The Sanctifying Nature of Religious Dreams and Visions

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Introduction

“My desire is known to God,” wrote Catherine Livingston Garrettson in 1819. “Tis for sanctification.”¹ Like so many Methodist women whose lives spanned the late eighteenth and/or early nineteenth centuries, Catherine composed a plethora of entries in her devotional diaries that reflected the longevity of this preoccupation; she committed her entire self—heart, mind and actions—to this subject for over sixty years.²

While sanctification certainly served as a centerpiece of early Methodist belief and stood, as Paul Chilcote has suggested, at “the heart of Methodist praxis,” a commitment to and engagement with this topic is not unique to Catherine and her Wesleyan contemporaries.³ Indeed, sanctification—defined broadly as personal progression toward purity and holiness, or as a state of being that resulted in unity with the divine—played a fundamental role in a variety of Christian contexts, including Shakerism and Catholicism. Notwithstanding different explanations about how a state of holiness could be attained, believers from various backgrounds agreed that sanctification and salvation were inextricably linked. In order to examine the significant role this doctrine played in shaping, reshaping and contextualizing personal and collective spirituality within a cosmological framework, this article will consider how the revelatory dreams and visions of three women—Ann Lee, Catherine Livingston Garrettson and Elizabeth Bayley Seton—helped them pivot the remainder of their lives around the pursuit of sanctification. Their ethereal experiences enabled them to cultivate a personalized theology while also stressing the expansive scope of religious narrative. As they came to recognize over the course of their lifetimes, their spiritual pilgrimages exemplified the daily, ongoing process of sanctification—a process that highlighted the depth and breadth of God’s salvific work.

¹ Catherine Livingston Garrettson Diary, 6 September 1819. Garrettson Family Papers, Methodist Archives, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey (hereafter, all manuscripts from this collection cited as Garrettson Family Papers).
³ For more info on early Methodist women and sanctification, see Chilcote, 90.
A collection of writers with diverse perspectives have documented the spiritual lives of Ann Lee (1736–1784), Catherine Livingston Garrettson (1752–1849), and Elizabeth Bayley Seton (1774–1821), each of who lived in Eastern New York during the late eighteenth and/or early nineteenth centuries. Descriptions of these women have ranged from depictions of exemplary piety to radical visionaries and mystics to feminist foremothers to dupes to crazed charlatans. They have also been described as important

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church members, religious figures, founders and leaders—Ann as radical visionary and founder of the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing (Shakers); Catherine as an example of Methodist piety and mysticism, as well as the wife of famed itinerant preacher, Freeborn Garrettson, and daughter of the socially prominent and politically powerful Livingston family; and, Elizabeth as organizer of one of the first congregations of Religious Sisters in the United States, and, later, as the first American-born canonized Saint in the Catholic Church. And yet, notwithstanding the various lenses from which their lives have been viewed, scholars, hagiographers and polemicists have not considered in depth the very core around which they formed their spirituality. Indeed, by underestimating how sanctification affected daily living, historians have dismissed the contextual richness this doctrine adds to the life stories of eighteenth and nineteenth century Christians. Although many believers did not engage in formal theological discussions, their commitment to the doctrine of sanctification suggests that they could and did create their own narrative theologies. Indeed, by seeking, defining, experiencing, and teaching the doctrine of sanctification, Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth were able to “position their individual and communal life stories within an overarching cosmic


5 Candy Gunther Brown notes that hymn narratives suggests that sanctification is the “core around which evangelical culture(s) were formed.” “Singing Pilgrims: Hymn Narratives of a Pilgrim Community’s Progress from This World to That Which is to Come, 1830-90,” in Sing Them Over Again to Me: Hymns and Hymnbooks in America, ed. Mark A. Noll and Edith L. Blumhofer (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), 196.

6 Joel Green defines vision of Narrative theology as follows: “Yahweh’s purpose thus determines the shape of this narrative and call [sic.] upon its readers to choose sides. Hence, engaging with the narrative involves us in a formative and decision-making process. How does this aim beckon us? How will we respond? In this important sense, ‘narrative theology’ is less theological method and more an intrinsically self-involving theological vision of God, church, Scripture and world, bound together within the economy of salvation, with the people of God cast as pilgrims on a journey whose destination is known and achieved only by indwelling the divine story—which cannot be reduced to principles and rules, but must be embraced and embodied.” Joel B. Green, “Narrative Theology,” in Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 533). See also K. Yandell, ed., Faith and Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Michael Goldberg, Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982); Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stanley Hauerwas & L. Gregory Jones, ed., Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989); Gunter Brown, “Singing Pilgrims.”
narrative.” As their spiritual lives developed, sanctification gave deeper meaning and purpose to, and provided greater continuity between, the past, present and future.

**Historiography**

Like so many of their contemporaries during the Revolutionary Era, Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth often found their lives in flux. Strained economic circumstances, challenges of war, loss of loved ones, risks of childbirth and a looming sense of general uncertainty resulted in a search for self and, by extension, a sense of their relationship with the divine. Each longed to have a story—a story with vertical and horizontal links—a story that connected them back to God as well as to humanity—a story that captured their place within an eternal framework.

Scholars have noted the increasing importance of life writings—autobiographies, memoirs, narratives, diaries and journals—throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Everyone, Mechal Sobel explains, from “well diggers, wall plasterers, mechanics, farmers, robbers, poor rapists and murderers sentenced to death, cross-dressers, madmen, wanderers, and spiritual seekers wrote narratives of their lives” in order to capture their place in a changing world. Religious historians have demonstrated a particular interest in conversion narratives as well as spiritual memoirs and autobiographies from this era. As a result, they have identified a variety of themes that emerged within these texts, including: gender, race, agency, identity, economic

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7 Gunther Brown, 194.
9 Sobel, *Teach Me Dreams*, 3.
10 Literary historian Virginia Lieson Brereton has identified five stages that, she argues, nearly all spiritual autobiographers incorporate into their stories: religious disinterest prior to conversion, spiritual awakening (often due to illness or death of a loved one) that leads to an awareness of one’s sinfulness and the desire for salvation, conversion through the means of justification, changed behavior and attitudes as a result of conversion, and periods of low spiritual energy followed by spiritual renewal. See Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation: Stories of Women’s Conversions, 1800 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 6. For more scholarship on the topic, see Daniel B. Shea, *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
circumstances and the creation of social class.\(^\text{11}\) In addition to and in connection with these subjects, they have also considered how the topic of justification is depicted in conversion narratives—a theme that reflects important aspects of Evangelical culture, but fails to capture its totality. Less attention, however, has been given to the ongoing nature of religious experience as reflected in the personal writings of the actual participants and their associates.\(^\text{12}\) As Ann Taves noted, “although the centrality of the conversion experience in American Protestant piety has long been acknowledged, far less attention has been paid to the ongoing devotional life of the already converted.”\(^\text{13}\) This is particularly true of the religious lives of Christians who did not fit within Evangelical, or even Protestant culture.

