

A Teacher of Souls: Elizabeth Ann Seton, Theologian

By

Paige Catherine Goldschmidt

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Approved by

Adam J. Jortner, Chair, Goodwin-Philpot Associate Professor of History
Melissa E. Blair, Assistant Professor of History
Christopher J. Ferguson, Associate Professor of History

Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of Elizabeth Anne Seton's conversion to Catholicism. It is also a discussion of her interpretation of traditional Catholic doctrine and eventual teaching and systemization of it within the American Catholic Church. This thesis argues that Seton should be considered a theologian because of her analysis of communion, transubstantiation, penance, and suffering. It also identifies the role that republican motherhood played in the solidification of her theologies in the structure of the Catholic Church. Seton played an important role in establishing a foothold in America for the eventuality of Catholicism becoming the largest denomination in America. She helped Americanize the faith, combining Protestant rituals with Catholic, making a uniquely American form of Catholicism. While the Americanized form of Catholicism did not last, Seton's impact should not be diminished. Her ability to convert people based upon her own interpretations and her unique theologies should make people recognize her as the theologian she was.

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Introduction

On September 14, 1975 Pope Paul VI gave a homily about the canonization of the newly deemed Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton saying “we rejoice and we are deeply moved that our apostolic ministry authorizes us to make this solemn declaration before all of you here present, before the holy Catholic Church, before our other Christian brethren in the world, before the entire American people, and before humanity. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton is a Saint!”¹ The canonization of Seton came on the tail of the United Nation’s International Year of Women, which was meant to highlight “the true role of women in the world and to contribute to their authentic advancement in Society.”² To emphasize his point, Pope Paul VI continues extolling the virtues of Seton, stating her “extraordinary contributions as a woman—a wife, a mother, a widow, and a religious” recalling her most “notable Characteristic...foundress of the first Religious Congregation of women in the United States.”³ Seton is remembered for the qualities spelled out in 1975 and her conversion to Catholicism from Anglicanism, but what is seldomly recollected is her actual religious thought on doctrines on which she based her conversion and a religious congregation. Seton’s actions are remembered, without much consideration as to the why.

While working on this project, I have often encountered the question “why is it important that she be labeled a theologian?” There are two reasons this intervention is critical. The first is that she should be labeled a theologian because that is what she was doing: she was theologizing. She was interpreting doctrine and teaching it as Catholic theology. She, unlike many that came before her, made no claims that she was simply the vessel out of which God was speaking. Seton acknowledged her own life experiences and used them to buttress her interpretations of

¹ Pope Paul VI “*Canonization of Elisabeth Ann Seton, Foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph’s.*” (1975)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Catholic theology and her instructing others on those principles. The second reason for claiming Seton is a theologian is to broaden the category in general. Often Seton, like many other women of the time, wrote her thoughts in letters and journals that were only seen by other women and she generally only taught women and children. Because of this, her writings are dismissed as simply conversion texts instead of valuable analysis. The diminishment of her thought, because of where it is found, is ridiculous and needs to be rectified. Seton convinced many people to believe and follow her theology, even garnering the support of the Archbishop at the time, John Carroll. Seton altered ideas of penance and transubstantiation and passed them on to her children and those she was teaching. The redefinition of theologian is necessary, because the structure of it is purposely exclusionary towards women, ignoring their thought, when it should be recognized as powerful and altering.

Seton's effect within the newly forming structure of American Catholicism and those she mentored was undeniable. In order to distinguish her thought from her actions, the usage of the word 'theologian' is necessary. Seton, like many women that came before her and the many that would come after was not the sum total of her actions, but instead the total of her thought that has long been diminished for the sake of her actions and for the sake of the medium in which her thought is generally presented. This is not to say that her actions are, by any standard, unimpressive or worthless, but to say she was more than her actions. In order to recoup Seton's, among other women's, thoughts, historians must cease to think of women's writings as simply emotional musings, but intentional acts of committing their beliefs to paper and having it preserved.

The importance of reclaiming and feminizing the word theologian falls very much in line with the same kinds of reclaiming that is occurring in Black Feminist intellectual movements, as referenced by Brittney C. Cooper in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race*

Women where she states “that we have not yet engaged with the content of what Black women intellectuals actually *said*, even as we celebrate all that they *did*, seems to escape notice.”⁴

Similarly, we celebrate Seton as a creator of the first American Sisterhood and all that she did for her children, but hardly recognize the value of her thought and words. I am engaging with Seton’s thought is in a similar vein that many feminist historians coming before me have engaged with other male gendered activities. Through redefining specific job titles, whether it be ‘politician’ or ‘theologian,’ it emphasizes the gender disparity that occurs because of women’s inability to be recognized as such during the time in which they lived.

Seton’s fascination with and devotion to the theology of the Catholic Church, extolling its virtues seemed to be a natural expression of membership. However, because she was not simply a member of the church, but an interpreter of Catholicism, and altered church practices she should be granted the title of theologian. Using Elizabeth Seton's letters and memoirs to reconstruct her thought and the alterations she made to Catholicism based upon them permeated both American Catholicism and the circle of people immediately around her, the definition of theologian should be readily available for her usage. Defining Seton as a theologian defies traditional definition set forth by Holifield, who wrote “what distinguished theology from inspirational writings or narratives of religious experience was its interdependence with various branches of philosophe.”⁵ Yet his dismissal of “inspirational writings or narratives of religious experience” automatically and systematically eliminates women from being categorized as such, as they were taught to express religious opinions and dissent in the form of letters, journals, and other personal writings. Dismissing those documents as something other than theology, we are dismissing women from the possibility of having substantive thought. Because women were not

⁴ Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, IL 2017) 10.

⁵ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 3-4.

formally educated in many of the traditional philosophies that Holifield argued were necessary for the title of theologian, he discounted all women. Instead of using formal education and systemization as a basis for the definition of theologian, I propose examining the theological quandaries and the resulting personal answers that alter one's view of their faith and the ways in which the new thought is dispersed. Using this wider perspective, a theologian is deemed a person who studies, interprets, and pronounces opinions on theological topics and uses their personal ideas to create fresh movements within a religious practice. Because of Seton's personal interpretation and alteration of Catholic theology injected with uniquely American views on Catholicism, I offer that she should be considered a theologian in her own right.

Seton's theology arose out of a series of horrible personal situations that resulted in her exposure to Catholicism at arguably the worst points in her life, but out of that, she entrenched herself comfortably within the Catholic faith. As she struggled through her conversion and was explaining her thinking to her friends and family through letters, she focused on two major pillars of her own faith: the importance and value of communion and the practice of penance. When discussing communion, her biggest excitement arose around the subject of transubstantiation, what that meant in partaking in the ritual, and the control she had over her own soul. Her second, and potentially more revolutionary theological quandaries arose out of an evolving understanding of suffering in a religious context and how the practice of confession and penance fit into her overall conception of Catholicism. As she attempted to understand more about the faith that she was joining, she considered ideas about trials of suffering, which were a distortion of Catholic practices of penance. Although not traditional Catholic doctrine, the acceptance of Seton into the Catholic Church despite these beliefs and the permission she is granted to teach children Catholic doctrine, confirms her as a theologian. She was not a preacher or an exhorter, she did not claim to be the reincarnation of God, but she was not simply a woman sitting in a

church. She was an influential presence to all around her and helped form the American Catholic church alongside Bishop Carroll.

Transformation through Transubstantiation: Seton's Conversion and Theological Expansion on Communion

William, Elizabeth, and Ann Seton traveled from New York to Italy during the fall of 1803 in the hopes that a fairer climate would lead to a cure of an unknown ailment from which William was suffering. When they arrived on the coast of Livorno, however, they were quickly quarantined in prison and forced to remain there for months. Upon the cold, damp floor Seton lay with her dying husband and child praying that he would live another day and writing a letter to her sister-in-law, Rebecca, she described their circumstances: “And now on the ship mattresses spread on this *cool floor* my Willy and Anna are sound asleep, and I trust God who has given him strength to go thro’ a day of such exertion will carry us on.”⁶ Seton’s prayer that her husband would be granted fortitude by God to continue living was countered by her daughter, Ann, who placed “little pieces of trust in God—she said ‘Mamma if Papa should die here—*but God will be with us.*’”⁷

Elizabeth Bayley was born in New York in 1774 to Dr. Richard and Catherine Bayley. She was baptized, confirmed, and married as an Episcopalian in Trinity Church in New York. Her husband, William Seton, was the son of William Seton Sr. and he inherited his father’s company, an import-export mercantile firm. Between the two families, they were wealthy and carried a great amount of influence in their communities around New York. During William’s tenure as owner of the mercantile firm, he struck up a business relationship with a family in Italy, the Filicchis, and grew both his wealth and the company. However, in 1803, illness befell William and, at the doctor's behest, was to travel somewhere with a better climate for him to heal. Elizabeth, William, and their oldest daughter, Ann decided to go to stay with the Filicci

⁶ Elizabeth Ann Seton journal to Rebecca Seton, November 19, 1803. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 253

⁷EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, November 19, 1803. 253

family in Italy. The trip that was once thought to be the potential life-saving conditions William needed instead proved to be a death sentence for William. While the Setons made it safely to the Italian shore, the Italian government, afraid of the outbreak of scarlet fever rumored to be spreading throughout New York, quarantined the three of them to a prison near the sea immediately after their arrival. The Seton family was trapped from early November until late December of 1803, during which time William grew progressively sicker. Elizabeth used this time to contemplate her faith and worship with her child and husband. They were released on Dec. 20, 1803, and made their way to one of the Filicchi estates where William would rapidly decline over the following week and die on Dec. 27, 1803. After his death, Elizabeth and Ann remained in Italy and Elizabeth began her conversion experience.

After William Seton's death, the Filicchis took Elizabeth and Ann in for the two months. During their time in Italy, Seton buried her husband and focused her energy on religion. Guided by the Filicchis, Seton and Ann toured the Tuscany region, visiting chapels that were ornately decorated with "ceilings in carved gold, alter loaded with gold, silver, and other precious ornaments, pictures of every sacred subject and the dome a continued representation of different parts of Scripture."⁸ While reveling in the beauty of the chapels, Seton recalled "Solomons vanity and vexation of Spirit," worrying of the placement of her fascination with ostentatious wealth and beauty within her religious life.⁹ As Seton continued to be confronted by magnificent artwork in the Uffizi gallery, she struggled with opulence and the role it played within her faith.¹⁰ Many of the pieces were "Sacred Representations...sufficient to engage and interest all my

⁸ EAS Florence Journal to Rebecca Seton, January 1804, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 283, 284.

⁹ EAS *ibid*

¹⁰ The Uffizi Gallery is located in Florence and during the early 19th century was subjected to Napoleonic raids and capturing of artwork, much to the horror of Elizabeth Seton.

attention.”¹¹ Seton comments specifically on a painting of the “Madonna holding an hour glass in one hand and a skull in the other with a smiling look expressing I fear neither time nor death.”

