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Elizabeth Seton—Mission of Education Faith and Willingness to Risk

BY

BETTY ANN McNEIL, D.C.

Introduction

Born an Episcopalian in New York, Elizabeth Bayley Seton (1774-1821), married (1794) William Magee Seton (1768-1803). Blessed with three daughters (Anna Maria, Rebecca, and Catherine Josephine) and two sons (William and Richard), the couple was healthy and happy for several years. They enjoyed the comforts of social status and prosperity but soon encountered bankruptcy and illness. Tuberculosis threatened William Seton's life. His wife Elizabeth and their eldest daughter Anna Maria desperately embarked on a sea voyage for his health. At Leghorn, Italy, authorities feared his disease and quarantined the family. William's death on 27 December 1803 left Elizabeth a widow at age twenty-nine and thrust her into circumstances that changed her life and history.

The Filicchi family, William's business associates, befriended Elizabeth and extended gracious hospitality to the Setons in Italy. From them the Setons learned about Roman Catholicism. After returning to the United States, Elizabeth converted to Catholicism (1805), struggled unsuccessfully to support her family in New York, and came to Maryland (1808) at the invitation of Reverend William Dubourg, S.S., (1766-1833) to begin a school for girls in Baltimore. Through the generosity of Samuel Cooper (1769-1843), a wealthy seminarian from Philadelphia, she moved to rural Emmitsburg in 1809 where she established the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, the first native community for religious women founded in the United States. In 1812 Mother Seton adopted a modified version of the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity*, originally developed by Saint Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) and Saint Louise de Marillac (1591-1660) in France.

Canonized in 1975, Elizabeth Ann Seton became the first native born United States citizen declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church. Elizabeth championed the cause of education, justice, and

charity beginning with the illustrious Saint Joseph's Academy which she founded and directed at Emmitsburg. In addition to honoring Jesus as the source and model of all charity by corporal and spiritual service to the sick poor, the Seton rule recommended that the sisters "honor the Sacred Infancy of Jesus in the young persons of their sex whose heart they are called upon to form to the love of God, the practice of every virtue, and the knowledge of religion, whilst they sow in their midst the seeds of useful knowledge."¹

The following presentation was made at an interprovincial Education Convocation of the Daughters of Charity in the United States that focused on innovation in Mother Seton's mission of education. This talk highlighted her deep faith and willingness to take risks to further her mission. Relying on several sources of her published writings, I have tried to be faithful to the mind and heart of Mother Seton and the integrity of her recorded thoughts, but I took the liberty to adapt where necessary and correct her writings for grammar, punctuation, and current English usage.² Direct quotes of Elizabeth Seton appear in italics. May Elizabeth's story speak to us today as if she herself were retelling the story of her mission of education and its challenges.

Called to Mission

Obstacles in New York

My life was full of creative tension which propelled me into a deepening spiral of spirituality looking towards eternity. Passionately devoted to the Eucharist, I came to know more about other modalities of God's real presence through life events, relationships, and poor persons in need. *I have been in a sea of troubles . . . but the guiding star [was] always bright and the Master of the storm always in view.*³ *We are never strong enough to carry our cross, it is the cross that carries us.*⁴

¹"The Rule of 1812. Regulations for the Society of Sisters of Charity in the United States of America" quoted in *Numerous Choirs. A Chronicle of Elizabeth Bayley Seton and Her Spiritual Daughters*, Ellin M. Kelly, ed., 2 vols. (Evansville, Indiana: 1981), 1: 243.

²The quotes used have been taken *ibid.* and also from Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville, eds., *Elizabeth Seton Selected Writings* (New York: 1987).

³Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 10 August 1806, *ibid.*, 192.

⁴Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M., *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton: A Spiritual Portrait* (San Francisco: 1990), 103.

My spiritual father, John Carroll (1735-1815), first bishop of Baltimore (1811-1815), prophetically wrote me that “[I had] gone through many trials . . . interior and exterior . . . [and that I was] destined to be tried by disapproval and humiliation where [I] expected to meet confidence and tranquility.”⁵ With it all I steadfastly believed that *Almighty God always provides, and to Him I commit[ed] my cause.*⁶ I sought to know God’s will through prayer and reading my dear Bible. When I left my native New York, Father William Dubourg, S.S., wrote me that he *remain[ed] more and more satisfied that, even were [I] to fail in the attempt [of coming to Maryland] . . . it [was] the will of God [that I] should make it.*⁷ I tried to know and do God’s will always!

