

Elizabeth – daughter. wife. mother. friend. widow. convert. religious woman. teacher...

pause

every person in this room can identify with Elizabeth Bayley Seton through one or more facets of her life and through who she was when she walked this earth. It really is quite remarkable the many different ways in which people connect with Elizabeth Seton.

Today we are going to reflect on Elizabeth as teacher.

pause

Elizabeth Ann Seton is considered the patron saint of American Catholic Education. Her pioneer role at the beginnings of an effective system of holistic, values-based Catholic education in Emmitsburg, Maryland, will be forever remembered in the United States and beyond.

In Elizabeth's short life of 46 years, she was a mother for 26 years. However, Elizabeth served in the role of teacher for possibly 40 years. As was often the custom in the late 1700's, children taught children and regularly checked the lessons of their younger siblings and/or boarders. In her memoir of her childhood, *Dear Remembrances*, Elizabeth Bayley recalled the beginning awareness of what she later referred to as her calling to be a teacher. Herself a motherless child, she was instructed well by her father and the schools which she attended for brief periods both in New York City and New Rochelle.

I invite you to close your eyes and allow a picture to form in your mind

1780 New York City - "At 6 [years old, I remember] taking my little sister Emma up to the garret window [of our house and] showing her the setting sun [over New York harbor. My stepmother was calling us to come down to dinner but first I must...out of love for Emma, let her know where God lived so she could also find great comfort in the presence of our Almighty that I enjoyed; knowing what little I knew at the time about where God existed. I] told her God lived up in heaven [above the clouds where sunbeams always glowed. I took her hand in mine to help her to understand the importance of what I was about to say...] and good children would go up there [to be with God when the time is acceptable. I knew my stepmother would not approve of my little imparts of knowledge to Emma but I felt it was good to help her by sharing my knowledge with her as my Father did with me. Emma was a

good little girl and I was] teaching her her prayers [too]. (p. 510, IIIa with fictional additions)

pause

A few years later, Elizabeth Bayley became Mrs. Seton a married woman with five children raising seven additional children from her Seton in-laws. Heavy responsibility for a woman so young but Elizabeth, ever joyful, took much in stride. Elizabeth organized her household around a daily schedule of schooling for all the children in her care. She described the daily schedule with updates on the children's progress in a letter to her friend, Julia Scott:

I invite you to close your eyes and imagine the scene

1801 State Street House - "[by] ten o'clock all is arranged and the round table [in our sitting room] is covered with different Books used by my Darlings; [10 year old] Cecilia begins Grammar, reading, writing, Spelling of large and small words, marking, sewing, and figures. You doubtless smile at the idea of my being her Directress, but certainly she makes very great progress and learns thoroughly whatever she applies herself to – her disposition cannot be excelled for mildness and assiduity *rare qualities united*, and Miss Shipton, with an attention she herself cannot conceive the value of, has furnished me with books of every kind that are useful in the Education of Children. Anna Maria [6 years old] follows Cecilia as nearly as her inferior age allows and discovers a capacity and amiability of mind that gives me a peaceful satisfaction, for a Mother always 'rejoices with trembling.' William and Richard say their lessons: little pieces [of poetry], names of the United States, Divisions of the Globe, *some* of the Commandments. Suppose yourself a teacher of Reading, writing, sewing for I devote the whole Morning – that is from ten till two – Going to school thro' snow and wet will give me more trouble than keeping them at Home[.] I have tried it one week, and as yet it has been only a pleasure at all events... (p.150 & 54, I)

pause

For Elizabeth, the combination of teaching with mothering seemed to come naturally. Multi-tasking was a necessity. Between caring for nurselings, supervising the household help, arranging for meals, teaching young children basic skills, monitoring the older children in the daily activities, and assisting her father and husband with their affairs, Elizabeth's life was full.