¹² Seton’s internal conflict over the beauty of the artwork and the effect it played on her religious health continued, but she was often moved to tears when she recalled her journeys in journals to Rebecca saying “in a short time” she had obtained more joy from the cultural and religious delights she was viewing than she “could have obtained in years out of [her] own Cabinet of precious things.”¹³ The glorious buildings filled with fantastic artwork made Seton exclaim biblical verse to describe how she felt the art had lifted her soul saying “My soul does magnify the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.”¹⁴ And while she still battled internally about the value of a gilded church, she was also confronted with the Filicchis religious teachings on communion making her ponder the validity of teachings in both the Protestant and Catholic churches.

While grappling with the effects that the magnificent artwork had on Seton's faith, she was also confronted with the subject of transubstantiation for the first time. Transubstantiation is the Catholic doctrine stating that when a priest consecrates the bread and wine used during the sacrament of communion, it became the actual body and blood of Christ. While at first Seton was shocked by this new concept, she was willing to entertain conversation and debate about the validity of the beliefs. Seton's concentration on communion was not a development that arose from prolonged exposure to the Filicchis in Italy, but one she had always felt a deep connection to, and Catholicism offered her a new reason to highlight its importance. The fascination with the sacrament of communion and the overall significance and meaning of it within religious life was

¹¹ EAS Florence Journal to Rebecca Seton, January 1804, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 285-286.

¹² EAS Florence journal to Rebecca Seton, January 1804, 285.

¹³ EAS Florence Journal to Rebecca Seton, January 1804, 288.

¹⁴ EAS Florence Journal to Rebecca Seton, January 1804. 285-286

hotly debated among other Americans at the time; therefore it was not unusual for Seton to focus on this ritual as well.¹⁵

Seton and Ann left Italy at the beginning of March of 1804 and returned to their family in New York. While Seton was re-immersed in her home church, surrounded by her supportive Protestant community, she continued to struggle with questions concerning Catholicism. She began introducing Catholic rituals into her daily life, such as blessing her children and herself with the sign of the cross. Seton also deeply missed the inability to receive communion every day as she had become accustomed to while living in Italy.¹⁶ While her admiration for Catholicism and ritual grew during her time spent in Italy, Seton was profoundly aware of the potential issues that could arise with holding those Catholic beliefs in New York. The majority of the newly formed United States was not open to having Catholicism as part of their religious discussion, so Seton's conversion was unsettling to many of her peers. A prominent member of elite society joined the Catholic faith, potentially threatening the tenuous, seemingly homogenous nature of Protestant American religious life. Bishop John Henry Hobart attempted to dissuade Seton from her new fascinations with Catholicism by stating that many of the practices she was interested in were considered "old customs," however, even Hobart was unable to convince her to return to her Episcopal roots.¹⁷ The more time she devoted to Catholicism, the more she became convinced that it was the true path and her thoughts can be traced through several journals and

¹⁵ The early republic was rife with a variety of religious groups that were all fractured from one another depending on their ideas surrounding communion, authority figures, and the structure of church services. The differences of opinion led to religious gatherings called revivals becoming somewhat popular and a center for people to formally and informally debate religious doctrine. One of the more famous examples is the Cane Ridge Revival that was occurring in Kentucky in 1801 that drew in thousands of participants and the event centered around a communion service. Paul Conkin, author of *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* states that "the Cane Ridge communion marked the climax, not the end, of the most exciting communion season in the history of American Presbyterianism." Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost*. The University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, Wisconsin, 1990.

¹⁶ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, April 18, 1804. 296-297.

¹⁷ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton April 18, 1804. 296. Seton quotes Hobart telling her that many of the actions she picked up and began using in her daily and religious life were "old customs." More discussion on this can be found in chapter two.

letters to her family members, priests, and the Filicchis. Within these conversations, Seton's theology evolves and became what a mixture of her traditional Protestant beliefs with newly discovered Catholic doctrines, creating a hybrid unique to Seton that highlighted the importance of communion and the value of suffering.

Seton's newfound fascination with Catholicism allowed her to justify a previously instilled love of communion that became the central aspect of her conversion and theology. While within the context of Protestantism, communion was a symbolic representation that was practiced once or twice a month, the Catholic faith elevated the sacrament, stating that it was the literal body and blood of Christ and allowed her to be a participating member of God's physical body and allowed her to partake every single day if she so desired. Transubstantiation, the aforementioned belief in the physical alteration of communion through the blessing of the priest becomes the physical body of Christ, was Seton's clear point of conversion to the Catholic faith. Seton envisioned transubstantiation to mean the through partaking in the act she could possess God, therefore, had a sense of authority over the fate of her and her children's salvation.

Prior to even hearing about transubstantiation, Seton felt a great draw to communion. In the Episcopal Church, communion, while not as central as it was within the Catholic Church, still played a pivotal role within the Seton's religious experience. While in Italy, she kept a journal of letters she was writing to her sister-in-law, Rebecca, and documents the many concepts she was learning from the Filicchis with comparisons between her church in New York and the services she attended in Italy. In a letter to her Rebecca, she expounds the wonders of being able to participate in "mass here every morning" but mentions the tragedy she finds in being unable to participate in religious life as often when she returns to the United States as she recollected to Rebecca "how often you and I used to give the sigh and you would press your arm in mine of a

Sunday evening and say *NO MORE till next Sunday* as we turned from the church door.”¹⁸ Seton expanded on the wonders of being able to participate in the ritual every day by recalling how their shared love of communion had been points of mockery: “we were laughed at for running from one church to the other *Sacrament Sundays*.”¹⁹ While previously, their obsession had been of something seen as a mere ritual within the Episcopal church, the concept of transubstantiation allowed for theological importance they had always been missing. Seton, along with Rebecca, were already convinced of its sanctity, but the Catholic faith enabled Seton not only to acknowledge it but place reasoning for the devotion and inviolability of the sacrament. While Seton's commitment to the practice of communion was an individual understanding of its importance in America, in Italy, among the Catholics, it was central to the way they worshipped. The frequency of communion and the church services that Seton was able to attend while in Italy helped eventually solidify her commitment to the Catholic church because of the new ideas of transubstantiation.

While in transit from America to Italy, Seton understood communion as a mere symbolic measure that was central to her faith, but not necessarily fundamental to the Protestant faith. Because of this, Seton believed that she could perform the ritual of communion herself. When her husband William was about to die, he said how he wished “we could have the Sacrament” and Seton obliged.²⁰ Seton, in an effort to appease her husband, immediately began “putting a little wine in a glass I said different portions of Psalms and Prayers which I had marked hoping for a happy moment.”²¹ William, through his acceptance of Seton's makeshift communion,

¹⁸ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, April 18, 1804, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 297

¹⁹EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, April 18, 1804, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000),297.

²⁰ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, December 26, 1803, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 273

²¹ Elizabeth Seton to Rebecca Seton, December 26, 1803. 273

relinquished all religious authority to Seton recognizing her right and ability to perform the sacrament, as the two of them understood communion. Four years before establishing her religious society, she was already recognized by her husband as capable of interpreting what constituted as communion. In performing this ritual herself, she also believes she has the same power over communion that a priest would have, either marking the devaluation of priests in her mind or highlighting a higher opinion of herself. Either way, it was unusual and highly irregular that she would practice such a crude form of communion, but it was deemed necessary for the desperate situation in which they found themselves. While she does practice a form of communion, there was no formalized ritual in Seton's method, but instead a series of prayers that she had liked. So while she does value communion, she does not recognize it as a systematized function of the church. Seton did not feel as if there needed to be a specified way of practice as she merely said a variation of prayers and psalms and not a specific Eucharistic Rite. Seton, in her interpretation of the ritual, believes that she has as much authority over communion as her husband does, and her husbands' acceptance reaffirms her authority.

During the time Seton spent in Italy, her understanding of who was able to celebrate the eucharist was altered because of new concepts surrounding communion. After being introduced to the theological idea of transubstantiation by the Filicchis, Seton began shifting her views on who was able to preside over the sacrament and from where that authority came. While Seton did not believe in transubstantiation during her time in Italy, she was, however, excited by the perceived meaning and the reverence in which many Catholics treated the ritual. The acceptance of the role of the priest during this time expanded as she experienced communion with a different understanding of what it meant within the Catholic tradition. In her journal, she expressed a developing understanding of the necessity of the priesthood by aggrandizing the men as more than human because of the elevated meaning of the services. When Mrs. Filicchi took Seton and

Ann “with her to mass as she calls it, and we say to church,” she explained the importance the concept of transubstantiation to Seton for the first time.²² Seton explains in her journal to Rebecca that “they told me *God* was present in the blessed sacrament” and the impact of such a revelation was so overwhelming to her that it “gave such strange impression to my soul that I could but cover my face with my hands and let the tears run.”²³ The effect of God being present with her in the same room, only through the ability of the priest who was a “tall pale meek heavenly looking man” yet had the inordinate ability to call upon God, therefore was “more than human person as he seemed to me.”²⁴ She begins to evolve her beliefs about communion because of her new understanding of the priesthood within the context of transubstantiation. Those calling upon God to transform the eucharist imbued new importance to communion and the priests. Because of this new ideology, her description of the priest seems to represent that she genuinely believed that they had some authority over the presence of God that she did not. That, paired with the coincidence of the lighting reflecting off the alter producing an illuminating effect on the priest, perhaps made her transition into giving an exclusive authority to priest a little easier. By accepting the priest power, she would be no longer responsible for the transformation of the eucharist. The believed ability to call upon God to enter a specific form was life changing for Elizabeth Seton.

As her time in Italy continued, so did her time in Catholic Mass. Within her first couple days of exposure, a “poor young Englishman at the very moment the Priest was doing the most sacred action they call the elevation...this wild young man said loud in my ear this is what they call the real *PRESENCE*—my very heart trembled with shame and sorrow for his unfeeling

²² EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, February 2, 1804. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 289.

²³ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, February 2, 1804. 290.

²⁴ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton February 2, 1804, 290.

interruption of their sacred adoration.”²⁵ To Seton, interruption any form of a eucharistic rite was unforgivable, and although she did not believe in the Catholic teachings, she was respectful to their beliefs. Her understanding that the Catholic views on the eucharist were more elaborate than her own conditioned her to pity the young man and his lack of compassion for another’s beliefs. The callous interruption made her more sympathetic to understand and accept the role of the eucharist within the Catholic tradition. She continued that she had "bent from him to the pavement and thought secretly on the words of St. Paul with starting tears ‘they discern not the Lords body’ and the next thought was how should they eat and drink their very damnation for not *discerning* it, if indeed it is not *there*.”²⁶ While Seton struggled to understand the seemingly thoughtless acceptance by the participants in the Mass, fearing that folly would lead to damnation, she did come to the defense of the Catholics when confronted by the outrageous interruption of a religious service. Seton's frustration made her question her own bias towards the service, resulting in a more in-depth analysis of what the sacrament truly meant and whether or not she could believe it.

During Seton’s struggle over the truth of transubstantiation, she meditates in a letter to Rebecca on the powers of God and his ability as it relates to communion: "yet how should it be *there*, and how did he breathe my Soul in me, and how and how a hundred other things I know nothing about.”²⁷ Her internal struggle pitted acts of God against each other and acknowledged her own inability to understand the power of God. Her argument with herself points to her shifting perspective on the actuality of the God within the sacrament because she respects her inability to understand how God had performed miracles in the past, including the miracle of her

²⁵ Elizabeth Seton journal to Rebecca Seton February 10, 1804, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 291.

