



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of August 4, 2021,
Feast of St. John Mary Vianney, Curé of Ars

Dear Friends,

ELIZABETH Ann Seton was canonized on September 14, 1975 by St. Paul VI, thus becoming the first flower to grace the North American calendar of Saints. A wife and mother, she founded a religious congregation after her widowhood; today its numbers have reached about 14,000 members in ninety countries.

Feeding the poor

Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born in New York City on August 28, 1774, the second child of Dr. Richard Bayley, a surgeon, and Catherine Charlton. Both were descendants of families that were at the origin of the British settlement in the city. As the chief medical officer of New York Harbor, Richard cared for immigrants who passed medical screening and remained in quarantine on Staten Island. He also provided care to the townspeople, especially during epidemics such as yellow fever. Elizabeth's maternal grandfather was rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church on Staten for thirty years. As a young girl, she was brought up in the Episcopalian Church (the American form of Anglicanism) in the years following American independence. She was only three years old when she lost her mother in 1777. Some time later, her father married Charlotte Amelia Barclay as his second wife. His new spouse was involved in the charitable work of her church and would sometimes take young Elizabeth with her to give food and clothing to the poor. After the birth of their fifth child, the couple separated. Dr. Bayley decided to go to London to further his studies. Elizabeth and her sister were taken into the home of a maternal uncle where they went through difficult times in the absence of a mother. In her diary, however, the young girl recorded her musings on the beauty of nature and music. Her reflections also revealed spiritual and religious aspirations. She enjoyed horse-riding and became a skilled pianist.

In 1794, Elizabeth married William Seton, a wealthy merchant ship-owner. Aged only twenty-five, he had traveled in Europe and had friends as far away as Italy because of his profession. Soon after their marriage, the young couple moved into a beautiful house on Wall Street, in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of New York.

William's family professed the Episcopalian faith, and Elizabeth, along with her sister-in-law Rebecca,

continued the charitable rounds upon which she had embarked long ago with her stepmother, even unto assist-

ing the destitute at the moment of death.

She became the treasurer of the church's charitable organization. Five children were born to the Setons, and they also welcomed William's six younger brothers and sisters into their home. But the conflicts between France and England, and later between the United States and England, led to a bad change of fortune and they lost their home. William, who had long suffered from tuberculosis, saw his health deteriorate and his doctors advised him to go to Italy. Elizabeth and her eldest daughter, Anne, aged eight, accompanied him. They arrived in Livorno on November 18, 1803 from New York, where yellow fever was rampant, and were quarantined in a miserable Lazaretto. Elizabeth wrote in her diary: "Not only willing to take my cross, but to kiss it too, and while glorying in our consolation, my William was taken with an ague which was almost too much." And further on: "After both were asleep, said our Little Office alone. William had not been able in the day." This Office consisted of morning and evening prayers that the couple had composed from the few Anglican books at their disposal. Elizabeth lived through their quarantine in consoling prayer: "I find my present opportunity a treasure and my confinement of body a liberty of soul, which I may never again enjoy while they are still united."

Little Ann herself seemed to be spiritually transported to regions beyond her years, but she understood very well that her father was dying. While reading the episode of the imprisonment of St. John the Baptist,



Saint Elisabeth Seton

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she told him: "Yes, Papa, Herod imprisoned him, but Miss Herodias gave him his liberty.—No, dear, she had him beheaded.—Ah!, well, Papa, but released him from prison by sending him to God!"

