

Reflection for January 4, 2013
Feastday of Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton

By Maria Fest, CDP

I am always inspired when I reflect on the life of a foundress of a religious congregation. I was inspired by the journey of Elizabeth Ann Seton as she kept responding to the ongoing call as she sought to serve the God she came to know in prayer.

As we begin this reflection, I want to present a snapshot of Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton's life. She was, as we know, the first native born citizen of the United States to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. She established the first Catholic school in the nation in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where she also founded the first American congregation of religious Sisters—the Sisters of Charity.

Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born in 1774, two years before the Revolutionary War. She was the second child of a socially prominent couple, Dr. Richard Bayley and Catherine Charlton, of New York City. The Bayley and Charlton families were among the earliest colonial settlers of the New York area. Her father's parents were prominent French Huguenots living in New Rochelle, New York. He later served as the Chief Health Officer of the Port of New York. Her mother was the daughter of an Episcopal minister who served as rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church on Staten Island for 30 years. Elizabeth was raised in the Episcopal Church. Thus far, it would be hard to predict that this child of privilege, raised in a Christian home, but not Catholic, would someday found a religious community. But as her story continues, there were difficulties mixed with the privilege she enjoyed. Her Mother died when Elizabeth was three years old as a result of giving birth to their youngest child, Catherine, who also died soon after birth. Bayley then married Charlotte Barclay, a member of the Roosevelt family, to provide a mother for his two surviving daughters. The new Mrs. Bayley became active in the social action of the Episcopal Church and would visit the poor in their homes to distribute food and needed items. She would take the young Elizabeth with her on these rounds of charity. Even though the couple had five children of their own, the marriage ended in separation as a result of marital conflict. Elizabeth and her older sister, Mary Magdalene, were rejected by their stepmother in the breakup. Their father then traveled to London for further medical studies, so the girls lived temporarily with their paternal uncle, William Bayley. Losing a mother for a second time, Elizabeth experienced a period of darkness, which she reflected on in her journals. In these journals, Elizabeth shows a natural bent toward contemplation, a love for nature, poetry, and music. She was given to introspection and frequently made entries in her journal expressing her sentiments, religious aspirations, and favorite passages from her readings. So perhaps it was at this time that Elizabeth began to reflect on how she wanted to live her life, knowing that everything she had experienced thus far was temporary.

In the next phase of her life, Elizabeth marries, at age 19, William Seton, 26, a wealthy merchant in the import trade. Samuel Provoost, the first Episcopal bishop of New York, witnessed the wedding vows of the couple. Five children were born to the marriage. Although busy raising her family, Elizabeth continued to show the concern for the poor of the city that she learned from her father and stepmother. She helped to organize a group of prominent ladies who would visit the sick poor in their homes to render what aid they could. This circle was informally called the

“Ladies of Charity” because of their conscious inspiration by the work of St. Vincent de Paul in seventeenth century France. This organization was the precursor of our modern parish organization, Ladies of Charity.

In 1802, her husband lost several of his ships at sea, which led to his bankruptcy. Soon after this, he fell ill and his doctors sent him to Italy for the warmer climate. Elizabeth and their eldest daughter, Anna Maria, accompanied him. Soon after they landed, William died. Elizabeth and her daughter were taken in by her late husband’s Italian business partners. While staying with them, she was introduced to the practice of Roman Catholicism. After her return to the United States, she was converted to the Catholic Church into which she was received on March 14, 1805 by the Rev. Matthew O’Brien, pastor of St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Church, the only Catholic Church in New York City. A year later, she received the sacrament of Confirmation from John Carroll, Bishop of Baltimore, and the only Catholic bishop in the nation.

Elizabeth was no longer a woman of privilege. In order to support herself and her children, she started an academy for young ladies, as was common for widows of social standing in that period; however, as the news of her conversion to Catholicism spread, most of the parents withdrew their daughters because of the anti-Catholic sentiment of the day. By chance, or Providence, she met a visiting priest from France who was a Sulpician. He was a member of a group of Sulpicians who were in the process of establishing the first Catholic seminary for the United States. After struggling through trying and difficult years, Elizabeth accepted an invitation of support from the Sulpicians who agreed to move her to Emmitsburg, Maryland. There she established St. Joseph’s Academy and Free School, a school dedicated to the education of Catholic girls. The year was 1810. With this school, Elizabeth Ann Seton started, and then spread, what became the highly successful parochial school system in the country. The Sulpician priest she had met a few years before established Mount St. Mary’s Seminary and University. In the same year she established the school, Elizabeth Seton established a religious community in Emmitsburg dedicated to the care of the children of the poor. It was the first congregation of religious sisters to be founded in the United States. The order was initially called the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph, and later, simply Sisters of Charity.