²⁶ EAs Journal to Rebecca Seton, February 10, 1804. 291.

²⁷ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, February 10, 1804. 291.

own life. Seton also diminishes herself in the admittance of knowing nothing of "a hundred other things," lessening her role within the church while simultaneously, through arriving at this conclusion, strengthening it.²⁸ Seton had to justify the dismissal of herself as an authority in order to believe in the reality of transubstantiation but only arrived at this conclusion once she had meditated on her role within the church based on her understanding of God. In an attempt to devalue her thought, she, in fact, highlights her desire to understand God and his nature.

With the elevation of the priest, her authority over the sacrament waned. Seton also had a growing conflict about denominational differences as she felt the Catholics were benefitting more from their beliefs in transubstantiation than she was in her own. Within the Filicchi household itself, she discusses their home chapel that holds communion in it, and how much she desperately wants to have the belief that God was present within the bread and wine. She commented that "in a moment of excessive distress I fell on my knees without thinking when the Blessed Sacrament passed by and cried in an agony to God *to bless me* if he was *there*, that my whole Soul desired only him."²⁹ Seton was so desperate out of a want to believe that she could be within feet of God, struggled with the closeness of the sacrament, begged God for affirmation of his presence. While she was desperate for some reassurance by God as to what the truth was, she simultaneously developed the understanding that transubstantiation instilled a pseudo-ownership of God.

Seton's interpretation of transubstantiation culminated in an analysis of traditional Catholic theology that posited that through transubstantiation Catholics could somewhat control God. In a section of her journal she wrote as if writing a letter to Rebecca saying: "My sister dear how happy would we be if we believed that these dear souls believe, that they *possess God* in the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ EAS Journal to Rebecca Seton, February 24, 1804. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 292-293.

Sacrament and that he remains in their churches and is carried to them when they are sick.”³⁰

Seton’s belief that transubstantiation meant that humans possess the ability to both call upon God to enter a particular form and be able to move him from location to location was comforting to Seton, yet, as she points out, a luxury with which she was not yet comfortable providing herself. She goes on to tell Rebecca that "when they carry the B[lessed] Sacrament under my Window while I feel the full loneliness and sadness of my case I cannot stop the tears at the thought my God how happy would I be even so far away from all so dear, if I could find you in the church as they do."³¹ While she longs for the same trust in the ‘real presence’ of God within the sacraments, a presence that she could identify with a specific location, she was unable to commit completely.

Seton’s indoctrination by the Filicchis was an apparent attempt to convince her to convert to the Catholic Church. Education on transubstantiation was the method that proved most effective on Seton, especially with the development of her own added significance. As she continued conversations with the Filicchis, she was confronted with the views that the Catholic Church was the only true faith. In a conversation Seton had with “Mr. F[ilicchi]...began to tell me there was only one true Religion and without a right Faith we would not be acceptable to God.”³² Troubled by this statement, Seton goes on to ask “if there is but one Faith and nobody pleases God without it, where are all the good people who die out of it.”³³ While Filicchi did not know the answer to her question, his statement itself concerned her, causing her to "pray and enquire," allowing herself to become fascinated with transubstantiation and communion. If she wanted to accept the Catholic ownership of God, then conversion became necessary.

Furthermore, the prospect of death and damnation for not only herself but her children as well

³⁰ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, February 24, 1804, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 292.

³¹ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, February 24, 1804. 292.

³² EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, February 10, 1804. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 291.

³³ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, February 10, 1804. 290.

frightened her, and because of this, the ability to influence God's decisions proved quite convincing.

Upon returning to the United States, Seton's struggles with communion and her relationship with the Catholic Church continued. She kept up her correspondence with the Filicchis and began relationships with the Catholic priests around New York. As she works through her confusion and frustration, she kept a journal to Amabilia Filicchi where she allowed her most unhindered opinions to flow. In September of 1804, Seton wrote that when she went to church one Sunday, "I got in a side pew which turned my face towards the Catholic Church in the next street, and found myself twenty times speaking to the Blessed Sacrament there instead of looking at the naked altar where I was minding the routine of prayers."³⁴ Her utter frustration with the genuine desire to be in the Catholic Church was palpable, as she criticizes the emptiness of the Protestant church and the service in general. Seton's admittance of speaking to the sacrament was her recognition that she believes that God was present within the Catholic eucharist, but does not seem to think that God exists within her church. Seton rapidly lost faith that the Protestant Church was God's Church, as she profoundly missed the feeling of being within "your blessed Church of Annunciation in Florence all turning to the one only desire to see the way most pleasing to God."³⁵ Her time in Italy marked her transitions from one faith to another, specifically the beliefs that she inherited from the Filicchis.

As it became clear that Seton was in danger of conversion, her Episcopal priest, Mr. Hobart, continuously attacked the Catholic Church as depraved and lost. When discussing the practice of communion, citing a typical argument against Catholicism, Hobart asked: "how can you believe that there are as many gods as there are millions of altars and tens of millions of

³⁴ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, September 1804. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 370.

³⁵ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, September 1804. 370

blessed hosts all over the world.”³⁶ But Seton pushed back that it was possible because “it is GOD who does it, the same God who fed so many thousands with the little barley loaves and little fishes, multiplying them of course in the hands which distributed them.”³⁷ By referencing the biblical tale of Jesus feeding the five thousand Seton justified her own belief as well as the practices of the Catholic Church and marked herself as an authority above Hobart. She begins to believe that God was present in the sacrament, saying "I look straight at my GOD and see that nothing is so very hard to believe in it, since it is He who does it."³⁸ Her claim that she was looking straight at God was her acknowledgment that she believes God was present within the sacrament of communion once it had been blessed and therefore she was able to visualize him as such.

She continued to remain within the Episcopal Church for another seven months, but it was a constant struggle for her to commit to the practices of the church fully. She described herself as "half dead with the inward struggle when they said the Body and blood of Christ" because she was taught it was to be "Spiritually taken and received."³⁹ Seton's description of herself as half-dead was a radical description of her failing to participate within the Protestant faith fully. To quell her struggles with the lack of recognition of the presence of God within the church services of the Episcopal church, she recalls an exercise that an Irish Catholic priest had taught her while in Italy. She began to "read the prayers after COMMUNION, but finding every word addressed to our dear Savior as really present and conversing with it."⁴⁰ While she

³⁶ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, September 1804, 370.

³⁷ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, September 1804, 370

³⁸ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, September 1804, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 370.

³⁹ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805. 373.

⁴⁰ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805. 374.

acknowledged the lack of the presence of God in that specific act of communion, she does yearn for the Catholic belief and prays over it like she had received it in the Catholic Church.

Seton's relationship with God strengthened once she converted, as she believed that she was consuming the body and blood of Christ, therefore the soul of Christ through it. On the day of her Confirmation, she wrote to Amabilia that "GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS."⁴¹ The act of taking communion was her final transition into Catholicism, and upon the administration she felt a claim over God, literally saying "I HAVE RECEIVED HIM."⁴² She became the household for God and was no longer concerned about the fate of her soul stating "now let all go its round" meaning she was prepared for the eventuality of death now that she had taken in God. She describes the act as a King "come to take his throne...it was but a triumph of joy and gladness that the deliverer was come and my defence and shield and strength and Salvation made mine for this World and the next."⁴³ She was able to claim his protection fully for herself, creating surety that she was destined for heaven. While she does compare God to a conquering warrior, there was an act of unity that goes on within her description, and she became imbued with the same sorts of abilities that she described as God's: the ability to defend, shield, and strengthen her salvation. While in the past she seemed to have no ownership over her fate, the Catholic Church and her understanding of transubstantiation created a sense of surety. The thrill that Seton had some feeling of ownership over God that ensures her of her fated afterlife was central to her conversion, but only through the sacrament of transubstantiation was she able to achieve this ownership. Along with her idea of control over God, God owns her as she feels "all the powers of my soul held fast by him who came with so much Majesty to take possession of this little poor

⁴¹ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, March 25, 1805, 376. ; Confirmation is a specific service that dedicates new members to the Catholic Church, and it allows them to participate in communion.

⁴² EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, March 25, 1805, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 376.

⁴³ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, March 25, 1805, 277.

Kingdom—"44 In asserting this dominance over God, it made her feel assured that she would be admitted into heaven in death. Because her reading of the scriptures had allowed her to believe that God has ordained the process of transubstantiation as a miracle, she feels she could debate with God on its truth.⁴⁵

The value of transubstantiation as perceived by Seton was the ability to control the destination of her soul after death. Therefore, communion and death tied tightly in Seton's mind. Even before arriving at the Filicchi estate and being introduced to transubstantiation, she recognized the ritual to be a necessary key to heaven. When discussing Christmas, she recognized it, as "the day of our dear Redeemers birth here you know is the day that opened to us the door of everlasting life."⁴⁶ The connection of birth and death, even in the subtle phrasing of her association of Christmas to everlasting life, it was clear that Christ's death and the remembrance of that was what she places the most emphasis on, making it reasonable for communion to be central to her understanding of Christianity. However, after her conversion, the links became even more pronounced because of her faith in the eventuality of heaven. When discussing her shock that more people have failed to convert and not understand the glories of the Catholic Church says that she sees "more mystery in the blindness of redeemed souls than in any of the mysteries proposed in the church," was a subtle comment on peoples dismissal of her and her faith. But she goes on to discuss how she does not care about what the others would think of her because of her eventual "rest with GOD—the tabernacle and Communion—so now I can pass the Valley of Death itself."⁴⁷ Seton was joined with God within the tabernacle because of communion, therefore does not have to worry anymore about the afterlife.

⁴⁴ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, March 25, 1805. 377.

⁴⁵ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805, 164

⁴⁶ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, December 26, 1803. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 273.

⁴⁷ EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi, April 18, 1805. 378.

Seton's conversion to Catholicism was partially thanks to her predisposition towards the sacrament of communion and the general ability of the Catholics to highlight its significance. Her belief that communion was one of the most important rites she could have participated in while she was a member of the Episcopal Church enabled her to make the transition to the belief in transubstantiation. Through her conversion, her acceptance of the miracle of transubstantiation helped her understand a long-standing belief in the value of a rite she felt had been overlooked by other members of her past religious life. Through transubstantiation, she reasoned that her conversion to Catholicism would enable her to guarantee the promise of heaven to herself and her children. Because transubstantiation supposedly alters the physical essence of the eucharist, it gave Seton a little bit of control over God and therefore the afterlife of herself and her children. Seton's conversion was because of her understanding of communion and how it altered according to the theology she was presented with and the theology she determined for herself. It led Seton to rejection from her family and other friend groups, establishing permanently that her conversion was for herself and her nuclear family because it was what she believed was the true faith.

Theology of Suffering: Penance by Trials

Laying on her cot in a ship sailing to the hopeful land of salvation of her sick, dying husband, Elizabeth Seton dreamed that she was struggling to climb a mountain, and when near the top an “almost exhausted a voice said—‘Never mind take courage there is a beautiful green hill on the other side-and on it an angel waits for you.’”⁴⁸ When she awoke, she perceived the dream to be speaking about her husband’s failing health, that soon he would be well again. Instead, the mountain that had appeared to her was the embodiment of the suffered endured in life, and when the eventuality of death befell her, the reward for her endurance would be heaven.

