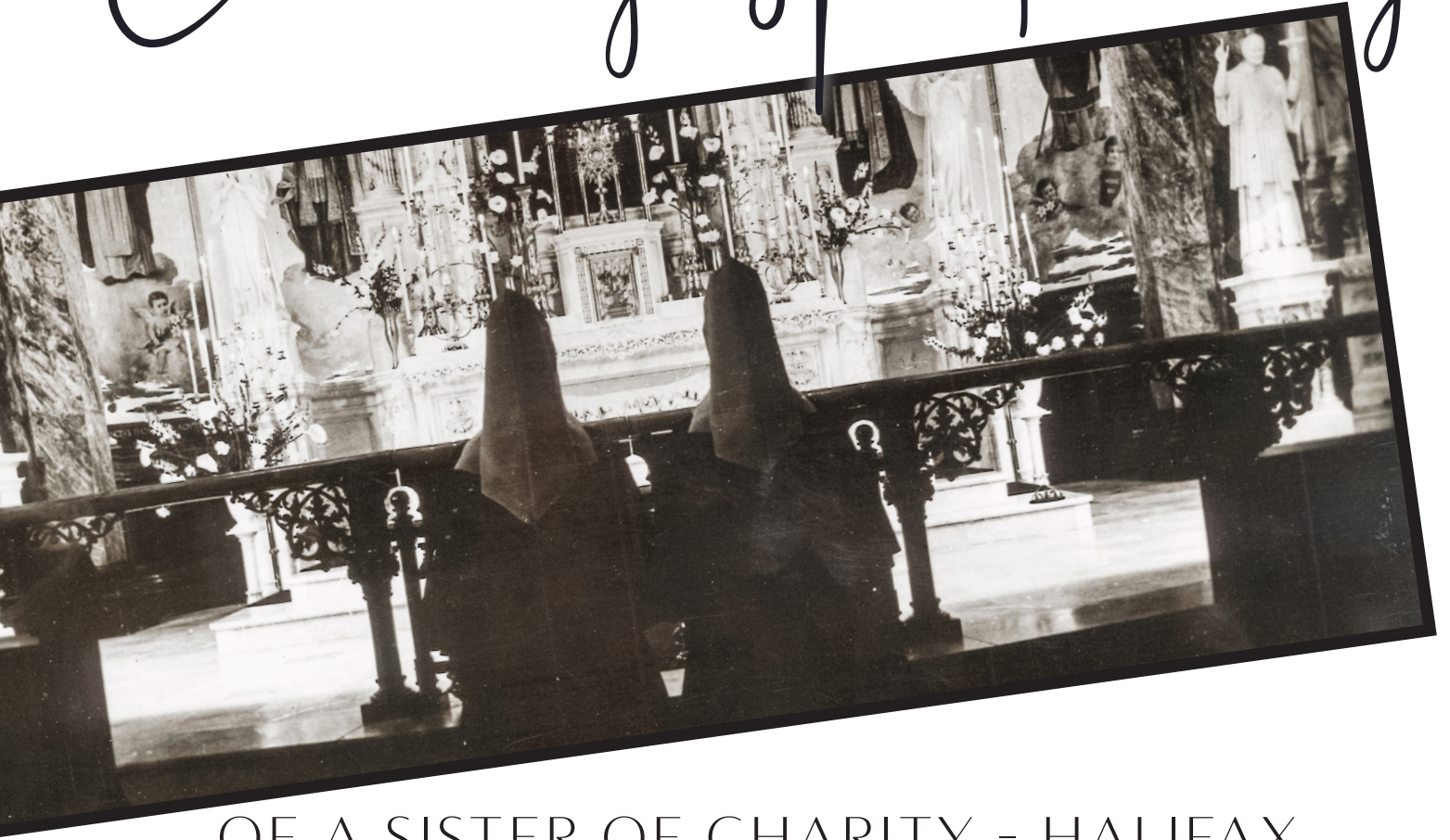


# Evolving Spirituality



## OF A SISTER OF CHARITY - HALIFAX

BY SISTER MARTHA WESTWATER



# Preface

Last November 2019, before any of us heard the word pandemic, Martha Westwater pursued an independent research project that caught her attention. The topic- The Evolving Spirituality of a Sister of Charity-Halifax. In this fifty page paper, she shares her perspective on how the faith of Elizabeth Seton, integrated and codified in an order of the day for the new community, became the foundation of the Prayer-Work symbiosis which was the basis of our spirituality for nearly one hundred fifty years.

## Martha's work is divided into four sections:

- The **Introduction (page 2)** raises the question that is an impetus for this research and for our reflection "What does it mean in the year 2020 to be searching for God as a member of a religious community, to feel called to the service of God and God's People, thus fulfilling the two great commandments to love God and our neighbor?"
- **Part 1 (page 6)** looks at the development of Elizabeth's Spirituality and its integration into the practices of the young religious community.
- **Part 2 (page 22)** shows how *Provisional Regulations for St. Joseph's Sisters in Emmitsburg* made their way to the NY mission and through them to Halifax.
- **Part 3 (page 29)** focuses on the evolution of these Rules and Regulations in the Sisters of Charity Halifax and the impact on daily life, spirituality and understanding of the Vows.
- In the **Conclusion, (page 43)** more recent developments in spirituality are touched upon. The initial thoughts of this section point to the lived reality: Practices continue to evolve, but the spirit of God's creative action is understood to be in our recognition of the transcendent in the individual's and in the congregation's lives.

By taking us along on this path from the past to present day, Martha invites us all to consider what are the connections that are important in our past and how our present is continually opening a path forward in our quest for God. It is our hope that together we will with intention continue this journey.

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Mary Katherine Hamm SC

August 28, 2020

Elizabeth Seton's 246th Birthday

*Evolving Spirituality of a Sister of Charity - Halifax by Sister Martha Westwater*

# Introduction

Refounding takes a long time. For nearly sixty years we have been wandering in the desert, seeking the original spirit of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. We have been guided in our discernment by that epoch changing work of the Ecumenical Council, which in 1965, gave us *Perfectae Caritatis* “Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life” and later on by Paul VI in his *Ecclesia Sanctae* “Norms for Implementing the Decree on the up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life. But it was John XXIII who in *Pacem in Terris* (1963) first addressed the moral imperatives confronting us in a rapidly changing world. When one considers the awesome scope and magnitude of the decrees, is it any wonder we are still straggling in the desert?

For too long religious had worked to preserve the *status quo*-signified most conspicuously by the traditional habit and the Rule or *Constitutions*. Throughout these years we’ve made many changes in government structures, in ministries, perhaps most flamboyantly in dress. The black cap, the fluted white bonnet and the veil have now disappeared from the garb of the Sisters of Charity. With these changes went old customs and traditions, dissolved in the chaotic changes beginning in the 1960s. Our wandering in the desert of “refounding” has been doubled by the dizzying changes still taking place in society. There is a world-wide Exodus, where millions of refugees are seeking freedom and where freedom itself is violated by extremism, found especially in corporate greed, in violence—particularly in the unparalleled use of guns. We are entering a new epoch with technological transformations we cannot even fathom, but also with a new appreciation of the spiritual, mysterious power of matter. Indeed we are living through a monumental paradigm shift in religion, science, society and politics. Despite the extraordinary

changes and the unconscious fear lurking beneath the breakdown of religious life as we have known it, Vincent's daughters and Elizabeth's sisters, are facing a new reality, entering into a renewed Federation, united under the universal quest for Love, and finding it in the very structure of the universe. Love is our charism—love of God, creation, all creatures—and it is sustained by prayer, that secret dialogue between God and the soul: the God Quest.

The greatest good coming from our wandering in the desert, the greatest spiritual paradigm shift, has been in our understanding of the all-encompassing power of the God Quest to those who search collectively- in community; as Carol Quigley, IHM, in her essay “The Primacy of the God Quest in Religious Life,” reminds us:

The quest is dynamic and not for the faint of heart. The call to religious life has at its center a summons to make God the priority in love, in possessions and power, with all of those lived within community (np).

What does it mean in the year 2020 to be searching for God as a member of a religious community, to feel *called* to the service of God and God's People, thus fulfilling the two great commandments to love God and our neighbor? Our call is a mystery, but we all share the same quest, “being of one mind, having the same love” (Philippians, 2:2) and living by the same vows - but perhaps not in the same way. The needs of the person and of the times determine how the individual responds to the quest to make God the center of her life “in love, in possessions and power.” What sustains and binds us together in our quest for God? **Prayer**. Our commitment to our vows, to love and service of the People of God can only be preserved by prayer. For over a century and a half our prayer has been mostly communal, dictated by the order of the day. Now our prayer is mostly personal, contemplative, dictated by conscience. What is prayer? It is



that mysterious interchange between God and the individual soul and in Luke's gospel we are counselled to "pray always and not lose heart" (18:1). As a religious, by maintaining a lifestyle that eschews wealth and control, and by keeping alive the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we are enabled "to walk in the presence of God all the days of our life" (Constitutions, 48).

Prayer, built on faith, makes it possible to proclaim with St. Paul that "neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God In Christ Jesus, our Lord" (Romans I, 8:38-39). How did Jesus pray?