Teaching alongside the role of mothering was how Elizabeth's life developed. I believe she viewed herself, during these busy years of managing a household, as mother who was able, and more than willing, to also be a teacher for her children. Elizabeth gained much experience in caring for and teaching children of different ages and managing multi-level, multi-subject teaching in essentially a one-room school setting. Challenging but fulfilling experiences. Elizabeth was also very proud of her children's accomplishments and praised them for doing well as illustrated in a letter she wrote to her 6 year old son, Richard:

I invite you to enter into Elizabeth's experience

1803 The Lazaretto, Leghorn, Italy - "My Dear Richard, your own Mother loves you dearly and is delighted to hear you are such a good Boy – and are so fond of going to school. Oh how pleased Papa will be to hear you spell. your mother EAS." (p.246, I)

pause

I find that in the busiest of times, I have learned and gained the most useful experiences. When I am trying to prepare lesson plans and courses, practice for a concert, prepare my students for a recital and meet a research deadline, I truly am energized by the flurry of activity and learn a great deal. I enjoy trying to balance the number of responsibilities while still trying to expand my abilities and improve my skills or knowledge.Such is the life of a Sister of Charity. Little did Elizabeth realize that during these busy years as a mother and teacher, she was also being prepared for life as a Sister of Charity.

pause

After her conversion, the widow Seton was desperately trying to find a means to provide for her children by herself with very little support from her extended family. She was offered a position as teaching assistant in a seminary and described the offer in a letter:

I invite you to imagine the scene

1805 small house near St. Peter's Church New York - "A Mr. [Patrick] White an English gentleman of very respectable character and a compl[ete] scholar but in reduced circumstances is endeavoring to establish a school for young Ladies, and perhaps Boys also, in which his wife will assist – He has seen my children and is interested for us – he has offered to teach them, and receive me as an assistant in his school in case it succeeds, of which there is

every prospect as he is well recommended and a school such as he proposes is very much wanted – I should have a good prospect for the education of my boys [and] quiet my conscience by doing something if ever so trifling towards our maintenance – and my Anna would receive more instruction than I can give her. [M]y profits are to be a third of whatever this plan produces [and] as I shall have no responsibility or trouble in organizing the plan, I could certainly find no situation more easy.” (p. 359, 361, I)

pause

The plan for success of this school ultimately did fail. Over the next couple of years, Elizabeth tried several schemes in an effort to provide for her family. She did sewing and mending, and took in boarders to help cover her rent. She continued to try to find work as a teacher in New York. Protestants thwarted every opportunity Elizabeth had to teach by promoting campaigns against her citing that she would convert all children to Catholicism. These are among the reasons why Elizabeth was so relieved to be given the opportunity to move her family to Baltimore, Maryland, and begin a new life as a Catholic teacher.

In Baltimore, Elizabeth cared for and taught her daughters and several other girls again in a one room setting. Her sons had been studying in George Town but were transferred St. Mary’s Baltimore. Elizabeth was enjoying her vocation as teacher and the simple life of her small house when she wrote to describe a new opportunity to her friend, Julia Scott:

I invite you to picture Elizabeth in your mind

1809 Paca Street house – “[Mr. Cooper] has purchased a very valuable farm forty miles from this place on which all the conveniences of life are abundant. It is true also that I shall be at the head of a community which will live under the strictest rules of order and regularity. Much as this offer delights[ed] me, I urge[d] my want of talents. ...but to speak the joy of my soul at the prospect of being able to assist the Poor, visit the sick, comfort the sorrowful, clothe little innocents, and teach them to love God!” (p.61-2, II and one line from p.506, originally said regarding school in Baltimore in 1808 NYC used in this context fictionally)

pause

On Feb. 22, 1810, the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s in Emmitsburg, Maryland, opened a free day school and in 1812 opened St. Joseph’s Boarding Academy. The students were daughters of distinguished English

nobility and wealthy Catholic and Protestant families from New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and many areas along the East coast. The student body also included girls who were poor “Mountain children” (p. 329 II) from near St. Joseph’s Valley and African American children both free and enslaved. Black girls were not formally admitted to the academy but learned basic skills and religion from the sisters. In the academy poor and orphaned girls were taught in separate classrooms from the paying boarding students. The different classroom curricula were designed to prepare the girls with the skills, beyond basic education, needed for their future stations in life. The admission requirements of students to the day school were that the parents should be poor and unable to pay for education, and the child should be promising. A sense of equality and mutual respect flourished among the sisters and student at St. Joseph’s.

