

# Birthday of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

## Introduction

We are here today for the annual celebration of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's birthday. But it is not we, who wish Mother Seton a happy birthday, rather, it is she who is praying for us, ardently desiring that we live the call to holiness we received at Baptism, the day of our rebirth into eternal life. Thus we are here as pilgrims, seeking her intercession, so that what Pope Paul VI said of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton might be true of us: "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 ..."

Most of us would agree that we have a long way to go before we can break out the champagne and cut the cake in celebration of our readiness to enter eternal life. One way we can tell that we're not ready for prime time is by reading Scripture. I don't mean casually reading a bit of the Bible now and again. I mean really reading Scripture prayerfully, letting it sink in, & applying it to our lives. I don't know about you but sometimes when I'm reading Scripture, I'll come across a passage that really gets my attention, not only because it is beautiful or profound but because it's calling me to change how I think or live. With the saints you can read almost any passage of Scripture, some will apply more directly than others but it's not hard to see how they truly lived any and every passage of the Bible.

Today's readings are a case in point. Rather than consult a commentary on Scripture to help us understand them, I thought, why not consult Mother Seton and have her lead us through them. She agreed to do so and best of all she promised to be brief!

## "You Duped Me"

So I asked her what Jeremiah's complaint meant in her life and ours. As you recall, Jeremiah never expected to be a prophet and once he accepted God's call to become a prophet, the going was rough. Prominent people ridiculed him and conspired against him. He realized his calling from God would cost him more than he expected.

Mother Seton's life also took unexpected turns. She was born into a prominent Episcopalian family and ended up a Catholic. She was born into wealth and married into wealth but ended up poor. She became a mother of a family and ended up the

mother of religious family, the Daughters of Charity. If anyone had reason to believe she had been duped, it might have Elizabeth Ann Seton. Yet this is what she told her fellow religious sisters: "... to do God's will because God will it, to be ready to quit at any moment and to do anything else to which you may be called ..."

The twists and turns in our lives may not be as dramatic as hers but how often we face the expected, even the unimaginable, and how often we are tempted to be angry with God for putting us in such situations. Mother Seton teamed up with the immortal Dante would tell us to calm ourselves, for, "In his will is our peace" and only those who seek the will of God are peaceful.

### **"Whoever Wishes to Come After Me"**

Mother Seton next advised me to skip over the second reading for a moment and head straight to the Gospel, where we read words that most of us find disturbing if we really think about them: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." I'll tell you why I find this passage so disturbing. I'd like to think that Jesus did all the necessary suffering. He died for me once for all, he loves me, and so I'm excused from bearing the Cross. But Jesus keeps telling me that I'm not excused from the Cross. Bearing the cross, in whatever form it takes, is how I participate and share in his saving love.

And don't we see that in St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's life. Her privileged, accomplished and rather comfortable life in New York was upended when her husband's import-export business faced bankruptcy. It was further upset when he came down with tuberculosis and died in Italy. After her conversion to Catholicism, Elizabeth Ann Seton was criticized as severely as Jeremiah by her former friends. And in the years that followed she and her children faced haunting insecurity. What emerges is the portrait of a strong woman who picked up her cross. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, she embraced her faith, sought spiritual direction, opening the first Catholic school in the United States on Paca Street, and went on to found a new religious community.

In speaking to her religious sisters, Mother Seton advised them not to confuse the make-believe crosses we bring on ourselves by our petulance with the real crosses that Jesus gives us to bring us to genuine holiness. "...We know certainly that our

God calls us to a holy life, that he gives us every grace... and though we are so weak ourselves, this grace is able to carry us through every obstacle and difficulty." This is good advice for us too for taking Jesus' words in the Gospel to heart.

### **Do Not Conform Yourself**

And now, with Mother Seton's permission, a word from St. Paul and his letter to the Romans, where he tells us to live, body and soul, as "a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." He goes on to tell us "not to be conformed to this age but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds so that we embrace God's will, what is good, pleasing and perfect."

In hindsight, it seems to me almost inevitable that a soul so open to God as Elizabeth Ann Seton's would embrace religious life, that she would want to live as Christ lived: poor, chaste, and obedient; that she would want to intensify her life-long practice of charity towards others; that she would seek the perfection of charity and the company of sisters all seeking to embrace God's will, to embrace what is good, pleasing, and perfect, and to do this, not only for their own sakes, but for ours, so that in the rough and tumble of our lives we might seek first the Kingdom of God.

Mother Seton broke through innumerable cultural and interpersonal barriers to reach the point of founding a religious community and causing it to flourish. She is telling us not to imagine that we're hemmed in by the culture we're living in or by the particular circumstances in which we may find ourselves. Holiness of life evidenced by generous service to others is possible for us all. "Be above the vain fears of nature and efforts of the enemy," she tells us, "You are children of eternity ... your immortal crown awaits you..."

### **Conclusion**

Dear friends, for this son of Mount it is a pleasure to be in the Valley and especially in this 225th year of the Archdiocese of Baltimore where St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's pioneering influence is still felt so strongly. May her prayers and example lead us deeper into the mystery of Christ and outward into the charity that evangelizes, now and in the years ahead!

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, pray for us!