Not much is known of Jesus's prayer life but what is recorded expresses his love and union with the Father and with his followers: "Little children, love one another" (John 13: 34) and "that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in me and I in Thee (John 17:21). We get fleeting glimpses of Jesus's prayer life from the gospels. He prayed at his Baptism in the Jordan at the beginning of his public life when the Spirit descended upon him; he prayed during his temptation in the desert; in his custom of going off alone into lonely places to pray, in the way He taught His apostles to pray the "Our Father;" In his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane and in his ultimate prayer on the cross, his surrender to the Spirit (Nolan x, xi). But we know that Jesus walked this earth in the presence of God; he found that Presence in the lilies of the field, in the sheep who knew the master's voice, in rocks and stones and thistles and wheat, in his trust of time even though he knew not the day nor the hour. He prayed communally with His disciples at the Last Supper where He shared unfathomable love and then washed His disciples' feet.

Charity and unity are the objects of all prayer: love and unity with God, and love and unity with one another. However, prayer is conditioned by the social and cultural milieu of its historical context. We, living into the twenty-first century, will not be praying the same way as Mother

Seton and her companions did, although it is astonishing that we followed her “Regulations” for over one hundred fifty years; neither will we follow in the same manner Vincent’s directives on Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. Above all we will not pray all together at the same time using the same format. Prayer was both communal and private in the life of Jesus, although one suspects it was mostly private—Father to Son. It has become essentially private today in the lives of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax. Ironically, it seems that as we pray more often in solitude, we find the need to share that prayer in public.

From 1857 when our first *Constitutions* were approved until 1985, when the last set was ratified, our prayer life was ritualized first in the *Small Prayer Book*, which we used for over a hundred years; for a much shorter period we used *Christian Prayer* or the *Breviary*. Prayer had been rigorously supported by the book of *Praiseworthy Customs* (1935), which was revised as the *Book of Customs* (1964) also by our community *Manual*. However, the salt of these books had lost its flavor. Communal prayer, so vital to the lives of Sisters of Charity of whatever congregation has become more muted in our own Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax. Were those prayers of the *Small Prayer Book* recited daily the prayers of St. Vincent DePaul, St. Louise de Marillac or St. Elizabeth Ann Seton? Did they come from France or were they strictly American in origin? What was their historical, cultural, religious and social background? It might be of value to examine these ever-varying, ever-growing prayer roots as we experience a new cosmic understanding of religious life and particularly of prayer which sustains that life. At this point in our history it might be well to examine the roots of the prayer life of a Sister of Charity-Halifax, by going back to the “Regulations” which Mother Seton drew up for her daughters in 1809, and based on the *Constitutions* which St. Vincent de Paul drew up for the Daughters of Charity in France but were not adopted in the United States until 1812.

# Part One

Our own times of division and disruption were no less chaotic than those of young Elizabeth Bayley. Born in 1774, she was three when her mother died. Her father married just a year after his wife's death and his second wife is rarely mentioned in Elizabeth Seton's Letters. Dr. Bayley, a respected physician, an officer in the British Navy, a researcher and humanitarian, was often away on medical research, and Elizabeth at a very early age coped with separation from her father by finding comfort in God, her true Father. Growing up in New York, the bastion of English control during the early part of the American Revolution, Elizabeth knew the turmoil caused by conflicting loyalties—to the highly respected, dominant English authority or to the roughly emerging energy of the Sons of Liberty. As a young widow she agonized over adherence to her Anglicanism or to her new found attraction to Roman Catholicism. As Elizabeth Bayley and the young colonies were struggling with the problems of separation and unification after the Revolution, so too, was the Catholic Church in the United States seeking a cautious, tremulous foothold.

The year 1789 seems to have been critical in Saint Elizabeth Seton's spiritual and national growth. Elizabeth's beloved father, Dr. Richard Bayley, who perhaps put his medical career ahead of his paternal duties, was away in England, and Elizabeth and her sister Mary were staying with her father's brother "Uncle William," at his home in New Rochelle, New York. Elizabeth wrote in a later journal about an experience she had that year. It is certainly central to her life of prayer. In her book, *Numerous Choirs*, Ellin Kelly describes the incident.

In the year 1789, when my father was in England, one morning in May with the lightness of a cheerful heart, I jumped in the wagon that was driving to the woods for brush about a mile from home. The boy who drove it began to cut, and I set off in the woods; soon found an outlet in a meadow and a chestnut tree, but when I came to it, found rich moss under it and a warm sun. Here, then, was a sweet bed. The air still, a clear blue vault above, the numberless sounds of spring melody and joy, the sweet clovers and wild flowers I had got by the way and a heart as innocent as a human heart could be, filled with ever enthusiastic love of God and admiration of His works. Still I can feel every sensation that passed through my soul. I thought at that time my father did not care for me. Well, God was my Father, my all. I prayed, sang hymns and laughed, talking to myself of how far He could place me above all sorrow. Then I lay still to enjoy the heavenly peace that came over my soul, and I am sure, in the two hours so enjoyed, grew ten years in my spiritual life (I: 30).

Peace and spontaneous joy, the marks of true contemplative prayer, were the emotional constituents of Elizabeth Seton's prayer. However, as Elizabeth was lying under the chestnut tree, her world was undergoing monumental change. In August of the same year that the adolescent Elizabeth had this religious experience in the New Rochelle woodlands, the French Revolution was gaining momentum, and the political turmoil in France had its repercussions in the United States—chiefly on the country's economy, but even more importantly, on the young Roman Catholic Church in the United States where French clergymen, among them William Charles Dubourg, fled to escape the catastrophes of the upheavals in France. The “ten days that shook the old European world” began on June 17 and continued to June 27, 1789. The Bastille fell on July 14. After abolishing the manorial rights and class privileges and distinctions on August 4, the French Constituent Assembly confiscated all ecclesiastical property on November 4. (Kelly:



I, 28). At this time, Napoleon, aged 24, was to become a general in the French Army. During this chaotic period in the history of the Catholic Church in France, the Daughters of Charity, four of whom were guillotined, were declining critically in numbers, while the Catholic Church in general and religious life in particular were beginning to rise in America. That rise was initiated by the work of the Reverend John Carroll, perhaps our American Church's Founding Father.

After the dissolution of the Jesuit order in France, John Carroll, who had been educated in Europe, returned to his native Maryland where he was appointed Superior of the American mission. The post revolutionary atmosphere in France proved to be advantageous to the Catholic Church in America. Ironically, as the government in France was vigorously repressing religion, the Bill of Rights, especially the First Amendment guaranteeing religious freedom, was being ratified in the United States. Early in 1789, a triumvirate in Elizabeth Seton's life: Philip Filicchi, John Carroll, and William Magee Seton, who was then visiting in Italy, called on Rev. John Thorpe, Carroll's friend in Rome, about the difficulty of satisfactory communication between Baltimore and Rome. Seton suggested using the trade route established between his father's firm and the Filicchi's as a mail channel. The letter containing Rome's permission for the American clergy to select their own See city and to nominate their choice for the first bishop came by way of the Filicchi-Seton trade route. Subsequently Carroll was approved as the "Bishop and Pastor of the said Church of Baltimore" and was commissioned "to erect a church in the said city of Baltimore, in form of a Cathedral Church" (Kelly, 28-29).

Elizabeth Bayley had not yet married William Magee Seton, but already the Seton-Carroll association had been made. She was well educated by the standards of the day and in his book *Mother Seton: Saint Elizabeth of New York*, Feeney suggests that it was her "mental accomplishments" that William admired so much (29). Elizabeth was fluent in French, had read

Rousseau, knew the English poets, and was an accomplished pianist. In future years she would translate many of the French spiritual writers into English for her daughters and helped her priest friend and spiritual guide, Simon Gabriel Brute “not only to develop his homilies and his class lectures but also to deliver them in acceptable English” (Celeste, 143). Elizabeth Bayley also had a profound and healthy prayer life, even before her conversion. As a devout Episcopalian, she was conscious of the transcendent in all of nature, human and divine. Even after her marriage both William Seton and Elizabeth were prayerful people. When tragedy struck with business failures, William’s ill health, followed by his acute suffering in the Lazaretto, prayer and a self devised Eucharistic service on Christmas Day sustained them both. William died on December 27, 1803. Elizabeth was praying at his side. There are an unusual number of references to prayer in her early letters and in her subsequent letters to the Filicchis, particularly to Antonio Filicchi, the brother of Philip. It was Antonio Filicchi who wrote to Carroll about Elizabeth’s possible conversion from the Episcopal to the Roman Catholic Church. Carroll’s subsequent letter to Elizabeth seems to have moved her to action. She wrote to Antonio on August 30, 1804:

The Bishop’s letter has been held to my heart on my knees beseeching God to enlighten me to see the truth, unmixed with doubts and temptations. I read the promises given to St. Peter and the 6th Chap. John every day and then ask God can I offend him by believing those express words ... God will not forsake me, Antonio, I know he will unite me to his flock (Melville, 87).

By 1805, Elizabeth Seton was the mother of five children ranging in age from three to fourteen. Her children were always her chief concern, her source of joy, and decidedly her main object of affection. On March 14, 1805, Elizabeth made her profession of faith and her witty, playful relationship with her God is evident in her recount of the event to Antonio:

After all were gone I was called to the little room next the altar and there professed to believe what the Council of Trent believes and teaches, laughing with my heart to my Saviour, who saw that I knew not what the Church of God declared to be its belief. As to going about a walking any more about what all the different people believe, I cannot, being quite tired out (Melville, 97).

Events moved quickly. Her first Communion, “a triumph of joy and gladness” was followed by her Confirmation, administered by Bishop Carroll, who was very fond of Elizabeth’s children and arranged for Elizabeth’s two boys to attend Georgetown.

