

Elizabeth Ann Seton  
First Roman Catholic “Saint” Born in the U.S.

*The details of Elizabeth Ann Seton’s life are extensive because she kept a personal journal from the time she could write until her death, not to mention the many letters she wrote and received, which have been archived at Emmitsburg, MD.:*

Elizabeth Ann was born on August 28, 1774, the daughter of Dr. Richard and Catherine Charlton Bayley. Her family was among New York City’s social elite, and as others of their rank, they were Episcopalians.<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth received an education appropriate for girls of her family’s position, which included learning French and being well read in the literature of her day—she excelled in poetry, music and the love of nature. Nevertheless, “Bet” had a difficult childhood. She had an older sister, Mary, but her mother died in 1777 giving birth to their baby sister, who also died a little over a year later. She had a caring father, who, because of his preoccupation with his profession, seemed distant. His second wife favored the children she had with Elizabeth’s father over Mary and herself. Although she remained close to Mary, Bet felt neglected and alone.

Dr. Bayley was of the “new school” of physicians, who sought rational causes for diseases. This sometimes made him a center of controversy. During the American Revolution he was a loyalist who treated British soldiers in New York City, but was known to occasionally attend to patriot soldiers, whom the British treated horribly because they were considered traitors who deserved to die. This brought him under suspicion by the occupying army. After the war, as the Port of New York’s health officer, who accepted the theory that a cause of disease was bad odors, he called for the filth of the city to be cleaned up to battle the seasonal yellow fever epidemic. He was ridiculed—it would cost too much! (Ironically, today we know that theory isn’t correct, but it did work when employed because it also eliminated bacteria and viruses that do cause disease.) Later he became the first professor of anatomy at Columbia College. (He is also credited as finding a cure for the croup, i.e., spasmodic laryngitis.)

To keep up with new medical ideas, her father went to study in Britain on a number of occasions. While he was in London, and then after he separated from his second wife in a dispute over who would receive his inheritance, Elizabeth spent her teenage years on the estate of her Uncle William Bayley in New Rochelle. There she was warmly welcomed and felt at home. Her maiden Aunt Molly, who lived with her brother on his estate, taught Elizabeth French and served as her informal spiritual guide; and, together, they often visited sick relatives and neighbors. Finding trust in God as her spiritual Father, she was able to develop a warm relationship with her biological father as well. (Her sister Mary married their father’s protégé, Dr. Wright Post.)

When she was sixteen, she met William Magee Seton, the oldest son of a New York import-export merchant, at a society ball. He had just returned from Europe, where he was learning his father’s trade, but found the music there much more to his taste. (He brought the

first Stradivarius violin to America.) They were immediately attracted to each other, and after Will got her father's consent, nineteen-year-old Elizabeth and twenty-five-year-old Will were married on January 25, 1794. While their Wall Street home was being completed, the couple lived with Will's father at his home on Stone Street. He was a wealthy man who was very generous, helping relatives and others he was aware needed help. Will's twice widowed father lived with his six children from his second marriage. He delighted in the companionship of these children. Elizabeth and the oldest of these children, Rebecca Mary, born in 1780, quickly became friends and soul-mates. In 1797, together with several other young women of Trinity Episcopal Church they formed "The Society for the Relief of poor Widows with Children," who they visited and for whom they collected food, clothing, and money.

Soon after moving into her Wall Street home her first child was born, Anna Maria in 1795. (Eventually, Will and Elizabeth had four more children: William in 1796, Richard in 1798, Catherine in 1800, and Rebecca Ann in 1802.) As members of a prominent family, their lives were frequented with social events and visits to the country and the beach. But suddenly, all that changed.

In the spring of 1798, as the consequence of a fall on the ice, Will's father died without having written a will. Will felt a heavy burden fall upon him as his father's eldest son. For one thing, it was clear to both Elizabeth and Will that they needed to care for his father's younger children.

Although complications delayed that happening, the following summer all the children gathered at their Aunt Eliza Seton Maitland's seashore home. Will insisted on staying in the city untangling his father's business affairs, so Elizabeth remained with him, helping to sort through his father's papers. Finally, Will agreed to go to the shore, but shortly after arriving, it was discovered he had yellow fever. Writing to her father for instructions and medicine, Elizabeth nursed Will far into November when the yellow fever epidemic was no longer a danger. Even so, their Wall Street home was thoroughly cleaned and repainted before Dr. Bayley allowed them to return.

