

Archbishop Lori's Homily - Feast of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Feast Day

Basilica of the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emmitsburg

Jan. 4, 2018

It is always a special joy to visit this beautiful shrine dedicated to St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, our nation's first native-born saint. I first came here in 1973, when I was a first-year theologian at Mount St. Mary's Seminary and have returned many times throughout my more than 40 years as a priest - but never with more joy than in these past few years in my service to the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

This is hallowed ground, foundational to the Church in the United States. And it is a place of blessing for so many pilgrims, families, and young people. My greetings to the pilgrims and so many parishioners present here today.

With special gratitude in my heart, I wish the Federation of the Sisters of Charity and especially the Daughters of Charity a very happy feast day. You are joined together in a ministry of prayer and charity that St. Elizabeth Ann Seton inaugurated in our nation. I pray that this day will be rich in God's grace as you seek to live consecrated life with fidelity and joy, even as I pray that God will call many to follow your way of life.

Today's Gospel offers us insight into the life of our patron, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. At the beginning of St. John's Gospel, Jesus encounters two of the disciples of John the Baptist. He sees them and asks: "What are you looking for?"

Note what happens in these very few lines of Scripture: Jesus sees two men, Andrew and Peter, who would become his disciples. But Jesus doesn't merely catch sight of them or see them out of the corner of his eye; rather, he looks intently at them, if you will, he contemplates them, or to say it another way, he gazes at them. And then he asks them, "What are you looking for?"

On the surface, this might seem almost like a casual question, a conversation-

starter, if you will. But, in fact, it is a more profound question. Jesus is really asking, “What are you seeking in life?”

“What it is that you want out of life?”

“What is it that will make you happy and fulfilled?”

Jesus is not looking at his prospective disciples superficially but rather is gazing into the depths of their hearts, for this is the only place where that question can be answered.

Under the gaze of Jesus, the disciples begin to follow Jesus. They ask where Jesus stays; they respond to his invitation to “come and see”; and they remain with Jesus, not for just a day but for the rest of their lives. By fits and starts, they will discover the real significance of Jesus’ question as they find in him the one who is the source of their life, the subject of their longing, the cause of their joy – indeed – “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world”!

Answering Jesus’ question, “what are you looking for” will bring about in their lives unexpected experiences, unanticipated twists and turns that were unimaginable in their day-to-day lives as fishermen.

Eventually, they will answer Jesus’ question about the search for meaning and joy by laying down their lives for him and for the Gospel, in a death not unlike his own.

Jesus’ encounter with Andrew and Peter continually repeats itself as it did in the life of Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton. From her earliest years as devout member of the Episcopal Church, Elizabeth’s mind and heart were open to the Lord.

She was aware that, somehow, the grace of the Holy Spirit preceded the unfolding episodes of her life. Again and again, she took the step the many of us routinely omit: instead of insisting, however prayerfully, on her own plans and prerogatives, Elizabeth Ann Seton allowed the Lord in his incarnate humanity to gaze at her, to look into the depths of her soul, to “see” her as only God can see her and to love her as only God can love her.

Thus her letters to her family and friends (letters that fill many volumes) are filled

with spiritual themes that have to do with growth in prayer, with trust in divine Providence, and devotion to the will of God.

These letters reflect not only her beautiful humanity and tender love for others, but also her bedrock conviction that the Lord always takes the initiative. Prayer is not, in the first instance, what we want to say to God but rather, prayer is a matter of allowing ourselves to be in the Lord's presence, to be under the gaze of his divine Providence. Indeed, she saw the spiritual life not as a personal attainment, but rather as "the continuation of our Savior's life in us."

And so we might say that St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, like the disciples in today's Gospel, lived under the gaze of Jesus and spend her whole life responding to the question, "What are you looking for?" "Whom do you seek?"

Responding to this question under the loving gaze of Jesus produced in Elizabeth's life unexpected experiences and unanticipated twists and turns, just as it did for the first followers of Jesus.

Born to wealth and social prominence, like Elizabeth Ann, might have been content to pray, to do good works, to raise a family but all within carefully drawn boundaries of social class and convention.

Yet, even as she emerges into adulthood and marries William Magee Seton, there is a restlessness in her heart, an openness, a yearning, a sense that the Lord looked upon her, her husband, and children with tender love.

In these years she began to pray with greater intensity and sought spiritual direction. Soon her life would change dramatically, first with the bankruptcy of her husband's import-export business and then with the onset of his tuberculosis.

Seeking a milder climate, Elizabeth and William journeyed to Italy. There William died and there Elizabeth Ann opened her heart to the fullness of faith. Returning to the United States, a widow with five children, she entered the Catholic Church, a step demanding courage and sacrificial love.

She went through difficult times as some of her former friends turned away and indeed she struggled just to support her family. The mettle of her faith was tested as

her New York boarding school failed and as she responded to the invitation of Archbishop Carroll and Father Dubourg to open a school in Baltimore . . . a venture that was also precarious.

Through it all, she never lost the conviction that the Lord looked upon her with love, that he was leading her even as she was seeking his face, and, in the midst of it all, heard the call to consecrated life, moved to Emmitsburg, and founded the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph, the Daughters of Charity.

Living under the Lord's gaze gave her the courage to grapple with the question, "What are you looking for?" "Whom do you seek?"

Like the first disciples, in answering that question she found Jesus, and, in finding the Lord, also found love, friendship, and community

The message of today's Gospel and today's feast could not be more clear: It is now our turn to allow Jesus to gaze in our lives so as to deepen our desire to see him and to follow him. It is now our turn to answer the Lord's question, "What are you looking for" by opening our hearts to the Lord's presence, especially in the Eucharist, by seeking the will of God in all things big and small but especially those unexpected events in our lives, including those events that cause us distress and anxiety.

Then we too shall find the Lord, the desire of our souls, and in finding him, find also love, friendship and community.

Elizabeth Ann Seton, pray for us!