Even more quickly was Mrs. Seton’s assumption of religious life. After failed attempts at working in private schools in New York and an offer to teach in a school in Montreal, Elizabeth was invited by the Reverend William Dubourg, a Sulpician who had escaped the revolution in France, and was now President of the newly found St. Mary’s College, to come to Baltimore in Maryland. Dubourg offered her a tract of land and promised her the “immediate charge of half a dozen girls, and as many more as she could manage” (Melville, 127). He was anxious for her to found a school for poor children, but Elizabeth knew she had to have boarders to help support her children. The house on Paca Street in Baltimore was rented for a year and the school begun. Always attracted to a spiritual life, Elizabeth moved nearer to her intention of opening a school and becoming a religious, of balancing work and prayer. She was not alone. Young American women, understanding the needs of a growing Catholic Church, were ready to join her.

Moving from the house on Paca Street, Elizabeth Ann Seton took possession of a farm two miles from St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, a gift of Mr. Samuel Cooper, like Mother Seton, a convert to Catholicism. In their monumental work of three volumes, Elizabeth Bayley

Seton Collected Writings, the editors, Regina Bechtle, S.C. and Judith Metz, S.C. cite a letter written to Philip Filicchi on February 8, 1809. Elizabeth reports:

--some time ago I mentioned to you the conversion of a man of family and fortune in Philadelphia--this conversion is as solid as it is extraordinary, and as the person is soon to receive the Tonsure in our seminary, in making the disposition of his fortune he has consulted our Rev. Mr. [William] Dubourg the President of the College on the plan of establishing an institution for the advancement of catholic female children in habits of religion and giving them an education suited to that purpose--(11, 54)

These “females” would need a regular daily order. Having assumed the religious habit on the Feast of Corpus Christi, June 2, 1809, the first few months from August till February, 1810, the little band of sixteen people, lived in a small house, not yet completed, of four rooms known as The Stone House. Sister Rose White, herself a widow and who was to become Mother Seton’s Assistant, joined the little band on July 28, 1809, and kept a journal in which she describes the hardships of those early days, particularly the move from the Stone House to the new White House. The ever practical and intelligent Sister Rose wrote on July 30, 1809:

Men began to plaster the first story; we moved from one room to another, and at one time lived in the hall. Our school increased in number, both boarders and day scholars. We had great difficulty in accommodating the boarders. Sisters all slept in the garret on the floor, in the same place as the hair was for the plastering, and often we pass[ed] the night carrying our mattresses from one place to another to find rest; we were so bit with fleas that our skin were purple in appearance. We began to take in sewing from the Mountain to pay the debt we owed. (*Collected Writings* II, 728)

Furthermore, the sisters suffered from an unhealthy diet: “Their poverty was indescribable, and their hardships called for heroic endurance. Carrot coffee, coarse rye bread, smoked herring, and if fortune smiled on them a few spoons of molasses constituted their regular fare for the first winter. In addition to this pathetic diet, there was difficulty of procuring water” (Lavery, 187). From this rough, unaccommodating beginning, where manual labor was intense (they had to walk two miles to Tom’s creek for water and laundry), this little band was instructed in the rudiments of religious life. Sister Rose White’s Journal records:

All was strange around us; the new house under cover, the carpenters yet at work, and we not knowing exactly what we were to do. However, it was necessary to make some little arrangement of Rules and begin the order of the day (*Collected Writings*, II, 720).

When one considers sixteen people living together in four rooms, some rules for sharing life in such close proximity would have to be established. No doubt the seeds for our praiseworthy customs were sown in Mother Seton’s Stone House. Guidelines regarding prayer, courtesy, house duties, refectory rubrics, use of books and property, sanitation, health care, etc. had to be formulated to make difficult living conditions tolerable, perhaps even gracious. We may not be certain of the instructions regarding living in community, but we are certain about the daily routine. The genesis for our “Order of the Day” in our later *Constitutions* is to be found in these early rules. Each sister would know exactly what to do at every minute of the day. When one considers the amount of manual labor, besides teaching, with which the sisters were engaged (sewing, weaving, cooking, cleaning etc.) it is no wonder that the Regulations which were to order their day, were so precise, so exact in their timing. Sisters Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz provide an undated copy of the *Provisional Regulations for St. Joseph’s Sisters in Emmitsburg*, regulations which were based on the Rules drawn up by St. Vincent de Paul for the Daughters



of Charity. The *Provisional Regulations* also give us a glimpse of how prayer underscored every moment in the lives of Mother Seton's daughters. More importantly, they give us a deep look into the origins of our *Small Prayer Book*, our *Books of Praiseworthy Customs*, and our *Manual*, but most importantly they form the basis of the Prayer-Work symbiosis which was the basis of our spirituality for nearly one hundred fifty years.

### Provisional Regulations for St. Joseph's Sisters

- I. They will rise at 5—give their first moments to God by reciting fervently on their knees, each by herself as soon as they are dressed, one Our Father and Hail Mary—then put up their beds, wash etc.
- II. At 5:30 vocal prayers (out of the pious guide) and a meditation till 6:15, the subject of which everyone will read for herself, laying down and using her book when she pleases.
- III. Then they will walk two and two to church saying one-third of the rosary in going and then another in returning—one of the Sisters by turns shall keep the house, whilst the others go to church—and employ herself in sweeping and fixing everything for Breakfast.
- IV. On their return home they will breakfast, after which they will be in recreation or permitted to talk for half an hour—during which they will employ themselves to the different arrangements in the house. (At 9 o'clock they will kneel down for two or three minutes to adore the Sacred Heart of Jesus.)

V. Manual labor till 11:45—in silence—during which one of the Sisters will read to the others the life of the saint of the day or some other, as the Mother may direct. They may also interrupt their silence by singing together at intervals under the direction of the Mother or the presiding sister such spiritual songs as they may know by heart.

VI. At 11:45 reading of twenty-five verses of the New Testament on their knees and examination of Conscience terminated by the Angelus and an act of adoration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

VII. At 12 dinner during which two of the sisters in succession shall read to the others. The first will read twenty-five verses of the Old Testament, chiefly of the books of Solomon (except his song), Esther, Judith, Tobias, and the Psalms, then some religious history. The second will continue the history and when the Mother gives the signal, two numbers of the Following of Christ.

VIII. After dinner, Recreation till two o'clock. Two will be appointed by turns to removing things from the table—washing the dishes, sweeping the hall etc.—and the rest of the time they will spend together in friendly conversation, avoiding, however anything that might degenerate into excessive familiarity—When the weather permits, it would be proper to take recreation out of the house in the grove and wherever the Mother may find it most agreeable—

IX. At 2, the reading of one chapter of [Thomas] a Kempis, either in the fields or at home as the Mother thinks proper, after which manual labor as in the morning, interrupted at 4 by an act of adoration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus—and accompanied by

intervals by pious reading or singing.

X. At 5 o'clock recreation for half an hour during which everyone will be at liberty to do what she may be inclined to—At 5:30 they will go to church to adore the Blessed Sacrament, saying the third part of the Rosary. Such as may be prevented from going will spend half an hour at home in this pious exercise. Those who go to church will only remain half an hour in it and go out together when the Mother or presiding Sister gives the signal. They may talk familiarly on their return.

XI. If on their arrival at home they do not find everything ready for tea, they will wait in silence. During tea, one will read out of *The Spiritual Combat*.

XII. After tea, recreation as after dinner till 8:30, during which they shall fix the beds, etc.

XIII. At 8:30 evening prayer and reading of the subject of meditation for the next morning, after which the Sisters will ask the blessing of the Mother and retire to bed in profound silence.

\*These regulations are bracketed through 'breakfast': then written outside the bracket is the stipulation: "Silence is to be kept during all this time. It shall be interrupted only in case of some personal necessity but for so short a time as possible and in a low voice.

Collected Writings, II, 737-739.

At this point the young band had no constitutions or rules for government, but, as our own

present *Constitutions* provide Directives, these Regulations provide clear instructions on how they were to make God the priority in their lives; how and when they were to pray; how they were to live simply, and how they were to obey the directions of the “Mother.”

The similarity between the “Provisional Regulations” given by Mother Seton to her daughters in 1809, and the *Prayers of Custom* as outlined in the *Small Prayer Book* and used until the late sixties or early seventies is astonishing. Bechtle and Metz suggest that the prayers might have come from the Rev. John B. David, a Sulpician priest who had “compiled a prayer book, *True Piety*, which became the most popular and representative manual of the baroque Jansenistic] tradition of spirituality in the United States” (*Collected Writings*, Illa, 278 [Note]). However, the simplicity and relaxing tone of the “Regulations” is lost somewhat in our *Small Prayer Book* of one hundred twenty-six 3 1/2 by 5 1/2 pages which begins abruptly with RISING.

