

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton



“A Little History”

Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born in New York City on August 28, 1774, two years before the Declaration of Independence. Her mother died when she was three, and her baby sister died a year later. She was reared as an Episcopalian by her father and stepmother. At 19, she married a wealthy young merchant, William Seton, and they had five children.

In 1803, William became quite ill, and the doctors suggested that a sea voyage would do him good. He died of tuberculosis when they were in Italy, and Elizabeth then spent some time there with friends. While in Italy, she was introduced to and came to appreciate the Catholic faith. She returned to New York and became a Catholic on March 14, 1805, when she was 30 years old.

Many of her family and friends abandoned Elizabeth when she became a Catholic, leaving her and her children without income. She opened a school and began to teach. One day Elizabeth was introduced to a young priest from Baltimore, who told her of the great need in that city for a religious community to teach young girls. Although she felt quite unworthy, she prayed about it, consulted her spiritual director, and agreed to try.

God soon sent Elizabeth several young women who wished to become teaching sisters. He also sent a generous benefactor who provided the finances necessary to build a school, an academy and a hospital in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Elizabeth trained teachers and prepared books, and laid the foundation for the American parochial school system.

Elizabeth Ann Seton founded the U.S. Sisters of Charity, the first native American religious community for women. She also opened the first American Catholic orphanage. Elizabeth made a wonderful Superior, for she gave her sisters a perfect example of prayerfulness, of calm, of mortification and of self-sacrifice. She looked after each sister and young pupil as diligently as she had looked after her own children. She died on January 4, 1821, and was the first American-born citizen to become a saint, canonized by Pope Paul VI on September 14, 1975. Her feast is celebrated January 4th.