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Betty Ann McNeil

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## FOCUS SECTION

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# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ELIZABETH SETON AND EDUCATION: SCHOOL IS MY CHIEF BUSINESS

BETTY ANN MCNEIL, D.C.

*Daughters of Charity Archives, Emmitsburg, Maryland*

*Elizabeth Ann Seton – the first native-born U.S. citizen to be canonized – and her passion for education are the subjects of this historical essay. Implications for contemporary educational leaders are also discussed.*

## BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

**B**orn an Episcopalian in New York, Elizabeth Ann Bayley (1774-1821), married (1794) William Magee Seton (1768-1803). Blessed with three daughters (Anna Maria, Rebecca, and Catherine Charlton, called “Kit”) and two sons (William and Richard), the couple briefly enjoyed the comforts of social status and prosperity. They opened their arms to care for extended family members, providing counsel and mentoring for the youngest Seton in-laws. To Cecilia Barbara (age 11), Elizabeth wrote a letter of spiritual advice prophetic of her future mission:

Let your chief study be to acquaint yourself with God because there is nothing greater than God, and because it is the only knowledge which can fill the Heart with a Peace and joy, which nothing can disturb. (E. Seton, 2000, p. 214)

The Setons began to experience business losses, bankruptcy, and tuberculosis which threatened William Magee's life in 1798. The parents and eldest daughter desperately embarked on a sea voyage to Italy on October 2, 1803, in hope of regaining his health. Arriving at Livorno, authorities feared his disease was yellow fever, which was then raging in New York. The Setons were quarantined in the lazaretto. William Magee's death on December 27, 1803, thrust his widow, at age 29, into circumstances that changed her life and history.

The Filicchi family, business associates of the Setons, befriended

Elizabeth and extended gracious hospitality to her during their stay in Italy. Accompanied by Antonio Filicchi (1764-1847), Elizabeth and Anna arrived in the United States on June 4, 1804. From the Filicchi family, Elizabeth learned about Roman Catholicism. After returning to the United States, the young widow converted to Catholicism (1805), struggled unsuccessfully to support her family in New York, and moved to Maryland (1808). Invited initially by Reverend William Dubourg, S.S. (1766-1833), Elizabeth began a school for girls in Baltimore. Through the generosity of Samuel Sutherland Cooper (1769-1843), a wealthy seminarian from Philadelphia who provided the property, Elizabeth moved to the Catoctin Mountain region of central Maryland in 1809. It was near Emmitsburg that she began the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, the first native community for religious women, founded in the United States on July 31, 1809. In 1812, Mother Seton adopted a modified version of the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* (1646/1995) developed originally by Saint Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) and Saint Louise de Marillac (1591-1660) in Paris for their Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor. Canonized in 1975, Elizabeth Ann Seton is the first native-born United States citizen to be declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.

## **UNITED STATES: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION**

The identity and location of the first Catholic school located within the present boundaries of the United States is unknown. Certainly, the Spanish Franciscans and French explorers would have preached and taught indigenous children. European chaplains probably conducted basic classes for ships' apprentices and native children in North American ports.

More formal Catholic education dates to about 1606 when Franciscans opened a school at Santa Fe de Toloca (Saint Augustine, Florida), to teach children reading and writing along with Christian doctrine. Somewhat later, Jesuits in the North instructed native pupils, including Kateri Tekakwitha (1656-1680), in New York and the vicinity of Montreal. On the Pacific coast, Father Junipero Serra inaugurated the first of the California missions at San Diego in 1769.

Although a pioneer Catholic educator of the early 19th century, Elizabeth Seton was neither the first to establish a Catholic school nor the founder of the parochial school system in the United States (Maynard, 1941). A parochial school is a primary or secondary educational institution within a Roman Catholic diocese which is supported by parish funding. As a result, pupils within the parish may attend the parochial school free or at reduced cost due to parish subsidy. Elizabeth conducted an academy fund-

ed through tuition income, and her free school was financed by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's. Since Saint Joseph's was neither supported nor sponsored by a parish, it was a private Catholic school, not parochial.

Catholic education for boys preceded schools for girls by many years. Brother Ralph Crouch, an English Jesuit, founded a school for boys at Newtown, Saint Mary's County, Maryland, in 1639, but it was suppressed in 1704 by Maryland legislators (Maynard, 1941). The Newtown school predated the Jesuit academy for boys at Bohemia Manor, on the eastern shore of Maryland, which was founded in the face of prevailing anti-Catholic forces in 1744. The next year John Carroll (1735-1815), who later became the first bishop of the United States, began his education at Bohemia Manor in 1745. The schoolmaster, Mr. Wayt, was a layman and convert (*Case 3: The Bohemia Manor Academy*, 2005). Education for girls had already begun in New Orleans through the efforts of Ursuline sisters who arrived from France in 1727. Their Ursuline Academy is the first Catholic school for girls in the present-day United States. This private school was sponsored by the religious congregation.

The laity of Saint Mary's Parish, Philadelphia, took the lead in establishing a school with a scholarship program in 1782. Following their example, the German Catholics of that city established one of the first parochial schools in the new republic for the immigrant children of Holy Trinity Parish in 1789.

The first Roman Catholic free school operated by the laity was established in New York City in 1800. The nucleus of the first Visitandines in the United States, Miss Alice Lalor and her pious associates, taught the neighborhood's children initially. Their efforts developed into the distinguished Georgetown Visitation Academy, dating to 1799. Rev. Gabriel Richard, a Sulpician priest working in the Northwest Territory, founded a seminary and a school for girls in 1804 at what later became Detroit.

