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# Elizabeth Seton: Her World and Her Church

BY

JUDITH METZ, S.C.

## Part 1:

### Political, Economic, Social, Religious Context

"Elizabeth Ann Seton was wholly American. She had the blood of French, English and Dutch Colonial pioneers in her veins and was . . . of 'rooted American stock'; both of her parents and two of her grandparents were born here. When our great Republic was born, she became a charter citizen."<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth became a charter citizen of a nation that had been in the making for well over a century and a half, a country whose origins were unique in the modern sense of nation building. What made these emerging United States of the last quarter of the eighteenth century such a singular place—so alike and yet so different from the European nations that were contributing to its creation?

A brief look at the colonial development of these thirteen North American colonies gives some insight. The pioneer settlers and their descendants were creating a set of beliefs, values, and institutions that, while having their foundations in European backgrounds, were taking on distinctive characteristics that were born out of their unique experience.

One of these characteristics was the growth of broad-based representative government, something that had been emerging since colonial days and was expanding with the passing years. Colonial assemblies, from Massachusetts to New York, from Pennsylvania to Georgia, were far more representative than the British House of Commons. Even though property qualifications existed for voting, the great majority of adult white males owned enough land to meet them. And when land became scarce in one locale, people moved on. When the

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<sup>1</sup>Francis Cardinal Spellman's foreword to Joseph Dirvin, C. M., *Mrs. Seton: Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity* (New York: 1962), 7.

British government attempted to retract or ignore some of the powers of these assemblies in the mid-eighteenth century, it discovered how deeply rooted these institutions had become. For instance, from our studies of American history we can recall the British taxes such as the Sugar Act and the Stamp Act which the colonists protested as "taxation without representation."<sup>2</sup>

Emphasis on education was another hallmark of these colonists. As early as the seventeenth century, Massachusetts law required every town with at least fifty families to hire a schoolmaster. It was believed that children needed to learn to read, particularly so they could read the Scriptures, an important part of their religious practice. This widespread ability to read and write gave New England a higher literacy rate than the mother country where for large numbers of rural peasants and urban factory workers access to education was not even dreamed of. By the middle of the eighteenth century nearly all adult men and many women in the colonies could read and write. For these people, the workings of church and state were no mystery. Availability of newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides kept them apprised of events and movements within their society.

A third distinguishing feature of colonial society was the attitude toward church and clergy. Church-goers expected their religious leaders to serve, not rule, and although most people attended church, the clergy did not dominate their lives or decisions. What existed of official connection between church and state diminished as the revolutionary period approached.

There was always a diversity of religious groups in the colonies and most of these were of the congregational model, where independent local congregations governed the affairs of the church. Emphasis was placed on private reading of Scripture, and Sunday worship centered on the sermon. There were no bishops, no hierarchy. The minister taught, prayed, preached, and admonished. He commanded respect or he lost his job, but he did not rule his church. Lay trustees or elders constituted the ruling body of the church and had the power to hire and fire the minister. In many cases all church members voted

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<sup>2</sup>John M. Blum, Edmund S. Morgan, Willie Lee Rose, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kenneth M. Stampp, and C. Vann Woodward, *The National Experience: A History of the United States*, 4th ed. (New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta: 1977), 62-69. I am using the section "The Emerging American Mind" as a framework for my discussion here.

on membership, censures, excommunications, and pardons. Even the Anglicans, an ordinarily hierarchial church, did not allow their clergy a great deal of power in the colonies. With no resident bishop, there was no ecclesiastical court, and local members controlled their churches.<sup>3</sup>

The position of women also separated colonial society from that of Europe. Seventeenth-century Puritan women had proprietary and contractual rights under colonial laws far exceeding their rights under English law. Even though they were excluded from office, they participated more fully in religious, economic, and political life than did women anywhere else in the contemporary world.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, in the eighteenth century some of the social power of women decreased but still remained higher than that of European women. In *Democracy in America*, written in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville noted, "In France, women commonly receive a reserved, retired, and almost conventual education, as they did in aristocratic times. But in America they are taught to be independent, to think for themselves, to speak with freedom, and to act on their own impulses."<sup>5</sup>

A mobile social structure and egalitarian creed also characterized this society. Most people worked for themselves as small farmers and believed in self-sufficiency and the possibility of continual progress. They looked suspiciously at anything that smacked of special privilege. We can sense this from Benjamin Franklin's 1782 piece, *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*, written for a European audience. He warns:

Much less is it advisable for a Person to go thither, who has no other quality to recommend him but his Birth. In Europe it has indeed its Value; but it is a Commodity that cannot be carried to a worse Market than that of America, where people do not inquire concerning a Stranger, What is he? but, What can he do? . . . The Husbandman is in honor there, and even the Mechanic, because their Employments are useful. The People have a saying, that God Almighty is himself a Mechanic, the greatest in the Universe; and he is respected and admired more for the Variety, Ingenuity, and Utility of his Handyworks, than for the Antiquity of his Family.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 22, 63.

