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CATHOLIC RETREATS

SITTING IN THE SIDE PEW
A RETREAT GUIDE ON SAINT ELIZABETH ANN SETON

written & presented by Fr. John Bartunek, LC, S.Th.D.
RCSpirituality.org

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

Saints are not superheroes; they are not demi-gods; they are simply our older brothers and sisters in the Church, and we are all members of the same spiritual family.

In other words, saints are regular, normal human beings, just like you and me, who have so generously cooperated with God's grace that they reached spiritual maturity in their lives here on earth, and so entered into heaven upon their death.

And by getting to know the saints, we can find fresh encouragement and wise guidance in our own spiritual journey. Here is how Pope Benedict XVI described the purpose of devotion to the saints in a homily on All Saints' Day:



... looking at the shining example of the Saints to reawaken within us the great longing to be like them; happy to live near God, in his light, in the great family of God's friends.

The saints' spiritual maturity reminds us of where we are going, and the stories of their journeys towards that maturity remind us that God's grace truly can get us there.

In this Retreat Guide, *Sitting in the Side Pew*, we are going to look at the shining example of North America's first native-born canonized saint, Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton.

She was born in 1774, two years before the Revolutionary War that led to the formation of the United States of America. She grew up in New York's high society as a member of the Episcopal Church, married at age 19, gave birth to five children, was widowed at age 29, and converted to the Catholic faith two years later.

In her brief 16 years as a Catholic, she founded North America's first native community of religious women (Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's), started the first free Catholic day school for girls, staffed by Sisters, and gave essential support and continuity to the country's first Catholic orphanage.

Some years after her death, Archbishop Francis Kenrick of Baltimore summed up her influence by pointing out that "Elizabeth Seton did more for the Church in America than all of us bishops put together."

And that can hardly be labeled an exaggeration, when we consider the vast impact of the religious communities and new religious orders that sprang from St. Elizabeth's first foundation, along with the millions of lives that have benefited from those congregations' charitable works and from the free Catholic education for girls.

But Elizabeth Seton herself saw very little of this. During her lifetime, her works remained small, and her life remained quite hidden and, in so many ways, ordinary. By her death at the young age of 46, her religious community had reached about 50 members and her school in Emmitsburg, Maryland came close to about a hundred students.

But this mustard seed was able to grow, because it was planted in the rich soil of faith and nourished by a love for God purified in the crucible of the cross.

This Retreat Guide, *Sitting in the Side Pew*, will show what the life and work of Mother Seton has to say to us today:

- In the first meditation, we will peek into two scenes from Elizabeth's life that remind us of how God works in all of our lives.
- In the second meditation, we will look at two more scenes that illustrate the deepest mystery of Christian living: the magnificent fruitfulness of the cross.
- And in the conference, we will get practical and go over a tried and true spiritual exercise that can help us all follow in the footsteps of this simple but inspiring woman — socialite, wife, mother, widow, foundress, educator, and saint.

But before we dive in, let's take a few moments to thank God for this chance to spend some time with him. Let's ask him to grant us the blessings we need most, and to open our hearts to hear whatever it is he wants to tell us through our prayerful reflection on the life of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

FIRST MEDITATION

The Whisper of Love

Every single one of us is called to become a saint — because only that will lead to our greatest possible fulfillment; it's what God created us for. The Catechism puts it like this:



All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. All are called to holiness...

– CCC 2013

But becoming a saint is not something that any of us can do just by trying real hard. Sanctity, also known as holiness, requires our effort of cooperation, but its primary source is God; God's grace makes saints. And that simple fact should fill all of us with intense hope, and maybe even a bit of relief.

All we have to do to reach the fulfillment we yearn for is to cooperate with God, to listen to him and go where he leads. That's all!

Here's how Pope Benedict XVI explained it:



Holiness demands a constant effort, but it is possible for everyone because, rather than a human effort, it is first and foremost a gift of God...

– Homily, 1 November 2006

In the case of some saints, this ongoing gift of God arrives in dramatic fashion — through visions and miracles. But in the case of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, it arrived in normal, ordinary ways, just as it does for most of us.

If we can learn to cooperate with God in these ordinary ways, we will find ourselves making rapid spiritual progress, just as she did. So let's look at two times in her life when God worked powerfully through ordinary circumstances.

FIRST MEDITATION

Under the Chestnut Tree

Elizabeth Bayley had a good, but not perfect, childhood. Her mother died when Elizabeth was not quite three years old. Her father was a dedicated physician and medical scientist.

Even though Dr. Bayley married again, his work, along with the apparent aloofness of Elizabeth's stepmother, required him to send his two daughters to live with relatives outside New York City for long periods of time.

Luckily, there were plenty of options and plenty of cousins, and the Bayley clan proved to be a lively and engaging society for a bright young girl to grow up in.

Dr. Bayley made a point of giving Elizabeth a solid education. This included religious formation, of course, in the Episcopal Church. But it also included music, and literature, and social experience with the most educated families of the budding American Republic.

Elizabeth loved to read, and to dance, and to play the piano — and she enjoyed her long periods visiting relatives in the country. In all these ordinary situations, she was able to hear and heed the whispers of God's love.

During one of her stays in the country, when she was fourteen-years-old, she had a delightful encounter with her Lord that she described years later. Her description beautifully illustrates one of God's favorite ways to speak to our hearts — through the simple beauties of his creation. She wrote,



In the year 1789, when my father was in England, one morning in May, in the lightness of a cheerful heart, I jumped in the wagon that was driving to the woods for brush, about a mile from home; the boy who drove it began to cut, and I set off in the woods, soon found an outlet in a meadow; and a chestnut tree with several young ones growing around it, found rich moss under it and a warm sun. Here, then, was a sweet bed — the air still a clear blue vault above — the numberless sounds of spring melody and joy — the sweet clovers and wild flowers I had got by the way, and a heart as innocent as human heart could be, filled even with enthusiastic love to God and admiration of His works... God was my Father, my all. I prayed, sang hymns, cried, laughed, talking to myself of how far he could place me above all sorrow. Then I laid still to enjoy the heavenly peace that came over my soul; and I am sure, in the two hours so enjoyed, grew ten years in the spiritual life...