Elizabeth Seton and her Sisters of Charity began Saint Joseph's Academy and Free School at Emmitsburg, Maryland, in 1810. This was the first free Catholic school for female education staffed by religious women in the country. The school was governed, financed, administered, and staffed by the Sisters of Charity. It was independent of the parish, admitting pupils from the environs as well as boarders from great distances, even as far away as New York and Philadelphia. Elizabeth Seton and her Sisters of Charity were pioneers in Catholic education but not the founders of the parochial school system.

As a response to what was then perceived to be Protestant domination of the public school system, the First Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1852 urged the establishment of parish free schools and pledged to finance them

with Church revenue. The hierarchy desired to educate the laity in the faith and to combat the prevalence of secularism in the country. The council decreed that it was “absolutely necessary” that schools for the young be established (Spalding, 1989, p. 103). Saint John Neumann (1811-1860), bishop of Philadelphia, served on the Committee for the Education of Catholic Youth during the Council (Guilday, 1932). At the time of Neumann’s death, the *Metropolitan Catholic Almanac and Laity’s Directory* listed 37 parochial schools in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia (American Almanac Collection, 1860). Neumann strongly advocated inviting communities of religious women into the diocese to teach in the growing number of parochial schools. These schools were developing a religious curriculum to emphasize Catholic doctrine along with secular subjects. The parochial school resembled its counterpart in the public school system but reflected Catholic philosophy and values.

Saint Joseph’s Academy became known throughout the United States for its high standards and educational excellence. At a meeting of the hierarchy of the United States in 1852, Robert Seton (1839-1927) recalled the reputation of his grandmother. He quoted Francis Patrick Kenrick (1797-1863), Archbishop of Baltimore (1851-1863), as having said to his peers: “Ladies and gentlemen, this boy’s grandmother, Elizabeth Seton, did more for the Church in America than all of us bishops together” (R. Seton, 1923, p. 60). The Seton legacy of education testifies to her lasting contribution.

## **NEW YORK: TEACHING MOST SUITABLE TO MY DISPOSITION**

Elizabeth’s exposure to teaching began as a young girl. In her retrospective diary, *Dear Remembrances*, Elizabeth fondly recorded childhood memories: “At 6 taking my little [half-]sister Emma up to the garret window showing her the setting sun told her God lived up in heaven and good children would go up there...teaching her her prayers” (E. Seton, in press). Elizabeth and William Magee already had two young toddlers and an infant when they provided a home for the seven youngest of his half-siblings after the untimely death of his father. While Elizabeth adeptly managed her expanded household in Manhattan, she also found great enjoyment in instructing her daughter and the youngest Seton girls at home. Elizabeth explained to a friend that “Going to school thro’ snow and wet will give me more trouble than keeping them at Home. I have tried it one week, and as yet it has been only a pleasure” (E. Seton, 2000, p. 54).

A woman known only as Mama Pompelion taught Elizabeth in a similar setting. Her extant copy books from youthful study indicated that Elizabeth had read extensively apparently enjoying learning from the copi-

ous entries she made. Even at age 24, Elizabeth, who was embarking on home schooling for her charges, presented herself as a courageous woman of deep faith, gladly undertaking her obligations as wife, mother, and teacher.

Elizabeth found her life full of creative tension which propelled her into a deepening spiral of spirituality oriented toward eternity. Passionately devoted to Holy Communion as an Episcopalian and then the Eucharist as a Roman Catholic, Elizabeth came to understand more about other modalities of God's presence in life events, relationships, and persons in need. Over time, her insight grew through reflection on her own experience as a widow, sole parent, and convert, who was consistently committed to providing for her children and their future.

Despite the cool and distant relationships within the Seton family after her conversion, Elizabeth held onto the hope of improving life for her children. She had the opportunity to teach in an English seminary, a proposed school for young ladies about to be established by Mr. and Mrs. Patrick White in Manhattan. Even though the Whites had failed recently at establishing a school in Albany, Elizabeth expected to receive one third of the profits of the present venture. Their proposal seemed beneficial, convenient, and attractive to Elizabeth who had "so great a desire if only to taste a bit of bread of my own earning, if it might be so, but in this I repeat the daily Prayer 'thy will be done'" (E. Seton, 2000, p. 361).

Religious bigotry soon raised its ugly head. The Whites were Protestants, but rumors circulated that they were Roman Catholics in league with Elizabeth to proselytize pupils in the "the principles of her new Religion" (E. Seton, 2000, p. 362). Even the zealous Reverend Henry Hobart (1775-1830), formerly a trusted friend but now bitter adversary, lashed out publicly against the proposed school. Elizabeth's prospects for success seemed doomed from the start. Hobart was a curate at Trinity Episcopal Church on Broadway and had been Elizabeth's spiritual director until 1805. Catherine Mann Dupleix and Eliza Craig Sadler, two of Elizabeth's close friends who remained steadfastly supportive and loyal for the rest of her life, clarified with Hobart that the Whites were Protestants. The women defended Elizabeth indicating that her only intention "was to obtain Bread for her children and to be at Peace with all the world instead of making discord between Parents and children" (E. Seton, 2000, p. 362). Afterwards, Hobart recanted and agreed not to oppose the project, but the damage had already been done.

