

Solemnity of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

Dear Sisters, dear brother Priests, and dear friends in Christ,

Introduction

What a joy it is for me to come here to the Basilica of the National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton on this, her feast day, which is a Solemnity here in this holy place, and to celebrate here the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, so near to her tomb.

Many times as a seminarian at Mount St. Mary's, I would come here to pray, and I vividly remember the joyful days of the Canonization of Mother Seton by the Venerable Pope Paul VI. I was a seminarian just down the road at that time - on September 14, 1975, to be precise.

To the Heart of Catholicism in the United States

Indeed, this Basilica, in this town of Emmitsburg, is a place that brings us to the heart of Catholicism not only in the Archdiocese of Baltimore but also in the United States; for it was here that Mother Seton lived and carried out her pioneering apostolate of Catholic education, and here it was that she departed this life for eternity.

Most of you who have gathered here this morning know well the story of Mother Seton's life and the significance of this place. In 1808 Suplician Father Louis DuBourg invited a young widow and recent convert, Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, to come to Baltimore to open a school for girls. She accepted the invitation and came with her three daughters in 1808. She was welcomed by the community at St. Mary's Seminary who helped her open the school on Paca Street.

It turns out that Mrs. Seton lived there only one year, until June 1809 but it proved to be a very important year in her life. During that year she took her first vows before Bishop John Carroll. During that year she discerned that it was God's will for her to found a community of women religious, viz., the Daughters of Charity. During that same year, she met a seminarian named Samuel Cooper who gave her money to

purchase property (known as the Valley) in Emmitsburg. And the rest, as they say, is history!

Living Legacy

Or is it? Indeed, the words of Pope Paul VI at her canonization still ring in our ears: “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!”

In his homily, Pope Paul went on to say that what sanctity is. “A saint,” he said, “is a person in whom all sin, the principle of death, is cancelled out and replaced by the living splendor of divine grace ...” Sanctity means that a unique individual with unique gifts leads a life of heroic virtue coupled with a mystical love for Christ. She was and is an original image of Christ and his love.

The Holy Father also pointed out that Mother Seton was an American. The point was not simply to proclaim that she was the first American saint. No, the Holy Father wanted us all to realize that our country is fertile soil - “Your land too, America,” he said, “is indeed worthy of receiving into its fertile ground the seed of evangelical holiness.” It is a holiness forged in prayer and sacrifice, a holiness that blossomed in an evangelical style of life shaped by the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, a holiness that poured forth its love by assisting the poor, educating the young, and ministering to the sick and dying.

Today’s Scripture Readings

Today we read in the Scriptures about the unfailing help which God provides to those who are faithful to Him, those who have left all things behind to do His will. In the Gospel, Christ speaks words which apply to Mother Seton, and to all who have followed in her footsteps in the apostolate of Catholic education. He says: Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.”

Indeed, these readings shed light on the living legacy we celebrate this morning. Throughout her life, Elizabeth Ann Seton was a woman of great and persevering generosity and service - as a wife, a mother, a widow, and as a religious. She came to Baltimore and Emmitsburg not to seek comfort and security but rather to educate the young, especially those in need. The door of her home and the door of her heart

were always open to those whose needs included not only physical care and comfort but also encouragement along the path of discipleship. In a word, her whole life was shaped by the spiritual and corporal works of mercy which continue to be carried forward by the Daughters of Charity. In God's grace her life became a total gift of self to God, to her fellow sisters, to her family, and to those in need.

Most often, dear friends, it is charity that moves us toward God. It is charity that gives us the courage, the hope, the renewed faith to turn our lives around, to seek the mercy of God, and to accept God's grace that puts us on the path to good order in our lives, to friendship with God and service to others. Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton's example of charity - a charity that lives in our midst in works of healing and service sustained by the Daughters of Charity, her beloved sisters, continues to inspire many to open their hearts to God's mercy. Truly, this charity is a charity that evangelizes. And for this blessing we give thanks today.

Be Children of the Church!

As Mother Seton prepared to pass from this world to the next here on these very grounds, on January 2nd, 1821, she spoke her last words, and from her place in eternity she repeats them to us today: "Be children of the Church!" She did not mean that we should be childish - immature and self-centered - but rather that our spirits should be innocent and open to God's will and ready to live the Gospel completely in the communion of the Church.

As the whole Church in the United States turns its eyes to Emmitsburg today, let us seek, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to be in Christ true children of God and of our holy Mother, the Church. Let this holy place remind us that the Church is truly our spiritual home where we can rejoice always to experience the mercy of God and then to bear witness to that mercy in works of education, healing & charity. May God bless us and keep us always in his love!