The intense beauty of a spring day in the country — not a vision of angels or an apparition of saints, just a bright hour in the meadows under a chestnut tree; there God whispered his love to her heart, and there she heard his voice and delighted in it.

I think we can all relate to the scene, so innocent and simple, and yet so authentic and powerful. We have all been moved with a kind of heavenly nostalgia at the marvels of nature, God's first book of revelation.

Let us not underestimate it; let us not be deaf to it.

FIRST MEDITATION

Sitting in the Side Pew

Although God often calls out to us through external messengers, like the beauties of nature, he also sometimes moves us from within. This is how Elizabeth found herself becoming a Catholic.

She had taken a trip to Italy with her ailing husband, William — the doctors thought that a change of atmosphere might help treat his consumption. William survived the voyage, but died soon afterwards. Elizabeth and her oldest daughter, Anna, were unable to find a boat and trustworthy captain that could bring them back to America right away, so they stayed with her husband's friends, the Filicchi family.

The Filicchi were devout Catholics, and generous hosts. While staying there, Elizabeth was not only exposed to the beautiful art and culture of Catholic Italy, but the Filicchi brothers also explained much of the Catholic faith to her. What struck her most, however, weren't the theological arguments. Rather, it was the devotion to the Eucharist that she witnessed firsthand.

That Holy Communion could be not only a symbolic union with her Lord — as was taught in her Protestant Church — but a real one, was a thought that seemed infinitely too good to be true. But when she attended Mass with the Filicchi and saw the deep devotion of those who adored and received the Blessed Sacrament, she began to be convinced that it was true.

With that conviction came a deep interior yearning to receive our Lord in the Eucharist. It was a yearning that took root in her heart, and grew steadily stronger.

When she was finally able to return to New York, she was already considering becoming a Catholic; she was already looking forward to her first Holy Communion.

But Catholics were social outcasts in the New York of the early 1800s, and her relatives and friends were vehemently against her conversion. Both clergy and laity argued tirelessly to convince her not to abandon the faith of her fathers, not to abandon her social circle, not to subject her children to such a trial.

And if she had made a list of practical advantages and disadvantages that would flow from becoming Catholic, she certainly would have found no earthly reason at all to take such a step.

The tension of her predicament was causing her great interior anguish. And yet, in the depths of her heart, she felt that yearning, that desire to be more intimately united with her Lord.

It was another whisper of God's love, arising from within, a whisper that she listened to in spite of the clamor of so many other voices that swirled around her. It got to the point where she even found it difficult to go to church on Sundays. And when she did, her heart was elsewhere — in the Catholic church next door, in fact.

Here is how she described one Sunday morning at her Episcopal church in a letter to the Filicchis:



Antonio [Filicchi]... would not have been well-pleased to see me in St. Paul's [Episcopal] church today, but peace, and persuasion about proprieties, etc., over-prevalled. Yet, I got in a side pew which turned my face towards the Catholic church in the next street, and found myself twenty times speaking to the Blessed Sacrament there, instead of looking at the naked altar where I was, or minding the routine of prayers. Tears plenty and sighs as silent and deep as when I first entered your blessed church of the Annunciation in Florence; all turning to the one only desire, to see the way most pleasing to my God — whichever that way is!

It would have been easier for her if God had sent her some kind of a dramatic, miraculous, supernatural sign to indicate whether she should stay Episcopalian or convert to Catholicism — but instead he chose to send her nothing more than a persistent whisper of love, a deep interior yearning.^f

And God often works that way. He is interested in our friendship and in our love. And so, instead of dazzling us into following him, he gently but insistently invites, tugging at our hearts with the call of his goodness and truth, but refusing to get into a shouting match with the other voices all around us — the voices of ambition, popularity, fear, pleasure, and comfort.

Elizabeth allowed herself to be wooed by God's interior courtship, and she didn't stay in the side pew looking out the window.

In spite of violent objections from friends and relatives, in spite of the social and economic sacrifice it would entail, in spite of the shame and mockery that she had to endure, Betsy Seton finally walked across the street and into St. Peter's Church.

There, after passing through the congregation of uneducated, poor, and stigmatized Catholic immigrants of early nineteenth-century New York City, she entered the sacristy where the priest received her into the Catholic Church. And 11 days later, she knelt at the altar rail to satisfy the deepest yearning of her heart: she received Holy Communion.

It was the liturgical Solemnity of the Annunciation, March 25, 1805, a day she would never forget. She had listened to the quiet but insistent voice of God deep within her soul, and preferred that voice to all the others, and she had been duly rewarded.

Here is how she described her First Communion in a letter to her friend back in Italy, Amabilia Filicchi:



At last, Amabilia, at last GOD IS MINE AND I AM HIS! Now, let all go its round — I Have Received Him... To the last breath of life will I not remember this night of watching for morning dawn; the fearful, beating heart so pressing to be gone; the long walk to town; but every step counted, nearer that street, then nearer that tabernacle, then nearer the moment He would enter the poor, poor little dwelling so all His own... it seemed to me my King had come to take His throne, and instead of the humble tender welcome I had expected to give Him, it was but a triumph of joy and gladness that the deliverer was come and my defense and shield and strength and salvation made mine for this world and the next.

FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion: How Not to Be a Saint

In one of his homilies for All Saints' Day, Pope Benedict XVI made a point of explaining what being a saint does NOT require. Here is what he said:



But how can we become holy, friends of God? We can first give a negative answer to this question: to be a Saint requires neither extraordinary actions or works nor the possession of exceptional charisms.

— Homily, 1 November 2006

We need to believe this with all of our hearts! Growing in holiness doesn't require us to leave behind our humanity — on the contrary, it is the only path to the true fulfillment of our humanity. We can find God's love under chestnut trees, and we can hear his voice deep in our hearts while we're sitting in the side pew.

If there's one shining truth that stands out from the example of Elizabeth Seton's spiritual journey, it's that being a saint truly is, as Pope Benedict put it in the same homily: "possible for everyone because, rather than a human effort, it is first and foremost a gift of God."

