

1 MY SOUL LONGS FOR YOU, O GOD (Ps 42:2)

THE HUMAN QUEST FOR GOD
—CCC, NOS. 27-43

ONE WOMAN'S QUEST



Elizabeth Bayley came from a wealthy, Episcopalian, New York family. Born in 1774, two years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, she came into a world of conflicting loyalties—royalists and revolutionaries. Her father threw in his lot with the American Revolution.

At sixteen, Elizabeth fell in love with William Magee Seton, a wealthy businessman. Three years later, in early 1794, she married William and in time gave birth to three girls and two boys. The couple was married for only a few years before a series of problems began to affect the family. By 1801, William's business had failed and so had his health.

William and Elizabeth accepted an offer from the Fillichi family of Livorno, Italy, to come there to help William recover. However, shortly after arriving in Italy in late 1803 with his wife and eldest daughter, William died. The Fillichis comforted the widow and child and impressed them both with their strong Catholic faith. While in Italy, Elizabeth spent much time visiting various Catholic churches and spending time in them praying in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

After about six months, Elizabeth returned to New York, where she was reunited with her other children, and she decided to become a Catholic. A year later, she was received into full communion with the Catholic Church on March 4, 1805, by Fr. Matthew O'Brien, pastor of St. Peter's Church in lower Manhattan. Her family and friends abandoned her, but Antonio Fillichi—who was in New York at this time—supported her.

Now she needed to make a living and support her family. She wanted to open a school. She received an invitation from Bishop John Carroll to start a school for girls near St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street in Baltimore. This became the groundwork of a career that would lead her to become the foundress of the American Sisters of Charity and that would lay the basis for the United States Catholic school system. She provided free education for the poor while also accepting tuition from those who could afford it.

Cecilia O'Conway of Philadelphia joined her effort. They discussed starting a religious congregation to ensure the future of their ministry. Bishop Carroll supported the idea. In a short time, their dream became a reality. Property was purchased at Emmitsburg, Maryland. Other women joined Elizabeth and Cecilia, and together they formed the nucleus of the new community. Mother Seton—as she was now known—founded orphanages in Philadelphia and New York. Her successors went on to establish a stunning array of charitable services.

Mother Seton did not neglect her own children. Her daughters were educated in her school. Her sons received their schooling at Georgetown College. She encouraged her son William to become a banker. Instead, he chose to be a merchant seaman. Eventually he settled down, married, and had two sons, one of whom became an archbishop.

Elizabeth Ann Seton died in 1821 at the age of forty-six, and she was canonized in 1975 as the first native-born North American saint. Her feast day is celebrated on January 4.

St. Elizabeth Seton and her journey of faith point to the reality that in all of us there is a longing to know God and to draw closer to him. The story of how she responded to that longing is a suitable introduction to our opening lesson on the human longing and capacity for God.



THE UNIVERSAL DESIRE FOR GOD

*The desire for God is written in the human heart,
because man is created by God and for God.*

—CCC, no. 27

People have always asked fundamental questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Why do I need to struggle to achieve my goals? Why is it so hard to love and be loved? What is the meaning of sickness, death, and evil? What will happen after death?

These questions relate to human existence. They also move one to ask questions about the divine because they pertain to God's existence. When asked with ever deeper reflection, they uncover an inner sense of longing for God. They challenge our minds, but the mind's answers are not always sufficient. We must also become aware of the mysterious yearning of the human heart.

God has planted in every human heart the hunger and longing for the infinite, for nothing less than God. St. Augustine, a theologian from the fifth century, said it best: "Our heart is restless until it rests in you" (St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, bk. 1, chap. 1, 1; cf. CCC, no. 30).

How is our quest for God awakened? God first pursues us; this spurs us to search for him for whom we were made. The *Catechism* presents three paths through which every person can come to God: creation, the human person, and Revelation. In the next chapter, Revelation will be presented as the greatest and most essential path to God. He is discovered also through creation and through the mystery of our inner life.

THROUGH CREATION

The heavens declare the glory of God.

—Ps 19:2

Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.

—Rom 1:20

St. Augustine asks us to look at the beauty of the world and let it open us to God. "Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea . . . question the beauty of the sky. . . . All respond, 'See, we are beautiful.'

Their beauty is a profession. These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One who is not subject to change?” (St. Augustine, Sermon 241, no. 2; cf. CCC, no. 32).

Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have seen the universe as evidence of God’s existence. The order, harmony, and beauty of the world point to an intelligent Creator. The purposefulness of creation from the inanimate to human life similarly points to a wise Creator. The fact that all visible things come to be and eventually pass out of earthly existence points to an eternal Creator who has no beginning and no end and who sustains all that he has created (cf. CCC, no. 32).

THROUGH THE HUMAN PERSON

I praise you, so wonderfully you made me.

—Ps 139:14

Every human person seeks to know the truth and to experience goodness. Moral goodness appeals to us. We treasure our freedom and strive to maintain it. We hear the voice of our conscience and want to live by it. We long for absolute happiness.

These experiences make us aware of our souls and our spiritual nature. The more we become aware of these truths, the more we are drawn to the reality of God who is the Supreme Good. These are the seeds of eternity within us that have their origins only in God. St. Augustine confirmed this insight when he prayed, “That I may know myself, that I may know you.”

Since this is true, why have so many not found God?

Many reasons account for the lack of familiarity with God. The presence of so much suffering and pain in the world disheartens some and moves them to rebel against the idea of a God who would let this happen. Some do not know who God is because no one has shared the good news of his self-revelation with them. Ignorance of religion or indifference to it is another cause.

