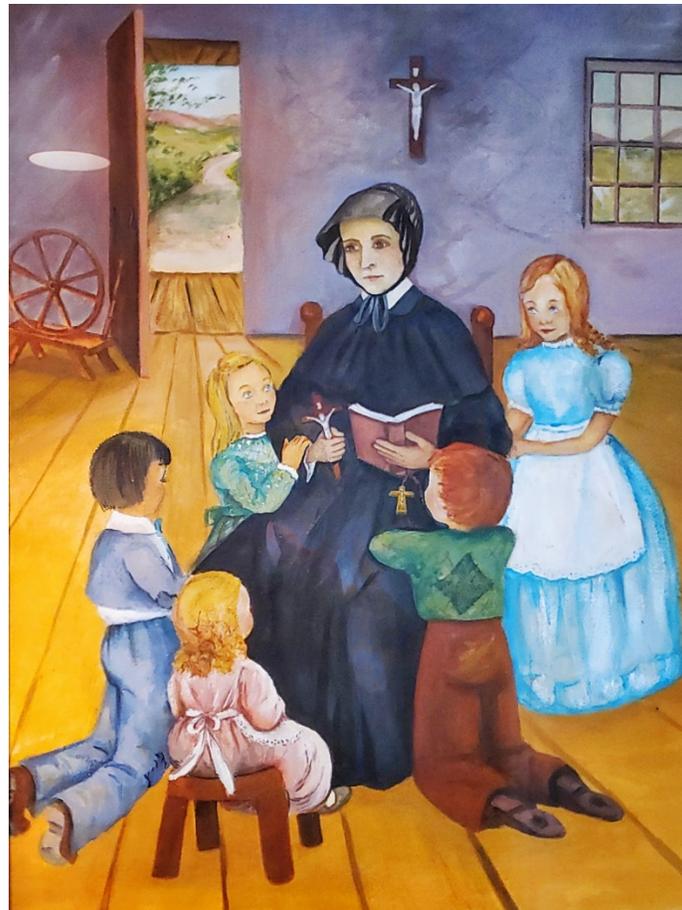


AMERICAN CATHOLICISM'S EMPOWERED WOMEN

By Richard Daniel McCann, Historian



American Catholicism's Empowered Women

Catholics need not look beyond their own Church to see the contributions of faith empowered women who have impacted not only our spiritual, but our social fabric as well. Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born into relative affluence. The daughter of a prominent New York physician, she came of age during the infancy years of the American Republic. A member of the Episcopalian church, she grew up with a burning desire to know and serve God. Marrying wealthy businessman William Seton at age 19, Elizabeth settled into a life of comfort, a gracious home at 27 Wall Street, and the joys accompanying raising a family. Even with these bounteous blessings, something was still missing. As a young wife and mother, Elizabeth became interested in the plight of the poor, and actively commenced working to ameliorate their suffering. Always a spiritual woman, Elizabeth was drawn to Catholicism and, after the death of her husband, was received into the Catholic Faith through St. Peter's Church.¹

¹ Joan Barthel, *American Saint: The Life of Elizabeth Seton* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014), 30-47.

2.

After seeking the guidance of Bishop John Carroll, Elizabeth Ann Seton, never one to brood over what she believed was the Lord's direct call to action, moved her family to Baltimore and established a Catholic girl's school in 1808. More importantly, Seton established the Sisters of Charity, the first Catholic religious order in the United States. In the coming decades, Mother Seton's sisters would successfully establish and staff schools, orphanages and hospitals. Seton's principal client base would be the immigrant poor, whose increasing numbers spurred the kind of Nativist and xenophobic reaction that typified the early decades of the nineteenth-century in the United States. Perhaps the greatest demonstration of commitment and courageous service by Mother Seton's religious order of women occurred during the great Cholera epidemic of 1832, when the sisters faithfully and steadfastly ministered to the needs of the sick and dying of Philadelphia. With the illness quickly overwhelming the limited medical resources of the city, the sisters travelled to the infection zone, sometimes with mortal consequences for themselves, serving as nurses for the afflicted and dying. So courageous were the sisters in the performance of these heroic services that Protestant writers of the time expressed incredulity at the selfless actions of these outsiders to

3.

the mainstream of American life.² Outbreaks of Cholera In 1849 and 1866 once again reinforced the unqualified and universally benevolent perception of the order. The heroism of the sisters during the Cholera years proved one of the greatest and most enduring boosts for promoting Catholic public relations in an otherwise bitterly anti-Catholic age.³

Nearer to home, John Connolly, New York's second diocesan bishop, authorized the opening of an orphanage in a wooden building on the site of 32 Prince Street in 1817. The initial staff consisted of three sisters furnished by Mother Seton from the Emmitsburg, Maryland mother house. Shortly afterwards, a Catholic school commenced operations in the same building, and was the second such school opened in the diocese of New York, St. Peter's Free Catholic school being the first. Filled with the deep faith and dedication exuded by their foundress, The Sisters of Charity would continue successfully building upon their mission of service to the poor and actively continue in the running of schools, orphanages and medical facilities.⁴

² Richard Shaw, *Dagger John: The Unquiet Life and Times of Archbishop John Hughes of New York* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 84.

³ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴ Jay Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 135-136.

4.

Elizabeth Seton died at the age of 46 in 1821. Though imbued from her childhood with “lamentation and longing and wondering (sometimes hopefully) about what God has in mind,”⁵ Elizabeth’s work in service to the poor and sick would be brought to its fulfillment with announcement by the Vatican in 1963 that she had been beatified. The year of 1963 was momentous for another reason. The Vatican Council was opening wide the door of revitalization and renewal in the Catholic Church. For the 400 plus religious orders of nuns and sisters who had followed in the footsteps of Elizabeth Ann Seton’s first community in Emmitsburg, the mandate for living a different kind of religious life was being promulgated. In Elizabeth’s day, the focus of the sisters was principally on the education of Catholic girls. In the mid-twentieth century, ministry addressed the needs of the times: working in shelters for abused women, in clinics for people with AIDS, in professions ranging from psychotherapy to finance and even lobbying in the halls of Congress for social justice. In addition, women religious were asked to shed their traditional garb, which traditionally separated them from the people they served, and adopt secular dress.⁶

⁵ Joan Barthel, 42.

⁶ Ibid., 211.

5.

Elizabeth Ann Seton was declared a Saint on September 14th, 1975. While having the honor of being America's first Saint, Seton's life is recognition of a far greater lesson. It is the lesson of empowerment by our Catholic Faith. Elizabeth Seton sought to understand her existence and place in this world by attempting to discern the message and calling God had for her. When she found and discovered that message, she translated her life into one of service to those in need. While Elizabeth Seton could not have known what the full extent of her impact would be on those she touched and helped, her unquestioning and unwavering faith in God was enough to strengthen and unselfishly extend that commitment to all she encountered. As evidenced by the dedicated nuns and sisters who labor still on behalf of the sick, the undereducated, the weak and the abandoned, the life and example of Elizabeth Ann Seton still clearly demonstrates that the power of faith not only moves mountains but gives clarity of purpose to those who dedicate themselves to salving the wounds of the human condition.

Bibliography

Barthel, Joan. *American Saint: The Life of Elizabeth Seton*. New York: St. Thomas Press, 2014.

Dolan, Jay P. *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865*. London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

Shaw, Richard. *Dagger John: The Unquiet Life and Times of Archbishop John Hughes of New York*. New York: Paulist Press, 1977.