"Experimental Proof of the Ever Blessed Trinity"

Personal Encounters with the Divine

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Due to his interest in the experiential elements of religion and his desire to gain a greater understanding of holiness or sanctification, John Wesley wrote letters to some of his followers in the late eighteenth century, asking if they had "experimental proof of the ever blessed Trinity."[1] Fascinated by accounts he had read of de Renty's encounter with the distinct persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Wesley wanted to know if others had experienced divine redemption in a similarly relational manner.[2] Several individuals responded to his missive in the affirmative; they reported that they had received "a clear revelation of the several persons in the ever-blessed Trinity."[3]

The responses Wesley received to his intriguing question, combined with Joseph Smith's 1838 and 1842 First Vision accounts that refer to

1. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley,* vol. 27, ed. Ted A. Campbell (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 275–76.

2. *The Life of the Baron de Renty; or, Perfection in the World Exemplified* (London: Burns & Oats, 1873); Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure, *An Extract of the Life of Monsieur de Renty, a Late Nobleman of France* (Philadelphia, 1795), microfiche. Wesley emphasized conversion and sanctification through physically experiencing the divine and was inclined to facilitate and publish these occurrences whenever possible. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 423–28.

3. John Wesley, *The Letters of Rev. John Wesley: December 11, 1777 to March 1780,* vol. 6, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 265–66. See also Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

his encounter with separate divine beings, have caused me to reflect upon similar manifestations and experiences in the lives of ordinary people across Christian traditions in the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Atlantic world.[4] Who did indeed receive proof, or a witness, of the Trinity? How and when did people commune with the divine? And was that communion tangible or ethereal? Did God speak in audible ways, or did his voice just reach spiritually attuned ears? Did the divine only appear in the context of visions and dreams, or was sacred presence manifest in a plethora of ways? Did the means and form of communication vary across culture and tradition? Did God individualize manifestations? And, finally, what made people seek and expect a personal experience with the divine? What circumstances brought seekers to their knees? What events made them plead for mercy, grace, relief, comfort, and hope? Indeed, what role did suffering play, and how did this suffering impact the quest to experience union with the holiest of beings?

In this article, I am going to consider how these kinds of questions play out in the lives of three deeply religious women: Ann Lee was a Shaker (1736–1784); Catherine Livingston Garrettson was a Methodist (1752–1849); and Elizabeth Bayley Seton was a Catholic (1774–1821). Although each woman lived in eastern New York between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, their personal backgrounds and their divergent religious traditions suggest that they had very little in common. Ann Lee, a poor and illiterate working-class woman from Manchester, England, became a radical visionary and founder of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, more commonly known as Shakers. She believed that God had called her to immigrate to the Albany, New York, area so she could establish a celibate commune in a chosen land.[5] Catherine Livingston Garrettson was the offspring of the colonial elite, a wealthy heiress whose family owned

4. "History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2]," 1–4, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 2, 2020, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/2; Joseph Smith, "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (1 March 1842): 706–7. For several accounts of visionary experiences contemporary to Joseph Smith, see Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 1 (1997): 183–204.

5. Tisa J. Wenger, "Female Christ and Feminist Foremother: The Many Lives of Ann Lee," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 5–7; Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

much of the Hudson River Valley area. Upon being drawn to the idea of sanctification, Catherine chose to convert to Methodism and, to the chagrin of her family, marry an iterant preacher.[6] Elizabeth Bayley Seton was a well-educated upper-middle-class woman from New York City, a wife and mother, who converted to Catholicism and eventually founded the first Catholic girls school and the first congregation of religious sisters in the nation. She would become the first American-born canonized Saint.[7]

Despite the deep economic, social, cultural, and denominational differences that distinguished Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth from one another, a common thread is laced throughout their spiritual narratives. Each of their life stories was shaped by the kind of suffering that their society overlooked—suffering often unique to the female experience. Hidden burdens included possible sexual, physical, and emotional abuse; broken marriage; shame and fear of the female body; infertility; miscarriage; stillborn babies; childlessness; insecurity; death; loss; mourning; single parenting; and the struggle to provide for a family. As these women attempted to process tragic life events that simply did not make sense—and that typically remained unacknowledged in their external worlds—they, like many sufferers before them, turned inward, turned Godward, hoping for clearer vision, for sight of the spiritual kind, for redemption from the sorrows that plagued them.[8] And each was primed to understand how God might alleviate that suffering. The results, while structurally similar, were different in content and form. Indeed, in the search for divine presence, each woman envisioned and encountered God in personally meaningful ways—God's voice, God's form, and God's love spoke to and met their individual needs, expectations, and desires. In their efforts to overcome suffering, in their quests to reframe their lives after experiencing God's redemptive power, Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth became nineteenth-century visionaries—visionaries who experienced God in their own ways and within

6. Diane Helen Lobody, "Lost in the Ocean of Love: The Mystical Writings of Catherine Livingston Garrettson," (PhD diss., Drew University, 1990), 31–65; Clare Brandt, *An American Aristocracy: The Livingstons* (New York City: Doubleday, 1986); John L. Brooke, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 371–74.

7. Catherine O'Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton: American Saint* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Three Hills, 2018).

8. A special thank you to my doctors, Rick McWhorter and Shelly Savage, whose compassion and care this past year have helped me endure my own experiences of female suffering—experiences that influenced my approach to this article.

the context of their own religious traditions, visionaries whose narratives hint at the myriad of stories in which encounters with the divine occurred in nineteenth-century New York and beyond.

