

40th Anniversary of the Canonization of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

We gather this afternoon with joy as a family of faith to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the canonization of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. Let me begin by offering my warm greetings and deep appreciation to the congregational leaders who form The Sisters of Charity Federation as we celebrate the Vincentian Charism of Charity reflected with such clarity and beauty in the life of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Beginning in the late 1940's, your predecessors prayed and worked for Mother Seton's canonization, a goal which you happily realized, and for the last four decades have worked together to strengthen your member congregations in carrying forward, amid the challenges and opportunities of the present day, the spiritual heritage of St. Vincent de Paul, St. Louise de Marillac, and, of course, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

I also greet most warmly the Vincentian priests who are concelebrating, as well as priests from Mt. St. Mary's Seminary, so beloved by Mother Seton. In a special way, I greet the Daughters of Charity here in place you love so much, and with you, I greet the many religious women and men who are here; what beautiful way to observe the Year for Consecrated Life called by Pope Francis! So many members of the faithful are here from parishes near and far, together with my brother Knights of Columbus as well as many benefactors of the Seton Heritage Ministries. And, of course, I want to thank EWTN for broadcasting this Mass and in the same breath greet all those who are watching this Mass at home or on live streaming video ... welcome!

Now, dear friends, let us place ourselves in God's presence, and ask for the grace to offer these Sacred Mysteries worthily:

Introduction

Let me begin on a personal note before we turn our attention to the light which today's Scripture readings shed on St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Some 40 years ago, I

was a second theologian at Mt. St. Mary's Seminary. I remember vividly September 14, 1975, really, as if it were yesterday. Seminarians were involved in helping with the large crowds & the many Masses that marked the celebration of Mother Seton's canonization here in Emmitsburg. Looking back, I'm not sure we were all that much help to the Sisters but I do remember how happy we were that, for the first time, a citizen born in the United States was being canonized, a saint so closely associated also with our seminary. It is an excitement that has not diminished with the passage of years. We are here today and many others are watching on television & life streaming video, because the declaration of Bl. Pope Paul VI still rings in our ears: "St. Elizabeth Ann Seton is a saint!"

And, as it happens, today's Scripture readings shed a lot of light on the life of this remarkable woman, this socially prominent wife and mother who would come to consecrate her whole life to God in the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul & St. Louise de Marillac: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Let us focus on three points from today's Scripture in her regard: her witness to Christ our Savior; the Cross in her life; and her life of charity, and let's begin with her witness to Jesus as the Christ.

Elizabeth Ann Seton's Profession of Faith in Jesus as Messiah

In today's Gospel from St. Mark, Jesus is starting out on his journey toward Jerusalem. Walking along with the Apostles, he asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" They proceed to give him a sampling of public opinion. Clearly, people had a high opinion of Jesus, but most everyone thought of him merely as a prophet who would prepare the way for the long-expected Messiah. Having heard from the pollsters, you can imagine Jesus stopping in his tracks to pose to his Apostles and to us the central question confronting every disciple: "But you," he said to them, "who do you say that I am?"

That same question resonated again and again in the heart of Elizabeth Bayley Seton who was blessed from her earliest years with a prayerful, reflective heart. As you know, she was born into a prominent Anglican family in New York just prior to the Revolutionary War, on August 28, 1774. We are told that Elizabeth and her sister were rejected by their stepmother, and when her stepmother and father separated, she experienced spiritual darkness. Through it all, Elizabeth's gift for prayer and contemplation increased. In deep recesses of her heart, the Lord was asking her:

“Who do you say that I am?”

Her prayerful inclinations remained with her when she wed William Magee Seton, a successful businessman also from a socially prominent family. Elizabeth, however, did not merely enjoy a comfortable life and its social circuit. Rather, she was a loving and attentive mother to her five children, and a daily communicant at Trinity Episcopal Church. Her spirit of prayer and contemplation grew as she received spiritual direction from her friend and confidant, Rev. Richard Hobart, the Rector of Trinity Episcopal. Indeed the stirrings of an ever deeper discipleship found expression in her charity toward the poor and the sick, both personal and in league with others. And throughout her life she drew close to those on the margins of society. All of us know well the story of her husband’s financial troubles, his illness, their voyage to Italy where William Magee Seton succumbed to tuberculosis. It was there that she encountered Catholicism, and that encounter elicited from her a profession of the fullness of faith in the One who is Messiah and Lord. Elizabeth returned to the United States in 1804 and a year later, she made her profession of faith at St. Peter’s Church in lower Manhattan and the following year was confirmed by Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore.

