

Saints
by Our
Side

Elizabeth Ann Seton



Anne Merwin

Saints by Our Side

Elizabeth Ann Seton

By Anne Merwin



BOOKS & MEDIA
Boston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Merwin, Anne.

Elizabeth Ann Seton / Anne Merwin.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8198-2380-9—ISBN 0-8198-2380-5

1. Seton, Elizabeth Ann, Saint, 1774-1821. 2. Christian saints—United States—Biography. I. Title.

BX4700.S4M47 2014

271'.9102—dc23

[B]

2014004071

The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition*, copyright © 1989, 1993, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America, copyright © 1994, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with permission.

Excerpts from *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings*, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2000–2006) copyright © Sisters of Charity Federation. Used with permission.

Excerpts from Rev. John David to Elizabeth Seton, Baltimore, 28 December 1809, Archives of Mount Saint Vincent (AMSV) 115, 1, 18. Courtesy: Archives Sisters of Charity of New York.

Excerpts from *Numerous Choirs, Volume I: The Seton Years, 1774–1821*, and the Archives Province of St. Louise (APSL) 1-3-3-4 #119, from Cecilia O'Conway, Christmas 1818. Courtesy: Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise Archives, Emmitsburg, Maryland.

Excerpts from the *Canonization of Elisabeth Ann Seton, Homily of the Holy Father Paul VI*, September 14, 1975, copyright © Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with permission.

Excerpts from the Navy Medal Pamphlet, *Commemorating Elizabeth Ann Seton, 1774–1821, Sainted Mother of Two U.S. Navy Sons*, copyright © National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Anne Seton, Emmitsburg, Maryland.

Cover design by Rosana Usselmann

Cover background photo: © istockphoto.com/ ver0nicka

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

“P” and PAULINE are registered trademarks of the Daughters of St. Paul.

Copyright © 2015, Anne Merwin

Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Pauls Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

www.pauline.org

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

19 18 17 16 15

“The Lord looks on the heart.”

—1 SAMUEL 16:7

“God loves a cheerful giver.”

—2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

*“Think of him, love him, and look to him,
and never mind the rest—all will be well—
the Lord will direct.”*

—SAINT ELIZABETH ANN SETON¹

“Perseverance and spirit have done wonders in all ages.”

—GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON²



Contents

INTRODUCTION

My Personal Connection to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton ix

CHAPTER ONE

Spiritual Seeds and Formation 1

CHAPTER TWO

Marriage and Motherhood 9

CHAPTER THREE

Livorno: Tragedy Transformed 21

CHAPTER FOUR

Conversion and Change 35

CHAPTER FIVE

Baltimore: Answering God's Call 45

CHAPTER SIX
From Emmitsburg to Eternity 57

CHAPTER SEVEN
The Spirit of Love and Service 73

CHAPTER EIGHT
Divine Education 79

Prayer in Honor of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton 89

Reflection Questions 91

Chronology 97

Bibliography and Sources 101

Notes 107

INTRODUCTION



My Personal Connection to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton

“Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter: whoever finds one has found a treasure.” (Sir 6:14)

I met Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton because of my husband. One weekend in the early 1990s, he suggested that we visit her house in Baltimore. He told me I had a great deal in common with her. I reluctantly agreed to put our active young sons in the car and go to a museum, where I would have to prevent them from running through the exhibits. When I arrived and walked through the front door of the Mother Seton House, I felt a peace that engulfed my mind, my body, and my soul. I knew I belonged there. From that day on, I have tried to learn as much as possible about Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. What I did not realize was how much she would teach me about my own life through her example.



We are all part of God's family through the communion of saints. My relationship with Elizabeth has another, earthly dimension, however, because I am related to her sister-in-law, Mary Hoffman Seton. I have other things in common with Elizabeth. She and I were both Episcopalians from New York City who converted to Catholicism while we cared for our young children. Her maternal grandfather was a Protestant clergyman, as was my maternal great-great-grandfather. Religion was ingrained in our families. Brought up to be debutantes, we went to private schools for girls and studied music. We both married men from New York who changed the direction of our lives. Circumstances concerning our husbands led us to Catholicism and to Baltimore at the age of thirty-three. Elizabeth found her mission in life while living at her house on Paca Street, and at that same house I discovered joy in promoting her legacy.