Because the quest for sanctification received more enduring attention than justification in personal devotional writings, a growing number of scholars have begun to look at the ongoing nature of religious life.\(^\text{14}\) For example, the subject of sanctification, especially in relation to Methodism specifically and Evangelicalism more generally, has received some noteworthy attention in the context of historical work. Paul Chilcote, Joyce Quiring Erickson, Phyllis Mack and Candy Gunther Brown, for example, have considered this doctrine’s significance in the personal writings of early Methodist women, which


\(^{14}\) For example, Candy Gunther Brown suggests that the narrative framework woven throughout nineteenth-century hymn texts also highlights the importance of this doctrine in the daily lives of spiritual pilgrims. Adding additional breadth to this topic, Kathryn T. Long examines the influence that Phoebe Palmer’s holiness teachings had on Evangelicalism during the post-Civil War Era, and Anthea Butler argues that this doctrine has played an important role in shaping religious rituals and practices in African American churches in the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions. Gunther Brown, “Singing Pilgrims”; Long, “Consecrated Respectability: Phoebe Palmer and the Refinement of American Methodism,” in Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 281-307; Butler, "Observing the Lives of the Saints: Sanctification as Practice in the Church of God in Christ," in Practicing Protestants, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 159-176.
Erickson argues, “particularizes them as a category of women’s spiritual autobiography” because “sanctification added an additional stage to the conventional pattern of spiritual narratives.” Whereas justification captures the “commencement rather than the consummation of evangelical narrative,” each of these scholars suggest both implicitly and explicitly, sanctification captures spiritual progression over time.

In an article that serves as a springboard for my work, Gunther Brown contends that sanctification provides scholars with “a theological lens through which to view the daily, life-long processes of growth in holiness, thus offering context for personal life stories within the broader framework of a cosmic narrative of origins, purpose and destiny.” I, however, suggest that the interest in attaining a sanctified or holy state that Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth shared provided them with a “theological lens” through which they discovered their place within this larger cosmic narrative. Ultimately, each concluded that she served as an author, narrator and protagonist, as well as an antagonist, within the story of salvation; indeed, each came to believe that her life, and the lives of those she later ministered to, were not anonymous moments lost in time and space. The grand cosmic narrative they had discovered, through their personal quests for theological understanding, linked humanity with the divine, underscoring that the quest for holiness truly mattered (long term!). Notwithstanding their different ideas about how sanctification could and should be attained, a belief in and commitment to this doctrine enabled Ann, Catherine and Elizabeth to become creators of distinctive narrative theologies that would add to and extend beyond the genre of spiritual life writings. Reflection and study, combined with personal mystical experiences, dreams and visions, convinced them that their stories—all stories—had eternal consequence.

Narratives

As one delves into the contextual details of Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth’s lives, it becomes clear that they were not distant observers of religion whose eventual fears of damnation led them to church; rather, they were active religious participants who sensed that life entailed more than the here and now. Such feelings were magnified as personal challenges and spiritual dissatisfaction arose; in response to their trials, they turned inward and God-ward. Convinced that religious experiences should infuse life with deeper meaning, each would eventually become a spiritual seeker in search of sanctification.

As religious seekers, Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth had mystical experiences, dreams and visions that helped them define the theology and experience of sanctification while also shifting how they understood and depicted this theology in narrative contexts. They

15 Quiring Erickson, 81.
16 Gunther Brown, 207.
17 Ibid., 207.
18 Susan Juster, “‘In a Different Voice’: Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America,” American Quarterly 41, no. 1 (1989): 51-54.
came to believe that all aspects of life should focus on the desire for sanctification, and that that quest had to be attained in very specific ways. This commitment to sanctification—whether experiential, sacramental, or tied to obedience—underscored the progressive nature of conversion, cultivated the desire to become completely consecrated to God and encouraged the creation of spiritual unity and community amongst believers. Each woman wanted to understand and help others understand the “story of how God orders the universe, the process by which he leads people to fulfill his purpose, and the ends for which he does so”—a quest that resulted ultimately in both intensely personal and universally salvific narratives. Believing that “every activity and experience has cosmic significance,” they wove their evolving theologies into their life experiences, and their life experiences into a theological framework.

Ann Lee

Ann Lee was born in Manchester, England in 1736 to John and Ann Beswick Lee. Due to her family’s poverty, she did not have the opportunity to receive an education and remained illiterate her entire life. Since she could not leave a written record, details about Ann’s personal pilgrimage are limited to those recalled by her followers approximately thirty years after her death, which they compiled into a book, titled, *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee*. Because biographical details are sparse and unreliable, or as one scholar suggested, “sketchy” at best, Ann’s life remains a “product of ongoing interpretation and historical reinvention.”

Scholars have long debated whether this Shaker reminiscence should be considered a primary source on Ann Lee’s life or a depiction of nineteenth century Shakerism. While both perspectives arguably have some merit, this article will approach this text as a memoir—a historical account or biography written from personal knowledge or special sources—of Ann Lee’s life. As she explained to her followers, “Ye are my epistles, read and known of all men. Ye are all the interest I have in this world.” Ann was suggesting that her spiritual narrative had been impressed on the hearts and minds of committed Shakers; they later decided that her story—which reveals Ann’s conceptions

19 Gunther Brown, 194.
20 Ibid., 205.
21 See also, Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*; and Humez, “Ye Are My Epistles,” 83-103.
22 Wenger, “Female Christ and Feminist Foremother,” 5.
25 Testimonies, 308. See also Humez, 83.
of the journey to redemption, sanctification, salvation and eternal life—needed to be preserved on paper so others could recognize its cosmic significance.  

As the daughter of a poor working-class family, Ann began laboring in the mills at the age of eight. In 1762, her father (a blacksmith) insisted that she marry his apprentice, Abraham Stanley. During her early married life, Ann experienced four difficult pregnancies: three of her children were stillborn, and the fourth, Elizabeth, died in infancy. Devastated by these losses, she turned to intense asceticism—an escape from the pain that had riddled so much of her life.

Raised by a “strictly religious, and very pious” mother, Ann made note of numerous religious impressions and divine manifestations throughout childhood. Some of these impressions foreshadow her future visions and revelations about the pathway to sanctification; her early concerns about human depravity, and her aversion to “lusts of the flesh,” are particularly noteworthy. For example, young Ann admonished her mother against having sex with her father, who, upon hearing about this conversation, attempted to whip his daughter. Later, Ann’s own marriage caused her great suffering; she sensed that “cohabitation with her husband” was wrong, and likely wondered if this sin explained the loss of her children. Indeed, was God punishing her for her sinful acts? Ann’s complex range of feelings—guilt, fear, self-blame, impurity, pain, aversion to sex and marriage, asceticism, extreme piety—perhaps hint at childhood abuse. While it is impossible to determine if, when, where, how or who, it is clear that Ann turned inward and Godward to escape personal agony that is often associated with an abusive past.