The Cross in Elizabeth Ann Seton’s Life

Throughout the painful events in her life, Elizabeth Bayley Seton was learning what St. Peter would have to learn after he professed Christ to the Messiah: the plan of God unfolds not according to human expectations or timetables but according to the mysterious design of the divine will. She learnt, as Peter would learn, that if the Messiah’s destination was the Cross, so too the Cross is the destination of any who takes discipleship seriously. Still grieving the loss of her husband, still struggling to provide for her family, she incurred the wrath of many because of her decision to become Catholic. Amid all the fear and disappointment, she maintained her serenity as she took up her cross in new and different ways. If anything, her life-long devotion of following the will of God was strengthened as she instructed her children in the faith & offered them her wise & loving advice.

Yet, amid all this, the Lord was asking even more of Elizabeth Ann Seton. Providence arranged that she would meet a Sulpician priest, Fr. William Dubourg. He had come to New York to attract a religious community of women to start a small school to

educate women in Baltimore. Like many of you, I've made pilgrimages to that little house on Paca Street where Elizabeth lived and educated young women. It cannot be said that she and the family members who came with her lived in the lap of luxury ... we safely say they lived a sacrificial style of life. Yet soon, the small school became the seedbed of a new religious community modeled on the Daughters of Charity of Paris who were founded in 1633. It was Archbishop Carroll who called her "Mother Seton" for the first time and received her vows and vows of her first sisters in the lower chapel of St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street in Baltimore.

In embracing consecrated life, Mother Seton truly took today's Gospel to heart: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross & follow me." When this Gospel passage speaks of "denying oneself", it doesn't merely mean the little, daily sacrifices we are called to make, although Mother Seton was surely the master of finding God's will in things like a cold house or a malfunctioning stove. Rather, in the Gospel "denying oneself" means "renouncing oneself" - 'a total shift of the center of gravity in one's life, a reckless abandonment to the Lord's love that entails letting go of all one's own attachments and agendas, even to one's hold on life itself'. (cf. Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 169) By giving her whole self to Christ and leading her sisters to do the same, she found the One who is the Messiah, the Source of the fullness of life and love.

Among the ways that Mother Seton & her Sisters gave of themselves was poverty. To be sure, they practiced poverty of spirit but they also experienced real hardship and deprivation, and this in spite of seminarian Samuel Sutherland Cooper's generous gift to Mother Seton of some 269 acres here in the vicinity of Emmitsburg in 1809. Nonetheless, in the midst of need, and even illness and death, many young women arrived in Emmitsburg to become Daughters of Charity, and from this place her sisters, almost immediately, began to fan out in missions of education, healthcare, and charity. In losing her life, Mother Seton found life, not only for herself and her sisters but indeed for many people who were truly in great need. She could make this extraordinary and wholehearted gift because her whole life was rooted in God's Word, in the Eucharist. Jesus Christ was the Source and Model of her charity and her mercy.

Faith with Works: Mother Seton and the Vincentian Charism of Charity

Mother Seton, it is fair to say, is not primarily remembered as mystic or theologian, though, to repeat, she was a woman of deep Eucharistic contemplation who combined a gentle, poetic soul with resolute determination. For her, the Faith was not merely a matter of the head or of the heart; it is something that to be practiced with one's hands and one's wits. How perfectly the second reading from the Letter of James fits this occasion, where the sacred author speaks about the uselessness of faith without works. 'What good is it,' James asks, 'to wish a needy person well but not to attend to that person's needs?'

So it is that in a very short time, Mother Seton's sisters were caring for the poor, for people of color, for orphans, for those who were infirm and aged. And today, the work of education & charity lives on in Elizabeth's spiritual daughters, not only in the United States and Europe, but globally. In you, sisters, her spiritual daughters, St. Elizabeth Ann's mission continues, a mission of apostolic service honoring Christ through service to the poor. For this we thank you and ask the Lord to bless you congregations with vocations, with unity, and continued apostolic vigor.

Dear friends, let us honor St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and her spiritual daughters by professing the Name of Jesus with all our hearts, by deepening our lives of prayer, especially our devotion to the Eucharist, and by expressing our faith in a charity that evangelizes. Then it is that all of us, religious, laity, and clergy will heed the call of Pope Francis to "wake up the world" to the truth of love of Jesus, our Messiah and Lord. May God bless you and keep you always in His love!