

The Seton “Italian Connection”

An Adventure in Livorno

by Monsignor Thomas P, Sandi, Pastor, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church, Shrub Oak, NY

The New York import-export businessman, William Seton, the husband of the future Saint Elizabeth Bayley Seton, had fallen on hard times, went bankrupt in 1800, and became mortally ill in 1803. On October 1st, the couple took their eldest daughter, Anina, and travelled to Livorno (Leghorn), the port city on the Ligurian Sea at the western edge of Tuscany, Italy, hoping the pure, clean sea air might affect a cure for the tuberculosis William had contracted. Quarantined for a month on an island because of an outbreak of yellow fever in New York, they eventually were allowed to disembark. Sadly, within 38 days, he succumbed to the disease, died two days after Christmas, and was buried in the local English cemetery. The crushed, young widow and her daughter had nowhere to turn other than the arms of their wealthy Italian hosts, the Filicchi (fill-IC-key) family and received more than they ever could imagine. Eight-year old Anina remarked once, “Oh, Mama, how many friends God has provided for us in this strange land, for they are our friends before they know us!” Born and bred an Episcopalian, Elizabeth found herself very moved by their devout Catholic faith, and the seeds of conversion to Catholicism were sown wide and deep with spiritual practices and apologetics presented in a form the widow Seton would understand. But the intense devotion of the Filicchis in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament touched her most profoundly and fortified her commitment to Catholicism. She returned to New York in early spring, 1804, and in mid-January 1805, she asked to be received into the Catholic Church at St. Peter’s on Barclay Street.

Ever since being appointed pastor of our parish, I had wanted to visit the gravesite of Elizabeth Seton’s husband, William at the Mother Seton Church in Livorno, Italy. Finally, I was getting the chance to do so. I was scheduled to be on pilgrimage in Florence, June 28-30, 2009, with 21 others, courtesy of St. Theresa Parish in the Bronx, so I made arrangements to be free on the 30th, rent an automobile, and drive to Livorno. I had communicated by e-mail with **Don Gino Franchi**, founding pastor of **la Parrocchia Madre Seton** (Mother Seton Parish), and looked forward to meeting him. He only spoke Italian, so I prepared myself as best I could. Amazing how language opens doors and brings smiles of recognition and respect!

Early in the morning of the 30th, I left by taxi for the rental agency which was located one block off the Arno River. The young lady behind the desk helped me complete the rental agreement and handed me a set of shiny new keys. She said, “Your brand new Mercedes is outside!” I asked for additional directions, and she calmly said to just follow the green *Superstrada* signs for “Livorno/Pisa.” *Superstrade* are Italy’s “interstate highways.” OK, here we go! I stepped outside, saw the gleaming, silver beauty, and began my mental checklist--assessing the vehicle dimensions, looking for any dents, locating and trying out the usual gauges and controls from the ignition to fuel to the radio. (I took notice of a local police station across the street.) Satisfied and ready to begin, I whispered a travel prayer, backed up, very cautiously, with traffic whizzing by, and drove down the street. I crossed the Arno River, made a right and saw green signs right away! *Bravo, padre!* I reassured myself, “Relax; you routinely drive in New York City, and as an Air Force chaplain, you drove in London, Rome and in northern Italy. Zipping along, I was entranced by the well-engineered roads and magnificent Tuscan countryside. During the 1¼ hour trip, I reviewed the directions, practiced my Italian, and prayed the rosary with a fervor I never knew. The time went quickly—110 km/h (62 mph) occasionally morphed into 120km/h (75 mph) here and there--and before I knew it there I was in the center of Livorno. The [capital](#) of the [province](#) of the same name, **Livorno** has a population of fewer than 200,000.

A turn here, and a doubling back there, suddenly I was in front of Mother Seton Church (Parrocchia Madre Seton), Piazza Maria Lavagna, which resembled the other homes on the small square. The parish had been founded in 1968, five years after the beatification of Elizabeth, and for forty-one years, the parishioners have reveled in the part their city played in the life of the first American-born saint.

I parked the car, thanked God for a safe journey, walked around the corner and there walking directly toward me was Don Gino Franchi! He was dressed quite formally certainly for a Tuesday in July—in black rabat and suit. He immediately said to me, “You must be Father Sandi.” “I said “Yes,” and we shook hands. “Ah, *amaranto*; I see you are wearing our football (A.S. Livorno Calcio--soccer) colors!” he continued. I realized he was talking about the maroon golf shirt I was wearing, embroidered with “Simply Seton, Shrub Oak.” I had

packed a yellow version of it in my briefcase, but I did some quick thinking, and said, “Father, as soon as we get inside the church, I’ll give you ‘the shirt off my back.’” He roared with laughter. (I was just happy he understood my poor Italian!) As we walked towards the church, Don Gino remarked, “**I always thought we were the first parish in the world named after the first American saint, but now I see, your parish in Westchester is!**” Then he escorted me past the outdoor garden where a bronze statue of St. Elizabeth stood between busts of William Seton, her husband and Antonio Filicchi, the Seton’s business friend, on the other. At my feet were the two gravestones with basic information about each of them. We prayed for several minutes, and I thanked God for the privilege of finally standing there representing our beautiful parish in Shrub Oak. I thought of all the struggles of Mother Seton in the early 19th century, and those of our founding pastor, Monsignor Arthur Nugent, and the Sisters of Charity in the early 1960s at Shrub Oak. What giant shoulders we stand on! *The Charity of Christ compels us!*

