

# St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

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Canonized by Pope Paul VI September 14, 1975

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, sometimes called Mother Seton, the first native-born American citizen to be canonized a saint, was not a "born Catholic." She was the daughter of a wealthy Episcopalian family in New York City. Her relatives, by blood or by marriage, included families of fame and power in the colonial United States. She grew up next door to Alexander Hamilton.

Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born in 1774, two years before the United States itself was born. Her father remained a loyalist during the Revolutionary War and served as a surgeon to the British Redcoats who fought George Washington's militiamen. When Elizabeth was yet a little girl, her mother died, but her father saw to it that his daughter received the best education possible in the colonies. As a schoolgirl Elizabeth looked forward to the time when she could care for the sick, especially those who were poor.

In 1794, when she was twenty, Elizabeth married William Seton. They became the parents of five children. Besides looking after her husband and family, Elizabeth established an organization in New York City called the Widows' Society. She and other members daily visited the poor in their homes to nurse and comfort them. Little did Elizabeth know that she would soon become a widow and with her children face sad and difficult times. The Seton family's shipping business went bankrupt when many ships were lost at sea during wars. Most of the crews and cargoes of the Seton fleet were at the bottom of the Atlantic.

To make matters worse, William Seton became seriously ill with tuberculosis, which was a dreaded killer in those days. The couple and their oldest daughter Anna moved to sunny Italy, where William hoped to regain his health. But instead of recovering, he died shortly after the long sea voyage. Family friends of the Seton's, the Filicchis, who were Catholics, helped Elizabeth through these difficult times.

Eventually Elizabeth returned to New York City determined to become a Catholic. In 1805, having completed instructions in her new faith, Elizabeth was received into the Church. She was happy to

be a Catholic, but her family of devout Episcopalians was dead set against Elizabeth's decision. At that time, unlike today, people were often very intolerant of other religions.

Elizabeth's close relatives chose to forget that they had ever known her and would not lend her money or help her pay her bills. Elizabeth was now a destitute widow with no means to care for her children. It was almost impossible to make ends meet. The bills were piling up. Elizabeth had to work night and day to make a simple living for her children. She started a school, but that soon closed when students would not come to class simply because their teacher was a Catholic.

Elizabeth was seriously thinking about moving her family to Canada, where she hoped life would be easier. Fortunately, Elizabeth did not have to make that move. A priest in Baltimore, Maryland learned of Elizabeth's plight and invited her to begin a girls' school in that city.

Elizabeth did just that and the school succeeded, though it was not without problems. The next year, 1809, Elizabeth moved her school to a stone house in nearby Emmitsburg, where in time it prospered. Poor girls who could pay no tuition as well as wealthy girls attended this school. This was the beginning of the Order of sisters that Elizabeth founded. On March 25 that spring, a priest-friend, Fr. William Dubourg, with the blessing of Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, witnessed Elizabeth's first promises as a religious. Father Dubourg gave her the title of "Mother." Indeed, the title was especially appropriate for Elizabeth. Some of her own children were still at the Stone House with her, and she was now the superior of the women who joined the Order.

That June the sisters started wearing a religious habit. They called themselves the Sisters of St. Joseph. By January 1812, twenty women, including Elizabeth's sisters-in-law Harriet and Cecilia, had joined her community. They decided to follow the rule of the Sisters of Charity in France. Mother Seton wrote textbooks, translated books from French to English, trained teachers, and wrote articles on the spiritual life. As in earlier years with the Widows' Society, Elizabeth continued to visit the sick and the poor, and the poor of the neighborhood. The sisters brought them medicine, food, and clothes, cleaned their homes, cared for the children, and offered kind words of encouragement.

In 1814 her sisters started a home in Philadelphia and cared for the children at St. Joseph's Orphanage. Three years later they opened an orphanage in New York City, Mother Seton's hometown. Wherever the sisters worked, they taught school. Thus, Mother Seton is sometimes considered a founder of the American parochial school system.

Mother Seton died in 1821, but the work of her sisters has steadily grown over the last 160 years. Today six separate communities of sisters trace their beginning to Emmitsburg. Five of these communities are now independently organized and are called Sisters of Charity. The sixth is the American Daughters of Charity. In 1850 these sisters united with a French order of the same name. That order is the largest order of religious in the Church, in 1982 having thirty-two thousand members across the world. The Motherhouse or headquarters of the order is in Paris, France. In the United States the Daughters of Charity staff hospitals, child-care institutions, home for the aged and handicapped, and schools at every level.

Those who knew Mother Seton realized that it was only a matter of time before she would be canonized. In 1882 James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore took the first step toward having Elizabeth so honored. The Church then officially began a detailed study of her life with that cause in mind. The officials learned that at least three miracles had been attributed to Elizabeth's intercession with God. A child was miraculously cured of leukemia, a woman was similarly cured of cancer, and a man recovered miraculously from a massive brain infection.

In 1959 Pope John XXIII declared Mother Seton a Venerable, and in 1963 a Blessed. Then, on September 14, 1975, Pope Paul VI named Elizabeth Seton Saint of the Church. She became the first native-born American to be canonized. The saint's body rests beneath an altar in the chapel of the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland, which is located in the provincial house (headquarters) of the Daughters of Charity of the Emmitsburg Province.