At the first sound of the bell in the morning, prostrate yourself in spirit before the tabernacle, make the sign of the cross and say: “All for Thee, O my God, all for Thy greater honor, glory and pure love”

Then follow specific prayers to be said while: Taking Holy Water, Washing, Dressing, Putting on the Habit, Going to Meditation, Going to Mass, Going to the Refectory, Grace before Meals, Grace after Meals, Going up Stairs, Going down Stairs, Going to Visit the Blessed Sacrament, Walking through the House, Going to Duty, Going to the Parlor, Going Out, On Returning, Going to Recreation, Undressing, Going to Rest. What vocal prayers are to be read at Morning, Noon and Evening are then prescribed. We find the prayer life and the rules for maintaining a spiritual atmosphere as written in the *Small Prayer Book*, *Praiseworthy Customs* (1927), revised as the *Book of Customs* (1964), and the *Manual* (1935) are rigidly regulated. Indeed, looking

back at our prayer life, we are astonished at the number of novenas and prayers that were added at either morning, noon or evening prayer periods and which covered the entire liturgical year: the Novena to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Act of Consecration for the First Friday of the month, Novena for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Devotions for Advent, Prayer for the Feast of the Expectation of Our Lady, Novena in Honor of the Holy Name of Jesus, Novena for the Feast of the Presentation, Novena to Our Lady of Lourdes, Novena of Grace, Novena to St. Joseph, Novena for the feast of the Annunciation, Prayers at Passiontide, Novena for Pentecost, Prayers for Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi, Novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Prayers to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, to St. Vincent de Paul, for the feast of the Visitation, Novena for the feast of St. Ann, for the feast of the Assumption, for the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, to the Queen of Martyrs, to St. Therese of Lisieux, Novena to Our Mother Most Admirable, and a Novena for the feast of the Presentation.

Added to these novenas and prayers were specific prayers in thanksgiving for little “miracles” like the prayer to St. Roch and to Our Lady of Lourdes. Furthermore, the spirit of devotion was maintained by the rule of silence kept throughout the house and during meals. Even these “talk days” were regulated—thirty-four—not counting the Christmas and summer vacations. There might be a few other days granted by the Superior, but St. Vincent’s counsel to keep the rule of silence because it “will enable you to preserve the spirit of devotion” was uniformly maintained (*Manual*, 21). These prayers and novenas were intended as an aid to piety, to increase reverence and devotion to God, but in hindsight these pious rituals exacted increased discipline, diminished personal, private prayer, and enshrined centralized authority. Many of the pious exercises combined with the usual Morning, Noon, and Evening Prayers that were added at various times over the years were attempts to satisfy the Congregation for Religious in Rome. There seems to be unusual zeal on the part of our superiors to prove ourselves worthy of papal



approval which was finally given under the leadership of Mother Mary Berchmans Walsh.

However different in tone, the same rules regarding prayer are found both in Mother Seton's "Regulations" and our *Small Prayer Book*: Vocal Prayer, Communal Prayer, Meditation, Silence, Mass, Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, the Rosary—these devotions were interspersed with manual labor. There is something very direct, informal, accommodating about Mother Seton's first set of rules which, Elizabeth admits in an August 6, 1809 letter to Bishop Carroll, were drawn up by Father Dubois, a Sulpician priest near Emmitsburg: "Mr. [John]Dubois, who is all kindness and charity to us, we begin to get accustomed to, and we also have the consolation of observing in some degree the System which is hereafter to govern us" (*Collected Writings*, II, 77). That system was based on the Rules of the Daughters of Charity founded by St. Vincent de Paul, but Elizabeth insists in a letter to Eliza Sadler, dated January 9, 1810: "But if you recollect the System of the Sisters of Charity before and since the Revolution in France, you will know the rule of our community in a Word amounts only to that regularity necessary for order and no more" (*Collected Writings*, II, 98). In another letter, dated February 4, 1811, to her friend Catherine Dupleix, Elizabeth writes:

As to all the nonsense of our being nuns ... it arises from our living in community under such regulations as we have chosen ourselves and without which so large a family could not be well governed, and from my having ... made at the feet of our blessed Bishop (the crucifix and sweet Cate the only witnesses) a vow of chastity and obedience to himself (*Collected Writings*, II, 172).

Saint Elizabeth Seton understood the need for change and modification in a time of great political and social upheaval. In the *Constitutions* of the Daughters of Charity, the sanctification

of its members remained inviolate, the primary object of the congregation. This primacy remained unchanged with Elizabeth's daughters. The secondary objects were adapted to meet the needs of a growing country. In St. Vincent's rule the most important of the works of charity was the care of the sick poor; in Mother Seton's institute it was the instruction of young females. Both ministries were to be nourished by communal prayer and meditation. The prayers found in Elizabeth's community might well be the prayers said by all Sisters of Charity up until the sixties. What is certain, however, is that there were set prayers used by Mother Seton after she and four candidates (Sisters Cecelia O'Conway, Maria Murphy, Mary Ann Butler of Philadelphia and Susan Clossy of New York) appeared in habit on the Feast of Corpus Christi, June 9, 1809, a year after Elizabeth reached Baltimore, and a year before the Rule of St. Vincent de Paul was brought to America in 1810 (Kelly, 127). *Constitutions* or Rules of various orders usually stipulate the necessity of prayer but do not stipulate the forms of prayer. St. Vincent DePaul, certainly not lessening the importance of prayer, was adamant in having his rules address the needs of the day, especially those of the sick poor. In the 1812 copy of "Regulations for the Society of Sisters of Charity in the United States of America" it is written:

As they are more exposed to the world than nuns, having in most circumstances no other monastery than the houses of the sick or the school rooms, no other cell than a hired room, no other chapel than the parish churches, no cloister but public streets or hospital rooms, no enclosure but obedience, no grate but the fear of God, no veil but that of holy modesty, they are on that account to lead as virtuous a life as if they were professed in a religious order ... (Kelly, Appendix A, 243).

In a letter of May 13, 1811, to Archbishop Carroll, Mother Seton raised some questions about adopting the French Rule in America:

*Evolving Spirituality of a Sister of Charity - Halifax by Sister Martha Westwater*

What authority would the Mother they bring over have over our Sisters (while I am present) but the very rule she is to give them?—and how could it be known that they would consent to the different modifications of their rule which are indispensable if adopted by us How can they allow me the uncontrolled privileges of a Mother to her five darlings?—or how can I in conscience or in accordance with your paternal heart give up so sacred a right? (*Collected Writings*, II, 185).

Both Bishop Chevrus of Boston and John Dubois were opposed to a union with France (Barthel, 144). Her children were always Elizabeth's chief priority. Elizabeth's anguished heart was nearly crushed at the death of the seventeen year old Annina on March 12, 1812, followed four years later, November 4, 1816, by the death of her daughter Rebecca, her "lovely gay little Bee" (Boyle, 12). It was after Annina's death that Mother Seton adapted from an old Methodist hymnal that haunting hymn "Jerusalem, My Happy Home" (Kelly, 160). Would the Rule of St. Vincent have allowed Elizabeth the daunting duties of a mother? More importantly, would Mother Seton be allowed to make teaching rather than caring for the sick poor her primary mission? Archbishop Carroll himself recognized the disparity between the French milieu which had nurtured the Rules and the Maryland scene in which they were to operate.

From 1812 until her death in 1821, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and her little band of American daughters would live by St. Vincent de Paul's Rules, which were revised to suit the needs of a new congregation. Its opening paragraph reflects the major shift from caring for the sick poor to education.

The Sisters of Charity in the United States of America, known by the name of Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's, are the daughters of St. Vincent DePaul, whom they acknowledge

as their chief patron and founder. Their institute is the same as that of the Sisters of Charity of France with this difference: that the education, which the Sisters of Charity were there bound to give only to poor children, will be extended here to all female children in whatever station of life they may be, for which the Sisters will receive a sufficient compensation, out of which they will endeavor to save as much as they can to educate gratis poor orphan children. There will also be adopted such modifications in the Rules as the difference of country, habits, customs, and manners may require. (Kelly, Appendix B, 268)

Archbishop Carroll died in 1815; finally the “By-laws of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s” were signed on July 23, 1817 (Kelly, 198). By this time, Elizabeth’s daughters had spread to Philadelphia in 1814, and New York in 1817. They took with them the “Provisional Regulations” of the Sisters of Charity which were drawn up by Mother Seton and her first companions, aided by Father Dubourg, and which resonate “Of the Employment of the Day” as given by St. Vincent DePaul in Chapter V of the 1812 *Constitutions* (See Kelly, Appendix A, 2S7).

## Part Two

At the beginning of Vatican II when we were advised to go back to the spirit of our founders, we would have recognized in Mother Seton's "Regulations" the essential, but paradoxical need for humans to belong and yet remain separate, to be alone and yet to be part of a group. Prayer, contemplative and vocal, satisfy these needs. We would also discover how the social, cultural and political needs challenge a leader's courage to meet those ever-changing needs. Our Founders begin with Mothers Elizabeth Seton, extend to Elizabeth Boyle, and finally to Basilia McCann. It might be well to review how change tested these women.

Like Mother Seton, Elizabeth Boyle, high minded and spiritual and a convert to Catholicism, entered the little community on March 16, 1810; with her was Ann Gruber. Elizabeth was a born teacher, while Ann was a born housekeeper, "trained by her thrifty German mother to bake and churn and spin." Both made invaluable contributions to the little band of Elizabeth Seton's followers (Walsh, 17). Their entrance together emphasizes the diversity which Elizabeth Seton recognized as essential to growth. While Ann Gruber became a talented Procuratrix and an astute woman of business, Elizabeth Boyle became a beloved teacher, mother to hundreds of orphans and "the partner of my cares" to Elizabeth Seton (Walsh, 52). After her profession, Elizabeth Boyle, besides her teaching and supervision duties, became a model for the multi-tasked Sister of Charity: she was sacristan at St. Mary's, the mountain church, the village church of St. Joseph, and the log house chapel. Cleaning and preparing these sacred places consumed her Saturdays. When Sister Rose White left to begin the orphanage in Philadelphia, Elizabeth Boyle became Assistant Mother to Elizabeth Seton. Although some saw a physical resemblance



between the two, Mother Seton was more vivacious and spirited, more likely to reveal herself completely in conversation or in the outpourings of a facile pen. Sister Elizabeth was less imaginative, less given to self-expression, perhaps harder to know. But if they were not identical in appearance or in traits of personality, there was a great sense of kinship between them and complete harmony of thought” (Walsh 40).