The other similar circumstances in our lives are too numerous to list here. They helped me understand Elizabeth's story. I never planned these events; they just happened. In retrospect, my connections to Elizabeth gradually and gently unfolded like a sunrise at dawn. Divine education teaches through revelation. My personal connections to Elizabeth can be best understood in light of a short overview of her life.



It is not possible to speak of the spirit of Elizabeth without joining it to the spirit of her land, the new nation, for she came from its soil, breathed its air, and walked its streets. She

dreamed its dreams, captured its vision, and lived the meaning of its pioneering experience.¹

Elizabeth was brought up during the tumultuous times of the American Revolution. She was born in the area of New York City in 1774 into a wealthy, aristocratic, and Episcopalian family. Her parents were preoccupied with the war and their expanding family while Elizabeth was growing up. Elizabeth's faith in God comforted her and became a source of strength.

In 1789, George Washington was sworn in as the first President of the United States at New York City's Federal Hall on Wall Street. The same year, Bishop John Carroll became the head of the nation's first Catholic Diocese in Baltimore. Elizabeth would convert to Catholicism; and her later association with Bishop Carroll gave her the opportunity for leadership in the formative years of the Catholic Church in America. The year 1789 was a year of spiritual growth and formation for the teen-aged Elizabeth. She discovered that God, who revealed himself to her in nature, was also her Father.

In 1794, Elizabeth married William Magee Seton, of the prominent Seton mercantile family. She bore five children in the next eight years. Then tragedy struck several times in quick succession. Elizabeth courageously faced the failure of her husband's business and his painful death from tuberculosis. Inspired by her stay in Catholic Italy at the time of her husband's death, Elizabeth returned to New York in 1804 only to face struggle once again. She decided to give up her social standing, withstood the rejection of family members (which included my relative, Mary Seton), and, to the horror of New York society, she converted to Catholicism. This penniless

widow with five children persisted while making such a bold move. And it got the attention of Baltimore's Bishop John Carroll.

In 1808, John Carroll approved the invitation of Reverend Louis William Valentine Dubourg, the President of Saint Mary's College in Baltimore, to have Elizabeth start a Catholic school for girls on its grounds. With extraordinary perseverance and hard work, she managed to bring up her own five children while she accomplished pioneering work for the Catholic school system and establishing the first order of Catholic sisters in the United States. From their formation days in Baltimore and Emmitsburg, Maryland, her Sisters and Daughters of Charity would travel across the United States and around the globe to establish new foundations. On September 14, 1975, the world celebrated the canonization of Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first native-born saint of the United States.

Elizabeth's life and work teach us how to put faith into action. She responded to the needs of each day and to the events of her time. She answered the call of Christ with a grateful and willing heart. She accepted God's will and moved forward.



Three memorable experiences solidified both my connection with Elizabeth and my commitment to her legacy. I can label these experiences human, historic, and holy.

Elizabeth's humanity became evident to me in the winter of 2000. In January, one of my children hit a tree hard while

sledding at dusk. While I waited in the hospital's emergency room for my son to return from getting x-rays, I prayed for Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton's intercession and promptly fell asleep. It was the last thing I wanted to do, because I intended to pray for a positive outcome the entire time he was having the x-rays. Upon waking, I immediately learned that my son suffered much bruising, but he did not break any bones. He would be fine, but I needed to recover. The only sleep I got that night was when my son was in the x-ray department.

In retrospect, not only were my prayers for my son answered, but I also got a few minutes of rest, which I needed for the following day.

When we left the hospital early the next morning, I realized the deeper significance of the nap. When I fell asleep, I lost control of my prayers. My agenda to pray continuously during the x-rays peacefully slipped into God's gentle, correcting hands. I believed that God, helped by the loving intercession of a maternal friend in heaven for an anxious mother on earth, knew what I really needed. I learned that I could finally trust God to set my agenda. In gratitude, I decided to commit as much of my life as possible to promoting the legacy of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Historic saintly connections can seem like coincidences. People have told me that they became interested in Elizabeth because her saint's day happened to be their birthdays or anniversaries. Others said that, like Elizabeth, they had five children or that they were one of five. These shared circumstances are factual magnets that draw people to Elizabeth and anchors that keep

them interested in her. They also can become holy, life-changing, faith-filled experiences. The first time I heard Elizabeth's story at her house in Baltimore, I reacted by thinking: *An Episcopalian woman married in Lower Manhattan who converted to Catholicism and moved to Baltimore . . . wow, I did that, too!* I was hooked and had to learn more.