A deep yearning for Christ

On December 17, the quarantine ended, but William was exhausted. The beauty of the landscape on the journey to Pisa, however, brought smiles back to his face. Friends, the Filicchi family, had prepared a comfortable house for them there. But soon William's sickness took the upper hand once more, and he asked to receive the "sacrament." The Setons had not the good fortune of being able to receive the sacraments of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist and the Anointing of the Sick, but they followed the practices established by their own church: with great devotion, Elizabeth poured a little wine into a glass while reciting prayers, and they then drank from the cup of thanksgiving in turn, casting their gaze toward eternity. This gesture evokes the first cup of thanksgiving that JESUS gave to his apostles (Lk 22:17-18). A deep yearning for Christ sprang from the hearts of Elizabeth and her husband. The captain of the ship who had brought them visited them on Christmas Day, and William entrusted his wife to him, asking him to take her back to the United States. This solicitude of her dying husband moved Elizabeth deeply. On December 27, William committed his soul to God with these words: "My Christ JESUS, have mercy! And receive me! My Christ JESUS..."

The Filicchi brothers, Philip and Anthony, William's business associates, were true friends: without being asked, they looked after all the formalities for the funeral, and took Elizabeth and her daughter into their home. This first contact with Catholic families made a deep impression on the young widow. The Filicchis took them to Florence, a city of incomparable art in its unique natural setting in Tuscany. Surrounded with nature and art's treasures, Elisabeth regained her zest for life, yet without forgetting her beloved husband. At the same time, she found herself deeply attracted to the contemplation of a Catholic assembly: "I sunk down to my knees in the first place I found vacant and shed a torrent of tears." Too intelligent and truthful with herself to stifle these new feelings, she asked the Filicchis about the difference between the Catholic and Episcopalian confessions. Antonio answered her in all simplicity: "Only one is true, and without it one cannot be acceptable to God." This clear affirmation made a long journey in Elizabeth's soul in a short time. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, says St. Paul (Eph 4:5). In fact, "The Lord JESUS, the only Savior, did not only establish a simple community of disciples, but constituted the Church as a *salvific mystery*: ... The Catholic faithful are required to profess that there is an historical continuity—rooted in the apostolic succession—between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church: This is the single

Church of Christ" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, August 6, 2000). Antonio had fulfilled the duty of the Christian laity: to be *cooperators of the truth* (3 John 8). As St. Thomas Aquinas declares, "To teach in order to lead others to faith is the task of each believer," who thus performs a work of spiritual mercy (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 904 and 2447).

Making the sign of the Cross

On February 18, 1804, the young widow and her daughter embarked on their return trip to America. Elizabeth wore the habit of the Tuscan widows, which later became that of the nuns she would found. The Filicchis accompanied them to the dock; with most delicate tact, they made her accept the money she would need in the near future. But Ann, and shortly afterwards her mother, were struck down by scarlet fever and had to postpone their departure. The Filicchis took advantage of this delay to talk about religion with the young woman, who was becoming increasingly aware of the soundness of the Catholic faith: "They possess God in the Sacrament, she said to herself... He remains in their churches. The other day, in a moment of excessive distress, I fell on my knees... when the Blessed Sacrament passed by... and cried in an agony to God to bless me, if He were really there." She also experienced the maternity of the Blessed Virgin: "May we find Him more surely through His Mother!"

The brothers accompanied her, marveling at the graces God gave her: "Antonio," she later said, "showed me how to make the sign of the cross and with what spirit to use it."

When they arrived in New York on June 4, the whole family was there except for sister-in-law Rebecca, who was dying of tuberculosis. Elizabeth told her of her faith in the Catholic Church, which Rebecca fully embraced before dying, filled with joy, on July 18. By contrast, Elizabeth set off a storm in her Episcopalian environment, in which faith was linked to a kind of religious patriotism. In this painful phase, Elizabeth was helped by Father Cheverus, a priest attached to the Boston mission. On his return from a trip to Ireland, he found a note from Elizabeth saying she was ready for the big step: "I seek but God and his church, and expect to find my peace in them, not in the people."

In February 1805, Elizabeth for the first time entered the modest Catholic church in New York, then the only one in that city, dedicated to St. Peter. The anti-Catholic laws, inherited from the Church of England, had been abolished only a few years earlier, and the Catholic community was very small, composed mainly of Irish emigrants. In front of the tabernacle, the young woman poured out her heart: "Ah! my God, here let me rest."