Numerous obstacles threatened the well-being of my family in New York, making our situation there very insecure. *My Seton . . . [had] left his five darlings and myself wholly dependent on the bounty of [others].*⁸ After my conversion, I felt the pain acutely of prejudice and the frustration of opposition every where I turned. I . . . *[became] wearied with consultations about what would be best [for my future].*⁹ *Some proposals [were] made me of keeping a tea store—or china shop—or small school for little children (too young, I suppose, to be taught the Hail Mary).*¹⁰ I felt that *they [did] not know what to do with me . . .*¹¹ but I was convinced that *God [did], and when His blessed time [would] come, we [would] know.*¹²

Necessity required me to be very resourceful and patient. There was even the suggestion that . . . *I might receive boarders . . . [to] . . . [partially] make . . . ends . . . meet.*¹³ After endless discussions I *yielded . . . and engaged to take . . . charge of twenty boys as boarders in a house . . . near their school.*¹⁴ *No sooner had I written Antonio Filicchi to tell him . . . [when I realized that plan would be delayed at least] . . . until May.*¹⁵ Lacking income, how I prayed!

In the meantime I . . . *entered into an engagement with [Mr. & Mrs. Patrick White] . . . to assist [in teaching at Mr. Harris’ School], . . . My profits [were] to be a third of whatever this plan produce[d] and include[d] education*

⁵Carroll to Seton, 18 July 1810, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 144.

⁶Seton to Filicchi, 10 August 1806, *ibid.*, 104.

⁷Dubourg to Seton, 8 June 1808, *ibid.*, 116.

⁸Seton to Catherine Duplex, 4 June 1810, *ibid.*, 141.

⁹Seton to Filicchi, 6 April 1805, *ibid.*, 92.

¹⁰Seton to Filicchi, 25 October 1805, *ibid.*, 98.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Seton to Julianna Scott, 15 July 1804, *ibid.*, 86.

¹⁴Seton to Filicchi, 3 December 1804, *ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵Same to same, 2 January 1805, *ibid.*, 87.

of my children.¹⁶ The project baited my adversaries. My old friend Mr. [John Henry] Hobart, [thought] it [was] his duty to warn all my friends of the falsity and danger of my principles.¹⁷ After three short months, Mr. White informed me, [on my birthday], that he could not pay his share of the house rent for the next quarter . . . [My brother-in-law], Mr. [Wright] Post hurried me out of town to his country seat [on Blessing Street, now Bleeker near Waverly Place, in Greenwich Village], and I found myself separated in a few hours from my liberty in every respect. The dear early Mass, no Saturday confession, Sunday communion, or word or consolation from anyone.¹⁸

I wrote my dear friend Julia Sitgreaves Scott that [I was] so tired [that I could] rest even upon thorns, tired of contradictions most completely.¹⁹ Then I told her about my latest embarrassment. The parents of my [ten] young boarders . . . [had] expressed much dissatisfaction [with my efforts and] roasted me handsomely for [their children's behavior]. To which . . . I could only reply that the business had been misunderstood. However, though I tried to laugh it off and pretend they were [not] in earnest, I . . . lost three [boarders] which [was] a large drawback in my income.²⁰ God's loving providence was always at my side in the most unexpected expressions.

Mission in Maryland

I decided to take the risk and embark on a new mission in Maryland. In the midst of my troubles I accidentally [met] Mr. Dubourg, [the president of Saint Mary's College in Baltimore]. [He] . . . offered to give me a formal [land] grant . . . situated close to the college . . . and to procure [for] me immediately the charge of a half-dozen girls and as many more as I [could] manage . . . He [agreed to] take my boys [into] [Saint Mary's] college [in Baltimore].²¹ I was so relieved!

I've always considered myself useful as an assistant in Teaching, as that employment was . . . familiar to me.²² Peacefully praying for insight into God's will, I welcomed Father Dubourg's ideas. He wrote me: "I [am

¹⁶Seton to Scott, 6 May 1805, *ibid.*, 94.

¹⁷Seton to Filicchi, 30 April 1805, *ibid.*, 94.

¹⁸Same to same, 28 August 1805, *ibid.*, 95.

¹⁹Seton to Scott, 19 November 1807, *ibid.*, 112, *ibid.* 95.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Seton to Carroll, 26 November 1806, in Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 203; Seton to Scott, 23 April 1808, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 114.

²²Seton to Carroll, 26 November 1806, in Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 203.

not] . . . anxious to see the number of your pupils increase with too great rapidity. The fewer you have in the beginning, the lighter your task, and the easier it will be to establish the spirit of regularity and piety."²³ "There are in [America] . . . too many . . . schools [with] ornamental accomplishments [as] the only objects of education. We have [no school] . . . where their acquisition is connected with, and made [secondary to religious] instruction—and such a one you certainly wish yours to be."²⁴ Christian character formation and Catholic values have always been my primary focus.