Within a few weeks, Elizabeth received some young ladies into her home as pupils briefly while Mr. White went to Albany for his family (E. Seton, 2000). The acceptance of these pupils may be the source of the erroneous conclusion

that Elizabeth herself operated a school in New York. The fact is that she was an assistant to the Whites in their short-lived establishment. By the end of August, the school failed. Mr. White “could not pay his share of the [house] rent after the present quarter” (E. Seton, 2000, p. 383). Circumstances forced Elizabeth to move in temporarily with relatives and left her without employment again.

Struggling against financial hardship, Elizabeth sought ways to be self-supporting and independent in supporting her five children. Unsolicited advice abounded as she explained in a few months to Antonio Filicchi, her friend, confidant, and benefactor: “Some proposals have been 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’)” (E. Seton, 2000, p. 394). In the midst of her personal turmoil, Elizabeth was courageous and faith-filled despite her realization that “they do not know what to do with me, but God does, and when His blessed time is come we shall know, and in the mean time he makes his poorest feeblest creature Strong” (p. 394).

Prior to the Whites' venture, it was suggested that Elizabeth take in boarders, including the children of John Wilkes and his brother Charles (relations of the Setons) as well as a dozen more pupils of the school conducted by Rev. William Harris, the curate of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in the Bowery. Elizabeth was reluctant to pursue this possibility but was pressured to do so. Eventually, she welcomed the opportunity with eagerness a year later (E. Seton, 2000). The contentious issue of religion arose again. Initially, it was unclear if Mr. Harris would be associated with a Catholic, and if the parents would commit their sons to Elizabeth's care (E. Seton, 2000). The parents agreed and Elizabeth assumed responsibilities, not in classroom teaching, but in caring for the boys, ages 10 to 16. She provided them with room and board, laundry, and mending services. This arrangement was more than challenging for the Seton boys, ages 9 and 7, who were often taunted by the boarders because of their Catholicism. Anna Maria, now 10 years old, was the same age as the youngest male boarder. Elizabeth was concerned for the best interests of her children in this environment.

During this tumultuous period, Elizabeth taught both French and music to her oldest daughter. Maintaining appropriate discipline among the boarders was doubly difficult without the support of their parents who seemed less than grateful for the pleasant comforts of home provided by Elizabeth. She had described herself earlier as having “been in a sea of troubles...but the guiding star is always bright, and the master of the storm always in view” (E. Seton, 2000, p. 414). The dissatisfaction of the parents ultimately resulted in withdrawal of their sons and the collapse of this way of life for the Setons in 1807. God's next plan for them was unfolding.

## MISSION IN MARYLAND: A SWEET DREAM OF IMAGINATION

Elizabeth first met Rev. Louis William Dubourg, S.S., (1766-1833), President of St. Mary's College in Baltimore, when he visited New York en route to Boston in 1806. During that visit, Dubourg first suggested the general idea of Elizabeth relocating in Baltimore to establish a school. At that time, she was considering the possibility of moving to Canada, but was ambivalent about its feasibility. She hoped to place her sons in a boarding school and secure a teaching role there in a convent school where her daughters could also attend. In a letter to Bishop Carroll, Elizabeth describes teaching "as that employment [which] was, (from the particular Providence in which I have been placed) familiar to me, and most suitable to my disposition" (E. Seton, 2000, p. 420). Even though the Canadian dream was vetoed by her most trusted confidants in America, Rev. John Cheverus (1768-1836, later bishop and cardinal) and Rev. Francis Matignon (1753-1818) of Boston, Elizabeth was not discouraged because she believed that "but God will direct it and that is enough" (p. 432). Referring again to Divine Providence, she explained to Antonio Filicchi that she had been advised by Cheverus and Matignon that she was "destined to forward the progress of his holy Faith" (p. 432). Despite the uncertainty of her situation, Elizabeth declared "so sweet is the Providence that overrules us, at this very moment of solicitude for our destination when the present means fails" (p. 506).

Based on the support of Matignon and Cheverus for Dubourg's suggestion for Elizabeth, Bishop Carroll approved the proposal. The hand of Divine Providence was enabling the realization of Carroll's pastoral vision announced in 1790. One of Carroll's objectives for his premier see was "to devise means for the religious education of Catholic youth – that precious portion of pastoral solicitude" (1987, p. 173). The newly created diocese of Baltimore, established November 6, 1789, extended from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River.

Carroll communicated his endorsement by letter to Elizabeth dated May 23, 1807. After learning the details of what Dubourg had in mind, Elizabeth summarized what it would mean for both her children and herself when writing to Julia Sitgreaves Scott, a lifelong close friend.

[Dubourg] offered to give me a formal grant of a lot of ground situated close to the College which is out of the town and in a very healthy situation and procure me immediately the charge of a half dozen girls and as many more as I can manage....Much as this offer delighted me, I urged my want of talents. (E. Seton, 2000, p. 506)



Within 2 years, God confirmed this new mission. Bishop Carroll wrote Elizabeth September 11, 1811, to assure her and the Sisters of Charity of his 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....Therefore [the sisters] must consider the business of education as a laborious, charitable and permanent object of their religious duty. (Carroll, 1976, p. 157)

When Elizabeth left her native New York in June of 1808, Dubourg wrote her that he “remain[ed] more and more satisfied that, even were [she] to fail in the attempt [of coming to Maryland]...it [was] the will of God [that she] should make it” (as cited in Melville, 1951, p. 128). Always seeking to know and do God’s will in all things, Elizabeth confidently sailed with her daughters to Baltimore on a journey of faith. Her sons had been pupils at Georgetown College since May 20, 1806.