She made her formal adherence to Catholicism on March 14, in the hands of Father Matthew O'Brien, an Irish Dominican; immediately she received the Eucharist, which became her daily nourishment. She who had felt the bitter regret of not being able to receive Communion in Italy, rejoiced: "How bright is the sun these morning walks to the church for preparation for holy Communion!" A year later, she received the sacrament of Confirmation from the hands of Bishop John Carroll, the first bishop of the first diocese erected in the United States, in Baltimore in 1798. On this occasion, the young widow confided to the bishop her desire for a life completely dedicated to the Lord.

How to teach others?

Little by little, Elizabeth separated herself from her former Episcopalian friends, who did not accept her conversion; however, a few did convert, among them several children of her family-in-law. One young girl even had to leave her parents' home and take refuge with Elisabeth when she converted. Elisabeth had founded an academy for girls, but her conversion to Catholicism caused her to lose all her students. She considered emigrating to Canada where Catholics were more numerous. However, Bishop Carroll and Father Cheverus, who wanted to found Catholic institutions, did not forget her. In 1807, the Pope erected four new dioceses in the United States, making Baltimore the metropolis. Archbishop Carroll decided to establish the first American seminary at Mont Sainte Marie. Father Louis Du Bourg, a French Sulpician priest who was founding a Catholic school near the new seminary, talked with the young widow about establishing a school for girls that she could direct. After some thought and consultation, Elizabeth accepted and went to Baltimore.

The school opened by September 1808 with Mrs. Seton's daughters and four boarders. In January 1809, other children were entrusted to her to prepare for their First Communion. Father Du Bourg, however, had a more far-reaching view; responding to Elizabeth's desire, he initiated her into the religious life. Young girls joined the nascent congregation and a regular life was established. They even began to call Elizabeth "Mother." Kneeling before the small group of her new daughters, Mother Seton said to them, "How can I teach others, I who know so little myself, who am so wretched and imperfect?" But trusting in the power of God's grace, she said, "We know certainly that our God calls us to a holy life. We know that he gives us every grace, every abundant grace; and though we are so weak of ourselves, this grace is able to carry us through every obstacle and difficulty."

The Sisters adopted a uniform habit, the one the foundress had worn since her return from Italy. Father Du Bourg was named ecclesiastical superior. On June 2,

1809, four Sisters appeared for the first time in public in habit, with Mother Seton who had made her first vows of obedience, chastity and poverty alone in the hands of Archbishop Carroll. The first female congregation on American soil was born. Its motto combines three phrases from the New Testament: *The charity of Christ urges us* (2 Cor 5:14)—*The good news is proclaimed to the poor* (Mt 11:5)—*One heart, one soul* (Acts 4:32). Having also converted to Catholicism, Elizabeth's young sister-in-law, Cecilia Seton, presented herself to enter the community. She was welcomed with joy, despite her failing health. Her arrival hastened the realization of the project to move the community to a property acquired in the mountains, where the air was healthier, in Emmitsburg, Maryland, forty-five miles (75 km) from Baltimore. The move took place in 1809. However, the house was not ready to welcome the Sisters who temporarily crowded into the lodging of Father Dubois, another Sulpician in charge of the local mission. In these early days, they had to go down to the river to do the laundry. But for the Mother, the important thing was to accomplish God's will: "The first end I propose in our daily work is to do the will of God; secondly, to do it in the manner he wills it; and thirdly to do it because it is his will." Indeed, God, who loves us infinitely, directs all events by his Providence and makes everything work together for the good of those who love him (Rom 8:28).

Mother Elizabeth worked actively for the construction of a school, with a boarding school and lodging for the Sisters. From Italy, the Filicchi generously subsidized her works; she often wrote to them and even asked them one day in all simplicity how much money she could count on. She also received help from a wealthy convert, Mr. Samuel Cooper, who later entered the seminary of Mont Sainte Marie and became a priest. A year later, the little school became St. Joseph's Academy, dedicated to the education of Catholic girls.