Let's take some time now to prayerfully reflect on this comforting, invigorating truth of our faith. The following questions and Bible passages may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 What does the word "saint" say to me and why? How firmly do I believe that my most basic calling in life is to become a saint?
- 2 Have I ever had experiences like the one Elizabeth had under the chestnut tree? If so, remember them, savor them, and thank God for them. If not, reflect on what aspects of my lifestyle may be inhibiting me from hearing God's voice speaking to me through the beauty of life's simple joys and pleasures.
- 3 In this season of my spiritual life, what is God whispering in my heart, and what other voices are trying to keep me stuck in the side pew?



O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth! I will sing of your majesty above the heavens with the mouths of babes and infants. You have established a bulwark against your foes, to silence enemy and avenger. When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place: What is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than a god, crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him rule over the works of your hands, put all things at his feet: All sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatever swims the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth!

– Psalm 8, NABRE



Hear, O children, a father's instruction, be attentive, that you may gain understanding! Yes, excellent advice I give you; my teaching do not forsake. When I was my father's child, tender, the darling of my mother, he taught me and said to me: "Let your heart hold fast my words: keep my commands, and live! Get wisdom, get understanding! Do not forget or turn aside from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you; love her, and she will safeguard you. The beginning of wisdom is: get wisdom; whatever else you get, get understanding. Extol her, and she will exalt you; she will bring you honors if you embrace her; She will put on your head a graceful diadem; a glorious crown will she bestow on you.

– Proverbs 4:1-9, NABRE



Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.

– John 6:53-58, NABRE

SECOND MEDITATION

Courageous on the Cross

In the homily where Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that becoming a saint does not require "extraordinary actions or works nor the possession of exceptional charisms," he went on to say what becoming a saint DOES require. This is what he told the congregation gathered in St. Peter's Basilica:



Then comes the positive reply: it is necessary first of all to listen to Jesus and then to follow him without losing heart when faced by difficulties...

– Homily, 1 November 2006

This is our part in the pursuit of holiness — allowing God to lead us, listening and following, even when he guides us along the way of the Cross. Following God's will even when it's hard, when it leads us to the tears of Mount Calvary instead of to the joys of Mount Tabor, is what Jesus did to open the gates of salvation.

And it's what we need to do in order to enter through those open gates. The new life of the resurrection is always found on the other side of the crucifixion. Jesus made this clear when he told us that "In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world" (John 16:33).

This doesn't mean that Christians are glum and grumpy and pessimistic. Those characteristics are not included among the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit that St. Paul identifies in his Letter to the Galatians:



... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

– Galatians 5:22, NABRE

We are not called to be wet blankets. But we are called to be courageous in the face of the difficulties and challenges that necessarily accompany our spiritual pilgrimage through this fallen world.

Elizabeth Seton showed that kind of humble courage in every stage of her life; it was one of her most characteristic virtues. Let's take a look at two of her experiences that illustrate what this courage looks like in a saint who lived as normal a life as you or me.

SECOND MEDITATION

Making Ends Meet

In the first scene, we have to picture Elizabeth at her little desk in the residence of her Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg, Maryland, trying to balance her books.

Two great dreams animated Elizabeth's 16 years as a Catholic. The first was her desire to somehow consecrate herself completely — heart, mind, and soul — to the Lord.

Mother Seton would end up fulfilling this desire by following through on an idea that originated with the Sulpician priests in Baltimore: to establish a new religious community of women in the United States, following the rules of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac for their own Daughters of Charity.

The second dream was to put her privileged education and motherly love at the service of the poor through opening free schools for girls — something almost unheard of in the United States of the early 1800s. Mrs. Seton received guidance, moral support, and financial assistance from many different sources in her pursuit of these dreams, both of which came true.

The first Catholic bishops of the United States took a lively interest in the distinguished convert, especially Bishop Carroll of Baltimore and Bishop Cheverus of Boston. A wealthy Philadelphian convert to Catholicism pursued his calling to the priesthood and disposed of some of his fortune in buying the land for Mother Seton's foundation and school. The local clergy and priests from the Society of St. Sulpice, who had started Mount Saint Mary's College in Emmitsburg, provided spiritual and sacramental nourishment. And she frequently appealed to personal friends to help make ends meet, especially in the first years of the foundation.

But even with all this providential support, Elizabeth faced a persistent difficulty that most of us can probably identify with: lack of funding.

Her dream, remember, was to open an entirely free school, a school where the poor could go to receive the education they needed to live a life of freedom and dignity. This was the desire God had planted in her heart. But try as she might, she just wasn't able to generate enough cash flow to make that dream work.

A free school would simply always be in the red, always at the mercy of circumstance. And that was unacceptable for Mrs. Seton.

She felt that she had no right to put her students and her religious order in constant risk of material failure.

Her institutions required a certain degree of stability in order to fulfill their mission. And so, eventually, she made a decision: the day school would remain free. But in the same institute, she would also accept boarding students, who would pay for their education.

It was a viable solution that demonstrated her practical wisdom: the income from her paying students, combined with support from benefactors, provided enough stability for both the order and the school not only to survive, but also to thrive.

The Fruits of Courage

But even so, this decision took real courage. Not the dramatic, visible courage of the martyrs who were thrown to the lions in ancient Rome.

But the quiet, hidden courage of humility: she had to let go of her original dream; she had to admit her limitations; she had to change her plans. It seems like such a small thing, such an obvious thing.

But so often it's in small and obvious things that our fears come out, and we resist change, and we get stuck in our personal plans and preconceptions.

In this case, Elizabeth's decision not only enabled her institutions to flourish in her lifetime, but it set a tone for the future generations of her sisters, whose same courageous humility spawned five other daughter congregations and hundreds, if not thousands, of charitable works and institutions around the world.

She had listened to Jesus and followed him, facing this difficulty without losing heart.

SECOND MEDITATION

Under the Oak Tree

This following of God's lead, "without losing heart in the face of difficulties" is the path to sainthood that Pope Benedict XVI identified in his All Saints' Day homily.