Her husband’s illness was constantly at the forefront of her mind while the ship pitched back and forth, making her “little Anna...very sick,” but the hope for husband’s recovery guided the journey for their small group of three.⁴⁹ What the dream did not tell Seton was that she was only at the base of her mountain, her suffering would only intensify from this point in her journey onward. The grassy hill that she was so hopeful for, the health of her family, would never be achieved. She would live the next ten years of her life as an ostracized convert to Catholicism, watching as many members of her family die painful deaths until she would succumb herself in 1821. Suffering and pain was the mountain she continuously climbed to which there was no relief or comfort, only the need to move forward until death.

During the Seton’s trip home from Italy, questions of Catholicism weighed heavily on Seton’s mind. While she grew to appreciate many of the new religious concepts she had encountered, she continued to question the validity of the Catholic Church and her relationship to it. While Seton’s eventual transition from the Episcopal Church to the Catholic Church was based in emotion, everything that evolved out of discussions about her reasoning for shifting was

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Ann Seton journal to Rebecca Seton, November 8, 1803, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 246.

⁴⁹ EAS to Eliza Sadler, October 3, 1803. 244

her own theology. Seton's letters point out that her conversion was not based in a specific church doctrine, but instead actively working out her own theology based upon what she believed to be true within the Catholic Church.

As Seton contemplated the theological shift, she was also considering a personal transformation. Seton recognized that if she were ever to convert to Catholicism, she would be disowned from her family. Although women during the 1800s were known for joining groups that allowed them to assert control over their religion and form groups of women together, ultimately her conversion risked alienating her from those groups which she was already a member of. Eventually, her conversion forced her to move to Maryland where she felt accepted and she could openly practice her beliefs. The deep-seated nativist fear in America made the conversion incredibly tricky, and Seton was aware of the consequences.

Seton, a convert to Catholicism, developed new theology surrounding suffering and death that was dependent on previously held Protestant ideas. Seton's conversion married Catholic rituals and theology of penance with American Protestant practices of death, making Catholicism palatable. Seton asserted that there was a viable pathway to salvation that was not dependent on the denomination, but instead the belief in Christ and the suffering endured by all people. She proposed that all suffering was a perpetual act of penance as prescribed by the Catholic Church in confession. Therefore, any type of pain inflicted on a person was palpable proof of an eventual entrance into heaven. Neither the Catholics nor the Protestants taught that pain was the pathway to forgiveness and salvation in the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. However, Seton utilized Catholic ideologies of penance to bolster her convictions regarding the state of suffering and its link to atonement. Seton's development of this set of beliefs, therefore, made her a theologian.

Seton's conversion to Catholicism began during her time spent in Italy after the death of her husband, William. Staying with the Filicchis, her late husband's trading partners, Seton became entranced with the subject of transubstantiation, and eventually, her conversion was predicated upon this belief and her understanding of the concept.⁵⁰ Seton developed her theology alongside official Catholic teachings, combining her preconceived ideas centered around mortality and Catholic ritual to create a unique brand of American Catholicism that emphasized penance within daily life. Seton's Catholicism would, over time, influence how women in America interpreted the Catholic faith, especially once she founded the Sisters of Charity, the first American-based female religious order. Over the next two centuries, her influence and personal convictions helped build that community from starting as a school for girls until it blossomed into a full religious order. Seton's focus on suffering is the central topic of this chapter as the subject of suffering was the primary arena in which she articulated her synthesis of Catholic and Protestant beliefs

The concept of suffering shaped Elizabeth Seton, and it became a pillar of her theology and an essential factor in her conversion from Protestant to Catholic. While prior to her conversion, Seton believed that suffering was the means to an audience with God, who provided comfort in times of struggle, during her conversion it became a form of constant repentance, therefore ownership over her soul. By tracing her life, specifically the letters and journal entries surrounding her husband's death, the shift in Seton's own views of suffering can be followed. Prior to Williams illness, Seton believed the pains of life "God is with us—and if sufferings abound in us, his Consolations also greatly abound, and far exceed all utterance."⁵¹ As someone endured, God became the source of comfort, so while not alleviating the pain, ensured the person

⁵⁰ Transubstantiation is the Catholic belief that the Eucharist becomes the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ.

⁵¹ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, November 19, 1803. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 253.

a direct connection. Suffering came with the acknowledgment of a joined comfort of God, and any ill felt was outweighed by the love put forward by God. During Williams illness and the constant barrage of horrible situations that befell the Seton family, the lines between love and pain became blurred for Seton because at some point they were the same: "the dear the tender the gracious love with which every moment has been marked in these my heavy hours of trial."⁵² God's love became united with the suffering, and the long, arduous journey that they made was therefore marred by both. Seton accepted God's role in her life as merely that of comfort. God was not to act as an interventionist deity in her early theology, but as one that offers solace.

As the journey to Italy continued and Seton as became less convinced that her husband would survive, her ideology of God and suffering shifted. While God was once the comforter in a time of trial, but neither the maker or reliever of any agony, she moved to the belief that God sets trials and "the Lord support and strengthen us in it. Retrospection brings anguish—press forward toward the mark and prize."⁵³ The success for enduring the trial would be heaven, but there must be a trial through pain. Yet, while the trial of anguish existed, the faithful person can survive because the Lord gave them strength. This belief was parroted by her daughter Anna during their quarantine in Italy when she asked her mother "One thing always troubles me mamma—Christ says they who would reign with Him must suffer with Him—and if I was now cut off where should I go for I have not yet suffered."⁵⁴ Seton's complete devotion to the message of trial through pain was taught to her daughter during their captivity, forcing questions of what pain was. As Seton points out one line later, Ann was sick and "coughs very much with a great deal of pain in her breast," but this pain was not the point of concern for Ann; instead she

⁵² EAS to Julia Scott, October 28, 1803. 245.

⁵³ EAS Journal to Rebecca Seton, November 20, 1803, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 254.

⁵⁴ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, November 29, 1804. 260

was grateful because she believed that "“when the pain comes in my Breast...God will call me soon and take me from this world where I am always offending him, and how good that would be, if he gives me a sickness that I may bear patiently, that I may try and please him.””⁵⁵ Not only did Seton believe that suffering and redemption were linked, she passed on this belief so that others could share in her theological stance. This view of suffering as a trial of faithfulness helped Seton endure the death of her husband and the many ordeals to come.

As their quarantine came to an end, so did William’s life. Upon their release on Dec. 19, the Setons moved in with the Filicchi family, yet the illness endured for months by William was not as easily released. On Dec. 24, Seton commented on William’s declining condition by stating that “constant suffering and for the first day confined to bed” but this suffering was paired with the communion and “setting aside the sorrow of time, in the views of the joys of eternity.”⁵⁶ Seton was so focused on the eternal life she was sure would greet him after his prolonged pain because his “submission to Gods will so uniform...throughout his trial, that it became sinful to doubt one moment of his reception through the merits of his redeemer.”⁵⁷ Seton, convinced of the redemptive power of suffering, had all but guaranteed William a place in Heaven, believing he had passed God's test. The maintenance of faith and the goodness of God through even the slowest and most miserable situation was a signal of true faith and how to ensure a place in Heaven. Seton's belief that God puts forth impossible situations for people to overcome through faith made suffering a necessary part of religious life.

The nature of what constituted as suffering was fluid for Seton, ranging from personal illness to the devastation of a lost relationship, but it was an essential part of Seton's Christianity.

⁵⁵ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, November 29, 1803. 261.

⁵⁶ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, December 24, 1803. 273.

⁵⁷ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, December 27, 1803. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000),275.

After William died, she acknowledged the reality of the hardship that her husband's death posed, but also, simultaneously ignoring it for the future she believed was certain if she should succeed in passing God's pain tests. The ability to live in a dualistic understanding of pain enabled Seton to grapple with the reality of adversity in her life and her family. William died on Dec.27, and Seton "took my little Ann in my arms and made her kneel with me again by the dear Body, and thank our Heavenly Father for relieving him from his misery, for the Joyful assurance that thro' our Blessed Redeemer he had entered into Life Eternal and implored his Protecting care and pity for us who have yet to finish our course."⁵⁸ This release to death followed by Seton's assured conviction that her husband was going to heaven arose out of her link of suffering and pain to the trials of God.

Seton's belief in the trials of suffering not only include her husband's pain ensuring that he would be prepared for the afterlife but the agony she endured while watching him die and the misfortune of having to continue her life without him. But this was yet another test because Seton "cannot doubt the Mercy of God who by depriving me of my dearest tie on earth will certainly draw me nearer to him."⁵⁹ Through both her heightened ability to devote time to God and her belief that suffering prepared one for the afterlife ensured her that the reality of pain was ultimately positive in her religious life. The lack of her greatest tie to earth, while devastating, prepared her for the existence of the afterlife and readied her to leaven when God called her.

After her husband's death, Seton and her daughter Ann remained in Italy with the Filicchis for about four months. During this time, Seton was exposed to Catholicism, and with Catholicism, the practice of penance and absolution. In a letter to Rebecca, she explains her discovery by telling her "they believe all we do and suffer, if we offer it for our sins serves to

⁵⁸ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, December 27, 1803. 274.

⁵⁹ EAS draft of a letter to Rev. John Henry Hobart. N.D. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000),305.

expiate them."⁶⁰ This was not her first time being exposed to the idea of suffering as part of penance, and when recollecting to Rebecca her past encounters with it, Seton discussed how when she had asked "Mr. [John Henry] H[obart] what was meant by fasting in our prayer books...you may remember what he said about it being *old customs*."⁶¹ While in the past she had not pressed the question of penance, her journey to Italy and exposure to what had once been so dismissed by Hobart, she yet again questioned the role of penance in her religious life. In discussions with "dear Mrs. F[ilicchi]" Seton notes that "she offers her weakness and pain of fasting for her sins united with our Saviours suffering—I like that very much."⁶² Seton was still hesitant on the belief, but the reward that suffering ensured drew her into the ideas.

As Seton and Ann returned to America, she built upon her newly discovered concepts of penance, shifting yet again her ideas of pain and suffering. The radical ideas that she was espousing quickly concerned some of her friends, yet she continued to develop her thought through her many letters to Antonio Filicchi and Bishop John Carroll. She waded through years of political and religious contention, comparing the testimonies given by "the clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church" saying "that they are a True Church" to the knowledge she had gained during her time in Italy, desperate for her "soul to know the Truth."⁶³ While she continued to question the validity of the Catholic Church as an institution, she did adopt some of the principles she learned in Italy into her faith, specifically the ideas of penance. Seton, remembering her "impurities and unholiness before God...wonder how we can expect from his so great a favor as the light of his truth until the sorrow and penance of my remaining <years> life shall invite his pitying mercy to grant it."⁶⁴ Seton earnestly believed that the only way to be

⁶⁰ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, April 18, 1804. 296.

⁶¹ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, April 18, 1804. 296.

⁶² EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, April 18 1804. 296.

⁶³ EAS to John Carroll, July 26, 1804. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 316.

⁶⁴ EAS to Antonio Filicchi, September 8, 1804. 319.

granted the truth of salvation is to suffer until God feels sorry for her. She was distorting traditional Catholic doctrine in regard to atonement, but through her new ideologies, she was specifically speaking to lessons learned while in Italy about what penance and atonement were meant for. Seton, while still a practicing member of the Episcopal Church, inserted some Catholic ideas, and many of her friends became uncomfortable with her new faith.