That harmony of thought was evident in Sister Elizabeth’s appointment as Mistress of Novices, then to Philadelphia as Superior, where she learned of Mother Seton’s death on January 4, 1821. Both Sisters Rose White and Elizabeth Boyle were named to succeed her. Sister Rose White, the older and more experienced, was elected. The November 22, 1824 Council Meetings at Emmitsburg record that Sister Elizabeth Boyle was appointed Sister Servant at St. Patrick’s Orphan Asylum. She continued her true vocation in the care of orphans, and then, most significantly, she was missioned to New York. It was Mother Elizabeth Boyle who was to mission four sisters to the Halifax foundation carrying with them the daily Morning and Evening Prayers, no doubt hand-written copies, used by the Emmitsburg group; later these copies were printed and used by the sisters in New York and Halifax until the late nineteen hundred sixties.

Just as Elizabeth Seton and her sisters had to make changes to the 1812 *Constitutions*, so the Sisters of Charity in New York had to face a similar, more serious situation. They were ordered to withdraw from the education of boys as the *Constitutions* stipulated their ministry was intended for the teaching of females only. Devastated as they were, on December 6, 1846, the notification was given by Father Deluol, the Superior of the Emmitsburg community, to the New York Sisters, that they were to make their decision, and if they chose to remain in New York, and continue to educate boys, they had permission to do so, but that they were to write to him for a dispensation from their vows (Walsh 119). It was a heartbreaking time for all, but of the

sixty-two Sisters in the diocese at the time, twenty-nine returned to Emmitsburg and thirty-three remained to carry on the backbreaking work of three asylums, three academies, and six parochial schools (121). Sister Elizabeth Boyle was elected Mother of the new community under the jurisdiction of Bishop Hughes. In less than two years after the New York mission separated from Emmitsburg, Bishop Walsh, a friend of Bishop Hughes, whose biological sister was in the New York community, requested sisters to come to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to open schools and an orphanage. After a delay of two years, Mother Elizabeth Boyle sent four pioneers: Sister Basilia McCann as Superior, Mary Rose McAleer, Mary Vincent Conklin and Mary Cornelia Fenney. On May 11, 1849, the Sisters, accompanied by Father Hannan, arrived in Halifax. The Reverend Michael Hannon was to become as much an adversary to the Halifax community as the Reverend John David was to the first Emmitsburg company and the Reverend Louis Deluol was to the New York group.

Of Sister Basilia McCann, who was to become the first Mother of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax, little is known. She was ten years old when Elizabeth Seton died. Apparently Mother Seton prepared Rose McCann for her First Holy communion; more than likely she attended the Free School which Mother Seton had established along with her Academy for boarders. Mother Seton was a born educator and adopted a strict regimen for all the students at St. Joseph's. Rose McCann would have been more than adequately educated by the standards of the day. What is certain, however, is that she entered the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph at Emmitsburg in 1829, eight years after Mother Seton's death. Her first mission was to St. Mary's Asylum in Baltimore (1833-36); here she began her apostolate of child care which was to be so very dear to her all her life. Other assignments followed: as teacher at St. John's School, Frederick, Maryland (1837-1839) and as Sister Servant and teacher at Martinsburg, West Virginia (1840-1841); in 1842 she was sent to New York as Sister Servant to the sisters who had domestic duties at St. Mary's

Seminary and St. John's College, Rose Hill, Fordham. Five years later, when the Jesuits took over these institutions, the sisters were withdrawn and Sister Basilia was sent to St. Paul's in Brooklyn, but not for long (McCarthy, 1-3). She was predestined to become the first Superior of the Halifax foundation. At a Council Meeting of the New York Sisters of Charity on January 24, 1848, it was decided to refuse a request made by the Most Reverend William Walsh, D.D. for four Sisters of Charity to staff a school in the cold, distant city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. However, a week later, a Council Meeting *Minutes* record:

In consequence of the advice and consent of Bishop Hughes, the decision of the last Council respecting the Halifax mission was reconsidered and sisters appointed to fill it. Sr. Basilia as Sister Servant, Sr. Beatrice, Sr. M. Rose, and Sr. Mary Vincent, the two latter novices when appointed but allowed to make their vows in consequence of going ... three months of the regular time dispensed with. The missionaries to leave early in May under the care of Rev'd Mr. Hannon (McCarthy 9-10).

In her book *The Sisters of Charity Halifax*, published in 1956, Sister Maura Power does not mention Sister Beatrice as landing in Halifax. [It was providential that the manuscript of this book was awaiting approval at the Diocesan offices when the disastrous fire of 1951 destroyed one hundred years of our recorded history.] Besides Sister Basilia McCann and Rose McAleer, Sister Maura lists Sisters Mary Cornelia Fenney and Mary Vincent Conklin. She also reports reminiscences of Mother Basilia as being always recollected and a strict keeper of silence, but also being of a bright and cheerful disposition, wholehearted in all she did.

In appearance, Mother Basilica was tall and erect; she had a dark complexion and very penetrating black eyes, which would kindle with disapproval or beam with sympathy

and kindness, as the occasion called. Often she entertained us with the experiences of her early religious life, and they were all so many examples of to be imitated, so many incentives to generous efforts in the service of our Crucified Master (9).

Mother Basilica McCann was a practical, patient educator, a good supervisor of school and orphanage both located in the house on Barrington Street, St. Mary's. It was noted in the October 2, 1851 Report of the School Commissioners that: "The large day school on Barrington Street, conducted by the Sisters of Charity, caused much admiration by the extreme order and neatness, its general arrangements, and apparent growth in knowledge, industry and good moral habits" (McCarthy, 15). Besides being an educator, Sister Basilia was also a good business woman. She was the first to organize a bazaar in Halifax for the benefit of her beloved orphans. At the time the convent revenue was quite insufficient for the maintenance of the sisters and the orphans. Sister Basilia, practical and compassionate, tried to eke out sustenance by the sale of fancy work and religious articles, sewing at night to supply the demand, which, in the end, proved insufficient. In the summer of 1850 she organized her first fund raiser and raised the colossal sum of four thousand pounds with which, first and foremost, she bought new uniforms for all the orphans. Later on, she insisted that, when a novitiate was to be established in Halifax, it must have assured means of support. A Novitiate would soon be established.

Since the Sisters arrival in 1849, they were considered members of the Sisters of Charity of New York and were subject to Mother Elizabeth Boyle, who in 1850, was replaced by Mother Mary Jerome Ely. There is no doubt that Mother Basilia McCann brought the same prayer books and the same horarium, revised to suit the new community. More than likely the prayers were hand written and led by one sister assented to by all. What is certain though, is that when the *Small Prayer Book* was printed, a 1920 edition shows identical prayers said by the New York and

Halifax Sisters of Charity. Furthermore, Mother Jerome's letters to Mother Basilia show the deep spiritual and communal bond between the Halifax and New York communities. Would that union persist?

Mother Jerome called Sister Servant Mother Basilia home to New York in the Fall of 1855 to discuss the possibility of making the Halifax mission independent. The decision is recoded in the New York Council Book, dated December 5, 1855:

The Council of the Motherhouse, Mt. St. Vincent, have agreed to allow the sisters on the Mission of Halifax to remain three years from the present date for the purpose of forming a Novitiate and Motherhouse at the said place to be independent of the Motherhouse of New York. And the sisters from New York are to return to their own community if they wish at the time, or remain and attach themselves to that in Halifax if they think proper to do so (McCarthy 20).

On December 8, 1855, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the new Motherhouse was formally established in Halifax at St. Mary's, and on January 1, 1856, Mary Holden (Sister Mary Aloysia) the Misses Fitzgerald (Sister M. Gabriel and Sister M. Ignatius) entered the community; they were followed by Catherine O'Neill (Mother M. Elizabeth) Eliza McDermott (Sister M. Teresa), then by Mary Rogers (Sister M. Martina), Mary Connolly (Sister M. Clare), and Miss Butler (Sister M. Stanislaus). The young community continued to grow in the following years, and, according to Sister Maura, "On February 17, 1856, His Holiness Pope Pius IX granted the petition presented by Archbishop Walsh, and graciously approved the diocesan community and its good works of teaching, visiting the sick, caring for orphans, and all others" (Power 9). In 1859, Mother Basilica McCann announced she was leaving Halifax to return to her beloved



New York community. She left after ten years of service to Halifax leaving them with the prayers, customs, and *Constitutions* which had been formulated in 1857. She left also, no doubt, the *Regulations* concerning prayer and work compiled by Mother Seton, brought to New York by Mother Elizabeth Boyle, and thence to Halifax by Mother Basilia McCann.

Sister Rose McAleer succeeded as Mother of the little community on December 8, 1858, just one year after the adoption of the first *Constitutions* of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax. Mother Rose occupied office under most unfavorable circumstances; she guided the still infant community for two three-year terms until 1864, and was responsible for the first Act of Incorporation of our Congregation. Yet, in her book *A Trio of Mothers*. Sister Francis d' Assisi McCarthy questioned:

Forgotten? or unknown? A mother not mentioned in our Golden Jubilee Book, not mentioned in our Centennial Book, not mentioned in our obituary list ... unremembered, even unacknowledged" (7). Why? Sister Rose was disobedient. After her term as Mother expired, she was refused her request to go to the new mission at Church Point, Nova Scotia. She left the Sisters of Charity with her companion Sister Teresa McDermott, was refused re-entry to the New York Sisters of Charity, and joined the Sisters of Mercy in California. She died in Eureka, California, December 28, 1895, and her death certificate noted her occupation as a "Sister of Charity" (McCarron, private "Memorabilia").