But financial struggles weren't Mother Seton's only cross. Without a doubt, the difficulties that most threatened Mother Seton's strength of heart had to do with her family. To understand them, we need to trace some events that marked her first years as a Catholic.

Going South

Soon after her entrance in the Catholic Church, Elizabeth's dreams of consecrated life and running a free school were already ripe and vivid, but they seemed an impossibility.

- She was a widow, and now that she was a Catholic, many of her relatives and former friends had ostracized her.
- The school she taught in order to support herself and her family after her husband's death had failed quickly, partly due to parents' fears that the crazy widow would try to turn their children into Catholics.
- She had no income, very little family support, and five young children to take care of (her oldest child was only 9 when she entered the Church).

How could her dreams of becoming a religious sister and opening a school for the poor ever come true under those circumstances? And why would God have given her those holy desires, which seemed to contradict so starkly her obvious duties as a widowed mother?

Only God knows why he chose as foundress of the first native community of religious women in the United States a convert and a widowed mother of five young children, but he did.

It turned out that her desires were in perfect harmony with the desires of a priest from Baltimore, who invited her to leave New York to start a school for girls near one that he had started for boys.

The bishops of Boston and Baltimore seemed to be in cahoots with the plan. Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore funded the Seton boys' tuition at Georgetown, and later the Sulpician priest, Father Dubourg, enrolled them at St. Mary's College (boarding school) in Baltimore free of charge.

Her school on Paca Street on the outskirts of Baltimore began in 1808 with only seven students, three of whom were her own daughters.

But it was a success. And just a few months later marked the arrival of the first postulants for the religious order of sisters that the good clerics also wanted Elizabeth to start up.

In her second year, the school and the budding religious order moved to their providentially provided permanent location in Emmitsburg, Maryland, and Mother Seton's dreams seemed to be coming true.

But new heart-wrenching difficulties were not too far away.

The First Three Graves

Her two sons were provided for as they pursued their education at nearby Mount St. Mary's College. And she continued to care for her daughters even while she served as Mother Superior of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's.

Her daughters lived in the religious community and attended the school where the sisters carried out their apostolate. This was a highly uncommon situation, and it actually required alterations to the Vincentian rule of life that the Sisters of Charity were following. But Mother Seton would have it no other way, and her ecclesiastical superiors agreed. All seemed to be in place.

Then her eldest daughter, Anna, became sick; she fell victim to the Seton family scourge: tuberculosis.

Elizabeth was no stranger to death. She had lost her mother and younger sister when only a little girl. She had helped bury her beloved father-in-law, her own father, and her husband and true soul-mate, William Seton, in the course of four years. And yet, even such ample training in the fleetingness of life couldn't shield Mother Seton from painful sorrow at the loss of her eldest child: it shook her to the depths.

There was already a graveyard on the property in Emmitsburg. It had been chosen playfully during a tour of the property when the sisters first arrived. Harriet Seton, one of Elizabeth's young sister-in-laws who had accompanied her younger sister, Cecilia who was frail and sickly, to visit Elizabeth, finished eating an apple as the tour made its way through a small grove of trees. She tossed the apple core against the trunk of a large oak tree, and laughingly proclaimed that where the core had landed she should be buried. Six months later, suffering from a mysterious brain fever, she died.

Her grave was the first in the little cemetery that still lies under the oak tree, located precisely where her apple core had landed. Cecilia Seton, another of Elizabeth's sister-in-laws and a sister in Mother Seton's community, died soon afterwards — the second grave. Elizabeth had been close to Harriet and Cecilia, and their deaths wrung her heart.

But when just two years later she stood under the oak tree gazing down at young Anna's grave, the third grave, more than just the pain of loss pierced her heart.

Anna too had entered the sisterhood, and so she was Elizabeth's daughter twice over. Why would the Lord have taken her away? Why not take Elizabeth first? Why must the mother outlive such a daughter and suffer a double pain?

The darkness and loss that she experienced, she united to the suffering of her Lord, repeating herself the prayer he prayed in Gethsemane. In her grief for Anna, she wrote to her friend of many years, Eliza Sadler:



Poor Mother must say no more now; only pray, Eliza, that she may be strengthened... You believe me when I say with my whole soul, "His Will be done forever!"

Rebecca's Goodbye

Her courage to continue trusting and serving God under the weight of her crosses was bearing fruit. Mother Seton's religious community was growing, and even spreading to other locations.

Her school was developing its well deserved reputation for excellent all-around education, and her graduates were continuing to write to her for advice when they went off to start their own families. But new crosses were still to come.

In 1816, just four years after losing Anna, her oldest child, Elizabeth's youngest child, Rebecca, also passed away. One more grave under the oak tree. But at least Rebecca and Anna had died with fervent faith, looking forward to a heavenly reunion with their Lord.

Mother Seton's sons were a different cross altogether. Although she worked as hard to get them started in the world as she had worked on her school and her order, she was never blessed with seeing them properly established, either in their faith or in their circumstances.

They were inconstant, distant, and often inconsiderate towards her, as immature young men tend to be towards their parents. Praying and suffering and working for them, for their souls in the first place, but also for their careers and their reputations, was perhaps the heaviest cross of all.

She had had such clear success as a mother of her religious sisters, of hundreds of students and boarders, even of young clerics who learned the spiritual life from her. But in the case of her own biological sons, even her heroic efforts seemed helpless to stir them out of their listlessness.

This cross weighed upon her and continued to purify her even to her deathbed. There, without even the satisfaction of knowing that her sons were firm in their Catholic faith, her abandonment and trust in God reached their glorious culmination.

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion: The Ordinary Way of the Cross

The path to holiness, to human *wholeness*, doesn't always pass through extraordinary actions or works, or exceptional, dramatic charisms. But it does always involve listening to God's call and continuing to follow where he leads, without losing heart in the face of difficulties.

And this was the path that Mother Seton followed. God granted her many special graces, but they were all small in the eyes of the world. Her successes were real, but modest, during her lifetime. Her losses were equally real, but in the face of them all, she continued forward, daily embracing the tasks that Providence gave her.