Some of the subjects in the curriculum of St. Joseph’s Academy included sewing, embroidery, grammar, spelling, reading, writing, foreign languages such as French, German, Spanish, and Italian, music including composition, vocal and instrumental, geography, history, arithmetic, drawing, and housekeeping. General tuition covered these studies but for extra fees private music and dance lessons were also available. There was also a spinning, weaving, and knitting school for the “country people” from the area around Emmitsburg. When the basic life skills considered necessary for an early 19th century woman were sewing, spinning, knitting, housekeeping, and basic handcrafts, St. Joseph’s Academy’s curriculum was challenging and a very fine, broad education for a young woman.

Elizabeth Seton was the matron or superior of the Academy and taught French and music though she claimed she need only “use the talent of smiling and caressing while the excellent mistresses had[ve] all the trouble.” (p.172 II) She was responsible and cared for the sisters, the students, her own daughters, and many who would arrive at their doorstep. All strangers were welcome at their doorstep and many besides were also invited to stay for dinner. Every Wednesday, boys who studied at Mount St. Mary’s had an outing to visit St. Joseph’s. As a result of these visits, many of the boys had a deep affection for Mother Seton. Elizabeth shared in a letter to Antonio Filicchi, her thoughts on the school and her responsibilities:

Imagine the scene

1811 Log House Emmitsburg – “Tonino...I have a very very large school to superintend every day, and the entire charge of the religious instruction of all

the country round. All happy [due] to the Sisters of Charity who are night and day devoted to the sick and ignorant. ... the promising and amiable perspective of Establishing a House of plain and useful Education, retired from the extravagance of the world...so simple and unpretending is our Object we cannot fail of success if not crushed in our Beginning. ...it will gradually succeed, as it is committed solely to [the] providence of Almighty God. My life is a very happy one spent [e]ntirely between my school and the chapel which joins our dwelling.” (p.127 & 206, 19, 46 II)

pause

Everyone in the school both sisters and students followed the daily schedule together and collectively participated in picnics, outings, and other recreational activities. The organization of St. Joseph’s Academy developed no doubt through Elizabeth’s teaching and supervisory experiences. The students of the school were divided into groups of ten called a “decury” with supervision by a sister-prefect or “angel.” (p.620 II) There was much emphasis placed on mentoring and character development within the school. This approach aided with efficient orderliness in the daily activities of the school and helped older students review their studies. Elizabeth explained:

“an excellent way to make children steady [is] to show them you confide in them, and put the younger ones in some degree in [the] charge of the older – [the older girls] go over the same lessons many times which they have carelessly learnt, and being obliged to give good example it has a good effect.” (p. 141 II)

Elizabeth’s younger daughter Kit only ten years of age heard lessons of the younger children and conducting herself with such grace “that girls twice her age show[ed] her the greatest respect.” (p.137 II) Regular review of materials was to Elizabeth the foundation of a fine education and how she helped her students strive for excellence.

At least once a month a whole school day was devoted to the art of letter writing. Most of these letters were written to parents. The sisters checked the letters for correctness and caught up on general household chores. Elizabeth maintained frequent correspondence with parents of St. Joseph’s students. There were it seems interruptions in the orderliness of conduct of the students which included incorrigible students who were asked to leave St. Joseph’s regardless of birthright or connections. In a letter to her spiritual

director, Simon Brute, Elizabeth offered a reflection on teaching and dealing with parents:

“I will tell you in what I know American parents to be most difficult – in hearing the faults of their children – in twenty instances where you see the faults are not to be immediately corrected by the parents, but rather by good advices and education, it is best not to speak of them to Papa and Mama who feel as if you reflected on their very self and while to you it will be “Yes Sir, I know, I perceive,” in the heart they think it is not so much, and they will soften and excuse to the child what they condemn to us, and our efforts afterwards avail very little – (p. 366 II)

Elizabeth maintained frequent correspondence with former students whom she considered as friends and extended family after they left St. Joseph’s. Alumnae were welcomed, and encouraged, to visit and/or join in the annual community retreat. An example of this strong inter-relationship can be seen in a letter written to a former student named Mary Diana Harper which described the intimate details of the death of Elizabeth’s daughter Rebecca.