The uniqueness of Ann's, Catherine's, and Elizabeth's narratives broadens the scope of and adds nuance to the visionary world of the Second Great Awakening, thus underscoring the importance of considering "inner history"—the personal, the private, the hidden, the invisible, the forgotten, and the overlooked—when defining the larger historiographical themes through which we interpret American Christianity. Indeed, by turning to accounts about women's private lives, by seeing complexity in their seemingly simple biographical sketches, and by considering how daily living, and the suffering woven into daily living, influenced personal and collective religiosity, it becomes possible to enter the overlooked spaces of history. By reading women's writings thoughtfully and creatively, we discover complexity in narratives we thought we already knew and thus begin to see beyond the shadows of female experience. A contextualized study of inner history encourages us to consider how ordinary individuals helped frame larger movements and how they fit into those movements.[9] In the cases of Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth, we see how life's challenges, replete with suffering and loss, led each woman to different understandings of what it meant to encounter the divine. Each longed for the presence of an embodied God, and each encountered that presence in a form and a manner that met her particular needs and desires. God revealed himself, it seems, to an array of seekers in need of answers to the questions that plagued their particular experiences. And such individuals would have undoubtedly answered John Wesley's question, "Have you an experimental proof of the ever blessed Trinity?" in the affirmative.[10]

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9. Gerda Lerner shares specific experiences from her life as an Austrian Jew during World War II to demonstrate how her inner history adds depth to both the larger events of her life and to Jewish and WWII history in general. Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1–17. For examples of this kind of history, see John Fea, *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); and Brett Malcolm Grainger, *Church in the Wild: Evangelicals in Antebellum America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

10. Wesley, *Works,* 27:275–76. For experiences with the divine contemporary to Lee, Garrettson, and Seton, see Phyllis Mack, "The Unbounded Self: Dreaming and Identity in the British Enlightenment," in *Dreams, Dreamers, and Visions: The Early*

Ann Lee

Due to limited manuscript source material, it is difficult to uncover the historical Ann Lee.[11] Since the primary sources that do exist must be read with a skeptical eye, it is important to approach them thoughtfully, creatively, and contextually, as well as critically. When they are read in these ways, narrative accounts about Ann reveal a complex figure whose life experiences pushed her into the role of visionary—a visionary whose rejection of the physical body (most poignantly manifest in her revelation that proclaimed celibacy the only means to purity and wholeness) hints at complex life experiences that shaped her distaste for physicality. Although several scholars have proposed that she played a significant role in shaping a more egalitarian Christianity, they have overlooked how her personal background might have shaped her role as religious leader.[12] I propose that, when contextualized, Ann Lee's story seems to suggest that she found communion with God and unity with her Savior as she overcame deep personal pain. For her, redemption meant rejecting her physical form and redefining herself as a spiritual being and, ultimately, as a spiritual mother to all.

Ann Lee's early life story encapsulates invisible female suffering—suffering that devalued a woman's worth. Like many children born into a poor, working-class family in Manchester, England, during the eighteenth century, Ann began working in the textile mills within the first decade of life; her labors began at the tender age of eight.[13] Children

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Modern Atlantic World, ed. Ann Marie Plane and Leslie Tuttle (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 207–25; Rachel Cope, "Salvific Significance in Personal Life Stories," *Magistra: A Journal of Women's Spirituality in History* 20, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 21–58; Ann Kirschner, "'Tending to Edify, Astonish, and Instruct': Published Narratives of Spiritual Dreams and Visions in the Early Republic," *Early American Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 198–229; and Henry Rack, "Early Methodist Visions of the Trinity," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 46, no. 2 (May 1987): 40–42.

11. Most documentation about Ann Lee's life comes from the pens of her followers in narrative accounts written thirty years following her death. Although it is essential to acknowledge and consider the problems of memory inherent in such sources, it is also important to avoid dismissing any kind of source that documents a woman's life. Wenger, "Female Christ," 5–6.

12. Wenger, "Female Christ," 5; Jean M. Humez, "'Ye Are My Epistles': The Construction of Ann Lee Imagery in Early Shaker Sacred Literature," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, no. 1 (1992): 84.

13. Nardi Reeder Campion, *Mother Ann Lee: Morning Star of the Shakers* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1990), 3. On average, children began laboring in the mills at the age of ten. Emma Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the*

employed in such settings not only received assignments that exceeded their physical capacities, but they also encountered dangerous, difficult, and unpleasant working conditions; long and strenuous hours; and minimal compensation. They were, as one scholar dubbed them, the "'white slaves' of England."[14]

In addition to the physical strain mill work placed on young children, it also positioned them in vulnerable situations. Working children, particularly female children, found themselves in powerless contexts where they became victims of abuse, manifest in an array of forms.[15] Little girls were surrounded by rough men who flogged and beat them and by cruel men who molested and raped them.[16] Their bodies became objects that were acted upon, and their hearts and minds inevitably accepted the labels that came with such awful acts.[17] While it is impossible to know whether, how, and when Ann was abused, her adult distaste for female physicality and her eventual rejection of sexual relations certainly hint at the possibility.[18]

Ann's encounters with physical trauma, and with experiences that devalued women, continued into adulthood. When she reached her mid-twenties, her father (a blacksmith) insisted that she marry his apprentice, Abraham Standerin (Stanley).[19] Ann had no desire to marry, but as a poor, working-class woman, she had no choice but to obey.[20] Culture and the common law of coverture defined her as property that

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Industrial Revolution (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 60. See also Seth Y. Wells, ed., *Testimonies Concerning the Character and Ministry of Mother Ann Lee and the First Witnesses of the Gospel of Christ's Second Appearing: Given by Some of the Aged Brethren and Sisters of the United Society, Including a Few Sketches of Their Own Religious Experience* (Albany: Packard & Van Benthuysen, 1827).

14. Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn,* 58–60.

15. For the conditions of child laborers in Victorian England, see Eric Hopkins, "Working Hours and Conditions during the Industrial Revolution," *International Review of Social History* 19, no. 3 (1974): 401–25; and Peter Kirby, *Child Workers and Industrial Health in Britain, 1780–1850* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell Press, 2013).

16. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 307.

17. Louise A. Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 89.

18. For a source that suggests Ann Lee may have had a history of child abuse, see Humez, "My Epistles," 88–89.

19. Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 3.

20. While urbanization and migratory patterns were circumventing the established traditions of courtship and marriage, the established traditions of parental control remained in force for the majority of adults. See Tanya Evans, "Women, Marriage and

could be passed from father to husband.[21] Ann's body—the physical, the spiritual, the emotional—did not legally belong to her.

