
Biography of Elizabeth Ann Seton

Elizabeth Bayley Seton was the foundress of the first active community of Catholic women religious in the United States and the first U.S. born canonized saint. She was born Elizabeth Bayley into a prominent New York Family on August 28, 1774. Her father, Dr. Richard Bayley was a physician, professor of medicine, and the first health officer of New York City. Her mother, Catherine Charlton Bayley, daughter of an Episcopal minister, died when Elizabeth was only three years of age.

Elizabeth's entire young life was spent in the New York area where, in 1794, she married William Seton a member of one of New York's prominent merchant families. The couple had five children between the years 1795-1802. During these years Elizabeth was an active and devoted member of Trinity Episcopal Church. Her writings from this period demonstrate a deepening spirituality. The Setons had a happy family life while at the same time experiencing the death of both the elder Mr. Seton and Dr. Bayley. Elizabeth raised not only her own children but fell heir to her husband's younger siblings as well. In addition, she put her energies into improving the lot of those less fortunate by participating in the newly-formed Widow's Society.

By 1798 a double tragedy visited Elizabeth. The family business was moving inexorably toward bankruptcy and her husband was becoming increasingly debilitated by tuberculosis. In hopes of arresting the disease, Elizabeth decided on a sea voyage to Italy. William died shortly after their arrival in late 1803. Elizabeth, along with her oldest daughter, Anna Maria, spent several months with the Filichi family, business associates of her late husband. It was during this time that she was exposed to the Catholic faith.

Upon her return to the United States Elizabeth converted to Catholicism. After three years of economic struggle and social discrimination because of her choice to become a Catholic, she and her family moved to Baltimore. Bishop John Carroll encouraged her to open a school for young women. Besides running the school, Catholic women from around the country came to join her and the beginnings of a religious congregation emerged. The women moved to Emmitsburg, Maryland in the

summer of 1809 where they formally began the Sisters of Charity on July 31. Elizabeth Seton was named the first superior and served in that capacity for the next twelve years.

As the community took shape, Elizabeth Seton directed its vision. Constitutions from the French Daughters of Charity were adapted, a novitiate was conducted and the first group, including Elizabeth, made their religious vows in July, 1813. Shortly after that event, they accepted their first work outside Emmitsburg when sisters were sent to Philadelphia to conduct an orphanage. By 1817 they had also opened a mission in New York.

During her years at Emmitsburg, Elizabeth suffered great personal loss. Her oldest daughter succumbed to tuberculosis in 1812 and her youngest daughter, Rebecca, died of the same ailment in 1816. Her spiritual growth and abandonment to God's will during this period is apparent in her writings.

By 1818 Elizabeth began to weaken from the effects of tuberculosis. She spent the last years of her life directing St. Joseph's Academy and the Sisters of Charity but also preparing herself for the inevitable outcome of her condition. She succumbed on January 4, 1821.

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