

Full Biography of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

Overview

Two hundred years ago, Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton founded the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's, the first new community for religious women to be established in the United States. She also began St. Joseph's Academy and Free School, the first free Catholic School for girls staffed by Sisters in the United States. Her enduring legacy now includes six religious communities with more than 5,000 members, hundreds of schools, social service centers, and hospitals throughout America and around the world. She was canonized on Sunday, September 14, 1975 in St. Peter's Square by Pope Paul VI. The first citizen born in the United States to be raised to the altars, her remains are entombed here in the Basilica that bears her name.

The remarkable life of Elizabeth Ann Seton spans the full spectrum of human experience. She was a New York socialite, a devoted wife, a dedicated volunteer in charitable organizations, the mother of five children, a convert to Roman Catholicism, an educator, friend of the poor, catechist—a tireless servant of God. Her story is instrumental to understanding her ongoing legacy and enhancing your pilgrimage to the Shrine.

Table of Contents

Early Life	Page 2
Social Prominence	Page 2
Change of Tide	Page 3
Faith-Filled Journey	Page 4
Maryland Mission	Page 5
Emmitsburg Foundation	Page 5
The Seton Legacy	Page 6
Bibliography	Page 8

Early Life

A convert to Roman Catholicism, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was foundress of the American Sisters of Charity, which was the first sisterhood native to the United States. She was the first person born in the United States to become a canonized saint on, September 14, 1975.

During her lifetime, she was a wife, mother, widow, sole parent, foundress, educator, social minister and spiritual leader. Elizabeth Bayley Seton, of British and French ancestry, was born into a prominent Anglican family on August 28, 1774 in New York City and was the second daughter of Dr. Richard Bayley (1744-1801) and Catherine Charlton (d.1777). She died in Emmitsburg, Maryland on January 4, 1821.

The Bayley and Charlton families were among the earliest colonial settlers of the New York area. Elizabeth's paternal grandparents were William Bayley (c.1708-c.1758) and Susannah LeCompte (LeCompte, b.1727), distinguished French Huguenots of New Rochelle. Her maternal grandparents, Mary Bayeux and Dr. Richard Charlton (d.1777), lived on Staten Island, where Dr. Charlton was pastor at Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church.

After the death of his first wife, Dr. Bayley married (1778) Charlotte Amelia Barclay (c.1759-1805), of the Jacobus James Roosevelt lineage of New York. However, the marriage ended in a separation as a result of marital conflict. The couple had seven children, three daughters and four sons. Among them was Guy Carleton Bayley (1786-1859), whose son, James Roosevelt Bayley (1814-1877), converted to Roman Catholicism and became the first bishop of Newark (1853-1872) and eighth archbishop of Baltimore (1872-1877).

Elizabeth and her sister were rejected by their stepmother. On account of her father's travel abroad for medical studies, the girls lived temporarily in New Rochelle, New York, with their paternal uncle, William Bayley (1745-1811), and his wife, Sarah Pell Bayley. When her stepmother and father separated, Elizabeth experienced a period of darkness. She reflected about this period of depression in later years in her journal, titled *Dear Remembrances*, and expressed her relief at not taking the drug laudanum, an opium derivative: "This wretched reasoning—laudanum—the praise and thanks of excessive joy not to have done the 'horrid deed'—thoughts and promise of eternal gratitude." Elizabeth had a natural bent toward contemplation; she loved nature, poetry and music, especially the piano. She was given to introspection and frequently made entries in her journal expressing her sentiments, religious aspirations and favorite passages from her reading.

Elizabeth wed William Magee Seton (1768-1803), a son of William Seton, Sr. (1746-1798) and Rebecca Curson Seton (c.1746-c.1775), on January 25, 1794, in the Manhattan home of Mary Bayley Post. Samuel Provoost (1742-1815), the first Episcopal bishop of New York, witnessed the wedding vows of the couple.

