

St. Patrick's Cathedral — Shrine of
Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

ATTENTIVE TO THE VOICE OF GRACE:

A Pastoral Letter by the Most Reverend John O. Barres
on the 200th Anniversary of the Death of
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

January 4, 2021

One week prior to the First Continental Congress, on August 28, 1774, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was born in New York. The timing of her birth would foreshadow the pivotal role she would play in both American history and the history of the Catholic Church in the United States.

As the first American-born saint, her story illustrates the spiritual realities of those nascent days of our nation and the blossoming branch of the Church in America. A wife and mother, a young widow and convert, a teacher and pioneer, the founder of a religious congregation and the embodiment of Christian service to those in need, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton offers a beautiful image of faith under trial and perseverance in carrying out God's will.

As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of her birth into eternal life on January 4, in this time when our nation and our faith both face great challenges, we do well to pause and study her life. In the Diocese of Rockville Centre especially, as we re-envision our mission of Catholic education with the *Morning Star Initiative*, we look to the patroness of Catholic schools for guidance and inspiration.

Reflecting on her background and early upbringing, we find that St. Elizabeth is a most unlikely saint.¹ She was raised in a successful Protestant merchant family in New York City and married William Seton, a successful Protestant businessman, in 1794. She had little occasion or reason to encounter the Catholic Church.

With generations of mistrust between them, Protestants and Catholics mingled little, especially those Protestants in the upper class. Furthermore, in a largely Protestant nation, Catholics at that time were frequently discriminated against and thus often purposefully circumspect about evangelizing, hoping to prove their loyalty to the nation against the accusation of being loyal only to the Pope.

St. Elizabeth's story therefore began as one steeped not in Catholic culture and tradition, but rather in a milieu of Protestant spiritual renewal. Growing into womanhood at the dawn of the Second Great Awakening, she was drawn into the transition from a dry and rationalistic faith, embodied by her scientific physician father, into a warm and personal faith, which she owed in good measure to the local Episcopalian preacher.

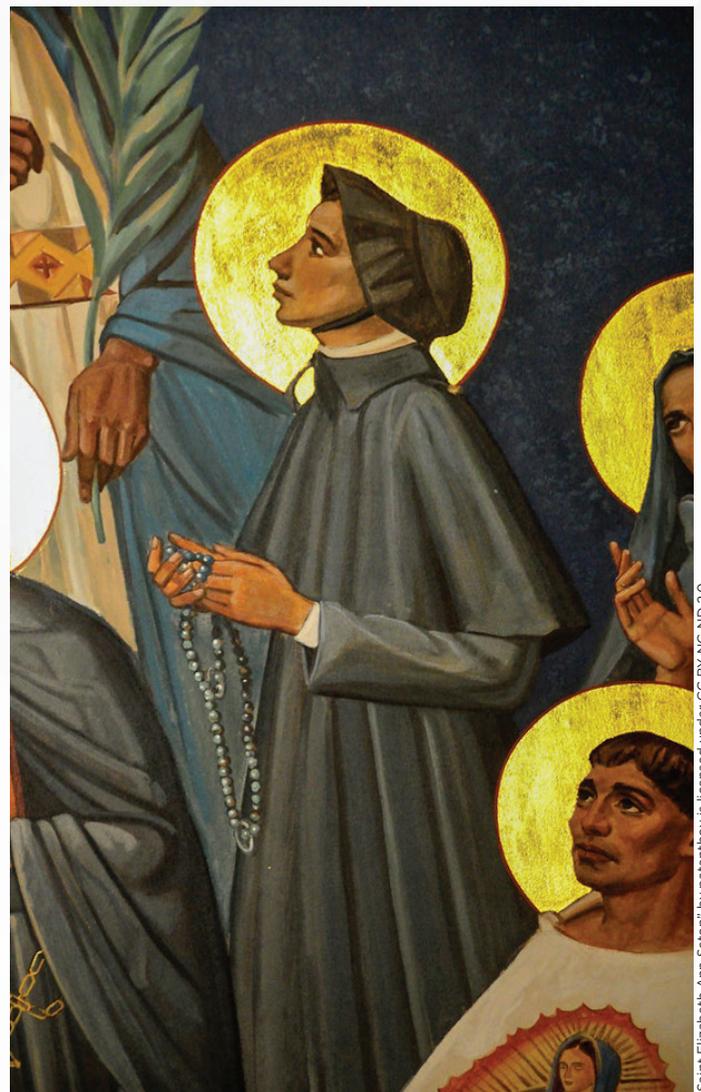
Though always devout, it was early in her married life that Elizabeth became vibrantly alive in her faith, which spilled into service. She became involved in one of the first charitable institutions in the nation run by women, the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, and in her personal life was equally generous—adopting six of her husband's younger half-siblings upon the passing of their father, while having five children of her own.