During her early married life, Ann encountered further bodily trauma—fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth all proved to be complicated, painful, and devastating.[22] In a short span of time, she experienced four difficult pregnancies: Ann had three stillborn children, and the fourth, Elizabeth, died in infancy.[23] Feeling that her body had failed her once again—indeed, crushed by the very fact that she could not be a mother in a world that equated womanhood with reproduction and motherhood—she seems to have further internalized her physical form as problematic.[24] Like many women of the time, she feared that the deaths of her children were a sign of judgment, a price paid for the mother's sins.[25] The female body appeared to be the very root of pain, sorrow, and sin. While mourning the loss of her babies, Ann turned to intense asceticism as an escape from the pain that had riddled so much of her life.[26]

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the Family," in *Women's History: Britain, 1700–1850,* ed. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Routledge, 2005), 57–77.

21. Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring, ed., *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 4.

22. For general experiences with fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth in eighteenth-century England and America, see Jennifer Evans and Sara Read, "'Before Midnight She Had Miscarried': Women, Men, and Miscarriage in Early Modern England," *Journal of Family History* 40, no. 1 (January 2015): 3–23; Jennifer Evans and Ciara Meehan, eds., *Perceptions of Pregnancy from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (Cham, Switz.: Palgrave, 2017); and Catherine M. Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society: 1650–1850* (New York: New York University Press, 1985).

23. Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 3.

24. Regarding the connection between womanhood and motherhood and the importance of reproduction to both, see Katarzyna Bronk, "From One Father to Another: William Cobbett's Advice on Motherhood and Maternity," *Women's History* 2, no. 5 (Summer 2016): 5–10; Marilyn Francus, "The Monstrous Mother: Reproductive Anxiety in Swift and Pope," *ELH* 61, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 829–51; Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society.*

25. Mothers were charged by religious and civil leaders alike with providing proper morals and teachings to their children. The events of a child's life were therefore a reflection of the mother's efforts and worthiness. See Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society,* 77–79.

26. For Ann Lee's ascetic practices, see Humez, "My Epistles," 94–95. See also Lucia McMahon, "'So Truly Afflicting and Distressing to Me His Sorrowing Mother':

Ann's spiritual quest and her eventual visions, dreams, and revelations allowed her to encounter a divine figure who slowly released her from the physical burdens she felt as a woman—from the guilt and pain she associated with the female body. This spiritual journey began to take shape in approximately 1758, when she joined a group known as the Shaking Quakers, a sect founded by Jane and James Wardley of Bolton (near Manchester), known for its charismatic excesses and shared ministry between the sexes.[27] At this time, Ann began to focus intently on becoming cleansed from her sins. She longed for personal purity. And she believed she found it by refusing to have a conjugal relationship with her husband.[28]

Ann's ongoing quest for spiritual transformation, her followers suggest, ultimately resulted in her receipt of visions and revelations from God. She did not just want to be delivered from sin; she longed to overcome "the very nature of sin."[29] She wanted to escape enslavement to her body. As she made efforts to enter a sinless state, her mind and soul suffered within the redemptive framework of Christianity. At times, her followers recalled, her suffering even caused "blood to perspire through the pores of her skin."[30] Through visionary means, they reported, she escaped the evil, the corruption, the innate sinfulness of the body and became one with, and one like, Christ.

Ann's visionary experiences continued to focus on spiritual regeneration; through ethereal means she concluded that the pathway to holiness required a complete rejection of sexual relations. In one of her most noteworthy visions, as recalled by her followers, the Lord Jesus appeared to her and revealed "the depth of man's loss, what it was, and the way of redemption."[31] From this encounter with her Savior, Ann learned that human depravity had originated in the Garden of Eden; sexual intercourse, she explained, was the original sin.[32] Overcoming innate human sinfulness so one could enter a pure Edenic state required

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Expressions of Maternal Grief in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Journal of the Early Republic* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 27–60.

27. Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 4; Wenger, "Female Christ," 6–7.

28. Wenger, "Female Christ," 6–7.

29. Wells, *Testimonies,* 4.

30. Wells, *Testimonies,* 4.

31. Wells, *Testimonies,* 38.

32. For Ann's teachings on Eve, see Wenger, "Female Christ," 13. For similar views among Protestants and Catholics in the eighteenth century, see Beverly Prior Smaby, "Female Piety among Eighteenth Century Moravians," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 64 (Summer 1997): 159.

complete confession of sins and obedience to God's law—it was "the only possible way of recovery"; it was the only means of redemption.[33]

Ann's conception of holiness required celibacy—a departure from the "lustful gratifications of the flesh, as the source and foundation of human corruption."[34] This interpretation, which she supported with the biblical injunction that we "neither marry, nor are given in marriage" (Matt. 22:30), allowed her to recast her own life story and the larger Christian narrative within a redemptive framework that resonated with her. By defining and interpreting holiness in a personally meaningful way, she shifted her story from that of sinner (one who caused lust) to savior (one who helped redeem others from lust). As Marjorie Proctor-Smith has suggested, "She chose to transform and thereby redeem her experiences by re-experiencing them as spiritual."[35] For Ann, redemption literally meant a new beginning; she could step away from her corporeal self and become her real self, her spiritual self. No longer a symbol of physical impurity, Ann came to see herself as purified. Ultimately, then, her visions and revelations protected her from physical corruption. In order to attain salvation, God required her—and everyone—to avoid the kinds of physicality that had hurt her most. Eventually, her followers would even come to equate Ann's rejection of her body with her reembodiment as a Christ figure. By overcoming her physical form—a form that she associated with pain—she came to house the divine. She became a holy vessel.[36]

As Ann shared her visionary experiences with a small group of believers, they accepted her emerging revelatory authority. Over time, her followers came to consider her the "first spiritual Mother in Christ"—a symbol that Ann's spiritual self could do what her physical self could not do. She had overcome her body; she had overcome her mortal limitations. She could be a mother. She could provide life of the spiritual kind, if not of the physical kind.[37] In a world that had stripped everything from her, Ann discovered a way to make her life purposeful and meaningful.

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33. Wells, *Testimonies,* 5.

34. Wells, *Testimonies,* 5.

35. Marjorie Proctor-Smith, "'Who Do You Say That I Am?': Mother Ann as Christ," in *Locating the Shakers: Cultural Origins and Legacies of an American Religious Movement,* ed. Mick Gidley and Kate Bowles (Exeter, U.K.: University of Exeter Press, 1990), 86.