The low gate

Throughout her religious life, Mother Elizabeth enjoyed the support of her successive confessors, Sulpician priests. This help was particularly valuable to her when in 1810 a new ecclesiastical superior, Father David, also a Sulpician, was given to her Institute. For several months, the foundress was confronted with the incomprehension of this priest, who came to seek to provoke her departure from the motherhouse. But he was soon replaced by Father Dubois, to the great relief of the Sisters. In 1811, the community took the name of Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph and adopted the rule of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac. Like the daughters of St. Vincent, the Sisters had "for enclosure, obedience; for grille, the fear of God." Mother encouraged them to pray: "We must pray without ceasing, in every occurrence and employment of our lives—that prayer which is rather a habit of lifting up the heart to God as in a constant communication with Him." She

also encouraged them in humility: "The gate of heaven is very low; only the humble can enter it."

The foundress had to bear many crosses, due to internal misunderstandings, the death of two of her daughters and of several young nuns. In the face of these trials, she acknowledged: "Faith lifts the soul, Hope supports it, Experience says it must and Love says... let it be!"

Having been ill herself for a long time, she said: "I am going toward dear eternity so gently and almost imperceptibly... I feel the general decay of poor sinking nature enough to shorten my perspective of every scene beyond the present moment... I do what I can to stand on the narrow path that leads to God alone."

Deep inside, Mother Seton was going through a profound crisis of aridity, desolation and even anguish. Nothing appeared on the outside, but her letters to her spiritual director revealed her trial. This suffering did not prevent her from writing: "I try to make my very breathing a continual thanksgiving." Remembering her friends, she wrote: "The accidents of life separate us from our dearest friends, but let us not despair. God is like a looking glass in which souls see each other. The more we are united to Him by love, the nearer we are to those who belong to Him."

Children of the Church

Mother Seton also worked to catechize the children of the neighborhood. Some poor girls came to the school, but in 1812, the majority of the students were from the wealthy classes who paid for their boarding and tuition. Soon, the proportions were reversed and up to forty poor girls received free lessons, books and meals. Other works, such as caring for the poor and

sick, were occasionally undertaken by the Daughters of Charity. But soon the Archbishop of Baltimore called for a foundation in his episcopal city. In 1814, Mother Seton sent a swarm of sisters to Philadelphia. In 1817, the Diocese of New York also welcomed Sisters, whose first task was to care for the city's many orphans.

At the beginning of the summer of 1820, the Mother's health deteriorated: she suffered from coughing, migraines and fever. At the insistence of Father Dubois, the construction of a new building at the convent-school began, and Mother Seton had to endure the fatigue of supervising the building site. Soon she was forced to stay in bed, but she was faithful to the rule as best she could, and continued to encourage the Sisters. In mid-September, she received the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. However, she showed improvement. The feast of Christmas was celebrated with anxiety some because everyone knew that Mother Superior was dying. On January 1, she received Communion for the last time. After thanking all the Sisters present, she said: "Be children of the Church! Be children of the Church!" One night, a Sister who was watching over her heard her say the words of a prayer that Pope Pius VII had just composed: "May the most just, the most high and the most amiable will of God be in all things fulfilled, praised, and exalted above all forever!" Shortly before dawn on January 4, 1821, at the age of forty-six, she gave up her soul to God. She was buried in the community's cemetery. The National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton is now located there. At Mother Seton's side was her youngest daughter, Catherine Seton (1800-1891), who became a nun in the Irish Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy. By 1821, twenty houses existed in the United States. Later, several of them, including the one in New York, would become separate institutes.

St. Elizabeth Seton suffered in her search for the truth, and to remain faithful to that truth, once recognized. Belonging to the Church of Christ was of special importance to her. May she obtain for us also a great fidelity to the Church, the Bride of Christ, and an ever more intense dedication to its service!

*+ Sr. Jean-Bernard, Abbot,
and all the monks of the Abbey*

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