## **BALTIMORE: FORMING A PLAN OF LIFE**

Elizabeth arrived at Maryland in June of 1808. Her year in Baltimore became a source of great blessings for the Setons. When they first debarked in the harbor of Fells Point, Elizabeth found the difference in her circumstances so great that she could hardly believe it.

Elizabeth was at peace as her new way of life unfolded, yet she continually searched for insights about God's will in her regard. In the fall of 1808, she opened a small Catholic school in her rented home on property adjacent to Saint Mary’s College. Its location was on the western edge of Baltimore, approximately one mile from the center of town off the Hookstown Road (now Paca Street). This structure remains as a historic building, *The Mother Seton House*, and is open to the public, located at 600 North Paca Street, Baltimore, Maryland (<http://baltimoremuseums.org/motherseton.html>).

Dubourg outlined his concept of gradual growth for the new school:

I [am 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. (as cited in Melville, 1951, p. 136)

By July, Elizabeth reported that she had “one pensioner only but have two more engaged – several have offered as day scholars which does not enter in my plan which I confine to 8 boarders for the first year or two” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 15).

She had every hope that it would “gradually succeed, as it is committed solely to [the] providence of Almighty God” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 19). By the end of the first semester, Elizabeth not only experienced deep personal satisfaction that she was engaged in Catholic education but realized that it was only the beginning. At Carroll’s recommendation, many parents were requesting that Elizabeth prepare their children for First Communion. Elizabeth described her life as a “very happy one spent entirely between my school and the chapel which joins our dwelling” (p. 46). Within a few months, the small number of girls enrolled as boarders was sufficient to meet living expenses adequately. During its year of operation, there were only 10 pupils including the Seton girls. Possibly this school was intended to replace one conducted by the aging Madame La Combe, which Dubourg had also been involved in establishing some years earlier.

Christian character development, faith formation, Catholic values, and academic foundations were the bases for Elizabeth’s educational program. Dubourg believed that the United States needed education in the faith and wanted this to be the major focus of the school.

There are in the country, and perhaps too many, mixed schools, in which ornamental accomplishments are the only objects of education; we have none that I know where their acquisition is connected with, and made subservient to, pious instruction – and such a one you certainly wish yours to be. (as cited in Melville, 1951, p. 136)

Elizabeth expected that the plan for her faith-based school would develop more slowly than a purely academic model. This school was neither parochial nor an elite day school. It was a private, select boarding school for Catholic girls. Its instructional program included basic academics and catechetics along with devotional piety and liturgical worship. Elizabeth developed an annual budget and charged \$200 per year for each pupil. Additional charges were applied for music, dancing, and drawing which required specialized teachers associated with Saint Mary’s College (E. Seton, 2002). By January, Elizabeth wrote Eliza Craig Sadler “ten girls, boarders, forming as large a school as I can manage” at this time (p. 48).

When the paths of Elizabeth and Dubourg had intersected providentially in New York, he had assured her that the Sulpicians would assist her in “forming a plan of life” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 18), indicating that they also wished to establish “a small school for the promotion of religious instruction” (p. 18). Years later, Dubourg recalled that “he had thought for a long time of establishing the Daughters of Charity in America” (L. W. Dubourg, personal correspondence, July 15, 1828). All the while, Elizabeth consis-

tently reiterated her “firm and steadfast Confidence looking straight Upwards” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 4) trusting all to Divine Providence.

The Sulpician priests of the seminary envisioned this school for the education of Catholic women to be devoted wives and mothers who would nurture their children in the faith, thus forming a generation of native-born Roman Catholics in the new republic. They also intended to nurture the seed bed for a religious community to be the faculty. The Sulpicians encouraged Elizabeth “in the hope, and expectation that there will not be wanting ladies to join in forming a permanent institution” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 19). Elizabeth was advised that she would become the “mother of many daughters” (p. 34) while the Sulpicians considered strategies to bring their vision to fruition. Elizabeth explained the impact of her emerging role: “the care of teaching will be off my hands tho' not the superintendence” (p. 60).

Some months after her arrival in Baltimore, the *Régestre* of minutes for the Sulpician assembly of March 14, 1809, read that:

It is a matter of buying a plantation near Emmitsburg to found there a community of daughters, *à peu près sur le même plan que les filles de la Charité, de Saint Vincent de Paul* [sic]; [similar to the model of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul] who join to the care of the sick, the instruction of young girls in all branches of Christian education. (Melville, 1986, p. 177)

Shortly after Christmas of 1809, Elizabeth confided to Antonio Filicchi that “already...some excellent souls [had come]...to...fulfill the intention of instructing children in religion” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 46). Cecilia Maria O'Conway (1788-1865) from Philadelphia arrived in Baltimore, December 7, 1809, and became the first member of the American Sisters of Charity. Before long, others also joined Elizabeth with the intent of forming a community of religious women: Anna Maria Murphy (d. 1812), Mary Ann Butler (1784-1821), Susan Clossey (1785-1823), Catharine (Kitty) Mullen (1783-1815), and Rosetta Landry White (1784-1841), widow of Captain Joseph White, Jr. Several of these women, particularly Susan Clossey and Rose White, spent their lives as educators. At Elizabeth's death, the latter was elected her successor.