While caring for eleven children was a challenge in itself, her responsibilities compounded when her husband's tuberculosis

grew worse in 1803 and his doctor recommended a journey to Italy for the fresh Mediterranean air. Upon arriving in Italy, Elizabeth and her husband had an experience we may be all too familiar with—she and her ailing husband had to quarantine for 40 days, to ensure that they had not brought yellow fever along with them from New York to Italy. After caring for her husband in isolation, he

ultimately succumbed to tuberculosis and Elizabeth was left a widow, far from home, in a time when the only option for widowed mothers was to rely on others.

Fortunately, the Italian family with whom she was staying was a faithful Catholic family more than willing to support and comfort Elizabeth in her grief. During her months with them spending time in Pisa and Florence, her spiritual life transformed once more, this time by an encounter with the splendor of their Catholic faith in that foreign land. She describes with profound reverence her first experiences of the overwhelming beauty of the Italian churches and of the Holy Mass:



I do not know how to express the awful effect of being where they told me God was present in the blessed sacrament, and the tall, pale, meek, heavenly-looking man did I don't know what. Being at the side of the altar I could not look up without seeing his countenance on which many lights from the altar reflected and gave such strange impressions to my soul that I could but cover my face with my hands and let the tears run.²

As her faith became more real and more personal, Elizabeth's longing for intimacy with God found its fulfillment in the Real Presence of our Lord in the Tabernacle. She described an experience she had while still an Episcopalian:

I got into a side pew which turned my face towards the Catholic church in the next street, and twenty times found myself speaking to the blessed sacrament there, instead of looking at the naked altar."³

Moreover, having lost her own mother at a very early age, she found great consolation in our Blessed Mother, about whom she wrote:

"From the first remembrance of infancy I have looked...to the clouds for my mother, and at that moment it seemed as if I had found more than her, even in the tenderness and pity of a mother, so I cried myself to sleep on her heart."⁴

While St. Elizabeth desired the gifts of the Catholic faith, she felt loyal to the faith of her upbringing and knew she could lose her family's financial support if she converted to Catholicism. Yet she could not resist the voice of God calling her—in 1805 she entered the Catholic faith with firm conviction at St. Peter's on Barclay Street in New York. Her family was slow to understand, wary of her newfound faith, but they continued to support her and her children.

When her zeal drew her sisters-in-law to convert, her family ties grew strained, to the point that Elizabeth decided to find a new environment to live out her Catholic faith freely and without restraint, possibly even in religious life. As a prominent convert, she was known to Bishop (later Archbishop) John Carroll of Baltimore, the first Bishop of the first diocese in the United States, and many others looking to establish the Catholic faith in the new nation. In 1808, she accepted an offer to move to Baltimore to teach, and then Bishop Carroll invited Elizabeth to found a religious order in Emmitsburg, Maryland, with the charism of teaching young girls.

As a mother of young children with no experience in religious life, Elizabeth hesitatingly accepted and set out with her daughters and sisters-in-law to Emmitsburg, where she was

set on a course to become Mother to a community of sisters and organizer of a new educational system.

Reading the accounts of those first days in Emmitsburg, one finds an image of early American pioneer life, with the first sisters laboring to begin their mission. In an untouched frontier landscape of mountains and big skies, conditions were poor and sickness rampant. Yet with perseverance and the assistance of the nearby Sulpician Fathers at Mount Saint Mary's College, they founded St. Joseph's Academy and Free School.

