

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

BORN 1774; DIED 1821

WIDOW AND FOUNDER

FEAST DAY: JANUARY 4

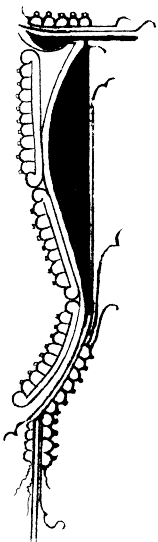
IT IS NEVER EASY to follow God's will, and doing so when God seems to rob one of happiness again and again is especially difficult. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, bereaved of her deeply-loved husband, three beloved sisters-in-law, and two of her children, stripped of her comfortable life and

plunged into poverty, and shunned by her family and friends because of her conversion to the Catholic faith, shows the way to respond to God's will in faith and trust.

Elizabeth was born in New York City just before the beginning of the American Revolutionary War to a family distinguished on both sides. Her father, Richard Bayley, was a well-known physician, the first professor of anatomy at King's College (modern Columbia University), and a health official for the Port of New York. He was a British Loyalist during the Revolutionary War. Her mother, Catherine Charlton, was a daughter of the rector of an Episcopalian church on Staten Island. Elizabeth was the middle of three daughters, although her younger sister died at two. Her mother died when Elizabeth was three, and her father married Charlotte Barclay. Seven children were born of this marriage. Elizabeth loved her half-siblings but was often lonely, as it appears that she and her older sister were not well received by their stepmother, and they lived with an uncle in New Rochelle several times while growing up. Elizabeth had a wonderful personality — outgoing, warm, vivacious, and charming. She also had a hot temper but learned to control it. She was well educated from a secular point of view, but her father was not religious. Nevertheless, from an early age she had a strong sense of God's presence in her life and was a faithful Episcopalian. As she grew older, she read not only novels but the Scriptures, lives of the saints, and Thomas á Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. She wore a crucifix, was devoted to her guardian angel, and showed an early concern for the poor.

At nineteen, Elizabeth married wealthy shipping merchant William Seton, and between 1795 and 1803 were born Anna, William, Catherine, Richard, and Rebecca. Elizabeth loved dancing and the theater, but also, with her sister-in-law Rebecca Seton, engaged in so much charity that they were called the "Protestant Sisters of Charity." Among her charitable works was the foundation of a society to help poor widows with young children. In 1798, Elizabeth's father-in-law died, leaving her husband to care for his many siblings