While Elizabeth went about her duties as school mistress, she became acutely aware of her deep desire to teach poor children. Simultaneously, Samuel Sutherland Cooper, who was settling his financial affairs, was inspired to discuss with Dubourg an idea which included Elizabeth. Cooper envisioned her as directress of a new venture which would involve

establishing an institution for the advancement of Catholic female children in habits of religion and giving them an education suited to that purpose...[and]

to extend the plan to the reception of the aged, the uneducated, [and to open] a manufactory. (E. Seton, 2002, p. 54)

On March 25, the fifth anniversary of her first reception of Holy Communion as a Catholic, Elizabeth, in the presence of only her daughter Kit, pronounced private vows for 1 year before Archbishop Carroll (E. Seton, 2002). Afterwards, Elizabeth wrote the following to her sister-in-law, Cecilia Seton: "I can give you no just idea of the precious Souls who are daily uniting under my banner which is the cross of Christ; the tender title of Mother Salutes me every where" (p. 65).

Embracing her mission with enthusiasm, Elizabeth wrote Rose Stubbs, a friend in New York, that "Everything has turned out far beyond my brightest expectations" (E. Seton, 2002, p. 56). She expressed her gratitude at the prospect of the gift of "a handsome property" (p. 57) where she could establish the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's who would be devoted to the education of poor children in the Catholic faith. Cooper specified the location to be Emmitsburg, near the Catoctin spur of the Blue Ridge Mountains in central Maryland, where he donated \$6,961 for the purchase of 269 acres for this purpose (*Robert Fleming to Samuel Cooper*, 1809). Elizabeth was delighted with the prospect and described her feelings to a friend in a letter: "to speak the joy of my soul at the prospect of being able to assist the Poor, visit the sick, comfort the sorrowful, clothe little innocents, and teach them to love God!" (E. Seton, 2002, p. 62).

## **EMMITSBURG: SCHOOL IS MY CHIEF BUSINESS**

The Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, a new community and an American foundation, is the first native sisterhood established in the United States. Elizabeth and her Sisters of Charity were among the pioneers in free Catholic education for girls predating the inauguration of the parochial school system in the second half of the 19th century.

The realities of the mission Elizabeth embraced at Emmitsburg challenged her very being. After a trek from Baltimore, Elizabeth and her companions arrived wearily at their destination in June 1809. Rev. John Dubois, S.S., (1764-1842) pastor of the area, graciously surrendered his rustic cabin for their use until the old Fleming farmhouse was habitable. It became known as the Stone House. There Elizabeth established her community on July 31, 1809. Julia LeBreton and Isabella Edith O'Conway, two pupils of her school in Baltimore, came to Emmitsburg with Elizabeth. Soon two women from the area, Sarah (Sally) Thompson (1779-1850) and her frail, younger sister Ellen (1788-1813), were the first to join the young community in its new location.

Until 1812, the community was governed by *Provisional Regulations for Saint Joseph's Sisters* (1809/2002) which were drawn up to outline the order of day for the nascent community. This document briefly addressed education: "Sister Cecilia [O'Conway] will attend the children in reading, spelling, and writing etc. one hour and a half in the morning and as much in the evening" (p. 14).

The Sulpicians obtained the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity* (1646/1995) from France for Elizabeth Seton in 1810 in order to adapt them for the American community. Dubois translated them and worked with his confreres in consultation with Elizabeth to modify them for the United States. Elizabeth reported to Bishop Carroll that "the rules proposed are near[ly those] we had in the original manuscript of the Sisters in France – I never had a thought discordant with them as far as my poor power may go in fulfilling them" (E. Seton, 2002, p. 195). Elizabeth was first and foremost a mother to her children and was adamant about not compromising her parental responsibilities even for her new mission but "would gladly make every sacrifice...consistent with my first and inseparable obligations as a Mother" (p. 196). Bishop Carroll approved the American version of the rule, *Regulations for the Sisters of Charity in America*, in 1812. After accepting the rule and making a novitiate, the sisters pronounced simple, annual vows for the first time on July 19, 1813.

The role of education and the overall needs of their pupils are laced throughout these *Regulations* outlining details of how the school sisters should attend to their respective duties. Particular norms were made for the school which was administered by the Mother "who is at the head of every department in the house, and every authority is derived from and dependent on hers" (E. Seton, in press). Elizabeth visited the classes, exercising the talent of smiling and caring, giving the look of encouragement or reproof, and in this way inspiring both the pupils and their teachers with a cheerful zeal in the performance of their respective duties (*Provincial annals*, 1809-1820). Elizabeth understood well the lifelong lessons she had learned from the school of experience. She wrote Carroll: "Well, my own troubles will teach me I hope how to comfort others, and serve as the payment of some little part of the great debt I own [sic]" (E. Seton, 2002, p. 78).

Elizabeth was very sensitive to individual differences among the pupils' aptitudes and personalities. Her example in accepting each child with her potential and challenges enabled the sisters to model their teaching style on hers. Elizabeth described her own role as follows:

I am 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, to give the example of cheerfulness, Peace, resignation, and consider individuals more as proceeding from the same Origin and tending to the same end than in the different shades of merit or demerit. (E. Seton, 2002, p. 154)



Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821)

*Courtesy, Archives Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, MD*

## MISSION

Elizabeth championed the cause of education, justice, and charity in the United States through her foundation at Emmitsburg. Her desire to provide a free education for poor children required both flexibility and resourcefulness to cover expenses. As an astute administrator, she had to adapt her initial plan and recruit tuition-paying boarders from wealthy families willing to pay “100 Dollars per annum and half in advance every six months” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 140). The tuition income educated children from impoverished circumstances and also provided for the care of orphans. Children did not have to be without both parents but the “parents should be poor, unable to pay for her education, and the child promising” (E. Seton, in press). Education for orphans focused on what was then considered to be the useful branches of learning: reading, writing, and arithmetic and basic life skills for 19th-century women. These skills included sewing, spinning, knitting, and the details of housekeeping. The talents of each girl were considered so that programs of instruction were individualized.