If there is one lesson that her example can teach us above all others, and if there is one grace more than the rest that we should ask her to intercede for on our behalf, maybe it's this one: to truly understand the sign of the cross.

The crosses we face in life are not outside of God's plan; they are not exceptions to his wisdom and love. No, they are part of his plan for our lives, just as they were part of his plan for the life of his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.

Listen to how Mother Seton described in a letter her first encounter with the sign of the cross, that particularly Catholic prayer that we are all so familiar with. She was in Italy, after the death of her husband, exploring the Catholic faith and culture under the gentle tutelage of the Filicchi family. Here she puts in writing her feelings of solemnity and awe when Antonio Filicchi taught her the sign of the cross:



This evening, standing by the window, the moon shining full on Filicchi's countenance, he raised his eyes to heaven and showed me how to make the sign of the cross. Dearest Rebecca, I was cold with the awful impression my first making it gave me. The sign of the cross of Christ on me! Deepest thoughts came with it of I know not what earnest desires to be closely united with Him, who died on it...

If by God's grace we can learn how to make and how to live the sign of the cross, as did St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, we will need neither extraordinary successes nor extraordinary sufferings to lead us into the heart of God and towards the fulfillment we yearn for.

For us, as for Mother Seton, the ordinary ones will suffice.

Take some time now to prayerfully reflect on the experience of this ordinary woman who had the humble courage to allow God to adjust her plans however he wanted, and to persevere with Christ through loss and sorrow.

The following questions and Bible passages may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 Mother Seton learned how to combine docility to God's will, determination to carry it out, and a healthy detachment from her personal hopes and plans. How far along am I in learning that lesson?

- 2 What are the usual sources of difficulty and loss in my life? How do I tend to react to them?

- 3 Read the following excerpt from the first biography based on research and interviews with those who knew Mother Seton. Then reflect on how these principles would apply in your life situation:



... And what was the first rule of our dear Savior's life? You know it was to do his Father's will. Well, then, the first end I propose in our daily work is to do the will of God; secondly, to do it in the manner he wills; and thirdly, to do it because it is his will. I know what his will is by those who direct me; whatever they bid me do, if it is ever so small in itself, is the will of God for me. Then do it in the manner he wills it, not sewing an old thing as if it were new, or a new thing as if it were old; not fretting because the oven is too hot, or in a fuss because it is too cold. You understand — not flying and driving because you are hurried, not creeping like a snail because no one pushes you. Our dear Savior was never in extremes. The third object is to do his will because God wills it, that is, to be ready to quit at any moment and to do anything else to which you may be called...

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation



Then the king will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him and say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?" And the king will say to them in reply, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

— Matthew 25:34-40, NABRE



Listen to counsel and receive instruction, that you may eventually become wise. Many are the plans of the human heart, but it is the decision of the LORD that endures. What is desired of a person is fidelity; rather be poor than a liar. The fear of the LORD leads to life; one eats and sleeps free from any harm.

– Proverbs 19:20-23, NABRE



Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations, not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench, until he establishes justice on the earth; the coastlands will wait for his teaching.

– Isaiah 42:1-4, NABRE



The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. In green pastures he makes me lie down; to still waters he leads me; he restores my soul. He guides me along right paths for the sake of his name. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me. You set a table before me in front of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Indeed, goodness and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life; I will dwell in the house of the LORD for endless days.

– Psalm 23, NABRE

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's Favorite Psalm

CONFERENCE

The Examen Prayer

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton loved to write. Up until the very end of her short life, she spent her nights at her writing desk, with paper and pen and the flickering light of a candle.

In fact, she bequeathed to the Church and the world thousands of pages of writings. But unlike so many other saintly authors, these writings are not treatises or books. Instead, they are personal writings. Almost all of them are either journals or letters.

As such, they are all first drafts — they weren't written and edited and re-written. Rather, they flowed from her heart into her head through her fingers and directly onto the paper. In their content, they reveal her many natural qualities and supernatural virtues — her sense of humor, her sensitivity to beauty, her prudence, her faith.

But in their style, they reveal something else, something that was a characteristic not only of her personality, but also of the time in which she lived, a period free from the relentless noise of our own age.

She lived and died before radio, TV, movies, and Internet. She lived before the 24-hour news cycle, before texting and smartphones and earbuds and social media. She even lived before the automobile and the phonograph and the electric light. It is difficult for us to imagine what life must have been like without all those things.

From the point of view of spiritual growth, the biggest difference might have been the silence and the time for reflection. Nowadays, we have to fight to create space for silence in our lives. But healthy silence in the early nineteenth century was as natural an element of life as sunlight and moonlight.

While working or walking or traveling, you had no choice but to be alone with your thoughts, or to contemplate the world around you, or to listen to the natural sounds of a society necessarily more in tune with the rhythms of God's creation than ours today.

And for someone like Elizabeth Seton, someone graced with spiritual sensitivity, this atmosphere of silence provided ample opportunity for reflection — deep reflection. And that is what shines forth in the style of her many personal writings.

After all, taking an hour to write a personal letter by hand is a very different experience than taking an hour to read and answer dozens of emails, tweets, and posts. The former is quiet and sensitive and deep; the latter is fast and noisy and necessarily superficial.

Mother Seton was a woman who thought deeply, who pondered the meaning of things, and the fruits of this deep interior richness flow spontaneously from her pen whenever she writes.

She expresses herself with elegance, thoughtfulness, subtlety, and vitality, as is shown so clearly by the examples we have seen in our meditations, and her writing style was the fruit of a life-style.

This rich but spontaneous eloquence of her personal writings flow from an interior reservoir of wisdom gathered through years of deep personal reflection, reflection that was encouraged and enabled by a culture in which silence had its proper place.

Much of her spiritual growth would have been stunted without this habit of deep interior reflection so evident in her personal writings.

CONFERENCE

The Benefits of a Daily Examen

This is one of the firm principles of spiritual growth: it requires frequent and deep personal reflection. If we want to continue to grow spiritually, we have to create space for this to happen. In our world — so much noisier, and louder, and superficial than Elizabeth's — it won't happen by accident.