Around 1758, Ann had joined a group known as the Shaking Quakers, a local sect founded by James and Jane Wardley of Bolton that was known for its charismatic

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26 Testimonies, iv, v.
27 Testimonies, 2.
28 For a source that suggests Ann Lee might have had a history of child abuse, see Humez, 88-89.
29 Testimonies, 2.
31 Testimonies Concerning the Character and Ministry of Mother Ann All and the First Witnesses of the Gospel of Christ’s Second Appearing (Albany: Packard & van Benthuysen, 1970), 2-3
excesses and shared ministry. This group condemned existing churches for their corruption and proclaimed the imminent Second Coming of Christ. Over time, Ann became increasingly committed to her faith. By the early 1770s, for example, she focused intently on becoming cleansed from her sins. She longed for personal purity.

Ann’s quest for spiritual transformation, which entailed nine years of intense suffering (coupled with visions and revelations from God) hints at the longevity of conversion; she wanted to be delivered not just from her sins, but from “the very nature of sin.” It was sanctification, not just justification that she hoped to attain. As Ann labored spiritually to enter this state, her mind and soul suffered, at times causing “blood to perspire through the pores of her skin”—an experience her followers used to underscore the dual role she played within the salvific framework. Through such experiences, she learned that sanctification did not come immediately. Rather, the “ways of God” gradually descended upon her mind “with increasing light and understanding.”

The “official” account of Ann’s nine-year conversion experience—through which she established a new understanding of salvation history by emerging as both redeemer and redeemed—seems contextually Biblical albeit Evangelical in tone. Biblical imagery and language legitimized her timeless role, but revival-like experiences, centered on conviction of sin and evangelical humiliation cast her into an eighteenth century context as well. This part of her memoir, then, combines the sacred narrative of scriptural text with contemporary conversion narratives in an attempt to speak across time and space. According to Stephen Marini, Shakers viewed the New Testament as a script to perform in the pursuit of true Christianity. He explained, “The charismatic performance of Mother Ann constituted just such a reactualization of the primitive church, mythically described for them in the New Testament script. Entering the sacred time of Biblical narrative, her converts ascribed to her the apostolic authority of illud tempus.” In order to accomplish this, they scripted her narrative to fit within but also to define the salvation narrative—something she had seemingly sought to achieve throughout her life. According to E. Brooks Holifield, Ann Lee “created a theology that claimed Christian roots while expanding the boundaries of Christianity so broadly that the linkage to Christian tradition often seemed to break.”

As a religious seeker, Ann had multiple dreams and visions that focused on spiritual regeneration; through ethereal means she discovered the pathway to holiness. In one of her most noteworthy visions, the Lord Jesus appeared to her and revealed “the depth of man’s loss, what it was, and the way of redemption.” In this moment it became clear to Ann that human depravity had originated in the Garden of Eden; she therefore came to define sexual intercourse as the original sin. Overcoming human depravity and sinfulness

34 Testimonies, 5.
35 Marini, Radical Sects, 96-7.
36 Marini, Radical Sects, 97-8.
37 Holifield, Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 340
38 Testimonies, 38.
so one could enter a pure Edenic state required complete confession of sins and obedience to God’s law—it was “the only possible way of recovery.”  

Ann’s revelations, Tisa Wenger suggests, gave her a central role in salvation history. Her conception of holiness connected the doctrine of sanctification to celibacy—a departure from the “lustful gratifications of the flesh, as the source and foundation of human corruption.” This interpretation—which she supported with the Biblical injunction that we “neither marry, nor are given in marriage”—allowed her to recast her own life story as well as the larger Christian narrative. By defining and interpreting the doctrine of sanctification—the pathway to salvation—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.” Rather than being punished, Ann was being purified. Ultimately, then, her visions and revelations—which enabled her to create her own narrative theology—served as a shield of protection for her. In order to attain salvation, she had to avoid the situations that hurt her most.

Several of the Shaking Quakers, which included some of Ann’s own family members, accepted her emerging revelatory authority. Eventually, they came to consider her the “first spiritual Mother in Christ.” 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, Ann 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. In America, she would, figuratively speaking, gave birth to a “community of the saints, or the elect.”

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39 *Testimonies*, 5.
40 Wenger, 10.
41 *Testimonies*, 5.
42 Matt. 22:30 (KJV).
43 When facing spiritual torment, Ann did not awake her husband because she wanted to avoid stirring up his affections; she was being careful to not tempt him. “I also prayed to God, that no man might suffer in hell on my account.” Testimonies, 37.
45 *Testimonies*, 49.
46 Upon their arrival, Ann likely found employment as a domestic. 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. *Testimonies*, 8.
47 Marjorie Proctor-Smith, 89.
It would, however, be several years after settling in America before Ann resumed public leadership among her followers. Eventually, external events brought the Shakers out of isolation, including the War of Independence and revivals— influenced by religious fervor and millennialism—being held among Evangelicals in New York and Massachusetts.48 The year 1780 thus marked the true opening of the Shaker gospel in America.49

By the spring of 1781, Ann and her followers commenced the anticipated Evangelistic tour through which they searched for the People of God that she had seen in vision.50 Through their extensive travels in the New England area, they gained thousands of converts, especially among Separate-Baptists in the Berkshires, Connecticut Valley, Narrangansett Country and Worcester Highlands. A number of converts were also drawn from a sect of local perfectionists in Harvard, Massachusetts. Noted one Shaker, “Here Mother found the place and the people which had been shown to her in vision while in England.”51

The Shakers “produced a theology grounded in a reading of the Bible filtered through revelations received by their founder Ann Lee.”52 As an emissary of God’s message, she shared her personal stories with religious seekers. She described her own struggles to overcome sin and talked about the importance of confession and the denial of self-gratification.53 In many cases, she linked temporal instructions to the spiritual quest for perfection—her teachings certainly blurred the lines between sacred and secular, suggesting, perhaps, that all things had a holy element.54 Ann also stressed human agency, confession of sin, celibacy and obedience in order to be formed in the character of Christ.55 God’s power, she explained, enabled souls to depart from sin and to live in obedience to his will.

Ann’s oral narrative served as an invitation to humanity to become a part of the larger salvific narrative—a narrative that extended beyond the boundaries of mortality. She taught that the dead, as well as the living—anyone wandering in darkness—could receive the gospel message.56 All could confess and forsake their sins and follow Christ in regeneration through obedience to God’s law.57 Indeed, she taught that salvation was “the reward for belief and an obedience that would be manifest in the confession of sin, the

48 Stein, 10-12
49 Testimonies, 65.
50 Ibid.
51 Testimonies, 67
52 Holifield, 319.
53 Testimonies, 34-37
54 Marini, 106.
55 Holifield, 328.
56 Testimonies, 33.
57 Ibid., 194.
love of neighbor, and celibacy.”58 She believed she had been divinely commissioned to share this message with the world. She thus cast her story “in a narrative mode” that made it more accessible to believers than the “analytic mode of formal theology.”59 Ann Lee’s memoir—a clear depiction of narrative theology—suggested that the mean’s to God’s sanctifying grace could be revealed through an illiterate and unlearned woman; therefore, all—the poor, the oppressed, the unsophisticated, the uneducated—were capable of understanding and invited to participate in the salvation story. Ann’s own narrative accounts, despite their problems, hint at spiritual possibility and inclusion; they also underscore the unifying power of sanctification on both a personal and cosmic scale.