Working together, Elizabeth, Rebecca Mary, and Mammy Huler, their servant who was treated as family, put the Seton household in order, with Elizabeth and Rebecca teaching the younger children at home to conserve expenses. Yet things were not going well with Will. He continued to mourn his father and worried about his responsibilities as head of a prominent family. Business conditions worsened after the outbreak of war (1799-1801) between Britain and France, with America's shipping industry caught in the middle. With blockades and attacks by warships and pirates, it became impossible to know how many ships the company actually had left, where diverted ships might be, and what foreign transactions failed and which, if any, succeeded. The only thing certain was that the company's cash flow wasn't allowing it to pay its debts. Will realized he was facing bankruptcy. Both his mental and physical health was deteriorating. As a young man Will had breathing issues, known by the family as "Seton's Complaint" because it seemed to run in the family. (In fact, it was early-

stage tuberculosis—not recognized then as contagious). Now his condition had become serious.

This was a dark period for Elizabeth. She got up early and went to bed late, working and praying. She turned to Trinity Church's curate John Henry Hobart for spiritual guidance. Will began to attend worship services, which he had neglected for much of his life. God spoke to him through one of Hobart's sermons on the foolishness of worldly things when coming face to face with his Redeemer. It brought him peace and acceptance of the company's bankruptcy. The family then moved to a modest home on State Street.

Yet Will's health did not improve. So, Will and Elizabeth accepted an invitation from his friend Fillippo "Antonio" Filicchi and his wife Amabilia, who was a native Bostonian, to visit them in Leghorn, Italy, believing that a warmer climate might improve his health. Elizabeth sold everything except a few keepsakes. Taking six-year-old Anna with them, she placed her youngest children in the care of their Aunt Eliza Maitland.

When they arrived in Italy, Italian officials insisted Will had yellow fever and quarantined them in a drafty, damp room of a stone building, which only aggravated his condition. On Christmas day, they shared the Episcopal communion service, having only a small cup of wine. Will died on December 27, 1803.

Mr. and Mrs. Filicchi took Elizabeth and Anna into their home and treated them as family. As such, they invited them to attend church with the family. Because they were Roman Catholic, Antonio explained to Elizabeth what they believe: "Jesus Christ is really present in the bread and wine by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because He is present in the sacrament, He is present in the church, and He is present in us and acts through us." To help her understand their faith, she was given *The Imitation of Christ*,<sup>2</sup> and other books to read. When Anna and then Elizabeth contracted scarlet fever, they were cared for with such attention that Elizabeth marveled at the goodness of her Catholic friends. Antonio went on the ship that took Elizabeth and Anna back to New York, both to look after them and to review his business interests in America.

When she arrived, Elizabeth was met by her whole family, except for Rebecca, who had also contracted tuberculosis and whom she visited whenever she could before her death. At first, Elizabeth, with her children, lived with the Posts until she found a small home just outside the city. She rented rooms as a source of income.

Elizabeth did not make a secret that she was considering joining the Roman Catholic Church. Because American's revivalists considered the United States a Protestant nation, Roman Catholics were believed by many to be subversives and were discriminated against. In fact, colonial Anti-Catholic laws had been lifted only a few years before. Reverend Hobart, visited her and sent her literature arguing that the Roman Church was corrupt and its doctrines fallacious. Confused, Elizabeth took months praying for guidance. Finally, she realized that she was not capable of understanding what these religious controversies were about, but that the faith she experienced living among caring Catholics in Italy gave her a

peace deep in her heart. She joined New York's only Roman Catholic Church, St. Peter's, on March 14, 1805.

The small congregation consisted of Irish, French, and German Roman Catholic immigrants who were poor; many of whom could not read or write English. Mobs often gathered outside the church to heckle and harass those attending Mass. Threats to set fire to the church were made and rocks were thrown through windows. Once Elizabeth's face was smeared with dung. Her family, including her sister Mary, turned against her, no longer giving her any kind of support. Driven to destitution, she found employment boarding, cooking, washing and cleaning for boys attending a Protestant academy. Her situation drew the attention of America's first Roman Catholic Bishop John Carroll in Baltimore,<sup>3</sup> who began corresponding with her. Through him and others, tuitions were paid for her sons William and Richard to attend Georgetown's boarding school in Washington D.C. This removed them from the hostile atmosphere of New York, while her daughter's remained with her. Soon her situation became intolerable when the boys she was boarding, prompted by their parents and others, became disrespectful and defiant toward her. She considered moving the Montreal, Canada to protect her daughters from those who were persecuting her.