As Seton held to her belief that suffering ensured salvation with Christ, she muddled through her final reservations of conversion in her journal to Amabilia Filicchi. Seton was desperate "to worship our God in Truth" yet was constantly presented with "a thousand uncertainties and doubts in [her] mind."⁶⁵ Within her confusion, she grappled with the frustration that both the Catholics and the Protestants rejected each other from heaven. While Seton felt she had lived "all my days in the thought that all and everybody would be Saved who meant well," that was not how many others saw the role of denominational boundaries.⁶⁶ As her new ideologies of trials through suffering evolved, it allowed her comfort, believing that Christians may go to heaven because all suffer. When Seton's friend, Eliza Sadler, came to visit, they discussed Sadler's issues with Seton conforming to some Catholic thought. Seton wrote to Amabilia that Sadler had argued that Seton "had penance enough without seeking it among Catholics" Seton countered with the fact that "we bear all the pain without the merit, Yet I do try sincerely to turn all mine for account of my Soul."⁶⁷ Seton implied that without the Catholic doctrine of penance, any suffering done is not done for Christ, therefore there had to be conscious recognition that all suffering was done for God. There had to be meaningful suffering in order to be fully participatory in the system of penance and redemption. While it was Catholic

⁶⁵ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, September 1804, 371.

⁶⁶ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, August 28, 1804. In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 369.

⁶⁷ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, November 1, 1804. 372.

principles guiding her, the expansion of penance to everyday life is not doctrinal to the Catholic Church, but instead an example of Seton's theological intervention.

The traditional practice of penance in the Catholic Church was dependent on a member of the church confessing their sins to a priest and the priest then prescribing them a particular task in order to expiate sins. Seton expansion it to everyday life made all pain an avenue for sacrifice and penitence: "I hoped the more I suffered in this life the more I hoped to be spared in the next as I believed God would accept my pains in atonement for my sins."⁶⁸ While Seton began holding to those ideas, she felt a continuous "coldness...from my friends in general because of my Catholic sentiments."⁶⁹ Ultimately, her conversion to Catholicism led her and her family to suffer at the hands of those she once loved and was no longer able to rely on them for comfort and support.

After months of debate, Seton finally sought confirmation in the Catholic Church, her deep faith that suffering leads to atonement led her to her conversion. Seton made her decision in January of 1805, telling her close friend, Amabilia Filicchi, wife of Antonio Filicchi, that she sought "God and his church and expect to find my peace in them not in the people."⁷⁰ This seemingly small announcement meant that she could begin pursuing a conversion to the Catholic church while also acknowledging the potential for ending relationships with family and friends. In the same letter, she discussed her attendance at the Episcopal Church, St. George, yet the sacramental rite of communion she received in that service moved her further away from her traditionally Protestant faith: "if I left the house a Protestant I returned to it a Catholic I think since I determined to go no more to the Protestants."⁷¹ Seton's move from Protestantism was

⁶⁸ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, November 1, 1804. 372.

⁶⁹ EAS draft to an Unidentified French Woman, November 20, 1804. 333. Translated by publisher.

⁷⁰ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805. 373.

⁷¹ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805, In *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 373.

shocking, yet one she felt she could not stop, for “if Faith is so important to our Salvation I will seek it from where true Faith first begun, seek it among those who received it from GOD HIMSELF.”⁷² While ultimately she did profess to her belief in the Council of Trent, she “knew not what the Council of Trent believed, only that it believed what the church of God declared to be its belief, and consequently is now my belief.”⁷³ Her acceptance of the Council of Trent arose out of a need to become Catholic, not because they were essential to her faith. While it was incredibly important for her to be labeled as Catholic, and because of this, any of her theological pronouncements should be considered Catholic theology. While Seton did deviate from doctrinal Catholic faith, because she adopted some of the learned principles into her theology and was confirmed as Catholic, Seton’s theology should be accepted as Catholic as well.

The tenuous connection to Catholicism through the Council of Trent, a doctrine that was foundational to the traditionally accepted theology of the Catholic church was key to understanding her as a theologian. She believed she was Catholic because of what has been offered to her by the Filicchi family; Mr. O'Brian, the Catholic priest in New York; and John Carroll, the first Archbishop of the United States. She took what she understood and made it fit her worldview. Her adoption of penance only worked because of her prior understanding of trials through suffering. As she adopted the Catholic faith into her Protestant life, she merged the ideas to create something she defined as Catholicism, yet was not in accordance with traditional Catholic theology. The merging of the Protestant and the Catholic made something uniquely Seton's, but also helped create a new theological basis for the American Catholic church to work with for the following fifty years until Rome re-established control over the American churches.⁷⁴

⁷² EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805, 374.

⁷³ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, March 14, 1805. 375.

⁷⁴ The Jesuits were responsible for bringing Catholicism to the American Colonies and were responsible for the Catholic faith. However, in 1773 Pope Clement XIV disbanded them and the remaining Jesuits in America created

Seton's belief in the Council of Trent, though surface at best, enabled her to be "light at heart and cool of head the first time these many months but not without begging our Lord to wrap my heart deep in that opened side so well described in the beautiful Crucifixion, or lock it up in his little tabernacle where I shall now rest forever."⁷⁵ She was in control of both the complicated theological thought that went into her religious faith and what the ultimate result of her practices would be. She also truly believed that her theological assessments were the direct result of praying and being granted information from Christ. Seton described her connection that she felt to Christ as if she was wrapped in his "opened side," articulating she felt directly linked to God.⁷⁶

While Seton was excited about her new-found devotion to Catholicism, and what she perceived to be the truth of pain and suffering were linked Catholicism, she quickly lost the last bit of support she may have had from her Protestant friends. While she knows that "the strictest Protestants allows Salvation to a good Catholick," the sentiment was not often granted to her.⁷⁷ This rejection of Seton would lead her to understand her situation as yet another trial set forth by God to ensure her entrance into heaven. Seton found the experience tolerable because the "poverty" and "suffering, displeasure of my friend all lead me to him."⁷⁸ In the pain of her abandonment, she revels in the joy that "to live forgotten and unloved is a part of Christian perfection."⁷⁹ Suffering became her link to Christ, saying that she was thankful she was able to

the Society of Jesus and took control over the American Catholic Church. During this time all Masses were said in English and they elected their bishops. The Catholic Church restored the Jesuit order by 1814, but this did not reach full effect until 1850 within the United States. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*. (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1972.) 527.

⁷⁵ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, March 14, 1805. 375-376.

⁷⁶ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, March 14, 1805. 375-376.

⁷⁷ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805. in *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 374.

⁷⁸ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, April 25, 1805, in *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 1* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 368

⁷⁹ EAS to Cecilia Seton, September 5, 1808. In *Memoir, Letters, and Journal of Elizabeth Seton: Convert to the Catholic Faith, and Sister of Charity, Volume 2*, ed. Robert Seton, (New York: P. O'Shea, 1869), 30.

share “the bitter cup” and that “his mercies are endless, and I shall not be left without my portion.”⁸⁰ Seton understood all events in her life as a trial being set forth by God, without which she would not be admitted into heaven. She desired to suffer, as it was the only way to ensure eternity with Christ, so while frustrated and hurt by the dismissal of her religious choices by her friends and family, she remained within the Catholic faith.

Seton genuinely did believe that the Catholic Church was the true church, but she also believed that all had the capability of going to heaven. Seton could not fathom the "blindness of redeemed souls" who continued to not believe the Catholic teachings, but accepted that they were saved nonetheless.⁸¹ Seton’s understanding of salvation and acceptance of the Catholic Church was dependent on the heart being given to God, and “if other conditions were required too, the Master certainly has a right to exact them” but this never limited her Protestant friend from seeking salvation in her eyes.⁸² Because all who suffer could be redeemed, it opened avenues to others that were not gifted with the belief in the Catholic Church. When Seton wrote a letter to her friend Mrs. Duplex, a Protestant, and discussed their prolonged separation, denomination was not a barrier to the eventuality of heaven: “Oh! dear sister, to us who look beyond the pains and separations of our present existence, how sweet is the hope of an eternal reunion in the presence of our Lord!”⁸³ The benefit of the pain that they might both be experiencing because of the separation proved to be, for Seton, the potential unifying factor in heaven. They both had suffered together in their inability to take comfort in one another, therefore, had the potential of being redeemed together. Seton continued to envelop other people in her ideal heaven so as not to be separated during death. Even those passed on before her, she

⁸⁰ EAS to Cecilia Seton, July 8, 1808. 21.

⁸¹ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, April 14, 1805. 378.

⁸² EAS to Antonio Filicchi, June 1, 1805. 366.

⁸³ EAS to Mrs. Duplex, February 1809. In *Memoir, Letters, and Journal of Elizabeth Seton: Convert to the Catholic Faith, and Sister of Charity, Volume 2*, ed. Robert Seton, (New York: P. O’Shea, 1869), 43.

did "not miss them half as much as you would think, as according to my *mad notions* it seems as though they are always around me—at all events separation will not be long."⁸⁴ Because all people had suffered in life, they would all be unified in death.

As Seton's order grew, yet more people died, suffering was not just contained to her struggle with life and the removal of sins, but also to the salvation that would be ensured for her in heaven. Suffering paired with death became the driving topic of her religious thought. Seton, for the last ten years of her life, was separated continuously either physically on earth, or spiritually in heaven, from those she loved most. She turned her "pains and separations of our present existence" into "hope of an eternal reunion in the presence of our Lord."⁸⁵ Death provided the release of all suffering, and only once someone had suffered and bound themselves to Christ through a certain amount of pain would God "chase away the clouds of mortality" and "his love will triumph in the hearts of both eventually thro' every danger of the world."⁸⁶

Death provided the pathway to heaven; therefore it was always greeted with a certain amount of joy. When her daughter Ann was incredibly sick in July of 1810, the pleasure of Ann's potential reunification with God made Seton giddy: "When I have seen my Anna in danger of death, I felt a sensation of joy mixed with the mother's pangs; rejoicing in her innocence and anticipating the pressure of human misery."⁸⁷ Seton's desire for Ann to die young arose from of a desire to keep her pure from worldly evil, and although Ann did not die until two years later, she was still just seventeen. Seton felt that "few will be blessed with a death so premature; if some, few; the greater number are, rather to serve."⁸⁸ The death of Ann at such a

⁸⁴ EAS to Mrs. Duplex, June 4, 1810, 99. It is unclear if "mad notions" was italicized in her writing, or if the transcriber added it in.

⁸⁵ EAS draft to friend [possibly Catherine Dupleix] after Ann Barry's death. January 1809. 51.

⁸⁶ EAS to Cecilia Seton, April 3, 1809. 65.

⁸⁷ EAS to Julia Scott, July 20, 1810. In *Memoir, Letters, and Journal of Elizabeth Seton: Convert to the Catholic Faith, and Sister of Charity, Volume 2*, ed. Robert Seton, (New York: P. O'Shea, 1869), 102.