During her Evangelistic journey, Ann often faced mobbing, persecution and other physical challenges; in many situations, enemies sought her life.60 In 1784, she, along with her brother William, finally returned to Niskeyuna. William passed away shortly after their return as a result of having his skull fractured by those who opposed Shaker teachings. Ann died six weeks following her brother, in part because she had never fully recovered from a particularly severe beating in Harvard, Massachusetts in 1783. Notwithstanding the persecution she had faced, her missionary journey had set the stage for gathering believers into local societies.61 In the decades that followed, her disciples would organize the most successful celibate communal sect—a sect committed to the quest for sanctification as defined by Ann Lee.62

Catherine Livingston Garrettson

Catherine Livingston Garrettson of Rhinebeck, New York was the daughter of Chancellor Robert L. and Margaret Beekman Livingston—both of whom came from politically powerful and extremely wealthy families. As coheir to her family’s vast landed estates, Catherine socialized in the most elite circles.63 She was also a well-educated and prolific reader who had been exposed to a plethora of classic works, including the writings of enlightenment thinkers.64 Although books were a rare and expensive commodity during this time—by the mid-nineteenth century, ownership of more than three books signified wealth—Catherine was privileged to have access to an abundance of texts, religious and otherwise, that broadened her view of the world, collapsed the distance between the secular and the sacred, encouraged experiential learning and resulted in her fascination with human progress and her yearning desire to understand God’s nature.65

58 Holifield, 330.
60 Testimonies, 88
61 Stein, 26
62 Marini, 55-57
63 Catherine Livingston was born in Rhinebeck, New York, in 1752 to Judge Robert Livingston and Margaret Beekman. Together, her parents owned more than three-quarters of a million acres of land in the Hudson River Valley.
The Livingston family’s worldview had been shaped by an amalgamation of religious and philosophical ideas. They combined the Calvinism taught in their mother’s “somber” Dutch reformed congregation, which they attended when spending summers in Rhinebeck, with their father’s “refined” Anglican traditionalism, which they committed themselves to while spending winters in New York City. They also embraced aspects of Enlightenment rationalism. This combination influenced the creation of “a family religion of biblical but politely reasonable piety.”

While the Livingston’s approach to religion had worked for Catherine as a young woman, it became less satisfying as she matured. Her sense of spiritual distance stemmed from her growing distaste for the frivolous privileges embraced by those of her social class, coupled with the loss of close family members. When her sister-in-law passed away in 1785, for example, Catherine withdrew from society and became increasingly committed to the development of her own religiosity; in particular, she spent considerable time reading the “word of God with more attention.” By engaging in such devotional activities, Catherine explained, “[my] heart was melted and many tears flowed from my eyes.” She shared her renewed interest in religion with her best friend, Mary Rutherford. The two women engaged in theological discussions; together, they contemplated the meaning and purpose of life.

During the summer of 1787, Mary Rutherford passed away unexpectedly. Her death ignited a personal crisis for Catherine, who subsequently became even more determined to understand salvation in all its complexity. Her religious beliefs no longer sufficed; she wanted more than a “form” of religion. So, once again, Catherine turned to the scriptures and other religious texts for answers; there she discovered “more plainly the way of salvation” through the “light” that “broke in upon my soul.” By contemplating upon a “retrospective view of my life” she began to consider how her story fit into the salvation narrative portrayed in the Bible.

Spiritual direction came to Catherine through rather unexpected means. Conversations with her mother’s housekeeper—“a very intelligent, respectable, good woman”—who had extended support to Catherine during her “awakened state,” suggested that she read the works of John Wesley. These books expanded Catherine’s vision; the possibility of

66 Lobody, 21.
68 Ibid., 4.
69 Ibid., 5.
70 Ibid., 7
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 8.
holiness, perfection, and unity with the divine hinted at the profound meaningfulness woven throughout human life. Wesley’s teachings expanded the definition of conversion to include sanctification as well as justification. Drawn to his theological ideas, Catherine would proclaim, “These books had opened to me the way to get religion, and the way to keep it when attained.” The idea of continual progression and commitment resonated with and expanded her enlightened worldview.

During October 1787—the “liminal period between the Constitutional Convention and the ratification upon which her family had so much at stake”—Catherine tuned out the social and the political and sought the spiritual. On 13 October, she finally experienced justification—an important step toward a sanctified life. Of this long awaited moment, she proclaimed, “My sins were pardoned; my state was changed; my soul was happy. In a transport of joy I sprang to 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.”

But newness was not completeness. Catherine recognized that conversion was a “threshold” rather than a “finish line.” Justification may have served as a “gateway into the journey of salvation,” but sanctification involved progressive steps through which an individual continued to work out her “final salvation as an active agent.” The focus of Catherine’s writings—her conception of her spiritual pilgrimage—thus shifted to a near obsession with the topic of sanctification. Understanding it, experiencing it, and sharing it with others became central themes as she reshaped her life story around the quest for sanctifying grace. As a committed pilgrim, Catherine recorded dreams and visions that she found spiritually meaningful in the diaries she kept, trusting that the “Lord would teach me to understand them right.” Most hinted at the “advances” she could and would

73 Ibid., 8.
74 Brooke, 372
75 Livingston Garrettson Autobiography, 8.
77 Ibid; Quirring Erickson, 75.
78 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.
79 Memoir writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often wove descriptions and interpretations of dreams and visions throughout their spiritual accounts. By engaging in this reflective process, they identified, created, and then legitimated their own identities. In many cases, dreams both predicted the future and served as guides to self-knowledge. See Sobel, Teach Me Dreams; Phyllis Mack, Heart Religion in British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 220; Patricia Crawford, “Women’s Dreams in Early Modern England,” History Workshop Journal, 49 (2008): 131; and Livingston to Catherine Rutsen, December 1791, Garrettson Family Papers.
make “in the divine life” through the process of sanctification. Her dreams thus encouraged her to create a narrative context for her theological beliefs.

While “more than ever engaged for sanctification,” Catherine became increasingly fixated on her relationship with the divine. In particular, she wanted to understand how her daily life intersected with the Salvific acts performed by her Savior—indeed, she wanted to know how her story, the purpose of which she would define as the quest for sanctification, fit within the context of Atonement and Redemption. On several occasions, answers—which she considered revelatory—came to her through dreams and visions. Two of these dream narratives, in particular, reveal how sanctification shaped and reshaped Catherine’s spiritual identity, while also encouraging her to shift her life story into a larger redemptive context.