Unexpectedly, on a Sunday in 1807 when she went to church, she found Father William Dubourg substituting for the congregation's regular priest. Father Dubourg was the founder and president of St. Mary's College in Baltimore. In a long conversation with him after the Mass, he told her that the college wanted to form a small school for girls in Baltimore. And he offered Elizabeth the position as its teacher. When she protested that she had no training as a teacher, Father Dubourg replied that they wanted their teacher to be more an example than being skilled as a teacher. If she would accept the offer, a house, which would also serve as the school, would be built for her. Furthermore, she would be closer to her boys at their boarding school. She tentatively agreed to the offer based on preparations for her at Baltimore be completed. In the meantime, two of Will's relatives—one on her death bed, the other, Cecilia Seton, who suffered from "Seton's Complaint"—requested they be nursed by Elizabeth. Because of Elizabeth tireless and devoted care of them both, most of her family began changing their attitudes toward her. Consequently, when she left New York a reconciliation with her extended family had taken place.

In June 1808, Elizabeth, with her three daughters, settled in a miniature French mansion on the grounds of St. Mary's seminary in Baltimore. Her boys joined them for the summer. Father Pierre Babade was assigned her spiritual director. Among her new acquaintances was Samuel Cooper, a wealthy seminary student, who later was influential in furthering her vocation. In the fall, although she needed to learn mathematics, she capably instructed ten girls boarding in the house as well as others who lived in the town.

Before long, Father Babade informed her of discussions by the priest for establishing the first community of young Catholic women in the United States. Their consensus was that Elizabeth had the ability to form such a community for which a number of girls were prepared to join. She accepted the request as God's calling. But, finding the finances for their intent

was their first concern. One morning Elizabeth told Father Babade that she heard a voice saying that Samuel Cooper would provide the money. That evening, without knowing of Elizabeth's portent, Samuel questioned his spiritual director Father Dubourg why there wasn't a women's community in the United States, and offered \$10,000 to start one. His only condition was that it be established at Emmitsburg, MD, where Father John Dubois had founded the small Mount St. Mary's seminary and college. Samuel thought that it would be a central location for expanding the number of female communities in the U.S.

In March 1809, Elizabeth professed before Bishop Carroll vows of chastity and obedience to be renewed or renounced after a year. The sisterhood would be modeled after the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in France, with the intent of opening a free school for girls, superintended by "Mother" Elizabeth Seton. (Vincent de Paul, a priest in 17<sup>th</sup> century France, rejected the conviction that "religious" women should be cloistered, and organized volunteer groups of unmarried young laywomen to nurse the sick and to teach small children, which were united in an association he named the Daughters of Charity, aka Sisters of Charity. Later the Roman Church gave such groups full recognition, with the stipulation that they follow accepted communal Rules.) Father Dubourg, as the community's Superior, would visit them periodically and Father Babade, as their spiritual director, was to correspond with them as needed.

In late June, Mother Seton set out with her daughter Anna and four Sisters, two of whom were Elizabeth's sisters-in-law Harriet Seton and Cecilia Seton—it was thought that the mountain air could improve Cecilia's condition. Father Dubois met Mother Seton at Emmitsburg and escorted her party to the nearby farm purchased for them on St. Mary's Mountain. There they were housed in a cramped stone house until the construction of a larger "white house" was finished. Six more Sisters joined the community in July. On July 31, Mother Seton organized the community on a temporary basis until a translated copy of the Daughters of Charity's Rule was sent to them. Thus, the first native community of religious women in the United States was founded.

For several months the spirit of the Sisters remained high, but a series of events challenged Mother Seton in keeping up the morale of the community. They were told that their beloved Father Babade would no longer be their spiritual director. Then Father Dubourg was replaced by Father John David, who dealt with them in a heavy-handed manner. Tensions grew between Mother Seton and Father Davis. Christmas was approaching without the "white house" being finished, forcing them to remain in the cold, damp, cramped stone house. Harriet suddenly fell ill and died three days before Christmas. Finding it impossible to live in the stone house, the Sisters moved to the white house despite it being unfinished. Cecilia's worsening condition caused her to be returned to Baltimore, where she died soon after Easter.