The scandalous behavior of some believers frequently drives honest seekers away from religion. Sinful conduct weakens the ability of

FROM THE CATECHISM

1. How have people expressed their quest for God throughout history?

In many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given their expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behavior: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a “*religious being*” (cf. Acts 17:26-28). (CCC, no. 28)

2. What do we mean by “proofs” for God’s existence?

Created in God’s image and called to know and love him, the person who seeks God discovers certain ways of coming to know him. These are also called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of “converging and convincing arguments,” which allow us to attain certainty about the truth. These “ways” of approaching God from creation have a twofold point of departure: the physical world and the human person. (CCC, no. 31)

3. Can we know God?

The Church teaches that the one true God, our Creator and Lord, can be known with certainty from his works, by the natural light of human reason (cf. First Vatican Council, can. 2 §1: H. Denzinger and A. Schonmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* [DS] 3026). (CCC, no. 47)

many to assume responsibility for their actions and causes them to hide from God (cf. Gn 3:8; Jn 3:19ff.). Others may resist acknowledging God because they do not wish to follow and obey God. Still others may allow

their lives to become so cluttered, hectic, or busy that there is little room for God.

Throughout history, people have yearned for God. Despite obstacles and occasions of violent opposition to belief in God, millions of people have continued to search for God. The spiritual dynamism of the human heart, having its origin in God, endures in countless and inspiring ways. Often just when the shadows of doubt and skepticism appear to have laid the great search to rest, our yearning for God surges again to witness to the light of God's inherent attractiveness in human life.

A GENERATION OF SEEKERS

Religious seekers in the United States live within a culture that in some important ways provides support for belief in God while at the same time also discourages and corrodes the faith in practice. It is encouraging that many are finding the move to secularism to be an unsatisfactory approach and continue to search for a deeper meaning in life.

Particularly encouraging is that a number of young people, who had once drifted away from faith, today are seeking a connection with a church community. Among the many causes of this hunger for God, two stand out: the experience of having children who need a proper education and upbringing, and the experience of one's own longing for direction, meaning, and hope.

Catholicism in the United States continues to attract thousands of new members each year as the Holy Spirit works through the Church to awaken a thirst for the Lord. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the pastoral process for initiating new members into the Church, is ministering to great numbers of seekers. The Church is leading them to knowledge of the truths of faith, to the celebration of the Seven Sacraments, to commitment to the moral life—including the forming of a social conscience—and to the practice of prayer, and at the same time, the Church responds to their desire for community.

The Church does more than welcome new members; she forms disciples. Seekers can begin to find in the Church fulfillment of their heart's desires. They are invited to undertake a spiritual journey that is focused

on Jesus Christ and his Kingdom of salvation, love, justice, and mercy. Jesus reminds us that this Kingdom is already in our midst, and as his disciples we are called to assist him in bringing it to its fullness.

This is the Church's invitation to seekers who want to discover a satisfying answer to their spiritual hungers. Her invitation is rich: to seekers, old and new, and to those who might label themselves as alienated or indifferent, the Church offers Jesus Christ and his love, the fulfillment of hope. The Church offers a way of belonging that teaches truths that free one from sin and its power. The Church initiates members into an intimate relationship with God—indeed, into a participation in the divine life—where one will find genuine joy and fulfillment. This is all possible because of Jesus Christ and his love.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are you looking for in life? What are your goals and ideals? How do God and the Church play a part in what you are seeking? How is your life a journey toward God?
2. As a seeker, how do you look for truth? When you hear of truth or behold beauty or experience goodness, what do you think? If you seek for God, what has made this possible? What have you found in your search thus far?
3. As a Catholic, how are you searching for God? Why does seeking God keep your relationship with him dynamic? How does the Church help you in your search for God? How does your family affect your faith?

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- God has planted in every human heart the hunger and longing for the infinite—for nothing less than himself.
- Only in God will we find the truth, peace, and happiness for which we never stop searching. Created in God's image, we are called to know and love the Lord.
- God can be known with certainty from his works in creation and from the spiritual nature of the human person by the light of natural

reason, although there are many difficulties in coming to this knowledge because of humanity's historical and sinful condition.

- By our openness to goodness and truth, our experience, our sense of moral goodness, our listening to the voice of conscience, and our desire for happiness, we can discern our spiritual soul and can come to see that this could only have its origin in God.
- We can speak of God even if our limited language cannot exhaust the mystery of who he is.
- While we can come to know something about God by our natural power of reason, there is a deeper knowledge of God that comes to us through Divine Revelation.

MEDITATION

Where did I find you, that I came to know you? You were not within my memory before I learned of you. Where, then, did I find you before I came to know you, if not within yourself, far above me? . . .

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! . . . Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would not have been at all. [O eternal truth, true love and beloved eternity. You are my God. To you I sigh day and night.] . . . You were with me but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would not have been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you; now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burn for your peace.

—St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, bk. 10, chap. 26, 27.37

PRAYER

As the deer longs for streams of water,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My being thirsts for God, the living God.
When can I go and see the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
as they ask daily, “Where is your God?”
Those times I recall
as I pour out my soul,
When I went in procession with the crowd,
I went with them to the house of God,
Amid loud cries of thanksgiving,
with the multitude keeping festival.
Why are you downcast, my soul;
why do you groan within me?
Wait for God, whom I shall praise again,
my savior and my God.

—Ps 42:2-6



God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love.

—St. Augustine