Built to look like “a house among houses,” emphasizing that God lives among his people, the large church was wide and brightly lit by several plain windows. I noticed two striking paintings on either side of the altar: *Our Lady of Grace of Montenero* (after the famous portrait at the mountain shrine for all of Tuscany), the *Santuario di Santa Maria delle Grazie* (Our Lady of Grace Shrine on Montenero--Black Mountain); and *Mother Seton*, praying rosary, eyes on the heavens. Touching the ceiling on the wall to the right of the altar was a large, colorful **mural** depicting the Setons time in Livorno (1803-4), including their arrival at the port, being confined in the *lazaretto*, being received at the Filicchi mansion, her weeping at William’s tomb, and finally Mother Seton in heaven, representations of the six communities of Sisters of Charity who trace their origins to Mother Seton, and children of different ethnic backgrounds. In addition, there are pictured Pope John XXIII (who beatified her in 1963) and Pope Paul VI (who canonized her in 1975), and Don Gino Franchi himself! (He told me, not having seen this depiction until the dedication; he was a bit embarrassed and yet profoundly moved by his inclusion.) My eye naturally fell downward to the **baptismal font** below the mural. The mauve-colored granite font is topped by two, gigantic, matching, *Tridacna Gigas* clam shells from the South Pacific. The natural formations were coarsely but beautifully fluted, and smaller versions served as holy water fonts at church entrances. Behind the font and separated from the church by a stunning crystal wall is the elegant **Blessed Sacrament Chapel**, with a marble Altar of Repose, and a unique tabernacle, beautifully sculptured with translucent marble, in the form of the façade of the cathedral of San Francisco, California! Don Gino and I exchanged gifts. I gave him a Seton bulletin, photos of our patroness, a Parish Pictorial Directory, the self-guided tour of our church, a pewter medallion with the image of Elizabeth Seton, and one maroon golf shirt, embroidered with, “Simply Seton, Shrub Oak.” (We laughed again.) He gave me three Italian language books on Mother Seton and a 500-page volume, “A Dialogue of Friendship and Faith, Correspondence between the Setons and the Filicchis,” which he himself had edited.

Suddenly, two priests walked into the church, genuflected and greeted Don Gino with great affection. They were Philadelphia’s Cardinal Justin Rigali and Monsignor Walter Rector of Washington’s Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Fresh from the June 29th Mass at the Vatican, during which Pope Benedict conferred *pallia* on new metropolitan archbishops, including New York’s own new shepherd, Timothy M. Dolan), the duo wanted to visit this Italian shrine erected to the first American saint (just like me). After pleasant introduction, we all vested, along with the parish Deacon, Franco Caccavale, and celebrated the Eucharist in honor of St. Elizabeth in Italian and English, punctuated with Latin plainchant led by the cardinal. After signing a guest book in the sacristy, Cardinal Rigali and Monsignor Rossi departed, and Don Gino Deacon Franco and I headed out for lunch and a quick tour of the rich Livorno countryside. We shared a delicious lunch at a local restaurant in the hills, and then visited the famous mountain shrine (*santuario*) where the original painting of *Our Lady of Grace of Montenero*, patroness of Tuscany, is enshrined. This is the actual portrait (framed in a sunburst over the altar) which so profoundly moved the Young Widow Elizabeth Seton, when she attended Mass there with the Filicchi family in 1803, and contemplated the Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

Don Gino had just returned from attending a special ceremony at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC, where he presented the rector with a magnificently created, mosaic of this unique portrait. It,

like the massive, exterior dome of the basilica, was crafted at the world-renowned Mosaic School of Friuli in Spilimbergo, Italy.

Finally, we drove by the port of Livorno and what was the nearby Filicchi Palace. Don Gino kindly insisted I pose for photographs. How very gracious. I asked Don Gino to visit us someday; he agreed. Deacon Caccavale told me that Don Gino's Golden anniversary of Ordination would be celebrated on July 3, 2010. (What a tempting temptation for me to revisit!)

Soon, I realized I had to get back on the *superstrada* if I was to return the rental car to the agency before the 7:00 PM closing time. We gave each other a priestly blessing and hug, and on a spiritual high, I was off, having spent five of the happiest hours of my priesthood in the presence of fraternal joy, deep reverence, true beauty and saintly history. (And necessity being the mother of invention, my Italian wasn't so bad after all.) *St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, pray for us!*

Treat yourself by clicking on <http://www.madreseton.it/sito>, the website of Mother Seton Parish in Livorno, Italy. . Don't forget to then click on the tiny British flag under "Linguaggio" so you will see the English translation of the Italian website.