The lava flow of information, advertising, and superficial chatter congeals to form a hard crust around our minds — like the hardened dirt path that Our Lord spoke about in his parable of the sower. When the seeds of grace fall on that hard surface, they can't penetrate into the soil; they can't take root and grow. And so the birds of the air come and eat them up.

By creating space for healthy silence in our lives, space for deep personal reflection, we can break through that hard crust and loosen up the soil of our minds, so that God's Word can penetrate and take root and grow.

One of the spiritual practices that helps us do that is the daily examination of conscience. This daily examen, as it's sometimes called, is simple enough for anyone to do, and powerful enough to revolutionize our interior life. It's an ancient practice that has taken many forms over the centuries.

And in the sixteenth century St. Ignatius of Loyola developed a practical method for the examen that could be adopted by anyone — from monks to matrons, from priests to politicians.

In this conference, we'll go over the basics of this method, so as to provide or to simply help polish up a tried and tested tool for cultivating a deeper interior life.

CONFERENCE

First Step: Thank for Blessings

St. Ignatius identifies five steps in the daily examen. They flow naturally one into the other, but it will be worthwhile to talk about each one separately, to get an overview. Once we have gone over all five, we will make a few practical recommendations that may help you get started.

The first step in the daily examen is to thank God for the blessings he has given you throughout the day. This is the most important step, because the daily examen is first and foremost a prayer. It is not some kind of self-help technique. It is a time of quiet communion and conversation with the Lord, who dwells in our hearts.

By turning our minds to the good things that we have experienced throughout the day, we immediately exercise our faith, and our hope, and our love for God, our Creator and Savior. And even in the very worst days, God is still loving us and guiding us, so there will be something that we can thank him for — even if it's just for granting us the grace to survive!

We can thank God for little things or big things, for a tasty meal or a beautiful sunset. We can thank him for our friends and for our faith, for our conquests and for our crosses — for any and all of the innumerable blessings that the good Lord showers upon us every single moment of our lives. It has been said that gratitude is the shortcut to holiness, because gratitude is the antidote to self-absorption.

This first step of the examen widens our gaze and keeps things in perspective. It's like hiking up a tall mountain. As you climb higher and higher you start breathing hard, and you become absorbed by the path — looking for where you are going to put your next step, how you are going to keep moving.

In the midst of the climb, it's easy to lose site of the progress that you are making, unless you pause every once in a while to look up and out, to see the view from the mountainside, to see how far you have come.

That's what this first step does for us, spiritually: it reminds us of the bigger picture, of all that God is doing in our lives, even while we are in the midst of a hard journey.

CONFERENCE

Second Step: Ask for Light

After thanking God for the blessings of the day, we move on to the second step in the daily examen: Ask for light. This too is crucial.

In the end, we can't make ourselves holy. We can't turn ourselves into saints. Christianity is not just a glorified self-help program. We actually need the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who leads us to spiritual maturity. He knows what we need in every moment.

By pausing in this second step to ask for light, for guidance, for help, we are exercising the crucial virtue of humility and intentionally opening ourselves to God's action in our soul. We are acknowledging that we are just children, spiritually, and that the Lord truly is our shepherd. In a sense, we are declaring to the Lord that we recognize ourselves as "poor in spirit" — the very first beatitude.

This petition for help can be short and simple — it doesn't have to be complicated. We can simply say, for example: "Lord, help me to see what you want me to see, so that I can follow you more closely."

Skipping this second step is foolish, but it's also an expression of arrogance. Imagine a young athlete training for the Olympics who has been given the best coach in the world. Now imagine that when he arrives for his training session, he decides that he can do it all by himself.

So, instead of checking in with the coach, he sets his own training schedule and agenda and activities. A fool, yes, but also an arrogant fool.

Well, the Holy Spirit is our personal trainer, our coach — with a proven track record: all the saints in the history of the Church, the spiritual gold medalists. He is ready and willing to help, but he won't force himself on us.

That's why the second step in the daily examen is always to ask for light, for help, for guidance as we look to grow in our spiritual life.

CONFERENCE

Third Step: Look Over the Day

The third step in the daily examen is simply to look over the day. This is where, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we engage in deep reflection. In this step, we simply review the events and the activities of the day, looking for two things.

First, we want to try and see how God was at work in those events and activities. What was God doing in my life today? What was he asking of me? What was he hoping for from me?

We know that God is always thinking of us, always wanting to use the normal activities of the day to give us a chance to grow spiritually, to exercise Christ-like virtue, to learn more about God and his wisdom, to experience and share his glory. This is what the Catechism teaches us in its very first number:



... at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength...

– CCC I

The more aware we are of God's action throughout our normal activities, the better chance we will have of collaborating with that action, and that's how we grow spiritually.

So that's the first thing we are looking for: What was God showing me, teaching me, giving me, asking of me in today's events and activities?

The second thing we want to look at is how we responded to God's action. Was I oblivious? Was I generous? Was I selfish, or sensitive, or afraid, or courageous?

As Christians, we are called to make a difference in the world — to show forth God's goodness in our example, our words, and our works. And when we do that, we move along on the path of true and lasting happiness. But our fallen nature often resists this call, this mission.

By taking time to reflect on how we're doing, we become more intentional in our relationships and our responsibilities, we create more interior depth. And that is essential for spiritual growth.

In this third step of the examen, we don't have to be exhaustive. Usually, one or two things will jump out at us right away. For example, we may remember a conversation where we gossiped or exaggerated in order to win the praise of other people.

Or we may remember a moment when we felt an invitation in our conscience to go out of our way to help or encourage a colleague or family member — and even though it was inconvenient, we accepted that invitation and reached out to the person in need.

Or we may see clearly that, once again, we allowed the hustle and bustle of semi-important things to crowd out the time we had set aside for prayer in the morning.

By giving ourselves time to reflect on our behavior, on our choices and reactions, we also give the Holy Spirit a chance to teach us, to instruct us, to guide us.

What was God asking of me today, and how did I respond?