# Part Three

Sister Rose McAleer was succeeded in office by Mother Mary Josephine Carroll (1864-1870), followed by Mothers Mary Elizabeth O'Neil (1870-1876), Mary Frances Maguire (1876-1881), Mary Benedicta Harrington (1881-1884), Mary Cleophas Connors (1884-1889), Mary Bonaventure Kennedy (1889-1895), Mary Fidelis Eustace (1895-1901). All these Mothers could write as Mother Seton wrote to Archbishop John Carroll on August 6, 1809, We “have the consolation of observing in some degree the System which is hereafter to govern us ...” (*Collected Writings* 11,77). The “System” was her Regulations or Order of the Day which we have already examined and the Rules of St. Vincent de Paul which Mother Seton's sisters would adopt in 1812. Our own Constitution of 1857 was based on the Constitutions of 1812. Article One of the 1857 Constitutions of the Halifax Community, a copy of which rests in the Archives of the Sisters of Charity-Halifax, reads:

The Sisters of Charity in the Archdiocese of Halifax, known by the name of “Sisters of Mount St. Vincent, Halifax, are the daughters of St. Vincent DePaul. Their Institute is similar to that of the Sisters of Charity in France, with this difference:

1st That the education which the Sisters of Charity were there bound to give, only to poor children, will be extended here to all female children, in whatever station of life they may be, for which the Sisters will receive a sufficient compensation, and out of which they will endeavor to save as much as they can to educate gratuitously poor Orphan Children.

2nd That there will also be adopted such modification of the Rules, as the difference of habits, customs, and manners of this country may require. The Rev. Superior General after mature deliberation with the council, has framed the Constitution, and obtained the approbation of the Archbishop of Halifax

In the proviso “That there will also be such modification of the Rules, as the difference of habits, customs and manners of this country may require,” we have the seeds of our Praiseworthy Customs and the Book of Customs. The fire of 1951 destroyed all the General Chapter, General Council Minutes of meetings over which these Mothers presided and the loss is irreparable. If we had these Minutes we would be able to trace the origin of these “habits, customs and manners” which form the basis of our Books of Customs. However, that they are the work of the General Chapter is verified by Sister Irene Farmer. In her Foreword to the 1964 “Book of Customs,” Mother Maria Gertrude (Sister Irene Farmer) wrote:

The Book of Customs is a practical guide for the observance of the constitutions. Although the customs of a religious are secondary to the ordinances of its constitutions, they are, nevertheless, binding under the virtue of obedience they are approved by the General Chapter ... All the norms and directions in the Book of Customs are designed to assist the sisters to achieve their spiritual goal, to intensify their zeal and fervor, and to increase their love and esteem for the congregation.

And what is the spiritual goal of a Sister of Charity of Halifax? In 1857 it was found in the “Regulations for the Society of Sisters of Charity in the United States of America.” Chapter I, Article 1.1 reads:

Now in order that they may correspond with the grace of that vocation and fulfill with merit to themselves and benefit to others the great obligations annexed to it, they must endeavor to live a holy life and apply with great care to their own perfection, joining the exercises of an interior, spiritual life to their exterior employments, according to the following regulations which they shall strive to practice with the utmost fidelity as the most proper means to arrive at the ends of their holy vocation. (Kelly, Appendix A, 243).

Furthermore, they shall perform all their exercises both spiritual and temporal in a spirit of humility, charity, and simplicity in union with those which Jesus Christ performed on earth ... (1.4, 244),

What Vincent exhorts so simply, “joining the exercises of an interior, spiritual life to their exterior employments” has had very broad interpretations. Some maintain work is prayer, while others maintain a rigid distinction between work and prayer, formal and informal prayer, or vocal versus contemplative prayer. Prayer is simply communicating with God. For religious it is the most important element in the God Quest which also demands service of the neighbor. The God Quest is the seeking, striving, with utter faithfulness, the Perfection which is God and embodied in the Person of Jesus Christ by joining prayer and service of others. The bedrock of the call to seek God, the All Perfect, is our profession of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

The third Article of our 1857 Constitutions gives the purpose of our congregation:

The object of the Institute of the Sisters of Mount St. Vincent in America, according

to the plan laid down by St. Vincent DePaul, is - 1st To honor our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all Charity, by rendering every temporal and spiritual service in their power, in the person of the poor, sick, children, prisoners, and others. 2nd To honor the Sacred Infancy of Jesus in young persons of their own sex, whom they are called upon to form to virtue; whilst they sow in their minds the seeds of useful knowledge.

(1.3)

Our Books of *Praiseworthy Customs* become very significant then because our earliest 1857 *Constitutions* did not address issues of prayer or of the observance of the vows. They relied on the 1812 *Constitutions*. How do directives in the Books of Customs relate to the prescriptions St. Vincent DePaul wrote on the vows, or, as Quigley defines them, those “summons to make God the priority in love, in possessions and power.” Briefly, we shall compare the two documents.

## POVERTY

*1812 Constitutions*, Adopted by Mother Seton

*They shall not dispose, either by gifts or loans, of anything belonging to the community nor borrow, purchase or receive anything without the consent of the Mother (II. i)*

*They shall neither ask nor refuse anything in temporal matters (II).*

Our *Praiseworthy Customs*

*Refuse nothing, ask for nothing, rely on God for all (1935) 25.*

*No religious, even the Superior, may habitually keep money in her possession. The sisters,*

*however should not ask for donations, either for the congregation or for themselves (31). Furthermore, "Any gift of money, not part of a sister's patrimony, is to be passed in to the local superior and deposited in the common fund (1964) 48.*

Both documents emphasize the essential role of the superior.

## CHASTITY

### *1812 Constitutions, Article II, Of Chastity*

St. Vincent de Paul does not try to define chastity, but he is meticulous in describing how it should be kept. He counsels:

*The Sisters of Charity shall use their utmost endeavors to preserve unstained the purity of their bodies ... 11.i.*

*[T]hey shall keep their eyes down particularly in the streets, in the church, in strange houses, and above all, when speaking to persons of the other sex (II. ii) ... They shall also abstain even in their recreation from childish levity, immoderate laughter ii ... They must carefully shun idleness as the parent of all vices (III. Iii) ... They shall never go out without the permission of the Mother to whom they shall declare when and on what errand they go, and on their return they shall give an account of themselves (iv) ... They shall pay no visit but in cases of necessity (v) ... On no occasion should a sister be allowed to go out alone (vi) ... But the use of wine or spirituous liquor is to be granted to no one without the express permission of the superior of their company (x).<sup>4</sup>*



Our *Praiseworthy Customs* (1935) does not even mention chastity, but it reminds us to avoid close contacts:

*“They shall never, at recreation or at any other time, push, pull. Or touch one another, or be unlady-like in their deportment (Article 9o).*

*Even when they take recreation on the grounds, the sisters shall never shout or call aloud, but shall speak in a subdued, gentle tone. (9c).*

Again we note in the “eyes down” instruction, a disdain for the world. Unintended perhaps, but the focus is on self. The world, all matter, was immaterial.

The 1964 issue of our *Praiseworthy Customs* is more forthcoming, but not enlightening as to chastity’s value or use.

*Like other virtues, that of chastity must be developed. The sisters foster this virtue through their active participation in the liturgy, faithfulness to religious exercises, fidelity to the common life, and generous service in the opostolote (29).*

*Each sister must strive to bring order into her life. Prudent self-control will avoid waste of time, over-indulgence in food, excessive light reading and entertainment, and the offences against charity which wound the family spirit and endanger the virtue of chastity (30).*

## OBEDIENCE

### *1812 Constitutions, Article III, Of Obedience*

*They shall above all aim at punctual obedience with submission of their judgment and will in all things which are not sinful ... (ii)*

*They shall not open the letters nor the notes addressed to them without the permission of the Mother who may read them before. Nor shall they write any themselves without the same permission ... (v).*

### *Praiseworthy Customs (1964)*

*The sisters shall respect the authority vested in local, provincial, and general superiors, and shall observe this line of authority in making requests or representations. They shall obey delegated authority and all officials in matters relevant to their office {20}.*

*Such permissions as the following should be asked at the Doily permission period:*

- a. To make telephone calls not covered by a special permission*
- b. To write letters not included in the annual permission*
- c. To dispose of articles not specified in the annual permission*
- d. To consult a doctor, dentist, oculist, etc.*
- e. To leave the convent for such purposes as visiting the sick and transacting business.*

Under *Praiseworthy Customs* (1935) "Obediences to be Practised by the Sisters," we read twenty-

three maxims, but these stress only external observance, for example:

Obey the first sound of the Community bell (1) ... Observe strict silence in rising and also in retiring (3) ... Sunday is the only day for letter-writing (22).

A “law and order” mentality prevailed in our customs. There seems to be no consideration of the law that is written in the heart. Discipline was seen to be an end in itself. Subservience, letting a “superior” person take control, seems to be the hallmark of a “good” Sister of Charity. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on not being of this world, “keeping the eyes modestly cast down” etc. However, it must be admitted that the *Praiseworthy Customs* and the *Book of Customs* capture the spirit not only of the prayer life of a Sister of Charity but also that of the vows.

