



Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

The First American Born Saint

--In Her Own Words:

“Oh, be with me and I shall be whole. Comfort Thy servants whose trust is in Thee, bend our minds to Thy will, enlarge us with Thy Grace, sustain us with thy blessing, until through the gate of death and the grave we pass to our joyful resurrection.”



Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born August 28, 1774 in New York City and was baptized in the Episcopalian faith. Her mother died when Elizabeth and her two sisters were very young. Her father, a physician and the first Public Health Officer in America, married a woman who did not particularly care for the Bayley girls. When Elizabeth's sister died, she and her older sister moved to New Rochelle to live with their uncle. In her mid-teens, Elizabeth returned to New York City to become part of the debutante scene. It was at a ball that she met her future husband, William Seton, a member of one of the wealthiest and most prominent New York families. (William was the first to bring the Stradivarius violin to America.)

Elizabeth and William married, had five children, and enjoyed living in luxury. They raised William's younger siblings after their parents died. William took over the family business, mismanaged it, and the Seton empire went bankrupt. Elizabeth wrote of the humiliation in having to watch their personal belongings repossessed. She watched as her husband deteriorated emotionally and physically from their financial situation. To lift his spirits, Elizabeth made arrangements with a former business associate, the Felicchi family, to visit them in Italy. During the two month voyage, William was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Upon their arrival in Italy, he was detained on board for several weeks. Two weeks after his release, William Seton died.

The Felicchis cared for Elizabeth while she awaited her return passage to the States. Through them, she became acquainted with Catholicism and found herself drawn to the faith. Antonio Felicchi accompanied Elizabeth back to America and instructed her in Catholicism on the voyage home.

When Elizabeth announced to her family and friends her plans to convert, she was met with anger and hostility. Few friends and fewer family members supported this bankrupt widow. Elizabeth was hired as a teacher in a boarding school but was quickly dismissed because of her religion.

Archbishop John Carroll heard of Elizabeth's situation and invited her to Baltimore. Under his direction,

Elizabeth opened the first Catholic school for girls in the United States in 1806 (tuition was \$250). Elizabeth desired to be part of a religious community. After much prayer and guidance, Elizabeth formed a community for women called the Sister of St. Joseph. Elizabeth took her vows in 1809, assumed a religious habit modeled after the widow's clothing she wore during her mourning period, and became known as "Mother Seton".

The Sisters of St. Joseph were given land in Emmitsburg, Maryland by a wealthy convert, Samuel Cooper. Samuel was so impressed with Elizabeth Ann Seton that he not only donated land, but stipulated money for the support of women religious and for the growth of Mother Seton Catholic school. On June 24, 1809, Mother Seton arrived in Emmitsburg and on February 22, 1810 the first Catholic school opened.

During her life as a religious, Mother Seton expanded her community to include several schools, orphanages, hospitals and child care centers. Elizabeth Ann Seton was truly a remarkable woman. She was a wife, convert, mother, widow, single parent, religious foundress and the first America born saint.

Mother Seton died on January 4, 1821.. Her last words were, "Be children of the Church."