Social Prominence

William Magee Seton, a descendant of the Setons of Parbroath, was the oldest of thirteen children of his father's two marriages. The elder Seton married (1767) Rebecca Curson (c.1746-1775). A year following her death, he married (1776) his sister-in-law, Anna Maria Curson (d.1792). Educated in England, William joined his father and his brother, James, as founding partners in the import-export mercantile firm the William Seton Company, which later became Seton, Maitland and Company in 1793. He had

visited important counting houses in Europe in 1788 and thus eventually became a friend of Filippo Filicchi (1763-1816), a renowned merchant of Livorno, Italy.

Socially prominent in New York, the Setons belonged to the fashionable Trinity Episcopal Church. Elizabeth was a devout communicant there under the influence of Rev. John Henry Hobart (1775-1830, later bishop), who was her spiritual director. Elizabeth, along with her sister-in-law Rebecca Mary Seton (1780-1804), her soul-friend and dearest confidant, nursed the sick and dying among family, friends and needy neighbors. Elizabeth was among the founders and charter members of The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children (1797), and she also served as treasurer for the organization.

Elizabeth and William Magee Seton were blessed with five children: Anna Maria (1795-1812), William (1796-1868), Richard Bayley (1798-1823), Catherine Charlton (1800-1891) and Rebecca Mary (1802-1816).

Anna Maria, who had accompanied her parents to Italy in 1803, became afflicted with tuberculosis as an adolescent and made her vows as a Sister of Charity on her deathbed. Rebecca fell on ice sometime before 1812, causing a hip injury which resulted in lameness and experienced an early death from tuberculosis. Both Anna Maria and Rebecca are buried in the original cemetery of the Sisters of Charity on the grounds of the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland. When sailing with the United States Navy as a civil servant, Richard died at age 25 off the coast of Liberia onboard the ship Oswego.

Catherine Charlton (also called Josephine) was beautiful and witty. She distinguished herself by her linguistic and musical talents, developed at St. Joseph's Academy, Emmitsburg. She was the only Seton present at her mother's death. Catherine later lived with her brother William and his family and traveled to Europe with them several times before entering the Sisters of Mercy in New York City (1846). As Mother Mary Catherine, she devoted herself for more than forty years to prison outreach in New York.

William received a commission as lieutenant in the United States Navy in February 1826 and married (1832) Emily Prime (1804-1854). Seven of their nine children lived to adulthood, including Archbishop Robert Seton (1839-1927) and Helen (1844-1906), another New York Sister of Mercy (Sister Mary Catherine, 1879-1906).

Change of Tide

After the death in 1798 of William Seton, Sr., Elizabeth's father-in-law, responsibility was thrust on her husband for both the family business and the welfare of his younger half-siblings. About six months pregnant with her third child at the time, Elizabeth managed the care of both families in the Seton household. There she enjoyed her initial teaching experience with her first students, Charlotte (1786-1853), Henrietta (Harriet) (1787-1809) and Cecilia (1791-1810), her youngest sisters-in-law.

During their monetary crisis, Elizabeth tried to assist her husband at night by managing the accounting for his firm, but the Company went bankrupt in 1801, and the Setons lost all their possessions including the family home in lower Manhattan. William Magee Seton began to show signs of tuberculosis as their financial problems escalated.

Faith-Filled Journey

In 1803, Elizabeth, William Magee Seton and their oldest daughter, Anna Maria, sailed to the warm climate of Italy in a desperate effort to restore William's health. Italian authorities at the port of Livorno feared yellow fever then prevalent in New York. As a result, the Setons were quarantined in a cold, stone San Jacopo lazaretto. The Filicchi family did all they could to advocate for them and to provide some relief during their month of isolation. Two weeks after his discharge, William Magee Seton died in Pisa on December 27, and was buried in the English cemetery in Livorno, leaving Elizabeth a widow with five young children at the age of twenty-nine.

