Elizabeth described this reality as a blessed one that strips us from the self by linking us to the “blessed chain of suffering”:

Hasten, Hasten happy moment time I bid thee

fly awake me to Eternity and bid this body Die

Jesus infinite goodness

Link by link the blessed chain

One Body in Christ – he the head, we the members

One Spirit diffused thro[sic] the holy ghost in us all...

Who can resist, all self must be killed and destroyed by this artillery of love...- O my Soul be fastened link by link strong as *death*....he wills us to enter in the way of suffering, and we desire to enter in action – We desire to give rather than to receive – and do not purely seek *his* WILL. (CW IIIb:108-109)

Here we can see that Elizabeth was convinced that we learn to seek God's will only through the way of suffering and receptivity which overcomes our resistance to the grace or the Presence of God. She had to learn this truth, however, through her own experience of loss, sorrow, and patient waiting.

Elizabeth experienced deep desolation on the loss of her beloved ones. Looking at the graves of her daughters and sisters-in-law in the community cemetery on May 9th, 1814 (CW IIIa:311-312), Elizabeth expressed the dark reality of death. By capitalizing the first letter of "Death" in her writings, Elizabeth emphasized the importance of death in our life. Elizabeth taught that both life and death are connected through the prayer for the First Communion class at St. Joseph's Academy. In this prayer, life, death, and eternity flow as a natural continuum:

My Saviour[sic], My Jesus, I come at last to my happy days of preparation, to the sweet call so long desired to make ready for my first Communion, to receive *thee my own Savirour*[sic], to begin my dear union here with thee which I hope to carry on so happily through *life, Death, and Eternity*. (CW IIIa:264)

Similarly we read Elizabeth's reflections on death in her meditations for the Christmas Season. The mystery of incarnation contains the crucifixion and the resurrection, and so the joy of Christmas is linked with the death of Jesus: "Sufferings are the ties, the bands which fasten and unite us to our dearest child of the cross! Child of Calvary!" (CW IIIa:307)

From her awareness that life and death are parts of the whole, Elizabeth developed a striking phrase, "bitter peace," to describe something we humans are capable of experiencing on this earth. This phrase appears in Elizabeth's meditation during Advent and Christmastide as Jesus' coming into the world makes us enjoy peace even in our misery and most bitter moments of life:

O! Adorable Infant my Saviour[sic], for thou camest[sic] to save, and to be saved is the only peace of our present bitterness, to wait, for Eternal joys, the blessedness, and the light of thy countenance is enough, the hope and desire of them, make us

cherish in peace our *very* bitterness,....all the days of that whole Eternal we begin even now, these first present days of trial in grace, and the glorious future *ones* – oh! Here below we can enjoy our peace “but in bitterness, *most bitter*” the feelings of our misery, and the misery of others, often overpower bitterness; the temporal distresses and renting of hearts tear poor nature incessantly, and relief enough, but thy will and thy peace -...O! Mother of sorrows, ever so, and even that ninth mon[th] through such anticipations, a Mother of sorrow but the Model of our own bitter “peace”- (CW IIIa:352-353)

This description of “bitter peace” is new to us, but since it depicts many experiences of our present life, it offers us comfort and courage to move forward.

In Elizabeth’s selected translation of the *Life of Vincent de Paul*, we encounter a few occasions that manifest how Vincent accepted and even welcomed suffering and death as times of grace. First, Vincent knew the value of poverty willingly practiced among the religious: “Poverty is the bond of our community – the tie which holds us from the things of the earth and fastens us to God.” (CW IIIb:234) Vincent assured his companions that poverty makes us turn to God, and that a grace is hidden under it, saying, “the company will never be lost by its Poverty, but I much fear if poverty was wanting in it, it would soon cease to subsist.” (CW IIIb:235) Vincent said to his community that “the infirmary is the place of trial for *all*” (CW IIIb:250) Elizabeth added emphasis on all, expressing her agreement that suffering is the common lot for every human being.

In the first line of her Good Friday meditation, Elizabeth Seton wrote “<Tomorrow> the good Friday of Death and Life!” signifying that death and life always walk together not only in Jesus’ life but also in all life of humanity and creation. The death of Jesus is clearly described as a cosmic event where all creation participated:

I stand upon Mount Calvary – my Saviour[sic] is there hanging on the cross these three hours of his suspension, between heaven and Earth. – the deepest darkness surrounds - ... a voice from the height of the Cross! The Voice of my Saviour[sic]

through this darkness strong – awful – loud. Spoken to the Father in the highest, and to resound to the remotest extremities of time and space, “*All is consummated*” - ... - he breathes his last with a powerful cry – Nature is convulsed – the horrid crash of rocks and opening monuments resound – JESUS EXPIRES (CW IIIb:37-38)

Just as the death of Jesus was not final, the death of individual human beings as well as the death of all living creatures will be transformed into the life of eternity.

Finally, it will be good for us to listen to Elizabeth Seton’s advice to focus on this high mystery of our eternal union instead of our suffering itself:

In receiving his Cross we are not to look at what it is made of, that is on the nature of our sufferings, *it* being a mystery[.] we are to look only at the interior virtue not the exterior form, eternal life is hidden under it, and when it comes in the shape of poverty, it conceals eternal treasures, in that of shame or reproach it is the glory of God, under the form of its afflictions carries eternal Consolations,...for Patience would be but a small matter to bring there, our Lord it is true is content with our docility and resignation, but to this high mystery of our eternal union with him. We should bring the burning fire of love and gratitude. (CW IIIa:421)

God is present in death as much as in life, for death and life are two sides of the continuation of life. Suffering is a mystery that humbles and unites both humans and non-human living beings of the earth. Only through suffering and death, is all life transformed and takes the character of a Sacrament, the visible symbol of the invisible God.