And so this first religious community established in the United States founded the country's first Catholic school for girls in the United States, rooted in a commitment to the Catholic faith and extending the promise of education beyond the elite. While boarders from wealthier Catholic families supported the institution, the school accepted many local and less fortunate students for free. St. Elizabeth proved to be an exceptional Mother to her religious sisters, and also a more traditional mother figure for the students, as women flocked to join the order and students filled up the desks.

Her sisters took the rule of the Daughters of Charity founded by St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac over a century earlier, and were known as the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's. By the time of St. Elizabeth's death, her sisters had expanded their apostolate to orphanages, hospitals, and schools, with branches of the order appearing across the United States; thousands of sisters continue these vital ministries today.

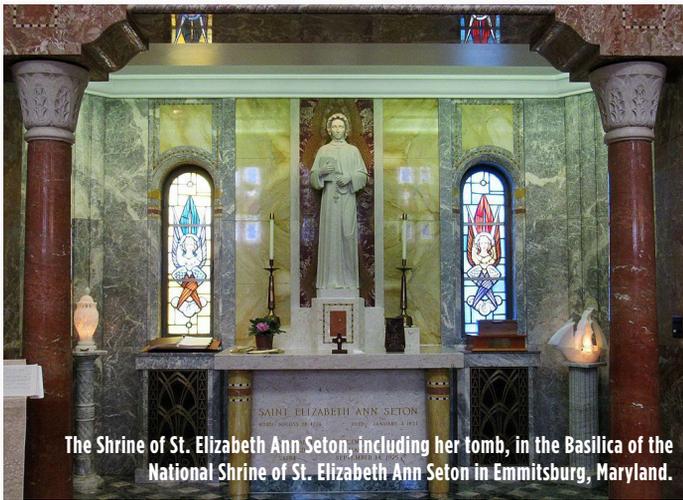
In a time when institutions and resources were limited, especially for the poor, she created a network that would care for generations of immigrants and struggling Americans, and that network still serves that purpose today. In St. Elizabeth's last days, as she clung to our Lord in prayer, she urged her sisters "Be children of the Church,"⁵ and they have remained true to that command.

Celebrating this Bicentennial of Mother Seton together helps us understand so powerfully and appreciate so deeply the "mystic chords of memory" of our women's religious communities and all they have done to share the Light of Christ in American history with such courage, charity and prophetic missionary daring.

Reflecting on St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's life thus offers us both inspiration and guidance in our own challenging times. Perhaps first and foremost, we find in this unlikely saint a story that testifies to the importance of surrendering to God's will in the many trials and upheavals of our lives.

Her path of faith and the desire for God above all else brought her first more deeply into a Protestantism that left her unsatisfied. On a trip to Italy to save her husband, she





The Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, including her tomb, in the Basilica of the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

lost him. As a young widow with so many relying on her, St. Elizabeth was called to abandon the safety net of her society by entering the Catholic faith, choosing rather to rely on God's providence.

In spite of constant misgivings, she went on to found a vibrant religious order and school without ever having been a religious herself. With recurrent doubts and fears, she entrusted herself to God and made a leap of faith to follow Him. St. Elizabeth was "attentive to the voice of grace" throughout her life, and at each turn, found herself blessed in ways she would never have imagined.⁶

Beyond this, we can see how in God's providence those ups and downs were an essential part of her success. Having come from New York's elite society—she and her husband were among the hosts of President Washington's 65th Birthday gala and were neighbors to the Hamiltons and the Burrs—she was able to navigate the rarified air of elite circles, engaging and challenging those within, often drawing support for her endeavors.



St. Elizabeth Ann Seton depicted in a stained-glass window at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, West Hempstead.

At the same time, as a widow who knew what it meant to depend on others and who fought to be self-reliant, she was unafraid to get her hands dirty and connect with those she served at all levels. She was a woman who had endured much in her life, and could say with Saint Paul, "I have become all things to all, to save at least some."⁷

As we look at the challenges St. Elizabeth faced, we can only understand her life by recognizing that she faced those challenges as an American to her core. Still a young nation full of rugged lands and bustling new cities, America was considered, and perhaps still could be considered, a nation of pragmatism.

Thousands of miles across the Atlantic from the Old World, Americans needed to find new solutions to New World problems. St. Elizabeth did just that. She had a desire to remedy social ills even before her conversion, engaging in work caring for widows and orphans. As a Catholic, she was a key player in establishing the Church within the United States.