Baltimore became a source of great blessings for us all! When I arrived there at Fells Point I [found] the difference of situation so great that I [could] not believe it [was] the same existence . . . I wrote my dear friend Antonio explaining that our plan [for a school] . . . [could not] be [developed as quickly as one] founded on worldly views. Yet there [was] every hope that it [would] gradually succeed as it [was] committed solely to the providence of Almighty God.²⁵ I calculated my expenses and charged \$200 per year [plus] extra accomplishments [such as] music [and art or] drawing . . . [were] paid separately.²⁶

The Sulpician priests of the seminary encourage[d] me in the hope . . . that there [would be] . . . ladies to join in forming a permanent institution. . . .²⁷ In a few months the small number of girls I [had] as boarders [kept] us in bread without any difficulty . . . [I believed that a religious establishment could] never take place but by the special protection of Divine Providence . . . Already . . . some excellent souls [had come] . . . to . . . fulfill the intention of instructing children in religion. It seem[ed] that its bounty [would] not be limited to a beginning.²⁸ It [was] expected [that] I [would become] be the mother of many daughters.²⁹

One day I became aware of my deep desire to teach poor children. Our good God also inspired Samuel Cooper, who [was] disposing . . . of his fortune. He . . . consulted our Rev. Mr. Dubourg . . . [about] establishing an institution for the advancement of Catholic female children in habits of religion and giving them an education suited to that purpose. He also

²³Dubourg to Seton, 27 May 1808, *ibid.*, 115.

²⁴Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M., *Mrs. Seton, Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: 1972), 219.

²⁵Seton to Filicchi, 8 July 1808, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 118.

²⁶Seton to Scott, 10 October 1808, *ibid.*, 121.

²⁷Seton to Filicchi, 8 July 1808, *ibid.*, 118.

²⁸Same to same, 16 January 1809, *ibid.*, 123.

²⁹Elizabeth Seton to Cecilia Seton, 6 October 1808, *ibid.*, 120. Membership of several thousand religious women in communities belonging to the Sisters of Charity Federation confirms the truth of this prophetic statement.

desire[d] . . . to extend the plan to the reception of the aged, the uneducated, [and to open] a manufactory. I . . . invariably kept in the background . . . knowing that Almighty God alone could effect it. In every daily mass and at communion I beg[ged] Him . . . to dispose of me and mine in any way which [would] please Him. Also . . . the idea of the building [proposed included a dual focus but in] . . . two separate houses: one for the rich children who [would] be educated in a general manner, the other for the poor and such persons as [would] be employed in the manufactory.³⁰

Devotion must carry the torch and open the door to all our actions.³¹ On March 25, the fifth anniversary of my first reception of Holy Communion as a Catholic, I pronounced religious vows for one year before Bishop Carroll. *I can give you no just idea of the precious souls who daily unit[ed] under my banner, which [was] the Cross of Christ. The tender title of Mother salute[d] me everywhere.*³²

Everything has turned out far beyond my brightest expectations . . . [I was filled with gratitude at the prospect of the gift of] a handsome property [to establish a sisterhood] . . . devoted to the education of poor children in the Catholic faith.³³ Father Dubourg preferred that I remain in Baltimore for his school, but our benefactor, Mr. Cooper, insisted that the new foundation be made in a remote area beyond the town of Emmitsburg on the 212 acres he purchased for us.³⁴ [So] we [began] . . . our novitiate [there] in [that] . . . beautiful country place in the mountains.³⁵ I [became] the head of [the] community which live[d] under the strictest rules of order and regularity. [Oh!] To speak the joy of my soul at the [thought of my new mission] being able to assist the poor, visit the sick, comfort the sorrowful, clothe little innocents, and teach them to love God!³⁶

Challenges in Emmitsburg

The realities of the mission I embraced in Emmitsburg challenged me to the core. After a trek of several days from Baltimore, we wearily arrived at our destination, and good Father John Dubois, S.S. (1764-1842), pastor of the area, gave us hospitality in a cabin at Mount Saint

³⁰Seton to Philip Filicchi, 8 February 1809, *ibid.*, 124-25.

³¹Kelly and Melville, *Writings*, 353.

³²Elizabeth Seton to Cecilia Seton, 3 April 1809, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 127.

³³Seton to Rose Stubbs, 20 February 1809, *ibid.*, 125.

³⁴Robert Fleming to Samuel Cooper, John Dubois, and William Dubourg, Frederick County, Maryland, Land Records, WR, Liber #35, folio 6-9, recorded 26 April 1809.

³⁵Seton to Stubbs, 20 February 1809, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 125.

³⁶Seton to Scott, 23 March 1809, *ibid.*, 125-26.