This is the essential question of the third step: looking over the day.

CONFERENCE

Fourth Step: Ask for Forgiveness

The fourth step flows naturally from the third. Since the daily examen is a prayer, a quiet conversation with the Lord, if I find that I have been selfish in my relationship with him, I will naturally want to ask for forgiveness.

That's the fourth step: asking for forgiveness. It's the most enjoyable step of the daily examen. It's the moment of reconciliation, when we turn to the one we know loves us and ask him to show us, once again, how deep that love really is. Our Lord once revealed to St. Margaret Mary that even if we had committed all the sins in the world, in comparison with his infinite mercy they would be like a drop of water thrown into a blazing furnace.

God's goodness, and his love, and his mercy, are infinitely greater than our spasms of self-centeredness and greed and lust and vanity. This is why we should never be afraid to go to him to ask for forgiveness — he will never fail to give it to us. But if we don't bring our misery to him, it will just fester, like a spiritual infection, distancing us from God and impeding our spiritual growth.

In the early days of his pontificate, Pope Francis encouraged a crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square to keep this in mind. He said:



[God] never gets tired of forgiving, but at times we get tired of asking for forgiveness. Let us never get tired of it, let us never get tired of it! He is the loving Father who always pardons, who has that heart of mercy for us all.

— Angelus, 17 March 2013

This is the fourth step — to ask for forgiveness, to look up into the smiling face of our Lord and to say: “Lord, do you see how much I still need your grace? Please have mercy on me!” And to let him wrap his arms around us and give us a fresh start.

That's his greatest joy, by the way, to put to use all the graces he won for us by dying on the cross — to give us a fresh start.

CONFERENCE

Fifth Step: Renew Commitment

Finally, at the end of the daily examen, we take the fifth step: we renew our commitment to Christ and his Kingdom. This too can be done simply — maybe just with the sign of the cross, or by praying the Our Father, or simply by giving him a warm smile.

Sometimes, though, this renewal of our friendship with God will take a more concrete form. We may be moved, for example, to make a specific commitment to do something that he has put on our hearts — like apologizing to someone we offended, or reaching out to someone in need, or giving some more time to prayer the next day.

Whether general or specific, this fifth step is the best way to conclude our daily examen, because it gives us faith-filled closure. It keeps us from getting stuck in the past, in our weaknesses, in our failures.

It is the renewal of our love for God that flows from having experienced anew, through the examen prayer, God's love for us. That's why the best motto for our daily examen is St. Paul's famous phrase: “The love of Christ impels us” (2 Corinthians 5:14).

CONFERENCE

Conclusion: Practical Tips

Those are the five steps of the daily examination of conscience: TALAR

- Thank God for His Blessings
- Ask for Light
- Look Over the Day
- Ask for Forgiveness
- Renew Our Commitment to Christ and His Kingdom

Those are the basic elements, but since it's a prayer, we need to be flexible and docile to however the Holy Spirit wants to arrange those elements. For example, there may be days or seasons in our spiritual life when we spend most of the examen giving thanks, and very little on the other steps. That's okay. That may be exactly what our soul needs.

As regards the length of the examen, there may be days when we can only spend 2 or 3 minutes doing the examen prayer — that's okay, that's better than nothing. But the most common recommendation is to dedicate ten minutes to this prayer every day.

That's how we form the habit of personal reflection; that's how we till the soil of our minds and resist the numbing effect of the relentless noise of our post-modern culture.

If you are just starting to use this prayer, you may find it useful to do it in writing. Get a nice prayer journal and use it to write down your thoughts for each step. The act of writing can help you stay focused and avoid distractions.

It's also helpful to do this prayer in a quiet place, when possible, like a chapel, or a prayer corner — although I have known people who do it on the train ride home from work.

Most spiritual writers advise doing the daily examen at the end of the day, before going to bed. But sometimes that's a difficult moment — whether because of tiredness or family matters. A good alternative time can be in the evening, before dinner. But it can also be done in the morning — looking over the day before, and renewing your commitment for the coming day.

All these specifics can change, and we can experiment with them to find what works best in our personal situation.

The important thing is simply to do it, to make this tried and true prayer into part of our daily spiritual exercises, to give ourselves and the Holy Spirit a little bit of silence, a little bit of deep reflection, which God's grace will be able to transform into a lot of interior depth, just as it did with Mother Seton.

Take some time now to reflect on the 10 questions in the personal questionnaire.

They are designed to help you start or improve your daily examen prayer.

Personal Questionnaire

- 1 What role does silence play in my life? What role would I like it to play?
- 2 How much deep personal reflection do I engage in on a regular basis?
- 3 If I have used the daily examen prayer in the past, what benefits did it bring me?
- 4 If I have used the daily examen prayer in the past, what factors made it useful or not useful, easy or difficult?
- 5 What recreational activities (video games, web surfing, sports, etc.) do I regularly engage in? Which of these actually help refresh my spirit, and which tend to drain it?
- 6 How do I react to the idea of keeping a spiritual journal? If I have done this in the past, what benefits did it have for me?

7 What time of day would be best for me to use the daily examen prayer, and where would I do it?

8 Try to explain in my own words the five steps of the daily examen prayer. Which step do I understand least? Go back over the explanation of that step.

9 If I were more faithful to the daily examen prayer, what difference do I think it might make in my life?

10 Take some time right now to do the daily examen prayer, following the five steps and looking over the last 24 hours of my life.