On 1 December 1791, Catherine made note of a rather startling dream. In her diary she simply wrote, “I last night dreamed I was crucified.” A few days later, in a letter penned to her friend Catherine Rutsen, Livingston again recounted this dream. She explained, “I was going to be crucified, that they were raising the cross up on which I was stretched, and I was in expectation of great suffering.” Mechel Sobel—who makes reference to the letter written to Rutsen but overlooks the previously written diary entry—has suggested that this dream makes it clear that Livingston “envisioned herself as a female Christ.” However, if one considers the sentences that follow Catherine’s rather rudimentary dream description in the 1 December diary entry—“Be it so, Lord Jesus! Let me die that I might live, and that my life may be hid with you”—one is left to question if their interpretation is reductive in that it makes too many gendered assumptions, while missing allusions to sanctification through Christ’s grace.

Catherine seems to see this dream as encouragement to submit herself to the divine (a choice and an act that she considered empowering) rather than as an opportunity to claim divinity. If one considers the centrality of the topic of sanctification and salvation in Catherine’s diaries, correspondence and dream accounts, including the December 1791 letter written to Rutsen in which Catherine proclaims, “I ardently long to be what the Lord would have me be. I want to be a shining witness of perfect love”—additional layers of meaning threaded throughout this particular dream become clear. The cross symbolized Christ and his sacrifice. Catherine’s personal experience of crucifixion

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80 Livingston Garrettson Diary, 1 December 1791. Garrettson Family Papers.
81 Ibid.
82 Livingston to Rutsen, December 1791.
83 Sobel also refers to a dream Livingston recorded on 13 April 1790 in which she saw herself walking on water. She uses this as further evidence that Catherine saw herself as a female Christ figure. I propose, however, that walking on water signified an act of faith—she was a Peter rather than a Christ. Sobel, Teach Me Dreams, 149, 181-182. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Kelly, ed., Women in American History (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 2:363.
84 Livingston Garrettson Diary, 1 December 1791.
85 Livingston to Rutsen, December 1791.
signified her willingness to surrender herself to her Savior and to become like him. In other words, the dream expressed her desire to be sanctified and her willingness to sacrifice all in order to attain salvation. At the end of her letter to Rutsen, another detail Sobel overlooks, Catherine concludes that her dream was “explained by the love of God being so shed abroad in my soul that I could rejoice in God with joy unspeakable, and a belief that I was cleansed from all sin.”86 This experience thus allowed Catherine to place her story within the salvation narrative. She was literally a part of—a beneficiary of—the sacrifice on the cross.

Just three months following this dream, Catherine experienced the most poignant of her recorded visionary experiences—this time, she would both see and feel God’s power and glory, as she had requested of him a few nights previously. She would also become a witness to the crucifixion of her Savior. The vision, so incredible that she doubted anyone would believe it, certainly augmented her earlier dream. As a result of this experience, Catherine became increasingly aware of God’s omnipresence, the sanctifying grace made available through her Savior, the sensory nature of spiritual life, her place within sacred narrative and the importance of creating spiritual community.

By experiencing the “sweet communion” of both the Father and the Son, Catherine came to recognize the glory of the Father and the condescension of the Savior, a differentiation that helped her better understand humanity’s need for divine grace. Witnessing the Lord’s glory resulted in feelings of “ecstasy,” an experience that was so physically and spiritually overwhelming that it made Catherine fall backward. In order to bask in God’s presence, she recognized that she needed a mediator who could extend sanctifying grace. Indeed, she explained, it was only through Christ that she could be “united to the glorious trinity”; it was through his power that the work of God was “deepened in her soul” over the course of the night. To Catherine, this deepening alluded to the process of sanctification. Her vision both enriched her understanding of salvation, while also allowing her to engage in personal salvific work.

Catherine’s experience was, at least at some level, both tangible and sensory. She refers to seeing the power and glory of God (although she later acknowledges that this glory was presented to her mind rather than the bodily eye), as well as the wounded hands, feet and side of her Savior. While describing the adoration she felt at the foot of the cross, she proclaimed, “God is love—I feel it—I know it. I taste, and can and do hourly rejoice in God my savior.” Catherine also made note of the intellectual, physical, spiritual and emotional engagement this experience entailed; her mind was indeed “deeply exercised.” Because she contemplated, felt, touched, tasted and saw the salvation story—she came to recognize its totality, indeed she saw the all-compassing nature of sanctification. In order to become holy, she had to willing give all and become all. This renewed understanding of Christ’s sanctifying grace made the impossible—such as witnessing the glory of God—seem within reach.

86 Livingston To Rutsen, December 1791.
The rhetoric Catherine employed as she recounted this experience hints at her familiarity with the Old and the New Testament, while also revealing how she personally experienced the text. Once again, she is entering sacred narrative. Her story is intersecting with the events at Calvary (although this time it is the Savior, rather than Catherine, who is on the cross)—she is a witness to, but also a participant in the most important moment of the salvation story. While observing the historic event is only possible through visionary means, she is learning how her own narrative fits within the context of the Savior’s sanctifying act. The vision, then, is providing more than a recounting of the climax of Christianity, it is teaching Catherine about her story’s relevance as a result of the atonement’s relevance. This collapsing of sacred distance makes the historic past her present. She is learning that the atonement is ongoing because every human life can access the grace that it provided. In Calvary, sanctification—both instantaneous and gradual—became a part of spiritual pilgrimages.

Threaded throughout her spiritual narrative, Catherine’s dreams and visions expanded her understanding of sanctification and salvation—thus underscoring the importance of uniting believers together in a salvific framework. Her belief in this doctrine encouraged her to value and create spiritual community so others could turn to sanctification, and, in the process, discover their place within sacred narrative. It was through her dreams and visions that past experiences and future expectations were woven together. Catherine used these stories to build faith in “doctrinal truth and the experiential relevance of the cosmic story.”87 Her life captures a point made by Candy Gunther Brown, “The evangelical narrative extended space and time beyond church ritual, lending universal and eternal, or what I term ‘cosmic’ significance to daily experiences—any one of which God could use as a vehicle for growth in holiness.”88 Catherine was learning to recognize how the past, the present and the future were bound together through the doctrine of sanctification—the passageway to salvation.89 As a committed disciple, she shared these ideas with others.

Creating community—through her understanding of sanctification—was not always an easy task for Catherine. Methodism was not particularly popular amongst the socially elite, since it was, according to John L. Brooke, the “antithesis of the proud, sociable and respectably orthodox landlord gentry.”90 For a time, many of Catherine’s family members, particularly her mother, essentially disowned her for making such a radical choice. They became increasingly upset when, at the age of forty, she decided to marry the itinerant preacher, Freeborn Garrettson.