Their experiences in Italy transformed the lives of Elizabeth and her daughter (now named Annina). Antonio Filicchi (1764-1847) and his wife, Amabilia Baragazzi Filicchi (1773-1853), provided gracious hospitality to the widow and child until the Setons returned to the United States the next spring. Filippo and his wife, the former Mary Cowper (1760-1821) of Boston, along with Antonio and Amabilia Filicchi, introduced Elizabeth to Roman Catholicism. Elizabeth came upon the text of the Memorare. Her lack of knowledge about the religion and inquisitive nature led her to inquire about the Catholic practices. She asked about the Sacred Liturgy, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, and the Church's direct unbroken link with Christ and the apostles. The Italian Journal, her long memoir written for her sister-in-law Rebecca Seton, reveals the intimate details of Elizabeth's heart-rending personal journey of inner conflict and conversion (cf. *Collected Writings*, 1:243). Antonio, who had business interests in America, accompanied the Setons back to America, and instructed Elizabeth about the faith and offered wise counsel during her indecision. Elizabeth felt deeply for Antonio, who provided not only emotional support but also substantial financial resources to her.

Although Elizabeth left the United States a firm Protestant, she returned to New York in June 1804 with the heart of a Roman Catholic. Immediately, opposition and insecurity threatened her resolve. Elizabeth's religious inclinations incurred the ire of both family and friends. Their hostility, coupled with the death of her beloved Rebecca, her sister-in-law and most intimate confidant, caused Elizabeth deep anguish. She was also troubled by her strained financial situation. Her five children were all under eight years of age. As their sole parent, Elizabeth faced many challenges and frequently had to relocate into less expensive housing.

While Elizabeth was discerning God's will for her future, the Virgin Mary became her prism of faith. In her discernment she relied on several advisors among the clergy, Rev. John Cheverus (1768-1836), the first bishop of Boston; and his associate Rev. Francis Matignon (1753-1818). Struggling with doubts and fears in her search for truth, Elizabeth resolved her inner conflict regarding religious conversion and embraced Roman Catholicism.

On March 14, 1805 Rev. Matthew O'Brien (1758-1815) received Elizabeth's profession of the Catholic faith at St. Peter's Church, Barclay Street in lower Manhattan. Elizabeth received her First Communion two weeks later on March 25. Bishop John Carroll (1735-1815, later archbishop), whom she considered her spiritual father, confirmed her the next year on Pentecost Sunday. For her Confirmation name, Elizabeth added the name of Mary to her own and thereafter frequently signed herself "MEAS," which was her abbreviation for Mary Elizabeth Ann Seton. Accordingly the three names, Mary, Ann, and Elizabeth, signified the moments of the mysteries of Salvation for her.

Elizabeth's initial years as a Catholic (1805-1808) in New York were marked by disappointments and failures. Rampant anti-Catholic prejudice prevented her from beginning a school. She eventually secured

a teaching position at the school of a Protestant couple, Mr. and Mrs. Patrick White, but they failed financially within a short time. Elizabeth's next venture was a boarding house for boys who attended a school directed by Rev. William Harris of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, but disgruntled parents withdrew their sons. Seton family members also distrusted Elizabeth's influence on younger family members. Their fears were realized when Cecilia converted to Catholicism (1806), followed by Harriet's profession of faith (1809). During Cecilia's struggles as a new convert, Elizabeth wrote an instructive Spiritual Journal (1807) for her, offering her wise counsel.

Although Elizabeth was frustrated in establishing herself to provide for the welfare of her children, she remained faith-filled. She was convinced that God would show her the way according to the Divine Plan. In considering her future and examining alternatives, Elizabeth remained a mother first and foremost. She regarded her five "darlings" as her primary obligation over every other commitment.

Maryland Mission

Rev. Louis William Dubourg, S.S. (1766-1833) was visiting New York when Elizabeth met him quite providentially about 1806. Since 1797 Dubourg had desired a congregation of religious women to teach girls in Baltimore, Maryland. He, with the concurrence of Bishop John Carroll, invited Elizabeth to Baltimore. The French priests of the Society of Saint Sulpice (Sulpicians), who were émigrés in Maryland, assisted her in forming a plan of life which would be in the best interests of her children. The Sulpicians wished to form a small school for the religious education of children.