⁸⁸ EAS notebook, N.D. (approximately March 1812), in *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808. vol. 2* ed. Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz (New York: New City Press, 2000), 138.

young age signified her purity and readiness to leave the earthly world behind. Seton's gratitude toward Christ for her daughter's death, even if it was painful and drawn out, was because Ann's return to Christ was a triumph: "O day! Happy day, the last of all; after which eternity alone! But eternity even now—eternity takes its endless course for the soul—a delightful, an inexpressibly delightful course for the blessed soul that watched so well for it during its short time of trial."⁸⁹Eternity was the inescapable and desirable future for Seton, only provided by death.

Suffering as a form of purification eventually relieved by death was the belief Seton came to after years of struggle within her own life and the intense study of the tenets of both the Catholic and the Protestant faiths. Suffering was a trial but also a relief. Seton described her belief saying "pain has become my rest, and my nights never more sweetly passed than when restless and uneasy. Dearest Lord! How good you are to me; you have indeed heard my prayer, always to let me suffer for you, that so I may expiate my offenses; and when the hour of death shall come I may pass immediately from this world into Thy arms of mercy."⁹⁰ Seton rejoiced in suffering, believing that God imposed certain trials, and as long as she suffered with the express intention of serving God, she was dedicating her soul to heaven. In a similar way that Seton's understanding of communion and transubstantiation allowed her some control over her afterlife, so did the pain of daily life. Seton's theology, as it evolved, gave her control when she felt like she had none.

⁸⁹ EAS notebook, ND (approximately 1812). 138.

⁹⁰ EAS to unnamed Clergyman, March 1, 1810. in *Collected Writings: Correspondence and Journals 1808-1820*. vol. 2 ed. Regina Bechtle, Judith Metz. (New York: New City Press, 2002), 107.

Imparting Theology: Teaching and the Formalization of Seton's Theology

Seton, responsible for the salvation of her children, instructed them in her understandings of the theology within the Catholic Church. Her recognition of her culpability for the eternal fate of her children leads her to be hyper-concerned with theology. Seton's obligation to her children that was put upon her by early American ideas of religiosity and citizenship make her fully responsible for the actions and faith of her children. Because of her beliefs of accountability surrounding herself and her actions, she holds full responsibility for the theology that was being imparted to her children, creating a hybrid of Protestant and Catholic thought that was Seton's alone. But not only did she seem to be teaching this to her children, but also her sisters in law, the children at the school she established, and the Sisters of Charity she created in Emmitsburg. Seton adopted concepts of republican motherhood, warped it to justify herself as a religious leader who was responsible of the salvation of those following her theology, and created a systematic way of continuing her religious thought all worked to help define her as a theologian.

In Kerber's *Women of the Republic*, she stated that the "private female virtues might comfortably coexist with the civic virtue that was widely regarded as the center of the Republic" therefore fulfilling the role of a 'republican mother.'⁹¹ Part of maintaining civic virtue was ensuring women were responsible for making their children good members of the republic, and in doing so were responsible for the religious upbringing of their children. While not allowed to have a formal voice in the religious institutions, women in the early republic were expected to take part in religious societies and activities that were purposely meant to "counteract religious indifference, rationalism, and Catholicism and to create enduring and moral social order."⁹² Women's devotion to religion was essential to the structure of the state in providing the correct type of virtuous citizens. Even when women were active in the public sphere through preaching,

⁹¹ Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. 11

⁹² Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1785-1835*. 133.

they were “orthodox in their theology.”⁹³ During the time of the American Revolution, churches tried to halt female preaching, and they “drew sharper lines between the ‘masculine’ and the ‘feminine’” and imposed ideas of republican motherhood. However, in the wake of the Revolution, the great awakenings grew and religious leaders began allowing the presence of women again in a diminutive leadership role.⁹⁴ As Brekus points out, the “nineteenth-century evangelicals affirmed that women had a right to preach as *women*...Influenced by a new ideology of republican motherhood, they celebrated women’s natural virtue and morality in the family of God.”⁹⁵ Both Kerber and Cott made religion out to be a practice of political importance, and the main reason to become involved in faith was to solidify the structure of the state while Brekus recognizes the importance of the acceptance of female preaching. None of the authors, however, fully recognize women's thoughts, but instead their actions.

Republican motherhood, as a guiding political structure, afforded women some political and religious power, as long as they were in service to the state. An acceptance of republican motherhood allowed Elizabeth Seton to potentially be a theologian through exploiting the cracks in the system. She established herself as an authority to her children and other people respected her right to do so. Seton was also able to group women together under the banner of a religious institution both through teaching and her sisterhood. Seton failed to fulfill the typical demands of republican motherhood in her usage of religion in service to the state by teaching a faith considered subversive by many in the United States. Seton's conversion to Catholicism was a betrayal of the principles set up by many of the women's religious institutions. Seton’s conversion to Catholicism was see as immoral, both religiously and politically, and she had failed in her role as a mother. Seton accepted her position as the religious authority among her

⁹³ Catherine Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*.(Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

children while simultaneously rejecting the premise and purpose of the structure on which she was building. Furthermore, in accepting her role as a religious figurehead to her children, where her children fail, she also fails. The system of dependency allows her to take on the authoritarian role of religious director in her children's life.

Seton's emphasis shaping her theology around her children and her teaching them this new theology can most clearly be seen and articulated in the relationship and conversations she had with her oldest daughter, Ann. In her role as a republican mother, Seton upheld the responsibility for teaching her children theology and accepts responsibility for her children. Reflecting Seton's responsibility for the faith of her children, much of her daughter's theology was a mirror of her own. It was in the constant discussion the conversations she had with Ann on the way to Italy in 1803 and then Ann's death in 1812 that Seton most fully articulated her theology. Even after Ann's death, Seton continued to worry about the fate of Ann's soul but ultimately decided she had led her to salvation.

Ann, like Seton, had been present for the slow decline of William Seton, therefore she often appears in Seton's letters about her husband's death. Seton's letters about this time often reflect conversations where Ann supposed made remarkable declarations that Seton continued to build upon. Through these conversations, perceived or real, Seton was able to portray the development of her theology more clearly. In an expansion of the theology of suffering, death held a vital role within Seton's forming theology, one she works explicitly out with her daughter. Death and hope for salvation became the central topics during the long trip between America and Italy. Death led to the unification with God, and the hope for death was so strong that they both share in the "wonder how anyone could be sorry to see a dear baby die...there was more cause to cry when they were born."⁹⁶ They echo each other in the faith that when death occurs, God was

⁹⁶ EAS to Rebecca Seton, November 11, 1803. 247.

present. In a letter to Rebecca Seton, while they were still in Italy, Seton described her daughter's dream about two men who broke into their residence, held Ann down and killed her. When Ann woke from her dream and found that she was still, in fact, safe, she relayed to her mother that she thought "so it will be with my Soul, While I am struggling with Death, in an instant I shall awake and find myself safe from all that I feared—but then—FOREVER."⁹⁷ The small separation between sleeping and death plagued Seton seemed to intrigue Ann. In Ann's dream, living was a struggle and death was greeted with safety. The conflict in life that guaranteed salvation in death was the cornerstone of Seton's theology, and although her theology developed further with the aid of Catholic doctrine that seem to support her beliefs, the kernel had already been planted before her knowledge of Catholicism. The rituals she learned helped develop and solidify her theological musings by confirming them as a legitimate way in which prescribed suffering leads directly to salvation.

Ann continued to lead Seton towards Catholicism when they were in Italy. While Seton was still relatively on the fence about the potential of conversion, her daughter was ready to make a rapid change. When they began to prepare for their trip home, Seton wrote to Rebecca that "Ann is wild with joy- yet often she whispers me 'Ma is there no Catholicks in America, Ma wont we go to the Catholic church when we go home.'"⁹⁸ Ann had an attachment to the Catholic Church that Seton was only beginning to work out. While Seton would be the ultimate authority when determining the religious practices of her children, Ann helped push her more towards Catholicism. The fear that Ann expressed about being separated from Catholicism once going home was apparent. Both Ann and Seton were overwhelmed by the Catholic community that were so devout, making the prospect of leaving them that much harder for Ann.

⁹⁷ EAS to Rebecca Seton, November 22, 1803. 249.

⁹⁸ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, April 18, 1804. 297.

While in Italy, Seton commented on the religious devotion in the daily life of both men and women, writing about the devotion people have uniformly towards their faith, as exemplified to her when she and Amabilia pass a "large Cross" and they stopped "before it and say some little prayers before we go further-Men do it as well as women you know with us a man would be ashamed to be seen kneeling especially of a week day."⁹⁹ Seton acknowledged that men were basically a non-participatory agent of religious life in the United States making it clear that she was aware of the role she played within her children's life. Seton saw the religious failings of men in the United States and was excited by the roles men played in religion elsewhere, granting that the one key difference was the Catholic Church. She did not seem to fear the fate of the soul of her children but did recognize that the participation in the faith was lacking.

When arriving back in the United States, she continued evaluating the value of a new faith in her role as a religious authority and a mother to her children. While she maintains the traditional position of a mother in her household, she also had to take on being a financial provider. When they returned to New York, Seton wrote of her woes to her friend Julia Scott stating "My [William] Seton has left his five darlings and myself wholly dependent on the Bounty of those individuals who have loved and respected him."¹⁰⁰ William "died quite happy in the idea that we would have a sufficiency when his books were bought up- but on the contrary there was even a great deficiency, and if John Wilkes did not continue a faithful friend to us I should see my dear ones in a state of absolute poverty."¹⁰¹ All the sudden the faith that she guided her children to was not only responsible for their immortal life but their mortal as well. She became more entrenched in the demands of republican motherhood because the livelihood of

⁹⁹ EAS journal to Rebecca Seton, April 18, 1804, 297. I think that this letter is probably postdated for the last letter she wrote in this collection of letters. I think this letter is more likely to have been written ten days prior, closer to April 8th.

¹⁰⁰ EAS to Julia Scott, July 15, 1804. 313.

¹⁰¹ EAS to Julia Scott, July 15, 1804. 313.

her children depended on making herself, as well as them, excellent members of the state. But with her entrenchment would ultimately what would help her decide to abandon the Episcopal church and become Catholic.

While she recognized the practical necessity of remaining protestant for the sake of her children's economic interests, she keeps being tempted back to Catholicism. She wrote to Antonio Filicchi that she "cannot think of my Soul without remembering you."¹⁰² Because of Antonio's influence on her life and her constant struggled with the effect of Catholicism on her life, she begins to take up a correspondence with Bishop John Carrol in July of 1804. In her first letter to him, she questions the ideas she has been imbued with by the books given to her in Italy about the fallacies of the Episcopal Church. She wrote that she had learned that the "Protestant Episcopal Church was founded only on the principles and passions of Luther, and consequently that it was separated from the Church founded by Our Lord and his Apostles, and its ministers without a regular succession from them."¹⁰³ Yet upon her arrival back to New York, she was given testimonies "by the clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church that they are the True Church I acknowledged that the foundation of my Catholick principles is destroyed and I cannot see the necessity for my making a change."¹⁰⁴ She weighed the statements of the Protestant Episcopal Church against those she learned in the Catholic Church and decided to make an informed decision about the faith for herself and her children.