From the time of Mother Basilia McCann to that of Mother Fidelis Eustace, the Halifax community of the Sisters of Charity, followed more or less stringently the directives laid down in the *Small Prayer Book*, *Praiseworthy Customs* and *Constitutions*. But if we compare the tone found in Mother Seton’s earliest Regulations with that of our directives, it is evident that if these documents maintain the same insistence on having a disciplined prayer life buttressing work, Mother Seton’s rules are given with less formality, less strictness and there is a much more personal tone and more allowance for brief periods of relaxation. For example, Mother Seton writes, “They shall rise at 5, give their first moments to God ...” Our *Small Prayer Book* commands, “At the first sound of the bell in the morning, prostrate yourself in spirit before the tabernacle ...” The tenth rule for Mother Seton’s sisters generously provided that during the five o’clock recreation, everyone will be “at liberty” to do what she may be inclined to do. The Halifax sisters had to work at something “useful” during recreation, particularly sewing. (Work was always a touchstone in the life of a Halifax Sister of Charity.) In the 1809 *Regulations* the sisters

were counselled to ask for a “blessing;” we were reminded to ask for a “penance.” To understand how our disciplined spirituality as seen in our Prayer Books, Praiseworthy Customs and our Constitutions became solidified, we must turn to the life of Mother Mary Berchmans Walsh.

The influence of Mother Berchmans on the spiritual life of the Sisters of Charity cannot be exaggerated. Sister Maura wrote: “The first quarter of the twentieth century belongs to Mother Mary Berchmans. She came into office in 1901 as head of a comparatively small diocesan community, and she left office in 1926 as head of a prosperous papal institute” (Power, 201). Mary Walsh entered the congregation in 1875, when the community numbered 50, and on February 2, 1878, she made her first profession. She lived through “The Troubles” when the community was divided into two camps: those siding with Bishop Hannan who was interfering in community affairs and those standing against the Bishop with Mother Francis Maguire. Simply put, there were “difficulties with the hierarchy over some matters of internal discipline” (MacInnis, 11). It was a period of turmoil with the scandalous leaving of Sister Rose McAleer, and there was dissension within the community and outside it. Furthermore, there seems to have been no formal period of novitiate training at that time. Several were withdrawing from the community and few were entering. Mary Walsh, now Sister Mary Berchmans, remained. She was appointed Sister Servant in 1885, Mother Superior (1901-1908), Mother General (1908- 1926) and Mother Assistant in 1926. She is at the heart of our rewriting of our 1857 *Constitutions*, our becoming a papal congregation, and of the solidification of the prayer life of a Sister of Charity - Halifax.

Sister Maura observed that “the original *Constitutions* were not sufficiently definite. Though admirably suited to the pioneer conditions of the mid-nineteenth century in Nova Scotia, it failed to guarantee the solidity called for in a more complex age” (Power, 51). “Solidity” is the

operative word here. When head of the community, Mother Berchmans rightly noted that novices were performing the work of professed sisters without adequate preparation. She quelled the demands of local superiors who asked for more assistants by insisting that newly admitted members should remain at the Motherhouse for a two-year formation period and thus become more valuable members. At the same time Mother Berchmans and her Council were preparing a revision of the existing *Constitutions*. The Archbishop of Halifax was still acting as “Superior General.” But in the rewriting the *Constitutions*, Archbishop McCarthy took his duty seriously and, after reading the submission presented to him by Mother Berchmans, warned, “Portions of this text could easily be interpreted against you. You would do well to change your constitution” (Power, 52).

The first approval of the establishment of the House of the Sisters of Charity in Halifax, noted to be “a branch of the institute from the motherhouse in New York,” had been given on February 17, 1856, under the Pontificate of His Holiness Pope Pius IX. On May 7, 1908, approval of the *Constitutions* was granted for a five year period. The Archbishop of Halifax was still the official head of the Congregation, but at this time the Congregation was under the protection of the Pope. Archbishop McCarthy appeared very willing to abrogate the responsibilities of the “Ordinary.” In an audience held on June 10, 1913, under the Pontificate of Pius X, “His Holiness deigned to give final approval as they now stand, saving the jurisdiction of the Ordinaries, according to the sacred Canons and the Apostolic Constitutions” (*Constitutions*, 1964, vii-ix).

During the five-year interim, the Reverend A.J. Elder Mullen, SJ, worked on the compiling and the printing of the *Small Prayer Book*, the *Manual of Prayers* and the *Novitiate Directory*. His Holiness affixed the seal of approval on the congregation as a newly constituted “papal community,” and in the next elections, which took place at the first General Chapter, convened

on May 16, 1920, Mother Mary Berchmans was elected the first “Mother General.” Papal confirmation was necessary to make Mother General’s election valid, and on August 31, 1920, a cable, addressed to Mother Berchmans, was received: “The Holy Father confirms your nomination” (Power, 84). Male domination ended. Canon law ruled.

For nearly one hundred years the prayer life and ministry of a Halifax Sister of Charity was rigidly prescribed in the *Constitutions*. Two revisions followed in 1933 and 1952, but the “Order of Day” as found in the 1920 edition was substantially the same as that drawn up by Mother Seton in 1809.

145. The Sisters shall rise at the first sound of the bell morning bell and then kneel down to adore Our Lord, thanking Him for His protection during the night, and offering themselves and all the actions of the day to Him. They shall, in dressing observe the strictest modesty.

146. Then follow morning prayers and a half hour’s Meditation.

147. They shall assist every day at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

148. After breakfast, each Sister shall apply to her duties as appointed by her respective Superior.

149. About noon, the Sisters shall assemble for the Particular Examen and the accompanying vocal prayers

150. In the course of the day, they shall spend half an hour in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and twenty minutes in spiritual reading, and shall also say one-third of the Rosary

151. At three o’clock, they shall, for a few minutes, join in adoration of Our Crucified Savior, offering Him to His Heavenly Father for the salvation of souls.



152. After the silence bell at night, the sisters shall assemble to prepare the subject of Meditation for the next day.

153. On Saturdays and the eves of Festivals of obligation and during Lent the gospels for the next day shall also be read.

154. After this exercise, the Sisters make the General Examen of conscience and say the usual evening prayers.

155. Then they shall repair to their cells or dormitories.

The only revision in the 1933 and 1952 “Order of the Day” was in the last rule: They shall retire at the time prescribed.

There is no “Order of the Day” in the 1964 revision of the Constitutions and there are major changes, mostly because at this time we were divided into provinces. Under Chapter XVI we have the subtitle “Common Observances” and then Daily Order with only two prescriptions.

185. In every house the order of the day, shall be adapted to the circumstances of the place and the nature of the work. The horarium must be approved by the higher superior.

186. The sisters shall promptly obey the sound of the community bell as they would the voice of our Lord calling them to their duties.

Soon there would be no bell and sisters would be allowed to make their own time for spiritual exercises.

The *Constitutions* of 1913 AND 1920 emphasized a “Jesus and I” mentality—my sanctification, my perfection, my union with God. It was preserved, for example, by ritual, an exacting discipline, and secrecy: “No one shall disclose her temptations or other interior trials to her

Sisters ... (159). Furthermore, revealing the faults of another is condoned, even encouraged (as it was in Vincent's Regulations). Rule 161 of the 1920 edition reads in part:

Each one shall be careful, humbly and charitably, to acquaint the Mother General and in case of pressing necessity the Local Superior, with any exterior faults of consequence of her sisters, which could bring damage to the Institute.

But perhaps the most rigorous aspect of the Spiritual Practices in the 1920 edition of the *Constitutions* was the establishment of Friday night Chapter wherein:

Each one, in the order of her Profession, shall, on her knees, and in the presence of all the others, accuse herself of her exterior faults against the Constitution, ask pardon for any cause of mortification or bad example she may have given, and cheerfully receive the advice and penance given her" (163).

Both the revisions of 1933 and 1952 repeat this rule, which by most sisters was considered a dreaded formality, a practice lacking authenticity. There was nothing pretentious about spiritual practices in the 1964 revision which gives a richer meaning to Prayer. Under the chapter heading "Religious Exercises," sisters were counseled:

The purpose of the spiritual exercises is to nourish true spirituality and not mere formal observances. The sisters shall seek in prayer that intimate union with God which is sustained by the contemplative life and made fruitful in good works. They shall remember that the salvation of souls depends largely on the prayer and reparation of the members of the Mystical Body of Christ" (158).

In all four editions of our *Constitutions*, from 1920 until 1964, the spirit or object of the congregation remained the same, the sanctification of its members: “the principal object of the Institute is the sanctification of its members by means of the observance of the three Vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, and of the *Constitution*”(2) and “to correspond with the grace of their vocation, and to fulfill with merit to themselves and advantage to others the great obligations which it imposes, their own perfection must be the principal object, the latent spring of all their endeavors”(69). The individual sister was at the service of the Institute. That is not to say that serving in education or in nursing did not have its own intrinsic value. Education has always been the chief work of Saint Elizabeth Seton’s daughters. At the very beginning of its history, the Sisters in Halifax were subject to governmental control and they were assiduous in living up to public demands. The *Constitutions* of 1920 affirm:

That proper sentiment may continue to prevail in favor of religious education, the Sisters must spare no efforts, through study, method and equipment, to make their Schools and Academies rank among the best existing. (345)

The *Constitutions* of 1920, 1933 and 1952, under the leadership of Mothers Mary Louise Meahan, Mary Evaristus Moran, Stella Maria Reiser, and Maria Gertrude Farmer, were substantially unchanged. Not until her second term did Mother Maria Gertrude, having resumed her baptismal name, Sister Irene Farmer, begin monumental changes. Sister Irene Farmer, at great personal cost, took to heart Vatican II’s injunction to read the signs of the time. Beginning in the late sixties, there was a cataclysmic shift of emphasis from personal sanctification to giving “joyful witness to love.” We had to accept change in all its myriad forms. No longer was the emphasis on self, but on living the gospel, showing forth God’s love in the world, the great Body of Christ. As Richard Rohr explains in his masterful work *The Universal Christ*. “[W]e are saved not by being privately perfect, but by being ‘part of the body,’ humble links in the chain of being.