Mary's, because our farmhouse that was already approximately fifty to sixty years old was still being repaired. During the first harsh winter in the stone house we were very crowded, so we courageously built a larger home of wood, which I named Saint Joseph's House.

In [the beginning] we . . . had continual sickness . . . all the winter, and I [was] obliged to incur many expenses . . . [Soon there were] twelve [sisters], and [numerous candidates for the sisterhood]. I [had] a very large school to superintend . . . and the entire charge of the religious instruction of all the country round. All [turned] to the Sisters of Charity who [were] night and day devoted to the sick and ignorant.³⁷ Our good Sisters [could] teach the country children very well, but [all was not ideal] when the class [was] [at a] higher [level] because the sisters needed to be better prepared as teachers.³⁸

Soon I had to be flexible and alter my plans and recruit boarders for tuition from well-to-do families to make ends meet. By the next year we also cared for a few orphans. It wasn't long, however, before our existence was threatened by more severe financial difficulties although "our school increased in numbers, both boarders and day scholars. We had great difficulty in accommodating the [additional] boarders [due to space]."³⁹

Among our many challenges was a conflict with superiors. Father Dubourg forbade us to write our dear former confessor Father Pierre Babade, S.S. (1763-1846). I protested! Then when Father Dubourg resigned, I felt so guilty! I confided to Bishop Carroll that *I [had] had a great many very hard trials . . . [Some] so deep that the anguish could not be concealed, but by degrees custom reconcile[d] pain itself; and I determine[d], dry and hard as my daily bread [was], to take it with as good grace as possible.⁴⁰ My very equanimity was tested by our second superior, Father John David, S.S., (1761-1841), who wanted to formulate the rules himself for our school, and then made overtures to replace me and appoint his postulant, Rose Landry White (d. 1841), as superior! It even seemed that *our blessed Bishop [Carroll] intend[ed] removing a detachment of us to Baltimore to perform the same duties there.⁴¹**

³⁷Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 20 May 1810, *ibid.*, 140.

³⁸Seton to Julia Scott, 30 May 1810, *ibid.*, 140.

³⁹Mother Rose White's Journal, 14 May 1810, *ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁰Seton to Carroll, December 1809, *ibid.*, 141.

⁴¹Seton to Filicchi, May 20, 1810, *ibid.*, 142-43.

Shortly we settled into our new quarters in my beloved Saint Joseph's valley. I realized that *the moment approach[e]d when order must be the foundation of all the good we [could] hope to do.*⁴² *All the clergy in America support[ed] . . . [us] by their prayers. There [was] every hope that [the community], [would be] the seed of an immensity of future good.*⁴³

When I heard that Father Dubois was to replace Father David as our superior, I felt hopeful about *[his] new administration; . . . [but] I [was] so worn out [at that time] that it [was] almost a matter of indifference how it [would go].*⁴⁴ By that time I was thirty-seven years old!

*Our success in having obtained the confidence of so many respectable parents who . . . committed the whole charge of their children to us to the number of about fifty, besides poor children who [had] not means of education . . . enabled us to get on very well without debts or embarrassment, and I hope[d] [that] our Adored [had] already done a great deal through our establishment.*⁴⁵

*I [was] at peace . . . in the midst of fifty children all day . . . Order and regularity [could not be] skipped over [in our school] . . . I [was] as a mother encompassed by many children of different dispositions—not all equally amiable or congenial, but bound to love, instruct, and provide for the happiness of all.*⁴⁶

It was a joy for me to receive the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* from France in 1810. Father Dubois and I adapted them to our American culture, and I let Bishop Carroll know that *the [text of the] rules [I submitted for his approval was] nearly [identical to] . . . the original manuscript [from] the Sisters [in] France . . . [and that I would] make every sacrifice [he thought] consistent with my first and inseparable obligations as a Mother.*⁴⁷ After Bishop Carroll approved our revision of the French rule in 1812, the community adopted them and proceeded to make our novitiate and then take vows.

God confirmed our mission through Bishop Carroll's support: "Assure yourself and [the sisters] . . . [of my blessing on] your prosperity in the important duty of education which will and must long be your principal, and will always be your partial, employment . . .

⁴²Seton to Carroll, 25 January 1810, *ibid.*, 142.

⁴³Seton to Filicchi, 20 May 1810, *ibid.*, 142-43.

⁴⁴Seton to George Weis, 24 June 1811, *ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁵Seton to Filicchi, 24 June 1811, *ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁶Seton to Eliza Sadler, 3 August 1811, *ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁷Seton to Carroll, 5 September 1811, *ibid.*, 152.