Their setting of bucolic beauty, which Elizabeth called Saint Joseph's Valley, was surrounded by persons who were poor and families in need throughout the countryside and along the mountain slopes. Elizabeth described their situation to Antonio Filicchi:

I have a very large school to superintend every day, and the entire charge of the religious instruction of all the country round. All [are] happy to [turn to] the Sisters of Charity who are night and day devoted to the sick and ignorant. (E. Seton, 2002, p. 127)

Elizabeth considered it both her moral and social responsibility to assure that schools conducted by the Sisters of Charity were affordable and accessible. Her convictions enabled the Sisters of Charity to carry out their educational mission with vitality, clarity, and flexibility in different settings and locations. She believed that collaboration and competence should be tempered with deep respect and genuine compassion for the school community.

## PHILOSOPHY

Elizabeth communicated her faith-filled philosophy to faculty, pupils, and parents in all her contacts. She inspired her pupils to consider the attributes of God as father and friend. She encouraged everyone to love God because “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him” (1 Jn. 4:16). She discouraged her pupils from seeing their Creator as a harsh and demanding judge. Rather, Elizabeth would tell her pupils: “Love God, my dear children and you may forget there is a hell” (as cited in *Provincial Annals*, 1809-1820, p. 318).

Teaching the children to offer their day and all its actions to God regularly, Elizabeth would often explain that

If a painter should draw his lines without proposing any idea to himself, his work would be a blot; or should a sculptor give a number of strokes to his block without intention to shape it, what would he do but weary himself to no purpose, while the least of our actions may carry its grace with it, if we turn it right. Every good action is a grain of seed for eternal life. (as cited in *Provincial Annals*, 1809-1820, p. 315)

The Sisters of Charity were formed to honor Jesus as the source and model of all charity through corporal and spiritual service to the persons who were sick and poor. The rule for the Emmitsburg community embodied a foundational principle for the Sisters of Charity ministry:

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. (E. Seton, in press)

Elizabeth began Saint Joseph's Free School in Saint Joseph's House, now The White House, February 22, 1810, with day pupils. This was the first free Catholic school for girls staffed by religious women in the country. About 3 months later, the first tuition-paying boarders arrived for the Academy on May 14. Governed, funded, and administered by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, Saint Joseph's Academy and Free School was rooted in methods to foster faith-based education and character formation to educate girls to lead devout Catholic lives.

For pupils dealing with conflict and misunderstanding, Elizabeth advised discretion and charity in speech. Elizabeth emphasized the importance of purity of heart and modesty for the girls whom the Sisters of Charity taught (E. Seton, 2002). Regarding dress, Elizabeth believed that "simplicity should be your only rule. It makes a lovely woman more lovely" (E. Seton, in press).

Elizabeth stressed sound principles of morality in her instructions to the pupils.

She taught them that beauty was but a "superficial grace; that when a fair soul, however, is in a fair body, the latter may be cherished as a gift of the Creator. Beauty should be used as an attraction to virtue. When profaned, it is a violation of the temple of God." (*Provincial Annals*, 1809-1820, p. 316)

Elizabeth imbued her school with a philosophy which permeated the school and gave direction to the total program. All involved endorsed it. Parents knew why they were sending their daughters to Saint Joseph's. The faculty understood the purpose of her school. The Archbishop of Baltimore and the Sulpician directors shared the same vision. They worked together toward a common goal.

## **VALUE-BASED PRACTICE**

Elizabeth and her sisters were women of courage amidst hardships, poverty, struggles, and challenges who believed that "we are never strong enough to bear our cross, it is the cross which carries us, nor so weak to be unable to bear it, since the weakest become strong by its virtue" (McNeil, 2002, p. 69). During their trials, Elizabeth encouraged her sisters to keep their sights on God in every event and circumstance.

The Sisters of Charity schools were founded on the enduring values of respect and equality. Elizabeth shunned the prejudices of her day. She welcomed pupils from diverse backgrounds accepting them without discrimination. For example, her Sisters of Charity would "take Dutch [German] or any trusting to God and educate them with as much care and daily regular-



ity as our pay boarders, so as to extend their usefulness whenever OUR SWEET PROVIDENCE may call” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 670).

Elizabeth admitted Protestants despite the opposition of Dubois, who wrote his views on this point: “Experience I think proves that their admission becomes very injurious to piety in general amongst the girls without providing any advantage to the protestant” (as cited in Melville, 1951, p. 221). In 1816, the council of the Sisters of Charity deliberated on the issue and agreed to admit Protestant children as long as their presence was not detrimental to Saint Joseph’s. They were expected to participate in all aspects of school life except sacramental preparation.

## ROOTED IN VINCENTIAN VALUES

Elizabeth based her mission and ministry on the tradition of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, which had been the inspiration of the Sulpicians for establishing the American sisterhood. Elizabeth embraced the Vincentian charism and adapted it to the United States through the rule of life chosen for the Sisters of Charity. The sisters received Vincentian formation from Dubois (1810-1826) and Bruté (1812-1815, 1818-1834) during their years in the Emmitsburg area. Elizabeth translated some of the classical documents related to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise in order to teach her sisters about the Vincentian heritage and its values. In the process, Elizabeth learned how the first Daughters of Charity had instructed poor children. She employed these same principles as foundational elements of education at Saint Joseph’s.