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87 Gunther Brown, 204.
88 Ibid., 197.
89 Livingston Garrettson Diary, 10 and 11 March 1782 [use this reference for entire section on this vision]
90 Brooke, 372.
Notwithstanding such difficulties, Catherine found ways to create a spiritual family—she helped establish a Methodist Community in the Hudson River Valley area. In 1789, for example, she formed the first Methodist class in Rhinebeck, which initially consisted of her and another man from the Dutch Reformed Church. She later engaged in charitable work, and made her home, Wildercliff, dubbed “Traveller’s Rest” by Bishop Francis Asbury, a stopping point for itinerant Methodists. But most significant was her personal ministry and the theological musing she engaged in through her correspondence with like-minded Evangelical women. Through each of these efforts, Catherine invited others to embrace sanctification, which she considered the centerpiece of the salvation narrative. Many responded. On her deathbed, at the age of ninety-six, Catherine cried out for her Savior. Her final words suggested that she would reach the promised state of sanctification. “He comes. He comes.”

Elizabeth Bayley Seton

Elizabeth Bayley Seton was the third daughter born to Dr. Richard and Catherine Carlton Bayley. Although not as elite as the Livingston family, the Bayleys did socialize in prominent New York circles. And, their wealth and its accompanying privileges resulted in educational opportunities for their children. As a young woman, for example, Elizabeth attended Mama Pompelion’s school. In addition to studying academic subjects, she learned to play the piano and speak French and acquired other refinements expected of upper-class young women. These opportunities cultivated Elizabeth’s ability to engage in intellectual thoughtfulness, a skill that allowed her ultimately to push and probe religious boundaries in search of new theological understanding.

From early childhood, Elizabeth experienced intense loss and grief. When she was only three-years-old, her mother passed away. Although her father remarried within a year of

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91 For more information regarding the structure of the Methodist family, see Anna Lawrence, One Family Under God: Love, Belonging, and Authority in Early Transatlantic Methodism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).
92 Class meetings were weekly meetings in which Methodists held each other accountable in regard to growth in grace.
93 Brooke, 373
95 Livingston Garrettson Journal, 13 October 1836, Box 2, Folder 13. Elizabeth Lovegrove insightfully stated, “Yet we are always hungering and thirsting; and the more we feast; the more we want.” Women learned that their growing desire for sanctification had not been satisfied not because they had less, but because they wanted more. Shaker Collection, Elizabeth Lovegrove Diary V. 94, 5 Thursday 1827, WRHS; Microfilm, NYSL
96 Lobody, “Lost in the Ocean of Love,” 69.
her mother’s death, Elizabeth was never close to, and often had a tense relationship with, her stepmother. In fact, while growing up, she moved back and forth between their home and the home of her father’s relations in New Rochelle. This lack of familial stability resulted often in feelings of abandonment and loneliness.

Because of the rootlessness Elizabeth felt, she turned to her faith from an early age—her family was Episcopalian—and focused on creating a relationship with the divine. The connection she felt with God developed immensely in 1789. At the time, her father had traveled to England and left her in the care of relatives. Saddened by his absence and the accompanying fear that he did not love her, Elizabeth decided to take a walk one afternoon. While alone in the woods, she had an ethereal experience through which she came to envision her place within the cosmic story. She explained, “I thought at that time my Father did not care for me. Well God was my Father, my all. I prayed—sung hymns—cried—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.” During this quiet moment she believed the divine had communicated with her; consequently, during a two-hour block she advanced ten years in her spiritual life.

The following day, still reflecting on this powerful experience, Elizabeth rested her head on a table, closed her eyes, and “lived all these sweet hours over again.” This experience made her long for “that Holyness which will be perfected in the Union Eternal.” Her budding desire for sanctification opened her mind to spiritual possibilities. During a powerful moment with the divine, her biography had expanded; she had discovered personal connections with an Eternal Father. And thus her life story no longer seemed as narrow as it had previously.

On 25 January 1794, Elizabeth married William Magee Seton at Trinity Episcopal Church. Together, they would have five children: Anna Maria, William, Richard Bayley, Catherine Josephine, and Rebecca. During the early years of their marriage, the Seton’s prospered financially. Elizabeth oversaw a considerable household and staff, engaged in the social life of the post-war city, and helped found a charitable organization. She also entered a new phase of religious enthusiasm under the influence of Reverend John Henry

98 In America - Episcopalians attracted fair share of economic and political elite - image as church of affluent and educated made it primary target of populist rhetoric. See, for example, Holifield, 235.
101 Ibid., 1:265
102 Ibid.
103 The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children in 1797, for example.
Hobart, who guided her spiritual reading and encouraged her interest in liturgy and doctrine. 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.

By 1800, the course of Elizabeth’s life shifted dramatically. Due to business failures, the Setons lost their home and had to declare bankruptcy on the family firm. Furthermore, William’s tuberculosis—a health condition that ran in the family—became worse. Although immersed in these trials when she gave birth to her fifth child in 1802, Elizabeth wrote, “I renewed my covenant—that I would strive with myself and use every earnest endeavour to serve my dear Redeemer, and to give myself wholly unto him.”

In a desperate attempt to restore William’s health, William, Elizabeth and their eldest daughter, Anna Maria, traveled to Leghorn, Italy on 1 October 1803 to stay with their friends, the Filicchi family. In her rush to prepare for their voyage, Elizabeth missed sacrament Sunday. Longing to engage, even partially, in this symbolic act, she knelt behind the library door, and reverently drank a “little cup of wine and tears to represent what I so much desired.”

Due to reports of yellow fever outbreaks in New York around the time of their departure, the Seton family and others were quarantined for months upon arrival in Italy. The dark and damp conditions they lived in during this time resulted in William’s weakened state. Despite and perhaps because of the difficult conditions that surrounded them in the lazaretto, Elizabeth sought ways to infuse spiritual meaningfulness into their days. Once again, she created a substitute for the communion—she shared bread, wine, and scriptural passages with her husband and child to provide them with spiritual sustenance.

Dreams also provided Elizabeth with spiritual comfort that she associated with communion. On one occasion, for example, she dreamt that she was attending Trinity Church in New York, where she sang, with “all my soul” the hymns associated with sacrament. She longed to engage in this symbolic act. As Christmastime approached, Elizabeth noted that she lacked what she most wanted: to partake of communion. Since

104 John Henry Hobart was a powerful bishop in New York and a supporter of the High Church movement. See Holifield, 236.

105 See Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings, 16. Hobart came as Assistant minister to Trinity Church in 1800. He later served as bishop of Protestant Episcopal Diocese of New York, and was renown for his evangelical zeal and moving oratory.

106 Her 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.

107 The Seton family had a history of tuberculosis, of which he suffered.

108 Selected Writings, 63.

109 Ibid., 68.

110 Collected Writings, 1:249
she believed the “cup of salvation” could not be “received in the strange land”—she only had access to Catholic Mass—she hoped to do so “virtually” with the “Blessing of Christ.”

Shortly after being released from the Lazaretto, the Setons traveled to Pisa to stay with the Fillicchi family, but for William, it proved to be too late. On Christmas day, just two days prior to his passing, he expressed his longing for the sacrament to Elizabeth. Determined to fulfill her husband’s request, she poured some wine into a glass, and read portions of some of the Psalms and prayers she had marked.