The Sisters finally received the translated French Rule. After reviewing it, the community voted unanimously to alter it in two ways. A provision permitting Mother Seton to spend time with her children—the boys were at a boarding school in Emmitsburg, and the

Sisters looked after her little daughters—was added. Also added was a provision permitting the community to board students. Their revised Rule was sent to France through Bishop Carroll for approval.

In early 1810, Father Dubois replaced Father Davis as the community's Superior and Father Simon Bruté, who was a French immigrant, became their spiritual director. Mother Seton, because she spoke fluent French, had earlier helped him learn English by engaging in the mutual task of translating *The Imitation of Christ*. Together, the three cooperated in enabling St. Joseph's Academy to grow and prosper. Mother Seton taught the older girls, Father Dubois taught religion, while less experienced Sisters taught the younger students. As the number of students grew, a "honeycomb" of groups of ten students was formed. Each group had an older, more accomplished student serve as its tutor. The goal of the school was to help the girls to become devout, capable and caring wives and mothers. Only if a girl truly desired to join their community, was she welcomed to do so.

The community's greatest challenge came as a result of severe inflation caused by the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812. They found their income from knitting and sewing insufficient. For a time, they were reduced to sustaining themselves on buttermilk and bread. Fortunately, General Robert Hunter, whose daughters were enrolled at St. Joseph's, and some of his friends, donated funds to see them through.

Personally, Mother Seton was sorrowed by the loss of two daughters. Anna had contracted tuberculosis and died shortly after she had taken her vows as a Daughter of Charity, in 1812. Then, in 1816, Rebecca died as a consequence of her falling on the ice.

The community had been living under their revised Rule, but its acceptance wasn't learned until 1813. On July 19, eighteen sisters then vowed to live under the accepted "Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph" Rule. Yet, it seemed, that their community had little impact on the rest of the world until 1814. It was then that Father Hurley requested that several Sisters come to Philadelphia to manage an orphanage for children whose parents had died from yellow fever. Thereafter, other requests came for the Sisters to meet a variety of needs in other places. Mother Seton was particularly encouraged when a request came from New York City. It indicated that the reputation of Sisters of Charity was changing the attitudes of many, especially prominent, people who had earlier rejected her.

In 1820, Mother Seton suffered from severe inflammation of her lungs and died on January 4, 1821, at the age of forty-six. At the time of her death fifty Sisters were serving in many places in the U.S. At the motherhouse there were seventy-two boarders, eighteen vowed Sisters, sixteen novices, and two candidates. A chapel had been built and a new school was under construction. Mother was buried in their order's cemetery, where her two daughters, two sisters-in-law, and fifteen of her fellow Sisters were laying at rest.

Both of her sons had become U.S. Naval officers. Richard died from a fever in Monrovia, Liberia in 1823. William retired to New York City and died in 1868. Catherine, "Kit", entered the New York Sisters of Mercy in 1846 and spent twenty-five years visiting the

inmates of New York City's prison. She died at the age of ninety-one in 1891. A grandson and a half-nephew were each consecrated an archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church.

Elizabeth Ann was beatified in 1963 and canonized on September 14, 1975. Her life is commemorated in the Episcopal Church and Roman Catholic Church on January 4.

<sup>1</sup> In colonial America, the Episcopal Church was the official Church of England. It was dominant in the Southern colonies. Trinity Church was established in New York City in 1698. During the American Revolution this church split, with some clergy and members returning to England or Canada, while others supported the patriot cause, including Washington, Jefferson and Patrick Henry. Because British troops occupied New York City from 1776 to 1783, Trinity remained loyal to the Church of England. In 1763, the "Protestant" Episcopal Church was reformed in America, declaring that "the church is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline, or worship." It just no longer recognized itself as part of the established church of England. In 1787, the Archbishop of Canterbury consecrated the first bishops of the Episcopal Church in America.

<sup>2</sup> *The Imitation of Christ* was written by Thomas á Kempis (1380-1471), who was ordained in 1413 and spent his life in quiet devotional pursuits in an Augustinian monastery near Zwolle in the Netherlands. *Imitation of Christ*, first published in Latin ca. 1471, quickly became a popular devotional book. It influenced many Roman Catholics, including Ignatius of Loyola, as well as Protestants, including those in the Anglican Communion.

<sup>3</sup> Maryland had the largest Roman Catholic population in America at this time because Lord Baltimore originally established the colony as a refuge for Roman Catholics discriminated against in England.

**Source:** Julie Walters, *Elizabeth Ann Seton: A Saint for a New Nation*, Paulist Press, 2002.