I read that Elizabeth had worshiped at Saint Paul's Episcopal Church in New York and had felt drawn by the nearby Catholic church of Saint Peter during her decision to convert to Catholicism. I had spent many lunch hours praying in Episcopal churches in mid-town Manhattan wondering why I felt something missing, why I was not quite connecting. When I stepped into the nearby Saint Patrick's Cathedral, I knew I had found the comfort of the missing link. It was the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, although I did not understand what that meant at the time. Now I feel most closely connected to Elizabeth in prayer that takes place in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, either privately or at Mass.

Finally there are the holy experiences that seem to include all dimensions of life. In the spring of 2006, almost exactly 200 years after Elizabeth's confirmation at Saint Peter's Catholic Church in New York by Baltimore's Bishop John Carroll, I visited the Parrocchia Madre Seton in Livorno, Italy (the first church in Europe named for Mother Seton). In Livorno, Elizabeth would become interested in the Catholic faith while staying with the Filicchi family after her husband's death. In the garden of this church named after Mother Seton, her statue stands most appropriately between the graves of her husband, William, and their

mutual Catholic friend Antonio Filicchi. She holds a rosary in one hand and a book in the other. The book reminded me of my Protestant days when I began to study the Bible, and the Rosary represented my Catholic faith and prayers to Mary, the Queen of All Saints.

The juxtaposition of the graves was deeply moving. The friendship of William Seton and Antonio Filicchi was honored in a way that revealed the beauty of God's love in his plan for Elizabeth's life. Through these men, Elizabeth's life as wife and mother became that of widow, convert, and foundress. The unity of the American and Italian men reflected the universality of the Church. In nature's peaceful setting, history met eternity in the sanctity of Elizabeth. And through the death and resurrection of Christ, we all have hope for a blessed eternity. In the silence of that garden, in the presence of earthly and heavenly friends, in a country where I could not understand the language, I finally understood the meaning of the Communion of Saints.

What does Elizabeth mean to me?

She has enlightened my life for the past twenty years. I have tried to visit the places in the world where her footsteps have left historical imprints. On a summer's day you can see me on the upper deck of the Governor's Island ferry in New York's harbor. Camera in hand, I click away at the approaching Manhattan skyline. For right in the center of that coastline is the site of Elizabeth's former home. In Baltimore, it was my great privilege and joy to show visitors her home and the chapel where she became Mother Seton. And as I approach Emmitsburg in my car during the different seasons of the year, I can see how Elizabeth

must have felt this was truly God's country. I simply never get tired of retracing her timeless footsteps.

When I arrive at the National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, I slip into the old cemetery to visit the graves of her two teenaged daughters and two beloved sisters-in-law. I ask for Elizabeth Seton's intercession for my family. Then I pray for her girls and soul sisters as well.

Elizabeth is like a jewel. The many beautiful facets in her legacy of love continue to sparkle. She trusted in God and thrived in the present. Yet she saw the present through the lens of eternity. She is a mentor and a heroic model of holiness. Best of all, she is a friend who is always available. I think of the words in Proverbs, "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all" (Prov 31:29).

In the following pages, I have attempted to show how God motivated Elizabeth's thoughts and actions.² My hope is the example of her life, one of divine education, can reveal the love and mission God has for your life. The reflections and questions at the end of the book are designed for that purpose.

If you feel particularly drawn to Elizabeth, I hope this book will help you understand why. In *A Simple Life*, Kathryn Hermes, FSP, beautifully describes the connection to a saint.

It is a blessed moment when one discovers a kindred spirit among the saints. When this happens, it often becomes apparent that the spiritual friendship had been developing quietly and patiently throughout life, waiting for the moment when it would blossom into a kinship of the soul.³

All saints have demonstrated extraordinary virtues, especially charity. So even if you have a different vocation from

Elizabeth's, it is still possible to imitate the purpose and motivation of her life. She loved God with her whole heart, mind, and soul. She also loved her neighbor. Through God's timeless love, the years melt away. Therefore, her neighbor today includes you.