Therefore [the sisters] must consider the business of education as a laborious, charitable, and permanent object of their religious duty."⁴⁸

Piracy and the threat of war cut off financial assistance from the Filicchis in Italy, and we desperately needed to raise money. Bishop John Cheverus (1768-1836), first bishop of Boston, discouraged me from making a tour of the country to solicit funds, so I turned to my new friends—influential Catholic families and invited them to . . . assist us, [and] become our guardian protector[s] [in caring for] the poor.⁴⁹ I told them that my establishment of plain and useful education . . . connected also with the view of providing nurses for the sick and poor . . . [was] . . . now disappearing under the pressure of debts [and pleaded that despite advance tuition payments,] we [were] reduced . . . to our credit, which [was] poor indeed.⁵⁰ [At this time] we began to take in sewing from the [college on] the Mountain to pay a debt that we owed.⁵¹

In the midst of this financial crisis my first born, my darling Anna Maria, whom we now called Annina, went to her Eternity and her depressed mother lapsed exhaustedly into a period of inner darkness. I sought consolation from prayer and turned to the Bread of Life for strength. [I continued to be convinced] that this [was] the way of salvation for me, and if, like a coward, I [would run] away from the field of battle, I am sure the very peace I [sought] would [have flown] from me.⁵²

Our financial realities forced me to recruit boarders more aggressively from affluent Catholic families while not excluding students of reduced circumstances. When I pondered our future, I dreamt of building a brick building to house the free school for the poor children.⁵³

As my mission in education developed I wanted to assure quality education and to establish standards of excellence. I distributed responsibilities among the sisters, set up a teaching schedule, and regulations for the school week. To be present to the students, I circulated through the classes and noted areas for improvement where *the mode of teaching [was] not uniform, . . . [children were walking out of classes], or [where there was] confusion on change of class, [etc.].*⁵⁴

⁴⁸Carroll to Elizabeth Seton, 11 September 1811, *ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁹Seton to General Robert Goodloe Harper, 28 December 1811, *ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Mother Rose White's Journal (Archives St. Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg, MD), 8.

⁵²Seton to Filicchi, 22 June 1807, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 109.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 161-62.

More than once we almost lost our property! Our first scare was in 1813. You [probably realize that] the family of Mr. Cooper claimed the property of [our] establishment. [Actually] Mr. Cooper [himself] . . . was to make . . . over the property to me [before] . . . the community [was] incorporated), and I was to make a will to secure it . . . [for the purpose] for which he destined it: the instruction and care of the poor.⁵⁵

To secure the title and safeguard the future of our little establishment in my beloved valley, we became incorporated as a community in the state of Maryland in 1817. Since then our official title has been the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's and *the heavenly Providence over us has been truly our continued source of mercy.*⁵⁶

Taking Risks Beyond the Valley

As our mission developed, the community took new risks in order to respond to requests beyond the valley. We served at Mount Saint Mary's by caring for the sacristies, staffing choirs, teaching catechism classes, and attending the sick besides the school and the small orphan asylum associated with it.⁵⁷ *Every occasion to visit the sick [was] embrace[d].*⁵⁸

In 1813, Father David requested sisters to assist in forming postulants for his new community at Nazareth, Kentucky, and later he proposed that they be united to Saint Joseph's but on his terms. Our council declined both requests, and Father Dubois explained to him that *The Constitutions of the sisters [could not] be modified according to the various opinions of each Bishop.*⁵⁹

⁵⁵Seton to Scott, 11 August 1813, *ibid.*, 167. Reportedly Robert Fleming changed his mind about the sale and requested full payment in *Gold Eagle* coins as a means to force foreclosure and reclaim his property. A neighbor, James Hughes, rode to Philadelphia and Baltimore and secured the requisite amount for Mother Seton. No date is given for this incident but it probably occurred prior to 1818 when Cooper was ordained to the priesthood. See [anonymous] *Bishop Bruté In His Connection with the Community: 1812-1839* (Emmitsburg: 1886), 315. Shortly after the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's became incorporated in January 1817, William Emmit instituted a lawsuit against the community claiming a technical defect in the deed. The community's prayers were answered, and the lawsuit was dismissed after William suddenly dropped dead while taking a walk in town. Samuel Emmit, for whom the town of Emmitsburg is named, had a son named William and had sold property in 1787 to Samuel Fleming, whose son Robert Fleming sold 212 acres to Samuel Cooper, John Dubois, and William Dubourg in 1809 for Mother Seton. The William who instituted the lawsuit against the community may have been the son of Samuel Emmit. See *Annals*, Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House and Frederick County, Maryland, Land Records, WR 7:366; WR 8:268, WR 35:6-9.

⁵⁶Seton to Scott, 19 February 1819, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 216.

⁵⁷[Sister John Mary Crumlish, D.C.], *1809-1959* (Emmitsburg, MD: 1959), 8.

⁵⁸Seton to Sadler, 9 January 1810, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 137.