Elizabeth made the first English translation of the earliest biography of Louise de Marillac, *Vie de Mlle Le Gras*, by Nicholas Gobillon (1676/1818). Elizabeth’s translations were selective and included portions of the text which were meaningful to her like the following:

She [Louise de Marillac] was Accompanied in these Journeys by pious women...and when they would come to a Village, they would assemble the charitable women...give them every necessary instruction and encouragement....They would then 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. (E. Seton, in press)

Having learned how organized instruction for poor children spread to wherever the Daughters of Charity served in France, Elizabeth adopted this model for her mission so that “this house became a holy school of charity” after the example of Louise and Vincent (E. Seton, in press). From reading

*The Life of the Venerable Servant of God: Vincent de Paul*, the earliest biography of the saint by Louis Abelly (1664/1993), Elizabeth knew that he, too, had taught and conducted schools. Vincent's experience as a teacher and schoolmaster predated his instructions to the first generation of Vincentian women whom he formed in the "spirit of their Mission which is to take charge of the sick and instruct children" (E. Seton, in press).

Elizabeth promoted the Vincentian tradition of education for all of the ministries of the Sisters of Charity. Flowing from Vincentian values, a faith-focus and inclusivity were their hallmarks. Twelve descriptors may be applied to educational endeavors of the Sisters of Charity. The following characteristics are not listed in order of priority.

- Clarity and consensus about mission led to a visible and public Catholic identity.
- Faculty and parents shared a common vision which permeated all dimensions of school life and flowed from the centrality of faith formation and religious instruction.
- Teachers presented social concerns and the needs of poor persons through appropriate projects so that their pupils could interiorize the lessons for life.
- Teaching methods challenged the minds and hearts of pupils as they participated in the educational programs integrating religious instruction and academics, liturgical worship and popular devotions.
- Administrative practices facilitated effective instruction and an enjoyable school experience for children of all classes since the school was accessible and affordable by design.
- Admission procedures and curriculum focused on the needs of the pupil and were applied with flexibility according to family circumstances.
- School culture was creative in promoting the bonds of caring and compassionate relationships which would endure into adulthood.
- Faculty members were credible role models who worked together to foster self-respect and personal responsibility among the pupils along with respect of other persons and their rights.
- A family-like environment enabled pupils to develop self-knowledge, esteem, and acceptance.
- The school planned and provided learning opportunities to address intellectual, spiritual, moral, affective needs, and skill development for responsible adulthood.
- The pupil population reflected inclusivity and diversity of Catholics and Protestants, tuition-paying and free scholars, day pupils and

boarders, along with orphans and the affluent.

- Administration, sisters, and laity collaborated to maintain competency and high quality education as they created a special spirit among all at Saint Joseph's.

Elizabeth created a faith-filled climate of education which was integrated, creative, flexible, excellent, person-oriented, collaborative, and focused (Sullivan, 1994). In everything related to the education of her pupils, Elizabeth focused on forming "their hearts to virtue....Her instructions were also characterized by a reasoning accommodated to the circumstances of her hearers" (*Provincial Annals*, 1809-1820, p. 313). Depending on both the child and circumstance, Elizabeth tried several methods of discipline but always with gentle firmness. She soon 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 permitted at Saint Joseph's.

The *Regulations for the Sisters of Charity* (1812) addressed important topics regarding the operations of the school department, including organization and scheduling, curriculum, direction of pupils, teacher preparation, speaking and silence during classes, destruction of school books, economy of supplies, sickness, initial assessment and pupil placement, attention during classes, attendance, behavior, authority and accountability of teachers, recess and recreation, mutual respect, promptness, discipline, and subsidiarity (E. Seton, in press). Five years before the state of Maryland required certificates for teachers, Elizabeth established an early form of the normal school to train teachers.

The teacher's role was central. Elizabeth believed in team teaching. She also involved her daughters as teacher aides, peer instructors, and role models. Elizabeth described how her daughter Kit (age 10) "rules books, sets copies, hears lessons, and conducts herself with such grace that girls twice her age show her the greatest respect" (E. Seton, 2002, p. 137).

Elizabeth and her faculty prepared students for successful adulthood. Long after leaving Saint Joseph's, former pupils kept in touch with Elizabeth through correspondence and visits to their former valley home. She was delighted when alumnae returned to the valley for retreats. To Ellen Wiseman, an early pupil, Elizabeth wrote that the "Saint Joseph's family will be ready to dance for joy and...[my] heart dances only at the thought of seeing you" (E. Seton, 2002, p. 248).

Elizabeth effectively engaged parents and guardians through her charming personality and frequent communication with them about their children. To a worried mother, Elizabeth reported improvement about the

precarious health of Mary Harper explaining that “from her very frequent return of cough and the unusual delicacy of her appearance...[that] the cough has almost entirely disappeared” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 262).

Families from far and near sent their daughters to Saint Joseph’s Academy. Elizabeth relayed the details of their children’s progress – or lack of it. She could be very direct when necessary, but was always discreet. For example, in a letter to Robert Goodloe Harper, Elizabeth first acknowledged that his daughter Emily possessed “many good qualities [which] are very consoling,” and then added “but I fear, my dear Sir, you will be disappointed in her Musical Talent” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 626).