The remainder of her life was spent in leading and developing the new congregation. Mother Seton was described as cultured and charming. Her connections to New York society brought pressures to leave the new life she had created for herself, but did not deter her from embracing her religious vocation and charitable mission. The greatest difficulties she experienced were internal, stemming from misunderstandings, interpersonal conflicts, and the deaths of her two daughters, other loved ones, and young Sisters in the community. She died of tuberculosis on January 4, 1821, at the age of 46. Elizabeth’s daughter that survived to the age of 91 was the first American to enter the Sisters of Mercy.

There are many connections with today’s Gospel. Andrew, John, and Peter encounter Jesus, and their lives are forever changed. Their encounter is recorded like this: Andrew and John said to Jesus, “Rabbi, where do you stay?” Jesus answered with an invitation: “Come and see.”

With a delicate touch of mystery, the Gospel concludes the conversation: So they went to see where he was lodged and stayed with him that day (it was about four in the afternoon). Andrew

was touched by what he experienced with Jesus, so he ran to find his brother, Simon, and told him, “We have found the Messiah.” Then Andrew took him to Jesus. Jesus recognized something special in him because he said, “You are Simon, son of John; you will be called Peter.”

Consider the parallels. Elizabeth Seton was raised in the Episcopal tradition, where she learned the value of generous self-giving. She discovered the Catholic Church while staying with an Italian family during her husband’s illness and death. The family’s devotion to the Blessed Sacrament led her to experience the “Real Presence.” Her life was transformed and she became a new person. Simon, raised in the Jewish tradition, encountered Jesus by an invitation of his brother. He, too, was transformed by his experience of Jesus and became a new person, signified by the name Jesus conferred upon him. He became St. Peter. She became St. Elizabeth Seton. That Italian family—by their ordinary faith and most likely without their knowledge—led Elizabeth to a new and more personal relationship with Christ. Because Peter believed what his brother Andrew told him, he also developed a personal relationship with Christ. We each have to ask the questions: Who is leading me to a new or renewed way of life? Who helps me through my personal periods of darkness?

We also know that true disciples of Christ are not just on the receiving end. Who do we lead to a new or deeper relationship with Christ? Who do we help through personal periods of darkness?

Dedicated to following the will of God, Elizabeth Ann had a deep devotion to the Eucharist, Sacred Scripture, and Mary. She was a woman of prayer and service all her life. She embraced the apostolic spirituality of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul. It was her intention to join the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg with the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in France, but the Napoleonic Wars prevented this from happening; however, in 1850, the Emmitsburg community took steps to merge with the Daughters and to become their American branch, as their foundress had envisioned. Today, six separate communities trace their roots to the beginnings of the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg: the Daughters of Charity and five communities of the Sisters of Charity, including the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill.

Each of us can ask ourselves today, where does my response to Jesus call lead me? Here we are, not speaking about the big call, but the ongoing call—the daily call, the call within the call. How do I respond to the needs of the time?

Our challenges in religious life today may be as great as the challenges of the women who founded religious congregations. Are we not called to re-found our communities? Certainly, the life we are called to lead today is different than the one our foundress, Marie de la Roche, was called to live in Germany in 1851. But our call is no less authentic. Like Elizabeth Ann Seton and Marie de la Roche, we are called to be deeply spiritual women. Responding to the ongoing call will bring us joy, peace, and a deep satisfaction, but it will not prevent us from experiencing pain, sorrow, or challenge. As another foundress, Blessed Theresa of Calcutta, said, “God does not call us to be successful, but to be faithful.”

And so today, on her feast day, we pray: St. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, pray for us that we may be strong women who continue to respond to God’s call—wherever it leads us!