36. See Wenger, "Female Christ," 9–18.

37. Wells, *Testimonies,* 49.

In 1774, Ann saw a vision of the people of God in America; Jesus asked her to find them and organize them into a perfected church that could usher in the Millennium. As a result of this vision, she led a small group of her followers from Manchester, England, to the Albany, New York, area, where they eventually established a communal farmstead in nearby Niskeyuna.[38] In America she would figuratively give birth to a "community of the saints, or the elect."[39] Although Ann had long internalized her body as a problem, as the source of pain and sin and sorrow, she finally recast her identity into a spiritual framework and made efforts to lead others to purity and wholeness. She wanted all of her "children" to experience the end of suffering by encountering the joys of redemption.

Catherine Livingston Garrettson

While Ann Lee's suffering centered on her various physical struggles and led to her eventual rejection of the temporal body, Catherine Livingston Garrettson's suffering emerged from feelings of emptiness while surrounded by wealth and abundance and from a deep sense of loneliness upon losing those she loved. Catherine longed for meaningful relationships. Upon learning about the Methodist doctrine of sanctification shortly following her conversion experience in 1787, she felt a spark of hope that ignited within her a desire for direct communion with her God. As she became deeply committed to religious life, she discovered divine presence and its accompanying promise of redemption in the context of powerful dreams and visions. Like other Methodist women of her time, she eventually came to experience a "clear revelation of the several persons in the ever-blessed Trinity."[40] Encountering the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ultimately enabled her to recast her story into a redemptive framework—indeed, it invited her directly into the salvific narrative of Christianity, thus alleviating the deep loneliness and loss that she felt. Hope in sanctification helped her redefine her seemingly

38. Upon their arrival, Ann likely found employment as a domestic laborer. When her husband became ill, she quit working and nursed him back to health. Following his recovery, Abraham Stanley reportedly associated with the "wicked," opposed the faith, and insisted that Ann had to "live in the flesh" with him and "bear children." She rejected his mandate—her sense of spiritual leadership had given her a sense of sexual empowerment—and the couple separated. Wells, *Testimonies,* 8.

39. Marjorie Proctor-Smith, "Who Do You Say That I Am?" 89.

40. Wesley, *The Letters of Rev. John Wesley,* 6:265–66; Rack, "Early Methodist Visions of the Trinity," 40–42; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast,* 420–36.

solitary story into a narrative grounded in relationships, human to human as well as human to divine.

Although Catherine lived in privileged circumstances and engaged in social events regularly, she found herself feeling particularly empty inside as she entered her thirties. The deaths of several close family members within a relatively short span of time only heightened this sense of emptiness and inspired her to read the "word of God with more attention."[41] Catherine shared her renewed interest in religion with her best friend and distant cousin, Mary Rutherford Clarkson. The two women became intimate spiritual friends—a term that Janet Moore Lindman defines as the "ongoing, emotionally intimate relationship with others who shared the same religious principles and who used these friendships to reassure, assist and strengthen one another in their journey toward eternal salvation."[42] Together, Catherine and Mary engaged in thoughtful theological discussions, contemplated the meaning and purpose of life, and longed for spiritual unity with the divine.[43] They understood each other's deepest spiritual needs and desires; their "emotional closeness" enabled a "union of the soul."[44]

On July 2, 1786, Mary Rutherford Clarkson passed away in childbirth. The sudden loss of her closest friend rattled Catherine, who simply wrote, "On Saturday she was well, on Sunday at 2 o'clock I saw her a pale corpse."[45] The word "pale" and the immediacy of Mary's death intimates that she may have died of blood loss or hemorrhaging rather than childbirth fever, a condition that usually lingered for a few days before resulting in death.[46] Although her demise was unforeseen, the loss of

41. Catherine Livingston Garrettson, Autobiographical Sketch, 1080-5-2: 41, Garrettson Family Papers, United Methodist Archives and History Center, Drew University, New Jersey, 3. For a similar experience, see Brekus, *Osborn's World*.

42. Janet Moore Lindman, "'This Union of the Soul': Spiritual Friendship among Early American Protestants," *Journal of Social History* 50, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 681.

43. Garrettson, Autobiographical Sketch.

44. Lindman, "This Union," 680–700.

45. Garrettson, Autobiographical Sketch.

46. Postpartum hemorrhage becomes life-threatening if untreated for multiple days after delivery from the severe loss of blood. Medicines during the eighteenth century were unreliable to treat complications during childbirth, and thus, the presentation of postpartum hemorrhaging in the eighteenth century would most likely have been fatal. Donna Freeborn, Heather Trevino, and Irina Burd, "Postpartum Hemorrhage," *Health Encyclopedia,* University of Rochester Medical Center, accessed January 28, 2020, https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.aspx?ContentTypeID=90&ContentID=P02486; Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society,* 26.

women during childbirth was not uncommon in eighteenth-century America.[47] Expectant mothers of the time often approached childbirth with a fear of impending death—a fear that the poet Ann Bradstreet captured when she wrote, "How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend, How soon't may be thy lot to lose thy friend."[48] Perhaps as many as one percent of all births ended in the mother's death, often caused by exhaustion, dehydration, obstructed labor, infection, hemorrhage, or convulsions. Since the average woman gave birth to between five and eight children, the possibility of dying in childbirth ran as high as one woman in eight.[49] Giving life meant risking death.

Losing a best friend, a spiritual friend, a person who understood her deepest sensibilities, ignited a personal crisis for Catherine—a crisis that our contemporary world might refer to as depression.[50] In her state of despair, she withdrew from the society of family members and friends and avoided all social engagements and activities for an extended period of time.[51] In a place of utter loneliness—the one person who understood her gone, taken during what should have been one of life's most beautiful and miraculous moments—Catherine turned to God. She prayed, perhaps, for Mary and Mary's motherless child, as well as for herself. (As a side note, Mary's daughter was named Mary Rutherford Clarkson, after her mother. Several years later, Catherine named

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47. Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society,* 21.

48. In addition to her anxieties about pregnancy, an expectant mother was filled with apprehensions about the death of her newborn child. The death of a child in infancy was common. For a poet's musings on the risk of death, see Anne Bradstreet, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children," in *Poems of Anne Bradstreet,* ed. Robert Hutchinson (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 45.