# Conclusion

Two events encapsulate the great paradigm shift in society and in religion: Woodstock and Vatican II. At the Woodstock Festival, August 15-18, 1969, a new generation published a new manifesto—Make Love not War. Over 400,000 young people trudged through 600 acres of a muddy dairy farm in Bethel, New York to attend a free concert featuring new artists. For three days, without adequate food, first aid, and sanitation, they listened to psychedelic music and let loose with music, drugs, sex, and mud. It was a defining moment in American culture.

In Rome, ten years before Woodstock, on January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII convoked the twenty-first ecumenical council, calling for metanoia—change—a new Pentecost, a renewal of the church and of the individual. From a seemingly strictly ordered church we went through an upheaval from disorder to some sort of order and were prepared for cyclic shifts in the ever-evolving flux from disorder to order and then to reorder. For the celebration of our Sesquicentennial, the motif chosen was a flame of fire. The flame was encircled by the words, “standing in the fire of charity.” Fire has always been a symbol of change. Think of that utterly disastrous fire at our Motherhouse (1951). Everything was lost. Fire destroyed (Disorder). We rebuilt (Reorder). The order restored in our magnificent Motherhouse imploded in 2001, and the changes continue. Whatever the changes, future General Chapters will insure that the Halifax Sisters of Charity continue to stand in the fire of charity.

We were thrust from our standard view of a “wonderful” past into an uncertain future by the Second Vatican Council. Perhaps the most important tenet of the council was re-establishing

the supremacy of the individual conscience. During the fourth session of the council under Pope Paul VI, the document *Perfectae Caritas*, the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life was promulgated; it proposed that religious hold a special general chapter of renewal to be held within three years, and to be preceded by careful study and assessment of their mission. In our congregation the years 1966-1968 preceded our Chapter of Renewal, convoked by Mother Maria Gertrude Farmer on January 4, 1968. The Covenant of Renewal emphasized the dignity of the human person, and resulted in Guidelines for Renewal, an interim Constitution. In her letter accompanying each sister's reception of the Covenant, Sister Irene wisely wrote:

*Guidelines for Renewal presents a different approach to religious life than the traditional one with which we are familiar. The adaptation called for is not easy. Sisters who were trained according to a tradition of separation from the world are now being called upon to insert religious life into the modern world (McKenna, 196).*

Following Sister Irene Farmer, we've been allowed to form our own Horarium linking ministry and prayer. Under Sisters Katherine O'Toole, Paule Cantin, Mary Louise Brink, Louise Bray, Donna Geernaert, and now Sister Joan O'Keefe, we have been given unlimited opportunities to deepen our spirituality through educational and personality development programs, sabbaticals, Myers Briggs analysis, the Enneagram, retreats, etc. Certainly we have advanced in our understanding of our prayer life, of the vows and of service. No longer is prayer to be repressed or restricted by specific formulas or in designated places. Each sister is allowed freedom in her prayer life. The Covenant of Renewal was replaced in 1985 by our *Constitutions*. Article 53 states:

Responding to God's creative and saving action  
each of us determines that pattern of prayer

which best sustains her life of faith.

This pattern includes daily Mass, as far as possible, and devotion to the Eucharist; a half hour of personal prayer daily; prayer with the community based on the morning and evening Prayer of the Church; devotion to Mary, including the recitation of the rosary; the frequent celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation; an annual retreat of at least six days (53).

Changes will have to be made, but the spirit of God's creative action is understood to be in our recognition of the transcendent in the individual's and in the congregation's lives. The meaning of the Divine Indwelling has taken on new meaning. We are to see the Incarnation of God in the Man Jesus of the gospels, in nature, in history, and in every human being. We are to trust the inner voice; we are to trust this inner self. All we are counseled to do is "to walk in the presence of God all the days of our life" (*Constitutions* 48). There are no stipulated rules regarding time and place of prayer. Each sister faces the reality of her own individuality and determines how she can best communicate with God in the depths of her own existence and experience. Each sister will formulate her own "Order of the Day." In prayer she discerns her call to service; she sees a need that others cannot or will not do, and, fortified by prayer, she tries to fill it. She strives "to give joyful witness to love: the love of God, of one another and of all persons" (*Constitutions* 1).

More than twenty-five years have passed since the approval of our last Constitutions in 1985, and in that comparatively short time new challenges have emerged in our understanding of the new cosmology, in the new ecology, and in our faith-filled acceptance of the Incarnation in all matter. As Sister Donna Geernaert reminded us:



*Traditional Christian cosmology has its source in the first three chapters of Genesis.*

*Genesis 1 unequivocally declares the whole of creation to be good. Humanity is created in the image and likeness of God and called to share God's Sabbath rest. The Sabbath is "a sign that none of us are ultimately slaves, neither of work nor of any human being nor even of God." It is a sign of the dignity of every human being, called to share God's life.*

As for God's impregnation of matter, we can go back twelve hundred years to St. John Damascene (675- 753) who wrote:

I do not worship matter. I worship the God of matter who became matter for my sake and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honoring that matter which works my salvation" (Quoted in Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, Frontispiece).

Again as our *Constitutions* (1985) counsel us:

Led by the Spirit  
formed by the Scriptures  
and immersed in the liturgical life of the church, we seek to grow in faith  
recognizing God's presence in all things. (51)

In "recognizing God's presence in all things" we understand what ecologists have proven: that there is an interconnectedness of organisms with their environments; all creatures are interconnected. It's a staggering thought when we come to pray because it is in experiencing our solidarity with humanity and nature that we recognize our solidarity with God; in knowing

the suffering and pain in another person that we come to understand and recognize our own compassion and love. That interconnectedness has profound implications, especially for us Sisters of Charity, as we live through our congregation's cycle of life, death and resurrection. With no new members and an average age having reached 80, we seem lost in the desert. But even in the desert we are fed with Bread from heaven and our very vulnerability and fragility can lead to deeper encounters with the Mystery which is God.

The Eucharist is the center of our life  
and the fullest expression of our worship.  
Through this mystery we unite with Jesus  
to celebrate the saving action of God and to join in his self-offering  
for all people. (50)

It is in the Eucharist that we find the interconnectedness between God and matter. As Pope Francis explains it in *Laudato Si*, The Eucharist “is the living center of the universe, the overflowing core of love and inexhaustible life” (236). Furthermore, “The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God with others and with all creatures” (240). The piety of a Jesus and I relationship has been transformed into the spirituality of the cosmic Christ. Richard Rohr explains this monumental shift in his book *The Universal Christ*:

*The revelation of the Risen Christ as ubiquitous and eternal was clearly affirmed in the scriptures (Colossians 1, Ephesians 1, John 1, Hebrews 1) and in the early church, when the euphoria of the Christian faith was still creative and expanding. In our time, however, this deep mode of seeing must be approached as something of a reclamation project*

*When the Western church separated from the East in the Great Schism of 1054, we gradually lost this profound understanding of how God has been liberating and loving all that is. Instead, we gradually limited the divine Presence to the single body of Jesus, when perhaps it is as ubiquitous as light itself-and uncircumscribable by human boundaries. (4)*

Rohr understands the name Christ is another name for everything - in its fullness (5), the transcendent present in all people, in every thing in the universe.

Every age is new in the sense that history is always changing and every age brings its own challenges. The new technology has brought unheard of means of communication. It took two years for a letter that Elizabeth Seton wrote to Antonio Fillicchi to reach him; today technology enables us to participate in a Congregational Assembly by never leaving our homes. Truly technology aids communication. The cell phone now satisfies the individual's need for personal communication as well as in major fields like education and entertainment. But the cell phone can also disrupt social communication, as in a disturbing individual overuse of the instrument; there is no need to directly communicate with another, to be bodily present to another, when one has a cell phone. But the advantages of the new technology far outweigh its disadvantages. Many use email to receive their meditation and to enrich their prayer life. Think how television has enabled millions to participate in the daily Eucharistic celebration.

We can never go back to the old horarium which Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton drew up in 1809 and gave us a structure of prayer and ministry which sustained her spirituality and which we her daughters have followed for one hundred seventy years. How can we expect a formula that satisfied a woman in the early part of the nineteenth century to satisfy a woman in the early part of the twenty-first? It can't be done. Would Elizabeth approve of Feminism's redemption of

woman? I think she would. We are looking for new ways to share prayer, to share our aloneness. It's a lifelong process. At birth we sought the warm sustenance of a Mother's breast, the comfort of a Father's strong arm; as children we sought playmates, then a club, a group, a team; as adults on the God Quest, we want to find new ways to share our solitude publicly, in community. Formal community prayers were a form of bonding. The ritual can never be completely dismissed, but now future Sisters of Charity, future leadership Teams will find ways to deepen our bonds because "neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our lord" (Romans I, 8:38-39).

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Feast of the Presentation

November 21, 2019

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