After her arrival in Maryland on June 16, 1808, Elizabeth spent one year as a school mistress in Baltimore. The Sulpicians envisioned the development of a sisterhood modeled on the Daughters of Charity of Paris (founded 1633), and they actively recruited candidates for the germinal community. Cecilia Maria O'Conway (1788-1865) of Philadelphia was the first to arrive on December 7, 1808. She was followed in 1809 by Mary Ann Butler (1784-1821) of Philadelphia, Susanna Clossey (1785-1823) of New York, Catharine Mullen (1783-1815) of Baltimore, Anna Maria Murphy Burke (1787-1812) of Philadelphia, and Rosetta (Rose) Landry White (1784-1841), a widow of Baltimore. Only Elizabeth pronounced vows of chastity and obedience to John Carroll for one year in the lower chapel at St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street, March 25, 1809. The Archbishop gave her the title "Mother Seton." On June 16, 1809, the group of sisters appeared for the first time dressed alike in a black dress, cape, and bonnet, patterned after the widows weeds of women in Italy whom Elizabeth had encountered there.

Samuel Sutherland Cooper (1769-1843), a wealthy seminarian and convert, purchased 269 acres of land for an establishment for the young community near Emmitsburg in the countryside of Frederick County, Maryland. Cooper wished to establish an institution for female education and character formation rooted in Christian values and the Catholic faith, as well as services to the elderly, job skill development, and a small manufactory, which would be beneficial to people oppressed by poverty. Cooper had Elizabeth in mind to direct the educational program.

Emmitsburg Foundation

Their stone farmhouse was not yet ready for occupancy when Elizabeth and the sisters arrived in Emmitsburg in June 1809. Rev. John Dubois, S.S. (1764-1842), founder of Mount St. Mary's College and Seminary (1808), offered his cabin on St. Mary's Mountain for the women to use until they would be

able to move to their property in the nearby valley some six weeks later. According to tradition, Elizabeth named the area St. Joseph's Valley. There, the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's began July 31, 1809 in the Stone House, the former Fleming farmhouse (c.1750). In mid-February, 1810, Elizabeth and her companions moved into St. Joseph's House (now The White House). Elizabeth opened St. Joseph's Free School on February 22, 1810 to needy girls of the area and thus the first free Catholic school for girls staffed by sisters in the country. St. Joseph's Academy began May 14, 1810, with the addition of boarding students who paid tuition, enabling the Sisters of Charity to subsidize their charitable mission. St. Joseph's Academy and Free School formed the cradle of Catholic education in the United States.

Divine Providence guided Elizabeth and her little community through the poverty and unsettling first years. Numerous women joined the Sisters of Charity. During the period 1809-1820, of the ninety-eight candidates who arrived in Elizabeth's lifetime, eighty-six of them actually joined the new community; seventy percent remained Sisters of Charity for life. Illness, sorrow, and early death were omnipresent in Elizabeth's life. She buried eighteen sisters at Emmitsburg, in addition to her two daughters Annina and Rebecca, and her sisters-in-law Harriet and Cecilia Seton.

The Sulpicians assisted Elizabeth in adapting the seventeenth-century French Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity (1672) for the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's in accord with the needs of the Catholic Church in America. Elizabeth formed her sisters in the Vincentian spirit according to the tradition of St. Louise de Marillac (1591-1660) and St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660). Eighteen Sisters of Charity, including Elizabeth, made private, annual vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service of the poor for the first time, July 19, 1813; thereafter, they made vows annually on March 25, the feast of the Annunciation.