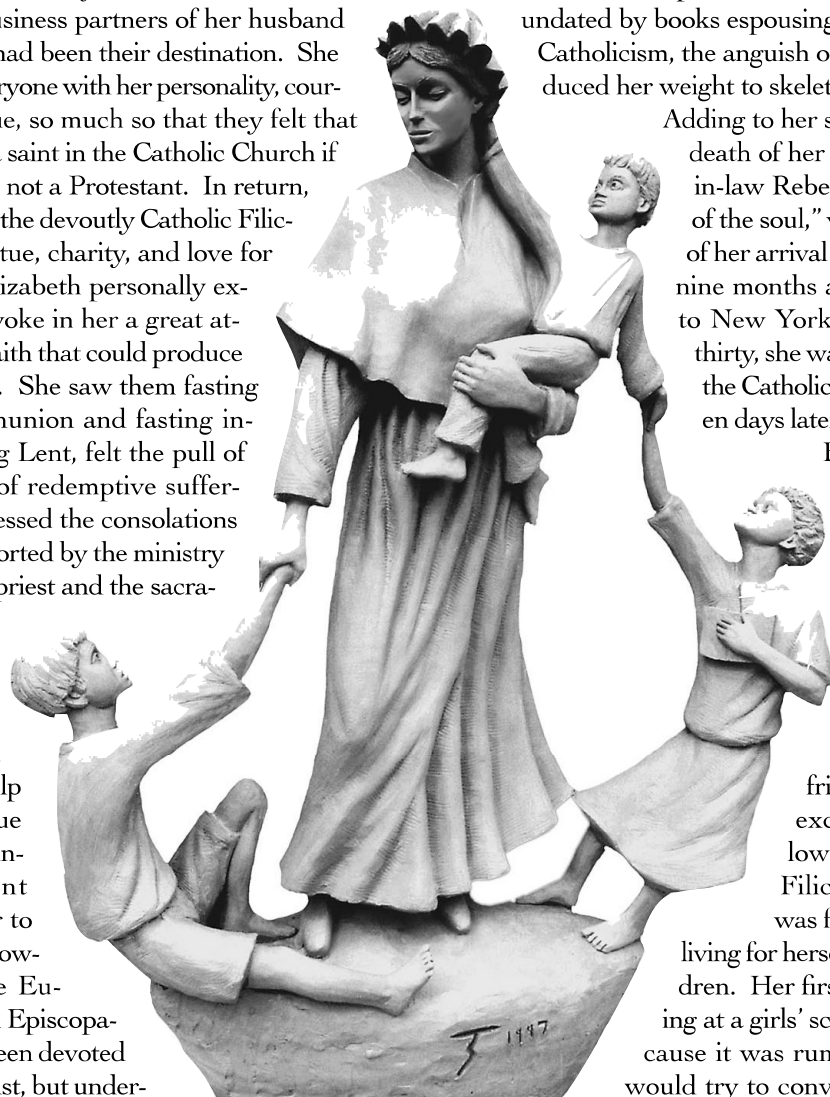
and the family firm. A series of business misfortunes resulting from the Napoleonic wars caused the firm to go bankrupt in 1800, and soon after Elizabeth's husband fell ill with tuberculosis. In October 1803, he and Elizabeth set out for Italy with Anna, then eight, leaving the four other children, ages seven to infancy, with Rebecca Seton. Husband and wife hoped that the mild Italian climate would prolong his life. However, news of a yellow fever epidemic arrived with his ship. Quarantine in a damp, cold building in Pisa from the last week of November through the first three weeks of December resulted in William's death eight days after the quarantine was ended. A widow at twenty-nine, Elizabeth deeply mourned his loss but sought comfort in knowing that his last months were focused on God.

Elizabeth and Anna stayed in Italy for several months, supported by the kindness of the Filicci family, business partners of her husband whose home had been their destination. She entranced everyone with her personality, courage, and virtue, so much so that they felt that she could be a saint in the Catholic Church if only she were not a Protestant. In return, the witness of the devoutly Catholic Filiccis, whose virtue, charity, and love for each other Elizabeth personally experienced, awoke in her a great attraction to a faith that could produce such holiness. She saw them fasting before Communion and fasting intensely during Lent, felt the pull of the doctrine of redemptive suffering, and witnessed the consolations of death supported by the ministry of a Catholic priest and the sacraments. She developed a devotion to the Blessed Mother and begged her help to find the true faith. The principal element that drew her to the Church, however, was the Eucharist. As an Episcopalian she had been devoted to the Eucharist, but understood it only to be symbolic.

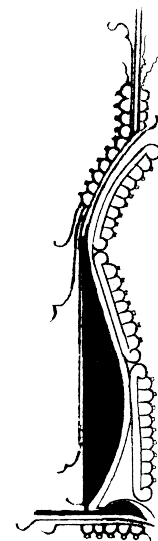
In the Catholic Church she found the Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and, longing to receive him, she begged God for faith. She wrote to her sister-in-law Rebecca: "How happy would we be, if we believed what these dear souls believe: that they possess God in the Sacrament, and that he remains in their churches and is carried to them when they are sick! ... The other day, in a moment of excess distress, I fell on my knees without thinking when the Blessed Sacrament passed by, and cried in an agony to God to bless me, if he was there — that my whole soul desired only him." God answered her prayer. She returned to New York six months after her husband's death, almost sure she desired to become a Catholic. She encountered strong opposition from her family, friends, and Episcopal spiritual advisor, and leaned for spiritual support on the Filicci brother who had accompanied her to New York. Undated by books espousing and opposing Catholicism, the anguish of indecision reduced her weight to skeletal proportions.