Please enter into yourself and feel Elizabeth’s connection with this student
 1817 The White House Emmitsburg – “My ever dear Mary – How many remembrances pressed on my heart on reading your letter (20th May 1817) and when your dear Mama related the difficulty you had had to reconcile yourself with the separation so truly painful...but you know all that is in order, a part of our fine Education in this pretty World where the first step to happiness is *to subdue our feelings* – by this time I am sure you are well convinced that your situation [of living in France] affords you a thousand advantages you could never meet in our American Schools...[My] Bec was more lively and playful to the last than you ever saw her, after sitting up so many months night and day, never able to lie down, and the three last days of her life in expectation of Death every moment she yet had so much peace and fortitude that when we offered her [something] to lull her pain, she said, ‘may be I shall get away in my sleep if I take it, so I will bid you all good bye, give my love to everybody’ – yet she had made such earnest preparation for Death and was in such truly heavenly dispositions of mind that her cheerfulness evidently was but the effect of a pure heart and good conscience – she dozed away her life like a sweet baby; returning from a stupor which had lasted some time, she said, ‘it seemed to me I have been with our dear Lord and he showed me my little cup almost full, only a few drops more can go in it dearest Mother’ – she breathed her dear Soul on her

Mothers bosom I hope indeed in fullest security of Eternal rest for the dear one had so little rest in this world and united so constantly with the sufferings of our Savior. Dearest Mary how different your life from hers, her early hopes crushed in the bud – yours all cherished with the fairest promise[;] every hour of hers marked with pain – yours a succession of ease and pleasure[;] sweet Bec – the crucifix which she had always before her was her strength and support to the last, in her severest pains she would look at it with rolling tears and press my hand in silence – that crucifix *you* will blush to own, and find it oftener your reproach than your consolation – Yet through all your dangers of Salvation, God will be a faithful God to you, if you are faithful to him as you well know. Your [little sister] Elizabeth will tell you how she loves her Sister Margaret [George] who is always the favourite, and truly a most useful and true friend to the little darling [and] who promises every thing your heart can wish. You are dearly remembered here by many my dear Mary and ever most tenderly loved by your own friend in best hopes of our eternal reunion. Your EASeton.

Pause

St. Joseph's was a school of love and care for the whole person which was exuded through Elizabeth Ann Seton. Elizabeth, now the motherly teacher, expanded her family through the community of sisters and students at the school and modeled a holistic approach to education through the organization and teaching style of St. Joseph's. Elizabeth said, "Tenderness is the language children best understand" (p.173 II) which was how the Sisters of Charity daily lived out Jesus' mission in Emmitsburg. As St. Paul exhorted, "You should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete, put on love." (Col. 3:12 & 14)

In Elizabeth's words, "I am as a Mother encompassed by many children of different dispositions – not all equally amiable or congenial, but bound to love, instruct, and provide for the happiness of all, to give the example of cheerfulness [sic], Peace, resignation, and consider individuals more as proceeding from the same Origin and tending to the same end than in the different shades of merit or demerit. (p. 154, II)

What is Elizabeth teaching each of us?

Please close your eyes, open your ears and your heart and let's go to meet Elizabeth Seton.

Guided meditation of walking in motherhouse/chapel to speak with EAS.

Four Sisters of Charity from Emmitsburg, at the invitation of Bishop Fenwick, arrived in Cincinnati in 1829. Their first ministry was St. Peter's Orphanage for girls and an accompanying day school. We as Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati continue the mission of Charity spirituality and the Seton Legacy of Education. What did Elizabeth share with you that will help you with this mission?

pause

Elizabeth wrote a letter to Sister Margaret George, who was on her way to the mission in New York on May 28, 1819, with advice and blessing:

My Marg[aret],

His Peace...take care of Margaret exactly as you would of EAS – mind that [which was] my last injunction [to] remember all the little things I told you in this corner [of St. Joseph's Valley] about Kindness to Strangers in the *true Spirit*. You have so much to do for our Lord. May he bless you as my heart and Soul blesses you-" (p.612 Vol. II).

Elizabeth Seton's advice and blessings for us...the daughters of both herself and Margaret....Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati.

References:

Carroll, J. (1976). *The John Carroll papers* (Vol. 3. T.O. Hanley, Ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings, edited by Regina Bechtel, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C.; mss. editor, Ellin Kelly; Vols. I, II, IIIa, IIIb (2000-2006).

MacNeil, D.C., Betty Ann. (March 2006) "Historical Perspectives on Elizabeth Seton and Education: School Is My Chief Business" *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*. Vol. 9, No. 3, March 2006.

Metz, S.C., Judith. "A Charity Spirituality for Educators" *Review for Religious* 67.3.2008