CHAPTER ONE



Spiritual Seeds and Formation

“Look up at the blue Heavens and love Him!”¹

As you approach the tip of lower Manhattan aboard the deck of a slow-moving ferry, the tall, gleaming glass buildings of State and Water Streets beckon. From this majestic, thin tip of the island, every linear structure reaches for its place in the spacious blue skies. But what is the tiny brick building front and center, nestled between two skyscrapers? More importantly, how can it justify the land it occupies in both the continuously evolving New York skyline and one of the most valuable real estate markets in the world? This three-story Georgian style house is associated with the legacy of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first native-born Catholic saint of the United States. Today, it is both a parish church and a shrine to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. Her journey began in New York City in 1774, but now her legacy is

worldwide, eternal, and accessible to all. Just as this site where she lived over two hundred years ago has endured to become a church that welcomes visitors from around the globe, her story still invites everyone to share in its relevance today.



Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born in the area of New York City on August 28, 1774, the feast of Saint Augustine. In November 1773, almost nine months before her birth, a British ship loaded with tea docked in Boston Harbor. Unwilling to pay the import tax to Britain, colonists failed to convince the proper authorities to have the ship return to England. A few people dressed up as Native American warriors and threw the cargo of tea overboard. Later known as the Boston Tea Party, the event was a bold act of defiance and a stunning protest that helped spark the American Revolution.

The leaders of the American Revolution cared deeply for the freedom that liberates the soul. Although the fight to secure independence would add risk and pain to the immediate future of many colonists, the vision of liberty fortified their ability to persevere.

As a child of the American Revolution, Elizabeth possessed the same qualities its leaders had: faith, foresight, and fortitude. Instead of using guns and swords to plow ahead, she used a gentle combination of prayer and action to skillfully outmaneuver the conventions and prejudices of her day. Rather than igniting a cannon's blast, Elizabeth quietly lit the flame of innovation one candle at a time, until the warmth and light caught on.

Elizabeth's childhood was intertwined with American history. One month after her birth in 1774, delegates from twelve of the thirteen original colonies, prompted by the Boston Tea Party, met as the First Continental Congress. The British prepared for a struggle. In 1775, Paul Revere warned the colonists in Massachusetts of the British army's advance, and the American Revolutionary War began.

By Elizabeth's first birthday, over three quarters of New York City's residents had fled due to the threat of war with Great Britain.² Elizabeth and her family probably moved to the comparative safety of Staten Island, staying with her maternal grandparents, the Reverend Richard and Mrs. Mary Bayeux Charlton.

Just before her second birthday, the Battle of Long Island started. The British were well prepared to fight and dominate by sea and by land. A month later, the Great Fire of 1776 devastated about one fourth of New York City, including her Uncle William Bayley's store and Trinity Church on Wall Street, which might have contained Elizabeth's baptismal records (they have not yet been found). The Declaration of Independence of 1776 had a backlash. Richard Bayley, Elizabeth's father, experienced the consequences first hand. As an army surgeon based in Newport, Rhode Island, during the beginning of the war,³ he was thoroughly acquainted with the fear and acute brutality of war. Later, as the first Public Health Commissioner of New York City, Dr. Bayley also dealt with the war's aftermath of poverty, destruction, and disease. In 1777, he returned to his ailing wife and young family in New York.



The Bayleys were a prominent family of French and English descent. Elizabeth was the second of three daughters born to Dr. Richard and Catherine Charlton Bayley. During Elizabeth's early childhood, her mother and younger sister died. Elizabeth coped with their deaths by focusing her thoughts on heaven. By looking up into the distant sky, her mind could reach out to a place where her mother and sister now existed in the fullness of God's love. In her day, the urban sky was still mysterious and peaceful. If it became cloudy, unpredictable, and stormy, it still held hope for change. Just as the earth depends on the sky for light, air, and water, the little, lonely Elizabeth instinctively looked up to God for sustenance. He in turn nurtured her soul.

In June 1778, Richard Bayley married Charlotte Amelia Barclay, a member of the prominent Roosevelt family. The new Mrs. Bayley would have six children over the next eight years.⁴ But she found time to teach Elizabeth to pray Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd," which remained her favorite psalm throughout her life. The image of the Good Shepherd comforted her.