49. L. Lewis Wall, *Tears for My Sisters: The Tragedy of Obstetric Fistula* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 57–58.

50. See also Lauren F. Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith: Anglican Religious Practice in the Elite Households of Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds., *Women and the Material Culture of Death* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2013), 43–47.

51. Mourning was displayed publicly through distinctive dress and accessories that served to separate the mourners from the remaining society. Withdrawing from society was not generally required, but not uncommon either. Christiane Holm, "Sentimental Cuts: Eighteenth-Century Mourning Jewelry with Hair," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 139–43; Rebecca N. Mitchell, "Death Becomes Her: On the Progressive Potential of Victorian Mourning," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41, no. 4 (2013): 595–620; Lou Taylor, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983). See also Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 40.

her only child Mary Rutherford Garrettson.) From Catherine's writings, one can sense that she longed for solace. For peace. For understanding. For purpose. For answers of the spiritual kind. Her desires for divine comfort and guidance seemed to exceed any of her previous attempts to understand matters of salvation. Catherine longed for a richer and more meaningful life.

While working through her grief, Catherine drew upon language commonly used within the Methodist tradition at the time (language later employed by Joseph Smith); she concluded that she wanted more than a "form" of religion.[52] Once again she turned to the Bible and other religious texts for answers; there she discovered "more plainly the way of salvation" through the "light" that "broke in upon my soul."[53] Finally, in 1787 she experienced her initial encounter with the divine. After family members retired to bed on a Saturday evening, Catherine prayed for peace. And it finally came. "A gleam of light broke in upon my soul and a measure of confidence and peace sprung up into my heart. It seemed to be said to me: 'lie down and take your rest,'" she recalled. As a result of this experience, she slept peacefully and arose early the next morning. While engaged in private prayer, Catherine finally had the conversion experience she had been seeking—a moment in which she felt God's direct presence in her life. Of this powerful occurrence she recalled, "A song of praise and thanksgiving was put in my mouth—my sins were pardoned, my state was changed; my soul was happy. In a transport of joy I sprang from my knees, and happening to see myself as I passed the glass I could not but look with surprise at the change in my countenance. All things were become new. I spent this day alone and needed no other food than what I then enjoyed."[54]

Catherine quickly recognized that newness did not guarantee completeness. Conversion, or justification, was a "threshold," not a "finish line."[55] The focus of her writings soon began to reflect a near obsession with the topic of sanctification. She longed to understand how her daily life intersected with the salvific acts performed by her Savior—indeed, she wanted to know how her personal story fit within the context of

52. Garrettson, Autobiographical Sketch, 5. For a discussion about this language, see Christopher Jones, "The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 88–114.

53. Garrettson, Autobiographical Sketch, 7.

54. Garrettson, Autobiographical Sketch, 7.

55. Lester Rush, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality: A Reader* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005), 101.

atonement and redemption.[56] What was her relationship to God? And how could she attain and maintain personal holiness?

As Catherine continued to seek a deeper relationship with the divine in response to her suffering, she received spiritual guidance in the form of dreams and visions. Much of this guidance hinted at the "advances"[57] she could make "in the divine life"; it intimated that she could experience God's presence, and that she could become increasingly pure, holy, and sanctified.[58] In late 1791 and early 1792, Catherine's hope for a divine encounter took on a more tangible form. She first had a spiritual dream of the cross and then later a powerful visionary experience in which she encountered the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These experiences illustrated to her the importance of reframing her life story within a larger redemptive context. She slowly recognized that the Crucifixion was more than a biblical narrative; it was an intimate part of the human story, of her story. Indeed, her autobiography figured into the salvific narrative, and the theme of salvation was laced throughout her life experiences.

Three months following her dream of the cross, Catherine prayed for the opportunity to see God's glory; much like other visionaries, she fully expected a response. A few days later, her request was granted. On March 11, 1792, Catherine had a vision in which she encountered tangible and sensory manifestations of each member of the Trinity. In this most sacred of moments, Catherine had the kind of trinitarian encounter John Wesley asked other Methodists about and that Joseph Smith would later experience—she encountered the Trinity as three separate beings. Although each individual's interpretation of this type of vision differs—for Wesley it signified sanctification, for Catherine it signified the relational nature of salvation, and for Joseph it signified forgiveness of sin and, ultimately, a restoration of Jesus's gospel—it is worth noting that there is a redemptive and salvific element at the center of each account.

Indeed, the very essence of Catherine's vision hinged on the theme of redemption. While praying for divine forgiveness, for personal transformation through the grace of her Savior, Catherine felt overcome by a

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56. Lester Rush has noted that various forms of grace parallel the spiritual states that early Methodists expected to pass through during their salvation journey. These include convincing grace, convicting grace, converting grace, sanctifying grace, and persevering grace. Rush, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality,* 102.

57. Garrettson, Autobiographical Sketch, 8.

58. Catherine Livingston Garrettson, Diary, 17 November 1787, Garrettson Family Papers, United Methodist Archives and History Center, Drew University, New Jersey.

powerful sense of peace. "A way was opened I was received, and encircled in the Arms of divine love," she explained. She marveled as she encountered "a Sin pardoning God"—a God whose "presence . . . was continually with me throughout the remainder of the day." Grasping for words that could capture the power and glory manifest throughout this ethereal experience, Catherine wondered, "How shall I discribe or who will believe the report of what the Lord God gracious and merciful, Condescended to reveal to the Eyes of the weakest and least of his creatures." As if in response to her own question, she attempted to explain through sensory language the power she beheld, the love that she felt, and the enlightenment that she experienced while being transformed by the redemptive power of the divine.[59]