⁵⁹Dubois to David, 27 December 1814, *ibid.*, 176-77.

The community responded to a request from Philadelphia in 1814 and risked opening our first mission beyond Emmitsburg. The challenges of new ventures taught us many lessons! Rose White, who headed this mission, left a record in her journal:

The trustees of the Orphan Asylum of Saint Joseph's Philadelphia [requested] . . . Sisters to take charge of [it], [but] allow[ed] [only] \$600 a year [to] support the sisters and orphans . . . Since the call had been submitted to Archbishop [Carroll] . . . it was thought [that] we ought not to refuse on account of [the inherent] difficulties. [The council at Saint Joseph's] agreed to . . . send three sisters. [When they arrived], the children looked poor and miserable . . . [and] were . . . running the streets like so many little ragged beggars. The asylum was in debt \$5,000; the subscriptions for its support few. [Our] fears were so great that we would not be able to make [a go of it].⁶⁰

Then Bishop John Connolly asked for three sisters to staff an institution in New York City for the education of destitute Catholic children in 1817. *The desire of my heart and soul . . . [that Sisters of Charity would go] to New York [had] been long pressing [on me].*⁶¹ The council, now more seasoned, approved the request with specific conditions relative to financial affairs, management of the orphans, and reimbursement for the sisters' services, because of our previous experience in Philadelphia.⁶²

In a few years we received another request from New York requesting more sisters to teach children at the [progressive] state school using Lancastrian methods.⁶³ I disapproved that proposal because [it was] *so uncertain as to the proposed good and so great a distance in so distracted a place, while we [saw] so good a prospect of schools among our best friends and much nearer to us.*⁶⁴

⁶⁰Mother Rose White's Journal quoted *ibid.*, 173-74.

⁶¹Seton to Bruté, 1 August 1817, *ibid.*, 202.

⁶²Dubois to Bishop John Connolly of New York, 24 May 1817, *ibid.*, 1: 202.

⁶³Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 18 April 1820, *ibid.*, 224. Joseph Lancaster (1778-1838), an English educator who emigrated to the United States in 1818, taught in a free school of a thousand boys and organized corps of elder boys as monitors to oversee and instruct those in lower classes. The Lancastrian system of education was adopted widely by nonconformists in competition with Andrew Bell's system supported by the Church of England.

⁶⁴Seton to Mrs. Marie Françoise Chatard, 24 August 1820, *ibid.*, 227.

Despite my failing health soon I was considering how to respond to the petition for sisters to staff a free school begun by a group of charitable ladies in Baltimore.⁶⁵ *Our poor little mustard seed [was spreading] its branches [very] well.*⁶⁶ I wrote letters late into the night to maintain strong bonds with our sisters serving on missions far away from Saint Joseph's Valley.

Model of Education at Saint Joseph's

I insisted on quality and excellence at Saint Joseph's Academy, which became a model educational program. I read and reflected on Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac's way of teaching and serving the poor. Among the Vincentian books I translated from the French was Nicolas Gobillon's *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*. I noted that the first Daughters of Charity in Louise de Marillac's little schools would . . . *assemble the young girls of the village at particular houses, and teach them the articles of Faith, duties of a Christian life, and if there was a school mistress in the place, they would instruct her in her duty, and if there was none, they would try to procure one.*⁶⁷ These principles were the cornerstone of education at Saint Joseph's.

I outlined my educational methods on four pages of a detailed schedule of instruction that gave the time, place and teacher's name. The teacher's role was central, and I believed in team teaching and involved my daughters as teacher aides. Ten year old Kit (Catherine Josephine) *rule[d] the books, [set] copies, hear[d] lessons, and conduct[ed] herself with such grace that girls twice her age show[ed] her the greatest respect.*⁶⁸ I was very sensitive to individual differences among our students and impressed on the sisters that . . . *[abilities] are not alike in all children, [therefore] the giving of good and bad points must be regulated by the knowledge that the [teacher] has of the talents and application of the child . . .*⁶⁹

⁶⁵[Crumlish], 1809-1959, 12. See also Daniel Hannefin, D.C., *Daughters of the Church* (New York: 1989), 32. Council Minutes, Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, of 18 February 1816, 14 August 1814, 10 October 1819.

⁶⁶Seton to Filicchi, 18 April 1820, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 224.

⁶⁷Monsieur Gobillon, *The Life of Mademoiselle Le Gras*, trans. Mother Elizabeth Seton (Emmitsburg, n.d.), 15.

⁶⁸Robert Seton, *Memoir, Letters, and Journal of Elizabeth Seton*, 2 vols. (New York: 1869), 2: 98.