With Bishop Carroll and the early American clergy, she was part of those first conversations seeking to navigate the treacherous waters of anti-Catholicism on the one hand and religious indifference on the other. And in establishing her new institutions, she was ready to modify and abandon old structures if necessary.

Her sisters could not be cloistered; they needed to be actively engaged in their new work. The habits and rule of life could not be as precise as in other orders because of their rugged life in western Maryland. Protestant students would be admitted, and evangelization efforts would be mild because it was necessary to keep peace and build understanding in a non-Catholic nation. Her practicality and creativity were essential to her success.

Most importantly, her actions were inspired by a deep spirit of prayer. In a perfect complement to her American practicality, St. Elizabeth knew that no work can bring forth fruit unless it is built upon the foundation of prayer. Her letters and journal show time after time her desire for peace and prayer, underscoring the greatest desire of her heart, that she and all those she loved would be together in heaven.

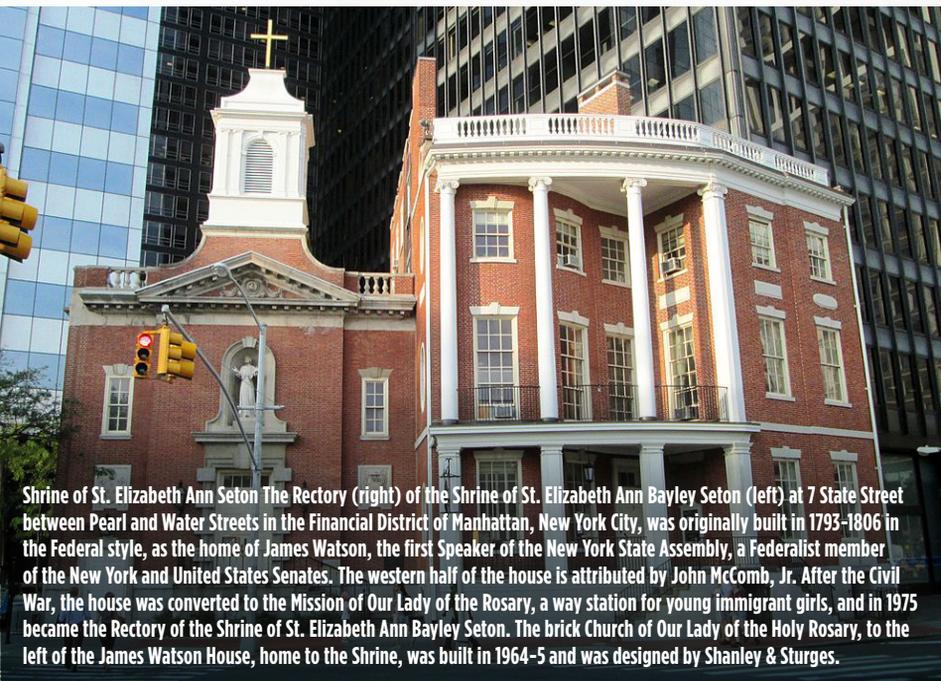
As responsibilities as a mother and Mother prevented her from praying as much as she would have liked, her prayer strengthened her and gave her focus in carrying out her mission. In the course of transforming from Mrs. William Seton to Mother Seton and building a life for herself and countless others in Maryland and across the United States, St. Elizabeth buried her husband, two of her daughters, countless relatives and younger sisters of her order. In the face of her challenges and the sorrow of losing so many loved ones, her writings continually display her hope of their immortality and joy at their being with God in eternal peace.

In our own diocese, we are challenged to share the same profound faith and bold pragmatism that inspired St. Elizabeth



Photo of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Regional Catholic School, Bellmore.

Photo by Ed Casey



Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton The Rectory (right) of the Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton (left) at 7 State Street between Pearl and Water Streets in the Financial District of Manhattan, New York City, was originally built in 1793-1806 in the Federal style, as the home of James Watson, the first Speaker of the New York State Assembly, a Federalist member of the New York and United States Senates. The western half of the house is attributed by John McComb, Jr. After the Civil War, the house was converted to the Mission of Our Lady of the Rosary, a way station for young immigrant girls, and in 1975 became the Rectory of the Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton. The brick Church of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, to the left of the James Watson House, home to the Shrine, was built in 1964-5 and was designed by Shanley & Sturges.