Sometimes Elizabeth saw the pupils’ parents as part of the problem rather than the solution. With perspicacity, she wrote the following to her friend and confidante, Simon Bruté:

I will tell you in what 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. (E. Seton, 2002, p. 366)

More than once, Elizabeth and the Sisters of Charity faced significant financial and legal issues, including threats of foreclosure at Emmitsburg. First, the former owner decided that he wanted the full balance due paid immediately in gold coins. An Emmitsburg resident rode to Philadelphia returning with the gold coins just in time to avert disaster (Law, 1886). Another scare was in 1813, when the Cooper family attempted to claim the property (E. Seton, 2002). Several years later, William Emmitt of Emmitsburg instituted a lawsuit against the community claiming a technical defect in the deed. The sisters prayed fervently that the problem would be resolved. It was but quite unexpectedly, Emmitt suddenly dropped dead while taking a walk in town. The lawsuit was dismissed (*Provincial Annals*, 1809-1820). To secure the title and safeguard the future of Saint Joseph’s, the Sisters of Charity were incorporated in the state of Maryland in 1817.

### **PHILADELPHIA AND NEW YORK: OUR ORPHANS INCREASED IN NUMBER**

As Saint Joseph’s Academy and Free School developed, the Sisters of Charity also responded to new requests elsewhere. The first two missions they established both cared for orphans but also offered educational programs for day students. This became the model followed by the Sisters of Charity in subsequent foundations.

Elizabeth launched the first mission beyond Emmitsburg at Philadelphia in 1814. Rose Landry White headed this challenging mission. It was the first Catholic orphanage in the United States. Four years later in 1818, the Sisters of Charity were also staffing a free school for German Catholics in Philadelphia. Rose succeeded Elizabeth as mother of the Sisters of Charity in 1821.

Beginning in 1815, the Sisters of Charity opened a mission at Mount Saint Mary's College and Seminary, near Emmitsburg. There they cared for the sacristies, staffed choirs, taught catechism classes, and attended the sick in the infirmary until their withdrawal from there in 1852 (Crumlish, 1959).

Then John Connolly, bishop of New York, asked for three sisters to staff an institution in New York City for the education of destitute Catholic children in 1817. Elizabeth expressed her pleasure regarding this request: "The desire of my heart and Soul...[that Sisters of Charity would go] to New York has been long pressing [on me]" (E. Seton, 2002, p. 494). The council, now more experienced about avoiding difficulties, approved the request but Dubois (now ecclesiastical superior) wrote John Connolly, O.P., bishop of New York, with stipulations regarding financial affairs, management of the orphans, and reimbursement for the sisters' services (E. Seton, 2002). The Sisters of Charity conducted the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum and then a pay school. The latter began in January 1820, and was intended for families who could not send their daughters to the distant academy at Emmitsburg. In the spring of the same year, the sisters also opened the New York Free School.

The council received another request from New York for more sisters to teach children in a school based on the model of Joseph Lancaster (1778-1838), an English educator who immigrated to the United States in 1818. Lancaster taught in a free school of a thousand boys and organized a corps of elder boys as monitors and peer instructors of 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. This request was not approved because "it was so uncertain as to the proposed good, and so great a distance in so distracted a place" and they saw better prospects for new missions not as far away (E. Seton, 2002, p. 665).

In the twilight of Elizabeth's life, she was considering how to respond to the petition for sisters to staff Saint Mary's Asylum and School begun by a group of charitable ladies in Baltimore (Crumlish, 1959). Indeed, Divine Providence had truly blessed "the dirty grain of mustard seed...[that was] planted by God's hand in America – the number of orphans fed and clothed" (E. Seton, 2002, p. 670).

## CITIZEN OF THE WORLD: LEGACY

Elizabeth referred to herself as being “a citizen of the world” (E. Seton, 2002, p. 494) at the thought of beginning a mission in her native New York so far away from her new home at Emmitsburg. Little did she dream that she would much later be canonized. Pope Paul VI declared her Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton on September 14, 1975, during the International Year of the Woman. The small community of apostolic women grew, multiplied, and spread around the globe. Her spiritual daughters continue her legacy through the Sisters of Charity Federation in the Vincentian and Setonian Tradition ([www.sisters-of-charity.org](http://www.sisters-of-charity.org)).

The Eucharist, Scripture, and prayer nurtured and strengthened Elizabeth's faith. These were the fonts which enabled her to fulfill the mission of Christian character formation and Catholic education. Having learned from the school of life and the Gospel of Jesus Christ how to deal with disappointment, loss, and failure, Elizabeth came to befriend such challenges as passageways for God's grace and wrote the following excerpt from an *Instruction on the Exercise of the Presence of God*:

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. (E. Seton, in press)

The signs of our times challenge Catholic educators to become spiritually mature persons committed to continuing the legacy of Catholic education. The culture of today invites educators to be creative in developing a strategic vision in the name of the Gospel. Educators are also faced with generating and implementing new ideas which respond to absolute human need in order to build a more just and humane society.

Examining the Seton legacy of education invites consideration of the following questions:

- How does a faith community in a school setting evaluate and decide the allocation of resources and time devoted to the secular and the sacred?
- Do local definitions of education adequately address the changing needs of children and families in society today?
- How are all levels of educational staff empowered to identify and address the greatest unmet needs of children in schools and communities?
- Are there ways to make Catholic schools more accessible, affordable, and inclusive?

In her role as educator, Elizabeth Seton focused on the whole person – teaching the lesson and touching the heart. She taught her pupils about God's love for them. Elizabeth set her gaze on the future and aimed “to fit [her students] for the world in which [they were] destined to live” (*Provincial Annals*, 1809-1820, p. 312).

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*Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., is an archivist for the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Sr. Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., Archives, Saint Joseph's Provincial House, 333 South Seton Avenue, Emmitsburg, MD 21727.*