While immersed in her visionary experience, Catherine first encountered the presence of Jesus and then the Holy Spirit—both experiences left her with the sense that she had been filled with the love and joy she had been seeking. The emptiness that had long been at the root of her suffering dissipated instantly. While basking in the gift of divine love, she confronted a period of "solemn waiting before God." Eventually, however, the waiting ended; a figurative representation of the conclusion of suffering. "The Father answered a request I had made a few nights before that he would show me his Glory—In wonder and astonishment I gazed—I am not sensible how long. I fell back my hands were raised . . . I was struck down upon my back, lost in solemn awe and wonder." Overcome by the power and glory she witnessed, by things "no pen or tongue can ever discribe," Catherine, recognizing her own limitations, called out to her Savior—asking him to be her divine deliverer, her mediator, her intercessor, her all. She then pled with the Son to cleanse her so that she might stand worthily in her Father's presence. Without Jesus's grace, without his strength, his wholeness, his perfection, she concluded, "I must have perished under the great views which I had." Catherine's relationship with her Redeemer took on a new meaning for her; she no longer felt alone.[60]

After recognizing her absolute need for Christ—even more intensely than she had in her dream about crucifixion—Catherine seems to have exited her visionary state. She spent two hours in prayer and then prepared for bed. As she neared sleep, she "was aroused with a visit from my blessed Lord." Again in awe of divine presence, Catherine cried out,

59. Garrettson, Diary, March 10 and 11, 1792.
60. Garrettson, Diary, March 10 and 11, 1792.

"I am the Temple of the Holy Ghost. I am espoused to Jesus, and in him united to the Glorious Trinity." For hours, Catherine could feel that her Savior had "powerfully deepened his work in my Soul." Through that experience, she came to understand the full magnitude of human redemption, "the profound depths of that Love, the half of which can ne'er be told!" As Catherine came to understand Jesus's saving role in a deeper and more nuanced way, as she felt his redemptive power transform her, she once again beheld the Father. In that instant, she knew that her "Dear Redeemers blood" was the only way such an encounter could even be possible. By experiencing the "sweet communion" of both the Father and the Son, Catherine witnessed the glory of God and the condescension of the Savior, a differentiation that helped her better understand humanity's need for divine grace. It seems that her vision both enriched her understanding of salvation largely conceived and allowed her to engage in personal salvific work.[61]

Catherine's vision ended at Calvary. "I saw the God of the whole universe veild in human nature and making expiation on the Cross." She also witnessed the wounded hands, feet, and side of her Savior. While describing the adoration she felt at the foot of the cross, she declared, "God is love—I feel it—I know it. I taste, and can and do hourly rejoice in God my savior." This sensory experience—feeling, touching, tasting, and witnessing the salvation story—helped her recognize its magnitude. As she witnessed divinity, Catherine made note of the intellectual, physical, spiritual, and emotional engagement this experience entailed, experiences that "deeply exercised" her mind. In order to become holy, she concluded, she had to willingly surrender all and receive all. "I cannot stand one moment without his support," she declared. "I cannot take one single step in the divine life without this aid and assistance."[62]

Catherine's vision responded to her suffering—it helped heal her soul—by meeting her relational needs. Her renewed understanding of Christ's sanctifying grace made the impossible, such as witnessing the glory of God, seem within reach. The culmination of this visionary experience made Catherine increasingly aware of God's omnipresence, the sanctifying grace made available through her Savior, the sensory nature of spiritual life, and her place within sacred narrative. She belonged. Catherine's story intersected with the events at Calvary. She was a witness to, but also a participant in, the most important moment of the

61. Garrettson, Diary, March 10 and 11, 1792.
62. Garrettson, Diary, March 10 and 11, 1792.

salvation story. Her vision taught her about her story's relevance in relationship to the Atonement. By collapsing sacred distance, the historic past became her present.[63] Her vision helped her see that the Atonement is ongoing; every human being, she concluded, has access to the grace that it provides. Because of Calvary, redemption—both instantaneous and gradual—had the power to influence every story, stories that linked humanity together across time and into eternity. Due to the Atonement of Christ, Catherine believed she could be woven into a web of relationships that connected humans to the divine.

Elizabeth Bayley Seton

Elizabeth Bayley Seton's personal writings reveal a woman who turned to God as she encountered deep loss, over and over again, throughout her life. The words she wrote capture the thoughtful way in which she reflected upon religion and encountered the divine in the context of such loss—a heart-wrenching spiritual journey that began in childhood and extended into adulthood. With each demise of a loved one, Elizabeth's longing to encounter the "intimate presence of an embodied God" grew ever stronger.[64] Unable to do so fully within her Protestant context as Catherine had done, Elizabeth eventually found herself being drawn to Catholicism. A spiritual or visionary dream eventually convinced her that the Eucharist—the tangible body and blood of her Savior—allowed her to encounter divine presence in a way that felt meaningful and healing to her. For Elizabeth, the Eucharist enabled the renewal of creation; it came to symbolize the possibility of healing within the wounded soul. She thus converted to Catholicism in order to bask in the full presence, the embodied presence, of her God—a being who could alleviate her ongoing suffering, the one being who would never abandon her.[65]

Loss began to figure into Elizabeth Bayley Seton's narrative in early childhood. When she was but three years of age, her mother, Catherine, died. Still weak from recent childbirth, Catherine Bayley did not survive her illness, despite her physician-husband's efforts to save

63. For further discussion on collapsing sacred distance, see Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 245; and Allen Hansen and Walker Wright, "'All Things unto Me Are Spiritual': Worship through Corporeality in Hasidism and Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 57–77.

64. Wendy M. Wright, "Elizabeth Ann Bayley and the Art of Embodied Presence," *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 18, no. 2 (1997): 251.

65. See also Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016).

her. Immediately following their mother's death, Elizabeth and her two sisters stayed with relatives in Long Island. Within a short span of time, their maternal grandfather, the Reverend Richard Carlton, also died. Unsettling change continued to plague Elizabeth's life. Her father quickly remarried a woman who seemed poorly equipped to take on three young children. Shortly thereafter, Elizabeth's baby sister, Kitty, passed away. Kitty's funeral is the first memory that Elizabeth recollects: "At 4 years of age sitting alone on a step of the door looking at the clouds, . . . while my little sister Catherine 2 years old lay in her coffin." She continued, "They asked me did I not cry when little Kitty was dead?—no because Kitty is gone up to heaven." She then concluded, "I wish I could go too with Mamma."[66] This heartbreaking statement captures the sentiments felt by a motherless and lonely child. A child who felt abandoned. A child who longed for love, nurture, and compassion. A child who needed to be noticed.