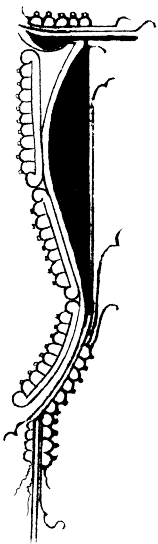
Adding to her sorrow was the death of her beloved sister-in-law Rebecca, her "sister of the soul," within a month of her arrival home. Finally, nine months after returning to New York, at the age of thirty, she was received into the Catholic Church. Eleven days later, she made her First Communion, and she wrote: "At last ... at last God is mine and I am his!"

Abandoned by family and friends, destitute except for an allowance from the Filiccis, Elizabeth was forced to earn a living for herself and her children. Her first effort, teaching at a girls' school, failed because it was rumored that she would try to convert the pupils; their parents withdrew them all



A Helping Hand, by Timothy Schmalz





and the school closed. She then opened a boarding school for boys that produced a modest income. Things became even more difficult when her sister-in-law Cecilia Seton, then fifteen, made it known that she, too, desired to become a Catholic and was thrown out of her own home. Anti-Catholic sentiment in New York was so strong that Cecilia's intention led to threats by the New York legislature to have Elizabeth expelled from the state. Cecilia nevertheless became a Catholic, in 1806.

Elizabeth's vocation became clear when she was invited by Archbishop John Carroll, the first bishop of the Church in the United States, to open a school for girls in Baltimore next to St. Mary's Seminary. She arrived in Baltimore in 1808 at thirty-three and opened St. Joseph's School, the first Catholic elementary school in the United States. She loved going to daily Mass, which had been difficult to do in New York, and the school prospered. The following year, she and her assistants were given a rule of life and began wearing religious habits and, a year later, she made her first religious vows.

1809 was also the year that Elizabeth moved her little community to Emmitsburg, Maryland, a town north of Frederick just below the Pennsylvania border, to a location near Mount St. Mary's College and Seminary. In 1810 she opened the first free school for poor children in the United States. Together with others, she was joined by Cecilia and another sister-in-law, Harriet Seton, who had become a Catholic the previous year. The first months in the primitive setting of Emmitsburg were ones of great hardship and privation, and Elizabeth again suffered bereavement when both Cecilia and Harriet died in 1810. Two years later, the little religious community adopted the rule of the Daughters of Charity founded by St. Vincent de Paul in France, naming themselves the Daughters of Charity of St. Joseph (DC) and becoming the first religious order for women founded in the United States. Archbishop Carroll modified the rule to allow Elizabeth to continue to raise her children, then ages seventeen to nine. Against

her will, she was elected superior, and she and eighteen nuns took their first vows in 1813. The year before, sixteen-year-old Anna had died of tuberculosis immediately after being allowed to make her vows early. Four years later, Elizabeth's daughter Rebecca, then just fourteen, also died of tuberculosis.

In her thirteen years as a Catholic educator and religious, Elizabeth's influence was immense. Her zeal for teaching inspired many women to join her, and the Daughters of Charity grew rapidly. An excellent administrator, she laid the

foundation for the Catholic parochial (parish) school system in the United States, training teachers and writing textbooks as well as overseeing the growth of the Daughters of Charity. She saw

the purpose of Catholic education to be bringing students to live good Catholic lives with their eyes fixed on eternity. Her love for her students was warmly returned, and many kept in touch after completing their education. She had a gift for friendship and carried on a voluminous correspondence. She also ministered to the poor and sick, both white and black, and opened orphanages in Philadelphia and New York. For her own community she wrote hymns, composed music, and translated many French spiritual works. Her spiritual diary gives evidence of much spiritual desolation during these years, along with her complete faith in God and her desire to do only what he willed.

A remarkable indication of Elizabeth's ability to lead others to God was the response of several of her own family. Her surviving daughter Catherine took vows as a Sister of Mercy and her grandson Robert became the Catholic Archbishop of Heliopolis (Baalbek, Syria). Not only did two of her sisters-in-law follow her into the Catholic faith, but so did her half-nephew James Roosevelt Bayley, who eventually became the first bishop of Newark, New Jersey and the eighth archbishop of Baltimore. By her life and holy example, she was a living embodiment of St. Paul's admonition to the Corinthians: *"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ"* (1 Cor 11:1).

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