

An Enduring Legacy: The Founding of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph

by Leila Joy Castillo, 11th Grade, November 2018†

On a bright summer day in 1809, a group of women clad in black descended St. Mary's Mountain in Emmitsburg, Maryland and entered the rolling green valley below. They were the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph and had arrived on the mountain the previous month. The leader of the group was a petite woman in her thirties, who with a light step and sparkling eyes was as eager as the others to reach a small stone cottage in the valley. Although they did not know it, these women would alter the Catholic history of the United States of America in a powerful way. For on this date of July 31st, their leader, Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton, was on the verge of starting the first community of religious women founded on United States soil. This first order made a permanent difference in American history by opening convents and orphanages throughout the country, starting the parochial school system, and actively serving the nation during the Civil War and 9/11.

Elizabeth Ann Seton, a young widow, mother, and convert to Catholicism, arrived in Baltimore in 1808 to open a Catholic school at the invitation of Bishop John Carroll. As children from the area came to be taught, other women wishing to assist her came also. These women, under Elizabeth's leadership, were candidates for a new religious order, the first to be founded in the United States. On March 25th, 1809, Elizabeth became "Mother Seton," professing her first religious vows in St. Mary's Seminary Chapel in the presence of Bishop Carroll. She and her nine companions donned black bonnets and the simple black gowns with shoulder capes worn by Italian widows. That summer, the new community traveled on foot from Baltimore to St. Joseph's Valley in the Catocin mountains in Emmitsburg and moved into a small stone house. They arrived on July 31st, the official date of their founding and a milestone for the Church in the United States.

The country's first religious order took firm root in Emmitsburg and then expanded its outreach in the decades after its founding. The first year in the stone house was difficult; the group of sixteen women and girls endured a bitter winter of sickness, cold, and meager provisions in the four-room

cottage. After their long-awaited larger house was finally completed the following year, the order accepted several new postulants. In 1813, Elizabeth and a few others made final religious vows and adopted rules similar to those of Saint Vincent de Paul's French Daughters of Charity. By her death in 1821, Elizabeth had sent sisters to begin a hospital in Pennsylvania and an orphanage in New York, her spiritual daughters already numbering fifty. During the rest of the nineteenth century, the order established locations in many northeastern states and even spread as far westward as New Orleans. In 1850, the American Sisters of Charity united with the Paris Daughters of Charity, adopting not only their habit but also their name, and have henceforward been known together as "The Daughters of Charity." The Vincentian-Setonian tradition of religious sisters continues their ministry of charity to the present day, educating and helping those in need almost two centuries after the life of their foundress.

In addition to opening convents and orphanages nationwide, the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph opened the first American parochial school. In 1810 the sisters began the nation's first free Catholic school, St. Joseph's Day School, which provided education without cost for girls in Emmitsburg. Mother Seton prepared textbooks for lessons and headed the affairs of the institute, while the sisters taught the classes. Eventually from this small establishment sprang St. Joseph's Academy, also located in the valley. Due to financial need, however, this school was not free but charged tuition and accepted boarders. The opening of the day school and academy was significant because until that time the country only had institutes for boys but none for girls. Yet under the patronage of St. Joseph, enrollment at the academy soared and the establishment educated young ladies until 1973, when they merged with Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American-born saint to be canonized, is the patroness of Catholic schools. The lasting influence of her order on education is still visible in America's thriving Catholic School system.

During the American Civil War, the order established by Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton served as true "Angels of the Battlefield." The Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, the bloodiest confrontation of the war, took place ten miles north of the Daughters of Charity headquarters in Emmitsburg. Before the battle, the Union army passed through St. Joseph's Valley, where the sisters allowed them to encamp for several

days and provided them with food. As the battle raged from July 1st through 4th, the Sisters at St. Joseph's Valley heard the din of cannon fire. Immediately afterward, they drove into Gettysburg, their "carriage wheels rolling through blood,"¹ and met the gruesome sight of thousands of casualties from both sides. Women nurses were not a common presence in these military hospitals since they lacked the dedication and organization necessary to serve, yet the skills and gentle management of the Daughters of Charity were welcomed. Their characteristic blue habit and stiff white cornette could often be distinguished moving among the wounded in hospitals and on battlefields as they tended to the physical and spiritual well-being of soldiers from both armies. The assistance of the Daughters of Charity at Gettysburg is only one example of their many invaluable services during the Civil War.

The service and legacy of the Sisters of Charity were vital during another American crisis, nearly a century and a half after the Civil War. On September 11th, 2001, the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers occurred in Lower Manhattan near several places significant to the life of Elizabeth Ann Seton. Trinity Episcopal Church where she was baptized, St. Paul's Episcopal Church where she attended services before converting, and St. Peter's Catholic Church where she embraced Catholicism, are all located on the same road in front of Ground Zero. These parishes, along with Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church, built where Elizabeth once lived, became physical and spiritual havens for many during those dark hours. Father Mychal Judge, chaplain to the New York City Fire Department, had been educated by the Sisters of Charity and was a devotee of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. The first victim found in the rubble, his body was laid at the altar of St. Peter's Church, her former parish.² Furthermore, the Daughters of Charity in New York and nearby states worked tirelessly to bring comfort to victims and families through their consolation, prayers, and a variety of search and relief efforts. Since Elizabeth Ann Seton was a native of New York City, it is fitting that her spiritual daughters and places connected with her life played so important a role in the city's recovery from this crisis.

When Mother Seton and her nine companions consecrated their lives to Christ on July 31, 1809, they did not foresee the enduring differences their community would engender. Not only did they make history as the first order begun on American soil, but their founding was especially providential "for a

time like this”³ in the United States. The work of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph in those early years was crucial to the country’s foundation. These devoted women undoubtedly made a significant impact in the formation of young girls, the beginning of Catholic education, and rebuilding after national crises. Two centuries later, graces still abound from the work of these first daughters born into America’s rich heritage of faith.

Endnotes

¹ Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., *Charity Afire. Pennsylvania 1862-1865*. (Sheridan Press: Hanover, PA, 2011) Caulfield/Coskery Account, Gettysburg

² Merwin, Anne. *Saints by Our Side: Elizabeth Ann Seton*. Pauline Books and Media, 2015. pp. 74-77

³ Esther 4:14

Sources

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National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. Emmitsburg, Maryland. Civil War Sisters Live Guided Tour and Exhibit (actual pilgrimage to this site, July 2018).

<https://setonshrine.org/elizabeth-ann-seton/>

<https://famvin.org/en/2018/07/29/july-31-sisters-of-charity-of-saint-josephs-at-emmitsburg-md/>