Likely because Elizabeth's father was often absent from home, and because she had a tense relationship with her stepmother, she learned to turn heavenward; she learned to seek a relationship with the divine. This deep longing suggests that she hoped to belong to someone, to feel a connection to a tangible figure.[67] Such feelings are laced throughout several of her childhood memories. On one occasion, for example, while walking through the woods, Elizabeth had an ethereal experience that helped her envision her relationship with the divine. "I thought at that time my Father did not care for me," she explained. "Well God was my Father, my all. I prayed—sung hymns—cryed—laughed in talking to myself of how far He could place me above all sorrow then layed still to enjoy the Heavenly Peace that came over my soul."[68] In a moment of utter despair, young Elizabeth found the parental love she needed from a divine source. From that point on, she longed for "that Holyness which will be perfected in the Union Eternal."[69] The power she felt through this experience—an

66. O'Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton,* 24. See also Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz, eds., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings,* 3 vols. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2000), 1:249.

67. In America, Episcopalians were a fair share of the economic and political elite and had an image as a church of the affluent and educated, which made it a primary target of populist rhetoric. See, for example, E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 235.

68. Elizabeth Seton, *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings,* ed. Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 41.

69. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 41.

early form of communion with God—would have a lasting impact on her life and her ongoing quest to find a powerful, tangible, and meaningful relationship with the divine.

Although Elizabeth experienced some stability in early adulthood, a narrative of loss would eventually reemerge in her life. On January 25, 1794, she married William Magee Seton at Trinity Episcopal Church. Together, they would eventually have five children. During the early years of their marriage, the Setons prospered financially. Elizabeth oversaw a considerable household and staff, engaged in the social life of post-war New York City, and helped found a charitable organization.[70] She also entered a new phase of religious enthusiasm under the influence of Reverend John Henry Hobart, a man who guided her spiritual reading practices and encouraged her interest in liturgy and doctrine.[71] Elizabeth held a particularly deep reverence for communion Sunday and was intrigued by the symbolism of the bread and wine, a curiosity that would deepen over time.[72]

As the family business failed and William's struggle with tuberculosis took a turn for the worse, life shifted dramatically for Elizabeth. Hoping that her husband's health might improve in a better climate, she insisted that they, along with their eldest daughter, Anna Maria, travel to Italy to stay with friends. During this time of deep uncertainty, Elizabeth learned to rely more and more upon God. Drawn to the corporeal nature of the Eucharist, she allowed it to take on an increasingly central role in her spiritual life. While Catherine Garrettson sought a relational God in the context of prayer, Elizabeth, who had suffered the abrupt loss of so many loved ones, sought his constant physical presence. The Eucharist assumed that sustaining role for her. It became a continuous symbol of hope and redemption in her ever-shifting world.

Notwithstanding Elizabeth's great efforts to save William's life, his health continued to decline. She noted that his "soul was released" on December 27, 1803.[73] Numb with pain, she buried her husband in a

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70. The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children in 1797.

71. John Henry Hobart was a powerful Episcopalian bishop in New York and a supporter of the High Church movement. Hobart came as assistant minister to Trinity Church in 1800. He later served as bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of New York and was renowned for his evangelical zeal and moving oratory. See Holifield, *Theology in America,* 236; and Seton, *Selected Writings,* 16.

72. Elizabeth's fascination for Communion was such that she once went from church to church on "sacrament Sunday" with a relative so she could receive it multiple times.

73. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 124.

foreign land. As she slowly processed all that had happened, she faced feelings of intense loss and grief. Abandoned, alone again, she was now a destitute widow, a mother to five fatherless children who would have to depend upon friends and family members for support. The uncertainty of her future proved to be overwhelming.[74] Elizabeth had more questions than answers. Although she often felt the "mercy and consoling presence of my dear Redeemer" during this time, she also continued to experience devastation and uncertainty.[75] How could she manage now?

Just as Elizabeth and her daughter were preparing to return to New York, Anna Maria became ill, thus postponing their trip home by several months.[76] It was during their extended stay in Italy that the course of Elizabeth's life began to shift in a rather unexpected way; their friends, the Filicchi family, introduced her to Catholicism. As Elizabeth witnessed Catholic sacramentalism, the power of the Eucharist captured her heart and mind; she felt drawn to its more tangible representation of the Savior. And thus she began to wonder if her religious life could be more meaningful. Those feelings only heightened as she attended mass. While participating in and observing Catholic services, Elizabeth wondered about her own spiritual incompleteness; she longed to "possess God in the Sacrament." Almost envious of those around her, she desired to find the divine presence "in the church as they do." On one occasion, as the Eucharist passed by her, Elizabeth fell to her knees "without thinking" and then "cried in agony to God to *bless me* if he was there, that my whole soul has desired only him."[77]

And yet, while being drawn to the Catholic Eucharist, Elizabeth remained uncertain about her religious future. Perhaps fearful of suffering additional losses if she converted, she did not know if she should remain a Protestant or become a Catholic. She thus faced a long and intense spiritual struggle as she sought to determine what beliefs and practices were most meaningful to her. Would Catholicism bring her closer to God? Could she, should she, make such a dramatic change in her life? After all, conversion required an abandonment of things she cherished deeply.[78] In a sense, it required the death of the person she thought she was; conversion

74. O'Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton,* 123–26.

75. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 125.

76. They did not arrive back in New York until June 4, 1804.

77. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 68.

78. For an example of a work that considers this, see Craig Harline, *Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

would require the end of her spiritual life as a Protestant. The paradox she encountered—the desire to attain a more meaningful life and the fear of death, loss, and abandonment that had plagued her life up to that point—lay at the heart of Elizabeth's conversion story.