Ann Seton to love and serve God by building the institutions that have encouraged and supported countless Americans from our nation's first days to today. Just as she was called to lay the groundwork for Catholic education, we too are called to be visionaries in rebuilding the system she founded.

In a new age, like her, we are challenged to leave behind old ways and embark upon new ventures like the *Morning Star Initiative*. And like her, we must navigate complicated questions in a divided society. When Catholicism is once again unwelcome in the public square, how can we hand on our faith to the next generation?

While so many negative influences draw our children away from Christ and His Church, how can we create a wholesome and faith-nurturing Emmitsburg in our own parishes and communities? In a culture that seems to have grown cold, how can we stoke that fire of zeal for the Lord which attracted so many to the Sisters of Charity and could attract so many today to religious life and the priesthood?

Looking to St. Elizabeth as we ask these questions, we can see the answers in her own life. It is when we are profoundly faithful to God's will, when we are eminently loyal to His Church, when we are unstinting in our desire to preach the truth of Christ with charity and prudence, that seeds of faith will be planted, and hope will sprout for a new and more vibrant Catholic future in the United States.

We call to mind the words of Pope St. Paul VI at the canonization Mass of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton:

Rejoice, we say to the great nation of the United States of America. Rejoice for your glorious daughter. Be proud of her. And know how to preserve her fruitful heritage. This most beautiful figure of a holy woman presents to the world and to history the affirmation of new and authentic riches that are yours: that religious spirituality which your temporal prosperity seemed to obscure and almost make impossible.

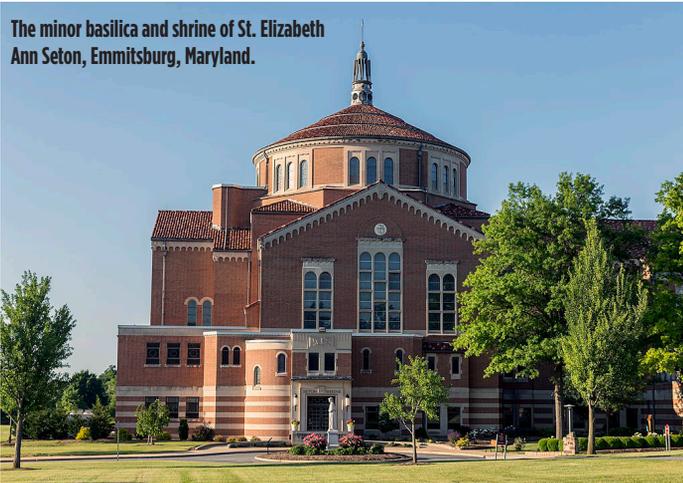
Your land too, America, is indeed worthy of receiving into its fertile ground the seed of evangelical holiness. And here is a splendid proof-among many others-of this fact.⁸

Let us rejoice in the great gift of our first American saint's witness. Let us ask that through the intercession of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton we may be blessed with the vision and strength, like her, to engage our times boldly and build up our faith for the salvation of souls and the glory of Almighty God.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ John O. Barres

Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre



The minor basilica and shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emmitsburg, Maryland.

¹For an excellent biography please refer to the recent work: Catherine O'Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton: American Saint* (Ithaca: Three Hills, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2018).



²Elizabeth Ann Seton, *Memoir, Letters and Journal of Elizabeth Seton, Convert to the Catholic Faith and Sister of Charity*, vol. 1, ed. Robert Seton (New York: P. O'Shea, 1869), 142.

³Seton, *Memoir*, 198.

⁴*Ibid.*, 146.

⁵O'Donnell, *Seton*, 418.

⁶Elizabeth Ann Seton, *Memoir, Letters and Journal of Elizabeth Seton, Convert to the Catholic Faith and Sister of Charity*, vol. 2, ed. Robert Seton (New York: P. O'Shea, 1869), 242.

⁷1 Corinthians 9:22 (NABRE).

⁸Paul VI, "Canonization of Elizabeth Ann Seton, Homily of Holy Father Paul VI" (Rome, September 14, 1975), http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/homilies/1975/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19750914.html.



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