William’s “soul was released” 27 December 1803. Once again, Elizabeth faced feelings of intense loss, abandonment and grief—but she also made note of the “mercy and consoling presence of my dear Redeemer” through her state of mourning. She had, for example, both prior to and following her husband’s passing had a dream that confirmed to her that Jesus had “opened the door of eternal life” for him. Noting her belief in the revelatory power inherent in dreams, indeed, the guidance from God she believed they provided, she concluded, “we had sweet comfort even in dreams—while Faith convinced us they were realities.”

Just as Elizabeth and her daughter prepared to return to New York, Anna Maria, became ill, thus postponing their trip home by several months. As Elizabeth would later see it, positive fruits would result from this trying circumstance. Indeed, It was during her extended stay in Italy that the Filicchi family introduced Elizabeth and her daughter to Catholicism. As she witnessed Catholic sacramentalism, the sanctifying power of the Eucharist captured Elizabeth’s heart and mind; in it, she found a more tangible Savior than she found in Protestant communion, and thus came to wonder if there was more to religious life than she had previously assumed. By attending Mass, Elizabeth suddenly felt a sense of spiritual incompleteness, a longing to “possess God in the Sacrament.” She wanted to find the divine presence “in the church as they do”—so much so that, on one occasion, as the sacrament passed by her, she fell to her knees “without thinking” and then “cried in agony to God to bless me if he was there, that my whole soul was desired only him.” Perhaps, as Wendy Wright has suggested, she had experienced so much loss in her life that she “sought the intimate presence of an embodied God.”

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111 Ibid., 1:266-67.
112 *Selected Writings*, 68
113 Ibid., 124.
114 Ibid., 125.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
117 They did not arrive back in New York until June 4, 1804.
118 *Selected Writings*, 68
119 Ibid.
Elizabeth’s feelings proved perplexing to her. She had not expected a positive response to Catholicism; her reaction thus resulted in a long and intense spiritual struggle. Conversion is so often depicted as a quest for change—as someone looking for salvation. Less heed is paid to the loss that is experienced, the abandonment of one’s former self, and the difficulties associated with this change.121 For many people, embracing something new also meant losing something that had at one point held deep meaning in one’s life. This paradox—the desire to attain and the fear of loss—is demonstrated in Elizabeth’s life. She had not been looking for a new theology or a new Church—she was a satisfied Episcopalian who found deep power and meaning in the liturgy of her faith, enough so that she would make efforts to replicate it when unable to attend a sacrament Sunday. And yet, on her voyage to Italy, she had had a dream that, at least in hindsight, hinted at the religious changes about to enter her life. In this dream, Elizabeth was climbing a mountain “of immense height and blackness.” As she neared the top, utterly exhausted, she heard a voice proclaim, “take courage there is a green hill on the other side—and on it an angel waits for you.”122 Despite the challenges of mortality, the dream seemed to imply, her spiritual life would be renewed. Speaking from a teleological perspective, Filippo Felichi later said that he believed divine providence provided Elizabeth’s voyage to Italy “For the particular purpose of giving [her] an opporunity . . . of discerning the true Church & being made a member of it.”123

Nonetheless, Elizabeth’s conversion was long and arduous, and hinged on agonizing indecision, particularly following her return to New York. Episcopalians and other Protestants pleaded with her to not join a church they associated with the Anti-Christ.124 Meanwhile, Antonio Filicchi persuaded Catholic clergy from various cities to correspond with her. During this time, both Henry Hobart and Filicchi provided Elizabeth with an excessive amount of theological reading material—materials that contradicted one another. Through all of this, Elizabeth felt confused and distracted by the numerous opinions shared with her as well as the scriptures she read, which also seemed contradictory. She wondered about questions of authority.125 She worried about risking her salvation as well as the salvation of her children by making the “wrong” decision. And, she could not decide between symbolism and transubstantiation—although she

121 For an example of a work that considers this, see Craig Harline, Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation to Modern America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).
122 Collected Writings, 1:246.
123 Selected Writings, 17)
124 For sources on anti-Catholicism in America, see Jason K. Duncan, Citizens or Papists?: The Politics of Anti-Catholicism in New York, 1685-1821 (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2005); Robert P. Lockwood, Anti-Catholicism in American Culture (Huntingdon, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000); and Francis Cogliano, No King, No Popery: Anti-Catholicism in Revolutionary New England (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995).
125 Elizabeth Bayley Seton, “To Antonio Filicchi, 19 September 1804,” in Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Correspondence and Journals, 1793-1808, Collected Writings, 1:322.
feared that looking at the host might be idolatry. 126 Quite simply, Elizabeth did not feel certain either way. To Antonio Filicchi, she would write, “Far different is my situation from those who [are] instructed—but my hard case is to have a head turned with instruction without the light in my soul to direct it where it should rest.” 127

In January 1805, Elizabeth, “in desperation of heart . . . 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.” It was while attending an Episcopalian service that afternoon that she realized she lacked faith in the Protestant approach to the Eucharist. Elizabeth concluded that the prayers offered lacked authority and power—indeed, the very meaningfulness she had been searching for. Although still unable to account for all of the “controversies” within both faiths, and, she explained, “incapable of deciding” which was correct—she determined that “if faith is so important to our Salvation I will see if where true faith first began” indeed, she would seek it from those who “received it from God himself” and trust that understanding and sanctification would come over time. Therefore, she would write, although “I left the house a Protestant I returned to it a Catholick.”

Elizabeth quickly acted on her decision to become a Catholic. On 27 February 1805, she walked into St. Peter’s Church and, kneeling before a crucifix said, “My God, here let me rest.” She formally entered the church on 14 March and made her first communion as a Roman Catholic on 25 March. Following this experience, she wrote, ‘At last . . . at last—GOD IS MINE & I AM HIS.” 128 For Elizabeth, conversion meant a change of heart, which would then be sealed by the reception of the sacraments of confession and

126 “After making her first communion as a Catholic, Elizabeth Seton said, ‘Truly I feel all the powers of my soul held fast by Him who came with so much majesty to take possession of this little poor kingdom.’ The Holy Eucharist was, indeed, to become the keystone of her spirituality, giving meaning to both the suffering and bliss of her existence. This meaning was not conferred simultaneously with the gift of faith. A decade or more after her conversion, reminiscing over her difficulties in 1804 with the Catholic teaching on communion, she confessed to her spiritual director that she was in church many times before she dared look at the host at elevation, so daunted was she by the fear of idolatry. ‘There,’ she added, ‘you read what I wd have carried to the grave, only i wish you to know well . . . the impossibility of a poor Protestant to see our meaning without being led step by step & the veil lifted little by little.’ Happily, the existing papers of Elizabeth Seton make it possible to trace the lifting of the veil in her case, to reveal with luminous clarity the place of the Eucharist came to hold in her spiritual life.” Selected Writings, 67.