Elizabeth needed answers; she needed to commune with God. At the center of her indecisiveness lay the question about symbolism and transubstantiation; although she longed for a tangible union with Christ, she also drew upon her Protestant background that suggested that looking at the host might be idolatrous.[79] In January 1805, she turned to prayer. "In desperation of Heart," Elizabeth "looked straight up to God, and told him since I cannot see the way to please you, whom alone I wish to please, everything is indifferent to me, and until you do show me the way you mean me to walk in I will trudge on in the path you suffered me to be born in, and go even to the very Sacrament where I once used to find you."[80] While attending an Episcopalian service that afternoon, she received her answer. God's voice spoke to her heart; he revealed his will to her. At that moment, Elizabeth realized that she lacked faith in the Protestant approach to the Eucharist. She knew she longed for the authority and power she found in Catholicism. Although lingering questions remained, she decided to act on faith. Although "I left the house a Protestant I returned to it a Catholick," she explained.[81] On February 27, 1805, she walked into St. Peter's Church and, kneeling before a crucifix, said, "My God, here let me rest."[82] She formally entered the church on March 14 and made her first communion as a Roman Catholic on March 25. Through that experience, she found her God—she became a visionary who saw the divine with her spiritual eyes. "At last . . . at last—GOD IS MINE & I AM HIS," she wrote.[83]

The Eucharist remained Elizabeth's central focus: first, because she did not understand it fully and knew that "at the heart of Catholic dogma was the belief in the Real Presence," and second, because she wanted to share it with others.[84] Although she lived during an era when frequent communion was uncommon, she approached the altar as often as permitted. Regular participation in this sacrament, combined with a dream that underscored its meaningfulness to her, healed Elizabeth's wounded

79. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 67.
80. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 67.
81. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 164.
82. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 27.
83. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 27.
84. Wright, "Embodied Presence," 255.

soul. Holy communion became the means through which she could become united with and purified through the divine. "Live always in me, and let me live perpetually in thee and for thee as I live only by thee."[85] She continued, "I offer thee O Divine Jesus! All that thou art pleased to be for the love of me: I offer thee thy most sacred body, thy most pure soul, and thy divinity which is the source of all happiness and Wisdom I offer myself to thy Father by Thee—to Thyself by thy Father, and by thy Father and thee to the Holy Ghost who is the mutual love of both."[86] It was through the literal presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Elizabeth suggested, that she could "possess him" for eternity—a relationship that would not, that could not, end suddenly.[87]

Elizabeth's richer and more meaningful understanding of the Eucharist would dramatically alter every aspect of her life. Due to the dreams she had, she no longer worried about whether or not Christ was literally present—she knew he was—but rather she puzzled over those who rejected this presence. As time passed, she increasingly sought to share the means of salvation with others so that they might "enjoy the adored substance in the center of [their] Souls."[88] She wanted all to experience God's presence, his healing power, his gift of redemption.

In 1808, Elizabeth moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where she started a school for girls. A year later, she moved to the rural village of Emmitsburg to help organize what would become Saint Joseph College, as well as the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph. She took her religious vows on March 25, 1809. From 1815 until her death in 1821, she focused on inviting others to come to Eucharist and partake of the divine presence so that they, too, could be transformed through Christ. She wrote, "Scarcely the expanded heart receives its longing desire than, wrapt in his love, covered with his righteousness, we are no longer the same."[89]

Conclusion

Although some visionary accounts—those with First Vision status—have worked their way into historiographical interpretations, become well-known narratives discussed by scholars and embraced by believers, and taken on the role of origin stories or the status of community or

85. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 229–30.
86. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 229–30.
87. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 229–30.
88. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 70.
89. Seton, *Selected Writings,* 71.

denominational history, it is important to remember that each began as an "inner history." Visions typically came in response to deep personal struggles and thought-provoking questions that affected individual lives. Indeed, within the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New York and beyond, ordinary people—those plagued with poverty and those blinded by wealth, victims of abuse, the ill, the lonely, the suffering, those in mourning, those desperately wanting a child, those unable to feed and care for their children, the young and the old, the educated and the illiterate, the devastated, the hopeful, seekers of forgiveness, seekers of wisdom and truth, seekers of salvation, female and male—made attempts to communicate with the divine, hoping to discover that a real presence, an embodied God, would hear and answer their desperate pleas for redemption. They, like John Wesley, like Ann Lee, like Catherine Livingston Garrettson, like Elizabeth Bayley Seton, and like Joseph Smith, longed for a tangible witness of "the several persons of the ever-blessed Trinity," for an assurance of salvation, for a promise of eternal hope, for divine redemption.[90]

These personal redemptive quests are best understood through a consideration and contextualization of "inner history"—through a perusal of source materials that implicitly and explicitly reveal the private, the hidden, the invisible, the forgotten, and the overlooked. When such an approach is employed, additional voices can be folded into the narratives we already tell; women, children, people of color, the poor, and the unlearned gain a voice, a story, and a place within history. They are recognized as a part of larger movements; they become participants in and shapers of religious culture. Their stories add depth, breadth, and nuance to our understandings of the past; details about their experiences push historical narratives in new directions, thereby demonstrating how ordinary individuals helped frame larger movements and how their life stories fit into those movements. Indeed, recognizing inner history allows us to place forgotten people, forgotten denominations, and forgotten modes of suffering into a story we think we know. Perhaps our understanding of the religious past is best enriched when we allow all—human and divine—to be present.

And thus, accounts about women like Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth are important to consider when seeking to understand early American visionaries such as Joseph Smith. Their stories hint at the ways in which distinct and particular forms of sorrow and suffering encouraged people to

90. Wesley, *Letters of Rev. John Wesley,* 6:265–66.

seek slightly different relationships with God, relationships shaped by their cultures and backgrounds, relationships that met their particular needs. They also highlight the various ways in which people encountered God, thereby suggesting that visionary experiences came in a variety of forms and contexts. God seemingly responded in a variety of ways—healing wounded hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. Visions of the divine hinged on the quest for redemption and resulted in the possibilities of—the promise of—such a gift. These visionary experiences thus hint at the countless stories yet to be told, remind us of details yet to be discovered, and encourage fresh historiographical interpretations yet to be written. They challenge us to ask new questions when studying broader movements and contexts such as the Second Great Awakening, the Burned-Over District, the First Vision, or the origins of a church. They broaden the scope of what it means to be a visionary, of what it means to encounter or see the divine, of what it means to seek religion, and of what redemption meant within daily and ordinary contexts. Indeed, Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth remind us that a recognition of inner history can add layers of meaning and significance to how we understand the role and meaning of redemption in the lives of early American Christians.

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