Elected by the members of the community to be the first Mother of the Sisters of Charity, Elizabeth was reelected successively and remained at its head until her death. The Sulpicians, who had conceived and founded the community, filled the office of superior general through 1849. Elizabeth worked successively with three Sulpicians in this capacity: Rev. Louis William Dubourg, S.S., Rev. Jean-Baptiste David, S.S., (1761-1841) and Rev. John Dubois, S.S. (1764-1842).

The Sisters of Charity intertwined social outreach with education in the faith and religious values in all they undertook in their mission. Elizabeth dispatched sisters to Philadelphia to manage St. Joseph's Asylum, the first Catholic orphanage in the United States in 1814. The next year, she opened a mission at Mount St. Mary's to oversee the infirmary and domestic services for the college and seminary near Emmitsburg. In 1817, sisters from St. Joseph's Valley went to New York to begin the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum.

The Seton Legacy

Reverend Simon Gabriel Bruté, S.S. (1779-1839) of Mount St. Mary's, served as the chaplain to the Sisters of Charity and Elizabeth's spiritual director until her death. He was her principal guide along the path to sanctity. He, along with DuBois, actively instilled the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac among the Sisters of Charity. Bruté advised Elizabeth to read and translate the lives of Louise and Vincent and some of their spiritual writings.

Today, the work of education and charity lives on in Elizabeth's spiritual daughters around the world (link to <http://sisters-of-charity-federation.org>). James Gibbons (1834-1921, later cardinal), archbishop

of Baltimore, initiated her cause for canonization in 1882. Officially introduced at the Vatican in 1940, it made steady progress. Blessed John XXIII declared Elizabeth venerable December 18, 1959, beatifying her on March 17, 1963.

Pope Paul VI canonized Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton on September 14 during the Holy Year of 1975. The Holy See accepted three miracles through her intercession. These included the cures of Sister Gertrude Korzendorfer, D.C. (1872-1942) of St. Louis of cancer; a young child, Ann Theresa O'Neill (b.1948) of Baltimore from acute lymphatic leukemia; and Carl Kalin (1902-1976) of New York from a rare form of encephalitis.

The extraordinary manner in which Elizabeth lived an ordinary life flowed from the centrality of the Word of God and the Eucharist in her life. These strengthened her, enabling her to love God, her family, and her neighbor. In the depth of her charity she undertook heroic works of mercy. Not only did she and her Sisters of Charity care for orphans, widows, and poor families, but they also addressed unmet needs of the poor. Elizabeth had a special concern for children who lacked educational opportunities, especially religious instruction in the faith.

Her lifelong devotion to the will of God led her to sanctity. Her longing for Eternity began at a young age with her early religious formation as an Episcopalian. Throughout her earthly journey of forty-six years, Elizabeth viewed herself as a pilgrim on the road of life. She faced each day with eyes of faith, looking forward to heaven.

Dominant themes in her life and writings include her pursuit of the Divine Will, nourishment from the Eucharist and Holy Scripture, confidence in Divine Providence, and charitable service to Jesus Christ in the poor. From her deathbed in Emmitsburg, she expressed her wish that those gathered about her "Be children of the Church, be children of the Church."

She prayed her way through life's joys and struggles using Sacred Scripture. This enabled her to live serenely. Psalm 23, which she learned as a child, remained her favorite treasury of consolation throughout her life of suffering and loss. Elizabeth's pathway to inner peace and sanctity flowed from her way of living the Paschal Mystery in her own life. She moved from devotional reception of Holy Communion as an Episcopalian to awe as a Roman Catholic and often ecstatic adoration of the Real Presence. Her Eucharistic devotion and faith in God's abiding presence nourished her imitation of Jesus Christ, the source and model of all charity.

As she established the Sisters of Charity in their mission of charity and education, she adopted The Regulations for the Sisters of Charity in the United States (1812). The choice of the Vincentian rule reflects how Elizabeth understood her mission as one of apostolic service honoring Jesus Christ through service to the poor. Elizabeth's spiritual pathway involved other people—her advisors, friends, collaborators, and those she served.

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