NOTES

Record Your Thoughts Here

FURTHER READING

For Reflection & Prayer

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- Mrs. Seton: Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* by Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M.
- Elizabeth Bayley Seton* by Annabelle M. Melville
- The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* by Timothy M. Gallagher, OMV

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APPENDIX

Homily of Pope Paul VI at the Canonization Mass for St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Given 14 September 1975 (from www.vatican.va)

Yes, Venerable Brothers and beloved sons and daughters! Elizabeth Ann Seton is a Saint! We rejoice and we are deeply moved that our apostolic ministry authorizes us to make this solemn declaration before all of you here present, before the holy Catholic Church, before our other Christian brethren in the world, before the entire American people, and before all humanity. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton is a Saint! She is the first daughter of the United States of America to be glorified with this incomparable attribute! But what do we mean when we say: «She is a Saint»? We all have some idea of the meaning of this highest title; but it is still difficult for us to make an exact analysis of it. Being a Saint means being perfect, with a perfection that attains the highest level that a human being can reach. A Saint is a human creature fully conformed to the will of God. A Saint is a person in whom all sin-the principle of death-is cancelled out and replaced by the living splendor of divine grace. The analysis of the concept of sanctity brings us to recognize in a soul the mingling of two elements that are entirely different but which come together to produce a single effect: sanctity. One of these elements is the human and moral element, raised to the degree of heroism: heroic virtues are always required by the Church for the recognition of a person's sanctity. The second element is the mystical element, which express the measure and form of divine action in the person chosen by God to realize in herself-always in an original way-the image of Christ (Cfr. Rom. 8, 29).

The science of sanctity is therefore the most interesting, the most varied, the most surprising and the most fascinating of all the studies of that ever mysterious being which is man. The Church has made this study of the life, that is, the interior and exterior history, of Elizabeth Ann Seton. And the Church has exulted with admiration and joy, and has today heard her own charism of truth poured out in the exclamation that we send up to God and announce to the world: She is a Saint! We shall not now give a panegyric, that is, the narrative which glorifies the new Saint. You already know her life and you will certainly study it further. This will be one of the most valuable fruits of the Canonization of the new Saint: to know her, in order to admire in her an outstanding human figure; in order to praise God who is wonderful in his saints; to imitate her example which this ceremony places in a light that will give perennial edification; to invoke her protection, now that we have the certitude of her participation in the

exchange of heavenly life in the Mystical Body of Christ, which we call the Communion of Saints and in which we also share, although still belonging to life on earth. We shall not therefore speak of the life of our Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. This is neither the time nor the place for a fitting commemoration of her.

But at least let us mention the chapters in which such a commemoration should be woven. Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton is an American. All of us say this with spiritual joy, and with the intention of honoring the land and the nation from which she marvellously sprang forth as the first flower in the calendar of the saints. This is the title which, in his original foreword to the excellent work of Father Dirvin, the late Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, attributed to her as primary and characteristic: «Elizabeth Ann Seton was wholly American!» 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.

May you always be able to cultivate the genuine fruitfulness of evangelical holiness, and ever experience how-far from stunting the flourishing development of your economic, cultural and civic vitality -it will be in its own way the unfailing safeguard of that vitality. Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton was born, brought up and educated in New York in the Episcopalian Communion. To this Church goes the merit of having awakened and fostered the religious sense and Christian sentiment which in the young Elizabeth were naturally predisposed to the most spontaneous and lively manifestations. We willingly recognize this merit, and, knowing well how much it cost Elizabeth to pass over to the Catholic Church, we admire her courage for adhering to the religious truth and divine reality which were manifested to her therein. And we are likewise pleased to see that from this same adherence to the Catholic Church she experienced great peace and security, and found it natural to preserve all the good things which her membership in the fervent Episcopalian community had taught her, in

so many beautiful expressions, especially of religious piety, and that she was always faithful in her esteem and affection for those from whom her Catholic profession had sadly separated her.

For us it is a motive of hope and a presage of ever better ecumenical relations to note the presence at this ceremony of distinguished Episcopalian dignitaries, to whom interpreting as it were the heartfelt sentiments of the new Saint—we extend our greeting of devotion and good wishes. And then we must note that Elizabeth Seton was the mother of a family and at the same time the foundress of the first Religious Congregation of women in the United States. Although this social and ecclesial condition of hers is not unique or new (we may recall, for example, Saint Birgitta, Saint Frances of Rome, Saint Jane Frances Fremiot de Chantal, Saint Louise de Marillac), in a particular way it distinguishes Saint Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton for her complete femininity, so that as we proclaim the supreme exaltation of a woman by the Catholic Church, we are pleased to note that this event coincides with an initiative of the United Nations: International Women's Year. This program aims at promoting an awareness of the obligation incumbent on all to recognize the true role of women in the world and to contribute to their authentic advancement in society. And we rejoice at the bond that is established between this program and today's Canonization, as the Church renders the greatest honor possible to Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton and extols her personal and extraordinary contribution as a woman—a wife, a mother, a widow, and a religious.

May the dynamism and authenticity of her life be an example in our day—and for generations to come—of what women can and must accomplish, in the fulfillment of their role, for the good of humanity. And finally we must recall that the most notable characteristic of our Saint is the fact that she was, as we said, the foundress of the first Religious Congregation of women in the United States. It was an offspring of the religious family of Saint Vincent de Paul, which later divided into various autonomous branches—five principal ones—now spread throughout the world. And yet all of them recognize their origin in the first group, that of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, personally established by Saint Elizabeth Seton at Emmitsburg in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The apostolate of helping the poor and the running of parochial schools in America had this humble, poor, courageous and glorious beginning. This account, which constitutes the central nucleus of the earthly history and worldwide fame of the work of Mother

Seton, would merit a more extended treatment. But we know that her spiritual daughters will take care to portray the work itself as it deserves.

And therefore to these chosen daughters of the Saint we direct our special and cordial greeting, with the hope that they may be enabled to be faithful to their providential and holy institution, that their fervor and their numbers may increase, in the constant conviction that they have chosen and followed a sublime vocation that is worthy of being served with the total gift of their heart, the total gift of their lives. And may they always be mindful of the final exhortation of their Foundress Saint those words that she pronounced on her deathbed, like a heavenly testament, on January 2, 1821: «Be children of the Church». And we would add: for ever! And to all our beloved sons and daughters in the United States and throughout the entire Church of God we offer, in the name of Christ, the glorious heritage of Elizabeth Ann Seton. It is above all an ecclesial heritage of strong faith and pure love for God and for others—faith and love that are nourished on the Eucharist and on the Word of God. Yes, brethren, and sons and daughters: the Lord is indeed wonderful in his saints. Blessed be God for ever!