Seton's first decision once returning to the United States was to remain a member of the Episcopal Church. Although she was still struggling with the differences between denominations, she remained within the confines of the Episcopal Church because of the realities of being a mother. She wrote to a friend that "If Mr. Wilkes had not taken such an interest in my

¹⁰² EAS to Antonio Filicchi August 30, 1804. 317.

¹⁰³ EAS to John Carroll. July 26, 1804. 315.

¹⁰⁴ EAS to John Carroll, July 26, 1804. 316.

situation, I would have left my country at almost the very moment of my return, because of the coldness I experienced from my friends in general because of my Catholic sentiments.”¹⁰⁵ Seton recognized that Catholicism would ultimately lead to ostracization and was unwilling to let that be the reality for her children. In this same letter she wrote that while Catholicism had “won me over, heart and soul, so much so that, were it not for my duties to my children, I would have gone into a convent as soon as my husband died.”¹⁰⁶ Because of her children, however, she remained Protestant, and she instructed her children “in this religion as best I can, without taking the decisive step.”¹⁰⁷ While she was not devoted to the Episcopal Church, she was a devoted mother who insisted that her faults should not ultimately damage her children. She was so conscious of the realities of the possibility of being completely abandoned by her support system and her children suffering for her choices that she ignored her desire to convert and taught what she was unsure of, because she recognized the importance of a proper religious upbringing in the ‘correct’ faith background within society.

Although she had informally dismissed the possibility of being Catholic to Bishop Carroll, she continued to study and pray on the Catholic faith. In a letter to Filippo Filicchi, she discussed the conversations she was having with clergy in both faiths, revealing that the Protestants think “that my strong belief in your Doctrine must be a temptation” yet even with those damning words about the Catholic Church, Seton continued to find her “Soul at Mass in Leghorn.”¹⁰⁸ Seton even got to the point of having annoyed everyone that was attempting to help her on either side of the religious spectrum and wrote that she had “endeavored to see Mr. OBrian but been disappointed, I have written to Bishop Carroll, but his silence to Antonios letter

¹⁰⁵ EAS to unnamed French women, Nov. 20, 1804. 333.

¹⁰⁶ EAS to unnamed French woman, Nov. 20, 1804. 333.

¹⁰⁷ EAS to unnamed French woman. Nov. 20, 1804. 333.

¹⁰⁸ EAS to Filippo Filicchi. After January 6, 1805. 341.

makes me hesitant in sending mine.”¹⁰⁹ While she struggled through the complications of the differences in theology between the Protestant Episcopal Church and the Catholic Church, she yet again came back to the concern over her children's fate, both in life and in death. When Antonio wrote to her of a priest in Boston that could potentially help her through her struggles, she told him “I could never separate my children from the influence of my connections, and must try every way for the best.”¹¹⁰ She was more concerned about what consigning herself to Catholicism and moving would do to her children’s connection’s later in life than she was about their real religious state. She chose to do her best, armed with the knowledge and faith she had, to instruct her children. She was following the structure of motherhood that had been laid out for her, teaching what she knew and instilling the importance of her many connections with her children.

While her faith in the denomination was continually shaken, her understanding of her role as a mother grows. In a letter to Julia Scott in discussing her daughter Ann's education she stated that she "may be able to give a large portion of my time to my Anna in communicating to her what I know of Music and French which is as much and perhaps more than she would attain in another situation, for I am persuaded and have experienced that in those acquirements which require so much patience and application, a Mother is by far the most desirable preceptress."¹¹¹ As Seton became more comfortable and confident in her ability as a teacher to her children for the inconsequential and yet formative studies that her daughter must partake in, she gains more confidence in her role as a formative religious leader in her children's life.

Seton’s journal to Amabilia was littered with examples of Seton teaching her children the new religious life she would eventually lead them to prior to her own acceptance. But through

¹⁰⁹ EAS to Filippo Filicchi. Ibid. 342.

¹¹⁰ EAS to Antonio Filicchi, January 24, 1805. 343

¹¹¹ EAS to Julia Scott. March 5, 1805. 344. Preceptress meaning teacher or instructor.

these letters, in the discussion of her children to another woman specifically, who understood the duties that women were to take on, she made it very clear what her role was with her children: to be a teacher. Her daughter Ann, once again pushing her forward into Catholicism “coaxes me when we are at our evening prayers to say Hail Mary and all say oh do Ma teach it to us, even little Bec tries to lisp it though she can hardly speak.”¹¹² She was teaching new prayers alongside old ones, integrating Catholic teaching into her children’s scholastic ones. As Seton continued teaching her children, her role as an authority became more cemented in her mind. Once she accepted broader version of her role as a teacher, she began to affirm her role as the religious authority in her children’s life by taking ownership of their salvation.

In Seton's letter of conversion to her friend Amabilia Filicchi, she stated, "Now they tell me take care I am a Mother, and my children I must answer for in Judgement, whatever Faith I lead them to."¹¹³ She was forced into responsibility for her children's fate but took it on willingly. While in the context of republican motherhood, the assignment of the salvation of children worked to the advantage of the state, with Elizabeth Seton, it worked to the detriment. Her role as mother and religious authority as given to her by both the state and the community enabled her to confirm her ideas to her children saying, “come my little ones we will go to Judgement together.”¹¹⁴ The affirmation of her responsibility to her children confirmed her role as both the authority and the instigator with her children's religious life. She accepted that it would not be the Catholic Church tempting her to their damnation, but instead her own beliefs that would lead them to it.

When joining the Catholic Church, Seton “PROFESSED to believe what the Council of Trent believes and teaches” yet she “knew not what the Council of Trent believed, only that it

¹¹² EAS journal to Amabilia Filicchi. August 28, 1804.

¹¹³ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805. Collected Writings Vol. 1, 374.

¹¹⁴ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805. Collected Writings Vol. 1, 374.

believed what the church of God declared to be its belief, and consequently is now my belief.”¹¹⁵ Seton confirmed the Council of Trent as the basis for the Catholic Church, but because she did not know what the actual theology of the church was, she used her dismissal of the legitimate theology stated by Council of Trent to confirm her thought as true Catholic thinking. Therefore, what Seton was teaching her children was an interpretation of Catholicism, but passed it off as traditional Catholic theology. Seton’s theology was thus cemented in her children’s minds as if it was confirmed as traditional.

ASDFG Seton used the Council of Trent to back up her statements, but she also recognized her interpretation and made theological statements. In a journal that she wrote to Amabilia, Seton confirmed that she was interpreting the word of God by saying that if once they reach heaven and Jesus says “You fools I did not mean that, we will say since you said you would be always even to the end of ages with this church you built with your blood, if you ever left it, it is your Word which misled us.”¹¹⁶ She put full blame on God if she misled her children to a new faith saying that God was the one that deceived her and made her believe that the Catholic Church was the correct faith. She accepted her role as a mother and a guide to her children, and took responsibility for their fate, but placed the blame of her own conversion on Christ himself. She linked herself directly to God, which was understood in the context of women's roles in religion, being more open to spiritual formation because “‘ women are happily formed for religion' by means of their ‘natural endowments' of sensibility delicacy, imagination, and sympathy.”¹¹⁷ Because of this, she was willing to place the blame of a failed effort to access heaven on God's inability to show her the right way forward. Faith was provided by God;

¹¹⁵ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi March 14, 1805, Collected Writing Vol. 1, 375.

¹¹⁶ EAS to Amabilia Filicchi, January 1805. Collected Writing Vol. 1, 374.

¹¹⁷ Nancy Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*. 129.

therefore any religious opinion she was given was granted to her because of her connection with God.

Elizabeth Seton felt the responsibility of teaching her theology like most republican mothers; however, she did not feel a need to subscribe to the political agenda that was the reason for pushing most Protestantism. She understood herself to be central to her children's salvation, but as she became more entrenched within Catholic thought, that did not mean that she was fighting for her children's acceptance in society anymore. Seton told Amabilia Filicchi that many of her friends said that there was "the only Catholic priest in New York" and "they say Catholics are the offscouring of the people, somebody said their congregation [is] 'a Public Nuisance.'"¹¹⁸ She moved her children from a well-to-do Episcopal Church that she had been a prominent member of to a small, "very shabby" Catholic Church.¹¹⁹ Her concern for her children became solely concerned with seeking "but God and his Church and expect to find my peace in them not in the people."¹²⁰ She rejected how she was expected to act and instead of seeking comfort from her long standing support system within the Episcopal Church, Seton choose to join the Catholic Church. When she joined, her access to political and social clout was quickly diminished and she had to rely solely on her new Catholic community. But as she stated, she was not expecting to find peace in the people around her, but instead her faith in God and her new religion.

While Seton purposely removed herself from the presence of her friends and the church she had been baptized and married in, she was also faced with the upsetting reality of her old friends warning against others against her presence: "My old friend Mr. H[obart] thinks it is his duty to warn all my friends here of the falsity and danger of my principles and of the necessity of

¹¹⁸ EAS to Amabilia January 1805. 372-373. ,

¹¹⁹ EAS to Amabilia January 1805, 373.

¹²⁰ EAS to Amabilia January 1805, 373.

avoiding every communication with me on the subject.”¹²¹ The fear that she could potentially turn people Catholic simply by preaching scared the Protestants with whom she once had been so close. While Seton ensured her friends that she “was not to be considered a ‘teacher of Souls,’” she did continue to discuss the denominational differences with those she encountered.¹²² She, in 1805, was not an intentional teacher of Catholicism to anyone except her children. While she is willing to engage in polite discussions about the differences, she did not attempt to convert anyone. However, as things became steadily more hostile to Seton and her children, Seton accepted a job as a school teacher in Baltimore where she took on the mantle of religious instruction and scholastic education for young girls.

In June of 1808, Seton along with her children left their home in New York and moved to Baltimore, Maryland. Seton was to be the founding school mistress for a small girls school that was adjacent to St. Mary’s College. Through her new appointment, Seton was also able to send her sons to St. Mary’s College in order to complete their education for free. Although she was utterly uprooting her life, she held on to the self-assured knowledge that “doubt and fear fly from the breast inhabited by him—there can be no disappointment where the Souls only desire and expectation is to meet *his* Adored Will and fulfill it.”¹²³ The total upheaval of her life, yet complete faith that because God was with her, it was the only course of action best exemplified Seton's ability to surrender herself completely to her faith. While her support in New York had shrunk to a paltry few upon her conversion to Catholicism, another main contributing factor was her ability to pay rent on her boarding house diminished as well. Among her boarders, there was “much discontent among the parents of the boys who boarded with me...and it was concluded that of the six who were with me four would go to College in the fall, and the two remaining

¹²¹ EAS to Antonio Filicchi, April 30, 1805. 358

¹²² EAS to Antonio Filicchi, June 1, 1805. 366.

¹²³ EAS to Cecilia Seton, June 14, 1808, in *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings Vol. II: Correspondence and Journals 1808-1820*. Ed. By Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz. 5

would not pay the Baker and the house rent.”¹²⁴ While potentially a tie to New York had been the monthly income, with that severed, there was nothing standing in the way of moving to Baltimore.

Upon arriving in Baltimore, Seton wrote to her friend Catherine Dupleix over her agony of being separated from her and “among strangers in one sense of the word” yet reassured by their shared faith, stating that they were “but not strangers in Kindness nor affection for we never received so much before since.”¹²⁵ This place of safety, rest, and hope for the establishment of a new life surrounded by an uplifting spiritual community mirror her reaction from four years previously when she stayed with the Filicchis in Italy. Once again, Seton found a new home among a Catholic community.