During this time period, women were often left at home to run farms and businesses while the men were at sea or war. Dr. Bayley was a successful and well-known teacher of anatomy at King's College (now Columbia University), then located in Lower Manhattan. His medical studies and research required him to be in England for months at a time. He understood the need for education to prepare both men and women for self-sufficiency in a tumultuous, young country. Dr. Bayley sent Elizabeth to a private girls' school where she received a profitable education.

As more children were born to Dr. Bayley and his second wife, Elizabeth was often sent to her Uncle Bayley's house* on the unspoiled, sparkling blue shores of Long Island Sound near New Rochelle. She spent many hours alone, walking in the leafy woods inhabited by the birds and animals. Along the sandy beaches and marshy coves, she listened to the sounds of the geese and seagulls that filled the air. There she felt close to God. The wind was his breath, the skies his domain, and the tiny wild flowers the artwork of his creation. One day in the spring of 1789, during her father's absence abroad, the teenaged Elizabeth felt the presence of God in nature fill the painful parental void in her life. His love filled her heart as her eyes were drawn toward a family of chestnut trees. The beauty of nature took hold of her senses, and her soul soared with wonder. She realized and rejoiced that God was her Father and wrote that she "then layed still to enjoy the Heavenly Peace that came over my Soul; and I am sure in the two hours so enjoyed grew ten years in my spiritual life."⁵ Just as teenagers throughout the centuries begin to reach out to peers and friends for support and companionship as they mature, Elizabeth's receptive heart found both her mentor and the recipient for her love in God.



* Today, the Bayley house is near the border of Pelham and New Rochelle in New York. It is privately owned and visible from the street. The nearby Glen Island Park in New Rochelle provides a good view of Long Island Sound. It is easy to picture the teenaged Elizabeth here, especially on the leafy shore road.

Elizabeth had always felt the presence of God in her young life, but now she understood the nature of this connection and recognized its meaning. God was both her Creator and her parent. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “He [God] . . . transcends human fatherhood and motherhood . . . no one is father as God is Father” (CCC, no. 239). And “If my father and my mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up” (Ps 27:10).

Of course Elizabeth’s parents did not intentionally forsake her. Her mother had died, and her father’s career required him to be absent. Her stepmother had young children who required constant attention. But when a heart such as Elizabeth’s is vulnerable, it requires tender care. God provided the warmth and love she needed.

Around the age of eighteen, Elizabeth entered the culturally sophisticated world of wealthy New York society. Upper-class girls of her time were exposed to the social graces of polite conversation, manners, and diplomacy. Tiny (just under five feet) and slim, Elizabeth had a lovely, open face, large brown eyes, and long, wavy brown hair. From all accounts of her beauty, she must have been the type of woman who could wear any style with ease. A talented musician, she loved to dance so much that she kept her dancing slippers all her life. At her National Shrine in Emmitsburg, Maryland, you can see her delicate, white-silk dancing shoes with an “S” on the toe area. With any debutante, a gentle and sparkling personality adds bounce to a dance step. Whether Elizabeth twirled across the ballrooms of eighteenth-century New York or later walked the dirt roads of rural Maryland as an American Catholic pioneer, God always led her in the dance, and she graciously followed.



Even as a teenager, Elizabeth was easy to understand because her soul was uncluttered. She was honest, imaginative, poetic, and emotional. She knew how to stand her ground. She gave what she could and was grateful for what she received. Her generous heart not only served others but also respected and forgave them. Of course she had her faults; she wrote about her sins and weaknesses. She asked for God's forgiveness, that he weed and prune her soul so that she could see his purpose for her daily life. Thus she wished to know herself in order to recognize her full potential in the service of God. Fortified with self-knowledge, she faced the world ready to give to others what God had given her. She desired his approval more than the approval of the people around her.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God gave her the ability she needed to serve him. Her qualities are similar to the fruit of the Holy Spirit: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22–23).

Her life incorporated the gifts of the Holy Spirit as well. They are described in the Book of Isaiah.

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear. (Isa 11:2–3)

Elizabeth's joy came from living Christ's words, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34). She

loved others through charity. If people were difficult, she persevered and sacrificed, knowing that her reward was God's peace and joy.⁶