⁶⁹Sister John Mary Crumlish, D.C., *The History of St. Joseph's Academy, Emmitsburg, Maryland, 1809-1902* (Unpublished Master's thesis: Catholic University of America, 1945), 4.

I encouraged the sisters to be angels or counselors to the girls. I delegated my authority among the sisters and established a division of labor in the school, especially regarding tuition and discipline. My administrative style involved a team approach, and I was convinced of the necessity of adequate professional preparation for the sister teachers. *To improve the instruction, [we] decreed the establishment of a normal school [for teacher training]. [Lay] help [was] hired, so as to afford the sisters time for study.*⁷⁰ Five years later the state of Maryland required teacher certificates.

Good home-school relations were important to me and I often corresponded with parents about their children's progress—or lack of it. *I will tell you [how] . . . I know American parents to be most difficult—in hearing the faults of their children. . . . When you see . . . faults [that are best corrected] . . . by good advice and education, it is best not to speak of them to papa and mama, who feel as if you reflected on their very selves.*⁷¹ I tried several methods of discipline but always with gentle firmness. I discovered that loss of recreation, deprivation of fruit, or payment of a penny for good works often worked well. Kneeling down was the only form of physical punishment that I allowed.

It was important that Saint Joseph's be a vibrant faith community as well as an educational community. Therefore I provided time for prayer, and I used the singing of hymns as catechetical tools. We always arranged for spiritual retreats before First Communion. Often I would take the older group for religious instruction and stimulate a discussion so they would ask me questions. In my diary for my daughter Kit I counseled her, as I did the other older girls, about attendance at balls and warned her that reading romances and attending the theater could distort her values.⁷² My goal was to prepare students for successful adulthood. Through regular correspondence, I tried to maintain contact with our alumnae. It was delightful when they returned to the valley for retreats!

I shunned any form of prejudice or discrimination. Inclusiveness was my goal. My school was founded on the enduring values of respect and equality. I pray that you bear in mind that authentic Christian compassion is expressed universally rather than selectively.⁷³

⁷⁰First Council Book of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, 20 July 1818, (ASJPH), unpaginated.

⁷¹Seton to Bruté, undated, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 188.

⁷²Elizabeth Seton, *Catherine Seton's Little Red Book*, ASJPH, 1-3-3-25B, 19-20, 50-55.

⁷³Loughlan Sofield, S.T., and Carroll Juliano, S.H.C.J., *Collaborative Ministry. Skills and Guidelines* (Notre Dame, Indiana: 1987), 69.

Sensitive to the bashfulness of the mountain children who were poor and in need, I saw that they received their dinner and such clothing as was required.⁷⁴ *We [even admitted Pennsylvania] Dutch [children] or any trusting [in] God and educate[d] [them with as much care and daily regularity as our pay boarders].*⁷⁵ I was also pleased to be able to offer some instruction myself to the African-American children of slaves and free parents.

I realize what a problem financial issues present in your ministry. How do you struggle with financial issues in your new ventures? I was constantly aware of the delicate balance of generating enough tuition revenue to cover the expense of needy students and other charitable activities. I desperately wanted to build a proper chapel at Saint Joseph's. Reluctantly I put that plan aside to begin construction on the brick building for our poor students whose number was increasing. I considered it my social responsibility to assure that our schools were affordable and accessible for all children whom I saw as citizens of tomorrow.

God gave me so many sources of strength in my verdant valley. Providence has truly blessed *the dirty grain of mustard seed [that was] planted by God's hand [here] in America—the number of orphans fed and clothed.*⁷⁶ *God [led] me . . . and [was] at my side . . . [refreshing] my soul . . . [and the Good Shepherd guided] me on right paths [to do God's will].*⁷⁷ The Eucharist, scripture, and prayer strengthened my faith and were the founts that nourished me in my mission of Christian character formation and education.

I learned to deal with disappointment, loss, and failure which I came to befriend as passageways for God's grace. *You know the general principle—that God is everywhere—God is so infinitely present to us that he is in every part of our life and being—nothing can separate us from him, he is more immediately present to us than to ourselves, and whatever we do is done in him . . . Wherever [the Sisters of Charity] go we must [seek and] find God everywhere . . . in the midst of contradiction, change, risk, and unmet needs.*⁷⁸ I came to recognize chaos as a lifegiving sign leading

⁷⁴Crumlish, *History of St. Joseph's Academy*, 25.

⁷⁵Seton to Filicchi, 19 October 1820, *Numerous Choirs*, 1: 230.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷Elizabeth Seton expressed a lifelong preference for Psalm 23 which Amelia Barclay Bayley, her stepmother, taught her as a young child. See "Dear Remembrances," in Kelly and Melville, *Selected Writings*, 344.