As Seton and her family became more comfortable in their new home and among their new community, the titles of strangers melted away. Seton reveled in the closeness of her new property to the chapel, as “the fence of our boundary is the only division from a beautiful Chapel which is open from day light till nine at Night.”¹²⁶ Her closeness to the community was a way to submerge herself solely in the religious activity around her. In a letter to Antonio Filicchi, Seton described the community as providing “immense happiness of living in such Society as here surrounds us every Soul breathing only Divine Charity.”¹²⁷ The merits of living in a religious society surrounded by people of the same faith created a sense of peace for Seton. She valued the rituals and the community almost as much as the faith itself. Seton could receive communion “every morning in the week” followed by “our Litany of Jesus, after afternoon, our Rosery.”¹²⁸

¹²⁴ EAS to Catherine Dupleix, June 20, 1808, 9.

¹²⁵ EAS to Catherine Dupleix, June 20, 1808, 11.

¹²⁶ EAS to Catherine Dupleix, June 20, 1808, 9.

¹²⁷ EAS to Antonio Filicchi, July 8, 1808, 19.

¹²⁸ EAS to Cecilia Seton, October 6, 1808, 33.

Seton's week was broken down into times specified for religion, and through this pattern, she fully embraced the peace and serenity that accompanied religious life.

As she embraced the religious practices that were sprinkled throughout the day, she also quickly took on her role as a school teacher, and through doing this, adopted herself out as a mother to all under her charge. When discussing the school with Antonio, she started by addressing the potential financial issues through a round-a-bout quest for funds for her school. Seton first mentions that John Wilkes "laments that he cannot come forward to my assistance...and I could not dream of applying to him for assistance in the promotion of a religious establishment."¹²⁹ While she was not asking Filicchi directly for money, her stated purpose of starting a religious establishment spoke to what she believed her school will do: teach children religion. She continued to describe this establishment to Antonio saying that the "establishment can never take place but by the special protection of divine Providence which as it has already provided some excellent Souls with dispositions to embrace it, and fulfill the intention of instructing children in our religion."¹³⁰ Her willingness to embrace the role of both a religious and a financial leader mimics that role she had as a mother. She was willing to expand her motherhood to all people that reside within her household.

Not only was she imbuing herself the qualities of a religious leader, but other people were as well. In the previously mentioned letter to Antonio, she discussed how "many parents have proposed sending their children to me to prepare for their first Communion from the recommendation of our Rev. Archbishop Carrol—five are now in the house for that purpose."¹³¹ She was being sent children by the Bishop to teach them of the value of First Communion. While she had no formal training, she was still suggested because of her understanding of the

¹²⁹ EAS to Antonio Filicchi, January 16, 1809. 45.

¹³⁰ EAS to Antonio Filicchi, January 16, 1809. 45-46.

¹³¹ EAS to Antonio Filicchi, January 16, 1809. 46.

importance of the sacrament. The authority that Carroll continued to give her throughout their correspondence when discussing of the faith of the Catholic Church and the teaching of young children, he allowed her to hold certain jurisdictions because of the role she is able to play as both a motherly figure and a school teacher. Carroll provided Seton with an audience that was willing to accept her theology as doctrine from the Catholic Church.

John Carroll was not the first person to recognize Seton's power in teaching and ingraining of religious thought, as seen during her time in New York. Many people had rejected her socially because of her ideologies and her ability to convince people of their truthfulness. When Harriet Seton began the process of conversion, her family immediately blamed Seton. The vitriol they spewed against Seton in letters to Harriet made it clear that they recognize, but do not accept Seton's theology. Mr. Ogden, Harriet's brother-in-law, commented that Harriet was lured to Catholicism "immured in the solitude of your retirement, you have lent a willing ear to the persuasions of Mrs. Seton...your mind thus seduced has embraced and avowed *her* faith."¹³² Seton was recognized as the main religious influencer among those she converted. She was teaching them her version of Catholicism, which is sanctioned by members of the American Catholic Church, yet not entirely traditional Catholic doctrine. The Ogdens see Seton's theology and religious practices as part of a faith that is dedicated to her religion, making her a charismatic leader in religious thought. Ogden even named part of Seton's theology that Harriet has parroted to her family, the trials of suffering. He called it the "jargon of a convent," that all members of Seton's faith were held together by the belief that "*religion will support me under every trial.*"¹³³ Ogden rejects Harriet's convictions saying that "these are unnecessary trials, never intended or imposed by our Heavenly Father; but on the contrary, militating against His express

¹³² Mr. Ogden to Harriet Seton, November 27, 1809, 67 (*Memoir, Letters, and Journal of Elizabeth Seton: Convert to the Catholic Faith, and Sister of Charity*. Edited by Robert Seton)

¹³³ Mr. Ogden to Harriet Seton, November 27, 1809. 68.

commands.”¹³⁴ While Ogden was rejecting a core tenant to Seton’s theology, in doing so, was confirming her as the religious leader and primary theological basis for his sister’s conversion.

As Seton received more people to her school, she established the Sisters of Charity. By January of 1809, she had adopted the title of Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton, and while a typical title for those in charge of a convent, Seton took on the role in a more substantial way. During this time, John Carroll continuously refers to Seton when it came to the conversion of young girls, and She explains to Antonio that she was “instructing and preparing the dear girl for the greatest of all blessings.”¹³⁵ Her instruction into religious life were her own views, solidifying them through the religious order she was forming. In a letter to Julia, Seton confirmed that “it is true also that I shall be at the head of a community which will live under the strictest rules of order and regularity, but I shall not give those laws, nor have an care of compelling others to fulfil them if any person embraces them and afterward chooses to infringe them they will only find in me a friend to admonish and it will be at the hands of Mr. Dubourg either to rectify or dismiss them.”¹³⁶ Seton, even when she took credit as the religious leader among a newly formed group of women, still occupied the role of the mother, offering support and gentle advise while it was Mr. Dubourg that controls the firmly set laws. This subtle separation between herself and the masculine figure allowed her to keep a typical motherly image. She was soft, caring, and godly. Seton was unwilling to engage in behavior that may in any way compromise her role as a mother.

Seton discussed the importance of the maintenance of the ‘Mother’ title with Cecilia, acknowledging the power that it had to truly unify her ‘children’ under her common theology.

¹³⁴ Mr. Ogden to Harriet Seton, November 27, 1809. 68

¹³⁵ EAS to Antonio Filicchi, January 1809. . in *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings Vol. II: Correspondence and Journals 1808-1820*. Ed. By Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz. (New York: New City Press, 2002),46

¹³⁶ EAS to Julia Scott, March 23 1809. . in *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings Vol. II: Correspondence and Journals 1808-1820*. Ed. By Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz. (New York: New City Press, 2002), 62.

When discussing her community, she compared the atmosphere to heaven and says “I can give you no just idea of the precious Souls who are daily uniting under my banner which is the cross of Christ.”¹³⁷ Seton recognized that it is her ‘banner’ or theology that she is teaching, but also claims that it is the correct one, pairing it with the crucifixion. She continued on discussing the “tender title of *Mother* Salutes me every where even lips that have never said to me the common salutation among strangers.”¹³⁸ Because Seton was teaching her specific brand of Catholicism to her sisters, yet recognized as a mother, even among strangers, meant that her thought was further reaching than even she assumed. She was recognized as early as four months into her tenure as a Mother Superior as an important figure within the minds of those who knew of her.

Seton’s call as a religious leader and educator to children was a way for her to further engage with the theology of the Catholic church. Through her role, she embraced a new extension of religious authority and eventually leader of a sisterhood. Through teaching Seton took on the responsibility of the religious upbringing of the children she is in charge of, embracing once again her role as a republican mother, simply extended to a school. Furthermore, she adopted the title of ‘Mother’ among some of her devoted followers prior to having a formalized sisterhood. Her sister-in-law, Cecilia, began to address her as such and Seton quickly adhered the title: “never loved you as at this moment I read the sweet words ‘my Mother’ added to the many precious titles which unite us.”¹³⁹ As she accepted this title she was pushing the boundaries of who fell under her care as a mother, but used it to continue preaching her religious thought as if she was teaching it to her children. Through this expansion of motherhood to others that are not her children, nor the children she is teaching, but grown adults, she formalized a system of implementing her theology within the Catholic Church. Seton utilized the established

¹³⁷ EAS to Cecilia Seton, April 3, 1809. in *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings Vol. II: Correspondence and Journals 1808-1820*. Ed. By Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz. (New York: New City Press, 2002),67

¹³⁸ EAS to Cecilia Seton, April 3, 1809. 67.

¹³⁹ EAS to Cecilia Seton, September 5, 1808. 31.

system of republican motherhood to justify her recognition as a religious authority among those that follow her, and she begins to be recognized as such by those who disagree with her.

Republican motherhood helped her institutionalize her own theology through the adopted bond of mother and child. As she 'adopts' more people, she imparted her beliefs onto them, further expanding her views.

Conclusion

In 1979, the *Saturday Night Live* character, Guido Sarducci, had a lot to say about the validity of Elizabeth Seton's beatification that had happened only a few years earlier. He stated that in order "to be made a saint in-a the catholic church, you have to have -a four miracles" yet with Seton "they could only prove -a three miracles. But the Pope- he just waved the fourth one...because she was American."¹⁴⁰ Seton was used as a punchline despite being the mother of the first Catholic American based female religious group and the first sainted person in the Americas. Yet, for as much as she should be remembered, she is often relegated to the background of history. Even in works specifically dedicated to women in American religion, the consideration for Seton does not exist. Seton suffers from double jeopardy when it comes to being recognized as a figure in American religion: she was female and Catholic. But her importance spans should span further than simply being recognized as a saint and an organizer, we should remember her as a intellectual that changed the way that Catholicism was practiced for years within the United States.

Seton was a theologian. She utilizes her role as mother within her family structure and then the expansion of it outward to solidify her thoughts and practices in the American Catholic Church by utilizing her role as a republican mother to attain an authority to interpret and teach 'Catholic' doctrine. Seton's Catholic faith included the beliefs that the action of receiving communion meant that there was a sort of ownership over God and an ability to control one's salvation and a mutation of the penance that made an act of suffering one of redemptive powers as a way to expiate sins. She also created a pathway in which she could teach her theology to her sisterhood and have it recognized as Catholic theology by the Archbishop Carroll. Her authority and theology within the Catholic faith was accepted by many of the people remembered for

¹⁴⁰ SNL, March, 17, 1979. Season 4:Ep. 15

having theological thought themselves, while Seton is often left by the wayside. Seton's role within the foundation of the Catholic community within the United States should not be limited to simply the leader of a female religious community or the first saint in America, but instead she should be highlighted as a crucial member of American Catholicism. Furthermore, she should expand past the bounds of just a denominational thinker and remembered simply as an American theologian, in line with men such as Cotton Mather or Jonathan Edwards. Seton's theology, while placed being both transmitted and disseminated in different fashion than male theologians of her time does not make her theology any less valuable or important, simply overlooked because of her gender and medium.

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