

Everyone's Sister of Charity

A Homily for Solemn Vespers on the Feast of

Saint Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton

The Church of Saint Andrew, Richmondtown, Staten Island, NY

January 2, 2005

What does one do when asked to *say a few words* about Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton at a special liturgy in her honor? Since her beatification in 1963, and her canonization as the first American-born saint in 1975, hasn't everything been said? How might one approach the rare privilege of preaching about the elegant, eighteenth century New York belle in the very church of which her maternal grandfather served as rector for three decades before and during the American War of Independence? I am sure there are others, perhaps even present here today, who could speak more knowledgeably about the diminutive communicant of Manhattan's Trinity Church whom fellow parishioners called the *Protestant Sister of Charity*. However, I was invited given the task of guest preacher, and I relish the opportunity. I thank the rector and the parishioners of St. Andrew's for affording me the honor of speaking in this historic sacred space, which has been serving Staten Island Christians for three hundred years.

In 1983, I was ministering in England as an Air Force chaplain. A kind Jesuit allowed me to make an overnight retreat in the Oxfordshire quarters of the well-respected Anglican priest and author, who became a famous Catholic cardinal, John Henry Newman. The next day he presented me with a first class relic (a piece of a bone) of Elizabeth Seton, encased in a stunning, bronze, cruciform reliquary. He told me "Father, take it; after all, she was a New Yorker, and anyway, someday, you'll need it!" Twenty years to the month, I was named the pastor of the Parish of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Shrub Oak, New York, the first named in her honor. Being a native New Yorker, I already was a longtime admirer of Mother Seton, but having that dramatic reminder of Mother Seton on my desk over the years made me more keenly aware of the *common wealth of faith* we Protestant and Catholics treasure as believers,

How very fitting it is to have heard earlier those clearly challenging words from the fifty-eighth chapter of the Prophet Isaiah. What a magnificent summary for what we see in *everyone's Sister of Charity*, for it speaks about the personal responsibility God expects of his People, and which Elizabeth Seton embodied so definitively:

... loosen the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke ... share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, cover them, and not hide yourself from your own kin ... then you shall call and the Lord will answer ... the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs ... you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water ... you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in (Isaiah 58: 3-12).

You might say those *corporal works of mercy*, in a way, served as the inspiration, and later the *business plan*, for the consecrated life Elizabeth Bayley Seton and her Sisters of Charity, embraced on the donated Emmitsburg, Maryland, farm at the beginning of the 19th century. It is from such biblical imperatives that parochial schools, orphanages, hospitals and colleges of all kinds under their guidance would emerge throughout North America. It's no surprise the Sisters would take as their religious congregation's motto, *The charity of Christ impels us* (2 Corinthians 5:14)!

When most of us think of St. Elizabeth Seton, we picture the mature Mother, foundress of Catholic Sisters of Charity, and of the American Catholic school system. We forget that for thirty of her forty-six years (as an infant, child, teenager and young wife, mother and widow), Miss Bayley, and later as Mrs. William Seton, she was a devout Protestant and parishioner of Trinity Church on Wall Street. There, most probably, she became a Christian and learned about the demands of Christ's charity. She was rightly proud of her deep, familial and cultural Christian roots, which, through the early years of her life, became deeper, and more thoroughly American and independent. With the help of her spiritual director, the Reverend Henry Hobart, she searched for, and found a personal relationship with God, and this sustained her for the rest of her life. Parishioners like yourselves surrounded and helped her know and cherish her faith and its implications. She would use that unshakable understanding of the divine to withstand personal losses, loneliness, illnesses, discouragements, disappointments, widowhood. We do well to give credit to the Christian church family, which informed and inspired this incredible, tiny woman of faith to become a saint without peer. An Anglican deep imprint is fabulously evident in *everyone's Sister of Charity*.

Among devout and compassionate Christians in this city Elizabeth Bayley became a passionate Christian with an unswerving love of God. She developed a natural love of prayer, a respect for the bible, a strong sense of morality, a consistent ethic of life. As she matured and eventually married, she became an early proponent of education for women, especially the daughters of the poor, who appreciated the importance of a layperson's spiritual life and the need for spiritual mentoring. She embodied unusual strength of character and the

courage needed for a lived faith. Her passion for everyday social justice at Trinity Church, especially among the underprivileged prompted her to found the *Society for the Relief of Poor Widows and Small Children* just after she married at age nineteen. The independent, wise spirit, the open, inquiring mind, the laser-like focus on, and trust in, God's will for her and those whom He placed in her care, the refusal to quit in the face of overwhelming problems, the life-long discipline of spiritual writing, the devotion to the church and especially to the Holy Eucharist--all defined the *grand dame* who took God at his word and helped so many become, and remain, tireless, faithful apostles of love. Without the seedbed of faith, hope and charity she experienced among Episcopalians, Elizabeth would not have perfected those characteristics which would be the hallmarks of the Sisters of Charity for two hundred years.

Hazard, yet forward, her Episcopal family motto, and *Be children of the Church*, her last word to her Catholic sisters in Emmitsburg, Maryland, frame quite neatly a dynamic, spiritual philosophy with the sturdy, flexible moorings needed for practical and Christian service. Saintliness surely required her to *do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with [her] God* (Micah 6:8), but with the richness and variety of the Christian message learned as a young person she was able to do so with extraordinary élan . . . bravely, confidently, and with a will of iron . So many of the golden girders that would support her and the living edifice that would become her strong, resilient Catholic congregation of religious women may be traced to the faith, hope and especially the charity of the firm and faithful Anglicanism planted deep within her so many years prior. I know I speak for many Catholics when I say we shall always owe your faith community a deep debt of gratitude, as we acknowledge *our joy* was first yours in Elizabeth Ann, for she was a committed, creative Catholic precisely because she had first been a committed, creative Protestant. I am convinced Christ's love can only be tastier and more long-lived when we Christians choose to be *salt for the earth and light of the world* (Matthew 5:13-14b), **together**, sharing our *common wealth* of faith, as *everyone's Sister of Charity* demonstrated long ago!

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, pray for us and with us!

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