⁷⁸Elizabeth Seton, *Instruction on the Exercise of the Presence of God*," ASJPH, 1-3-3-23, page 1.

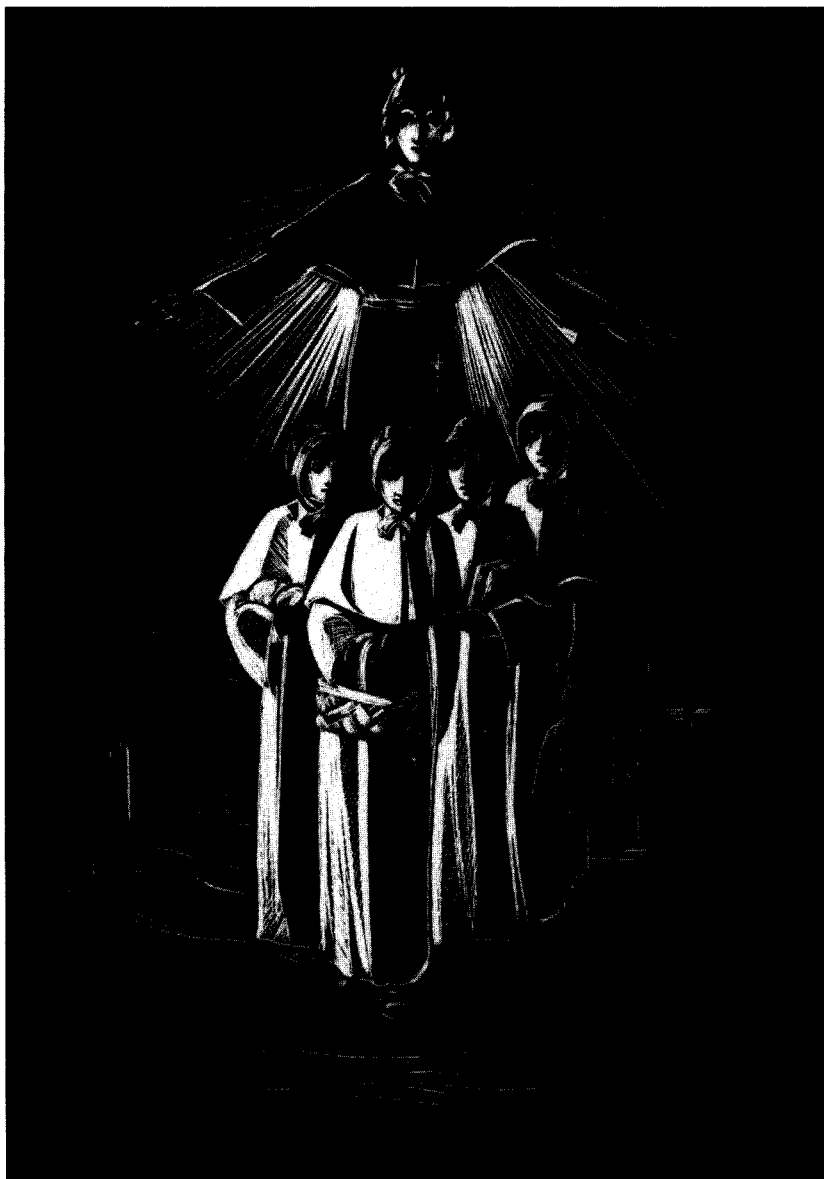
me deeper into the paschal mystery. I believe that collaboration and competence tempered with deep respect and genuine compassion will enable you to carry out your educational mission with vitality, clarity, and flexibility.

I share your struggle as educators today, and I am with you in that struggle. The signs of your times beg you to become spiritually mature to foster a climate of missionary renaissance faithful to my legacy of Catholic education. Are you convinced of the need for a strategic vision in the name of the Gospel? Are you willing to risk carrying out new ideas that respond to absolute human need?

What unmet needs exist in your school, parish or community that you can realistically address? How do you interface with public, private, and home school networks? What new programs or courses would benefit your students or attract new ones? What timely services do you currently offer which can be extended to others? Are there ways you can combine efforts and resources for new uses? What improvements could be made by adopting new techniques? I invite you to discuss whether your definition of education really meets society's changing needs.

In your role as educators, focus on the whole person—teach the lesson and touch the heart. Above all, my friends, teach your pupils about God's love for them. Oh! Set your gaze on the future and always strive *to fit [your students] for the world in which [they are] destined to live.*⁷⁹

⁷⁹Charles I. White, *Life of Mrs. Eliza A. Seton* (New York: 1904), 344.



Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton Overseeing the Arrival of the First Four Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati in 1829. Drawing by Sister Augusta Zimmer, S.C.
Courtesy Archives, Mount Saint Joseph