127 Ibid., 26.

128 Ibid.
communion. She considered this combination the first step in the pursuit of holiness. As Elizabeth indicated in her comments about her final decision to turn to Catholicism—this choice was an act of faith. At that point, she believed, or at least wanted to believe in the theology and the practice; she was drawn to the purifying and nurturing power she saw within the sacraments and trusted that they had a persevering power that would help enable perfection. The idea of the literal presence of Christ was of particular appeal. Conversion was the first step toward sanctification; the sacramental nature and the practice of devotional piety were necessary to both sustain and perfect conversion over time. Elizabeth’s conversion, then, was an ongoing process; she would grow in grace, both by intellectual understanding of and spiritual experience with the Eucharist. Eventually, Elizabeth came to believe that the literal flesh of Christ represented God’s role in the salvation drama; it was a reminder of the sacrifice that had been made by the bread of life. Christ gave his flesh that all might live. He thus became a sustaining power—and that power, available, in part, through the Eucharist, was required for sanctification. It would take a full year, however, before she could fully embrace “the heavenly consolations attached to the belief of the presence of God in the Blessed Sacrament to be the food of the poor wanderers in the desert of this world as well as manna was the support of the Israelites through the wilderness to their Canaan.”

The Eucharist remained the central focus in Elizabeth’s spiritual development—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. Consequently, Father Matthew O’Brien—committed to aiding her spiritual progression following conversion—recommended that she become associated with the Society of the Holy Sacrament in order to help her attain perfection. At that time, she was receiving communion every Sunday. Although she lived during an era when frequent communion was uncommon, she approached the altar as frequently as permitted. Regular participation in this sacrament, combined with a dream that underscored its meaningfulness further, helped Elizabeth integrate doctrine and theology and thus recognize how individual sanctification progresses through the power of this particular sacrament.

On 8 July 1807, Elizabeth penned a powerful rumination—in the form of prayer—that captured her struggle to become holy. She detailed moments of success, moments when she approached and found sanctifying grace, as well as moments of decline and loss. “In this constant change of interior dispositions” she lamented, “I walk in darkness and often go astray.” She longed to be perfected through God’s grace, but feared her soul “desires much, and is unable to do anything.” And yet, she recalled, during moments of utter

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130 Ibid., 108, 112.
131 Ibid., 179
132 Seton, *Selected Writings*, 69
133 Wright, “Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton and the Art of Embodied Presence.”
despair she would eventually discover that God was nearer than imagined. He mercifully “opened her eyes to see the true ways to Peace and Life” so she could abandon “all things else” and be transformed through divine grace. How then, she wondered, might she “preserve the graces” she had received?¹³⁴

Elizabeth seemingly answered her own question, in which she implicitly suggested that communion is 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.” 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.” It was through the literal presence of Christ, Elizabeth suggested, that she could “possess him” for eternity.¹³⁵

The quest for salvation remained a central concern to Elizabeth. On 14 August 1807, she wrote about “the sweetest dream”—a dream that visually captures the eloquent expression just discussed. She explained, “I held the blessed Host close to my heart making earnest acts of adoration and love—mixed with great fear of it being lost in a quantity of almond and raisins which were thrown in my lap—you know how fond I am of them—earthly affections.”¹³⁶ Although in possession of the blessed host—Christ himself—and thus sincerely committed to him, Elizabeth also found herself susceptible to outside distractions, including friends and family members who disapproved of her choice to join the Catholic church—situations and people she also loved and felt drawn to. This concern becomes even more evident in another account she wrote of this dream, in which Elizabeth notes that she pressed the “adored host close to my heart” after saving it from one who “rediculed my faith in its Divine essence.”¹³⁷ The dream, then, also addressed and legitimated the idea of transubstantiation—a confirmation Elizabeth had been seeking since first encountering Catholic communion. It helped her combine the experiential and sacramental nature of God’s grace, while hinting at the need to persevere if one wanted to attain a sanctified state. Through this dream, Elizabeth’s understanding of the pathway to salvation was enriched, and her own personal pilgrimage contextualized. She was living theology.

Elizabeth’s deepened understanding of the Eucharist would dramatically alter her religious life from that point on—it was during this time that her “joy in the Eucharist reached the intensity that was to characterize her spirituality for the rest of her life.”¹³⁸ In the weeks that followed this dream, Elizabeth kept a journal that contains powerful meditations about this sacrament. She was no longer concerned about whether or not Christ was literally present—she knew he was—but rather puzzled by those who rejected

¹³⁴ Seton, Collected Writings, 7:329.
¹³⁵ Seton, Selected Writings, 229-230.
¹³⁶ Ibid., 14 Aug 1807.
¹³⁸ Seton, Selected Writings, 70.
this presence. She wrote, “Jesus then is there we can go, receive him, he is our own—
were we to pause and think of this thro’ Eternity . . . that he is there (oh heavenly theme!) is as certainly true as that Bread naturally taken removes my hunger—so this Bread of Angels removes my pains, my cares, warms, cheers, soothes, contents and renews my whole being.” No longer anxious about transubstantiation, Elizabeth became increasingly conscious of sharing the means to salvation with others so that they might “enjoy the adored substance in the center of [their] souls.”

In 1808, Elizabeth moved to Baltimore, Maryland, to start 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 25 March 1809. Elizabeth continued to participate in communion as often as possible—she rejoiced in the opportunity to be “admitted so often to the spring of Eternal life.” From 1815 to 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.”

Like her husband and several of her children before her, Elizabeth became extremely ill with tuberculosis. In writing to Antonio Filicchi of her final days, Brute noted that her intense love for communion remained ever-present. “Communion was all to her” he proclaimed. On Saturday, 30 December 1820, Elizabeth received her Holy Communion as Viaticum. On Sunday she received communion with the community, and on 1 January she partook a third and final time. On the previous night, she had proclaimed “one communion more and then eternity.” As she saw it, sanctification had certainly transformed the course of her life.

Conclusion

Ann, Catherine and Elizabeth’s spiritual pilgrimages pivot around the quest for sanctification—as religious seekers, as converts, as dreamers, as committed believers and as forgers of spiritual community, each sought to understand and apply this doctrine to their lives. Consequently, this subject became the centerpiece of their life writings, and their life writings, in many cases, became the means through which their understanding of sanctification unfolded. Although each developed different ideas about how a state of holiness could and should be attained, a belief in and commitment to this doctrine enabled Ann, Catherine and Elizabeth to teach their theological views within the context of their personal narratives. Their experiences with sanctification also helped them connect their lives to a grand cosmic narrative; they came to see the quest for salvation as both intensely personal and incredibly universal. Indeed, their narratives suggest that the story of Redemption was not limited to scriptural text; it was woven throughout the daily

139 Ibid., 70.
140 Ibid., 69
141 Ibid., 71.
142 Ibid., 72.
experiences of ordinary Christians who wanted to become united with the divine. Sanctification taught them that their stories—all stories—had eternal consequence.