<sup>4</sup>E. Amanda Porterfield, *Maidens, Missionaries, and Mothers: American Women as Subjects and Objects of Religiousness* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: 1975), 48, 49.

<sup>5</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, quoted in Mary Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: 1978), 3.

<sup>6</sup>Blum et al., *The National Experience*, 115.

Along with this attitude went a general confidence and optimism of the people in themselves and in the future of their society. From colonial days they had looked on themselves as "the New Israel", the "city on a hill," fleeing the corruption of Europe. By the late eighteenth century, they had reframed this self-definition to seeing themselves as "the workshop of liberty." The availability of land and seemingly boundless opportunity lent a flexibility and buoyancy to the society. The top of the social ladder was lower than in Europe and easier to reach but at the same time more difficult to hang on to, as we know from the changing fortunes of the Seton family.

Last, but extremely significant, was the impact of Enlightenment thought on this society. These ideas that were to change the course of world history originated in Europe but were applied in a unique way in these North American colonies that were to become the United States of America. Isaac Newton's discovery of "natural laws" which governed the physical world set off an explosion of new thought and theory. Intellectuals developed a tremendous confidence in the powers of human reason and eventually came to redefine God, the world, and themselves. The English philosopher John Locke extended Newton's natural law approach to the interaction of people in society. The most important natural law, for Locke, was that no person should take away the life, liberty, or property of another. The role of government was to protect these "natural rights." If a government did not fulfill this role, it lost its reason for existence and deserved to be altered or overthrown by the people it governed.

While European philosophers articulated these ideas, the colonies became a laboratory for their implementation. These doctrines penetrated society widely. Clubs were formed to discuss them, and as they were disseminated they were enthusiastically embraced. Recall Elizabeth Seton's excited response to the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau during her young adulthood. The ideas and writings of these European philosophers were the foundational principles for dramatic changes that were already occurring during Elizabeth's youth.

From earliest times these thirteen colonies had been a mercantile venture. Building wealth through agriculture, manufacturing, and trade was their way of life. Philadelphia, New York, and Boston were the largest cities, each a cosmopolitan port with hundreds of merchant vessels annually making calls to deposit or load wares. A constant flow of immigrants testified to the promise and opportunity offered in these bustling colonies. As their economic fortunes grew, so did their

conflicts with British economic policies that sought to restrict their trade and force them into specific functions in a global plan that included all British colonies. As early as the 1660s the mother country had trouble enforcing her mercantile system. The tensions ebbed and flowed over the next century until they erupted in revolt against British rule and the creation of an independent United States of America.

The decade following the revolution was one of both struggle and promise: struggle for recognition abroad; struggle to manage successfully the population growth and its accompanying demands on health care, education, and the infrastructure; and most importantly, struggle to rise above narrow economic and political visions.

But it was also a decade of promise. A climate of openness, enthusiasm, and toleration prevailed as the new nation, with a population approaching 4 million, strove to implement the philosophy it had articulated in its Declaration of Independence. New constitutions were drafted in the states, most including a bill of rights. Property qualifications for voting and holding office were lowered and a spirit of inclusion and acceptance prevailed.

It was in this decade that Elizabeth Seton grew up experiencing all the excitement, growth, and challenge of a new nation being born. New York was a city at the heart of the nation. With a population close to 30,000, it was second only to Philadelphia in size. Because of its strategic position it had been occupied by the British during the course of the Revolutionary War, the military being withdrawn only in 1783 with the signing of the Treaty of Paris. So, for the first nine years of her life, Elizabeth Seton lived under the shadow of the world's greatest army.

Being a port city, New York's fortunes suffered when the British enacted harsh economic reprisals after the revolution. Its citizens, like those of other cities, also experienced the constant threat of epidemics. Diseases which were of most concern were tuberculosis, malaria, influenza, and the most dreaded, yellow fever. There were outbreaks of the latter in 1791, 1793, and 1795. Doctor Richard Bayley, Elizabeth's father and active in public health campaigns, took a leading role in the fight to combat this disease and the conditions that fostered it.<sup>7</sup> But New York was also caught up in the excitement of the new nation. In 1789 George Washington arrived amid public acclamation to be inau-

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<sup>7</sup>Annabelle M. Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton, 1774-1821* (St. Paul, Minnesota: 1976), 34-36.

gured as the first president under the new federal constitution. Just two years later Elizabeth, then a young woman of eighteen, met the well-educated and cosmopolitan William Magee Seton of the prominent merchant and shipping family.

It was also in this decade following the revolution that the Roman Catholic Church began to take its place as a recognized entity in this country. Throughout the colonial period Roman Catholics had been a persecuted minority constituting less than 1 percent of the population. Strong hatred, distrust, and fear of Catholics had been imported from Europe by the Protestant majority. These attitudes were spawned from centuries of political and religious hostility and the forces of change in Europe that rebelled against the old, established institutions.

Penal laws threatening Catholics who openly practiced their religion were on the books in most of the colonies. Although a handful of Jesuits served as circuit riders to provide mass and the sacraments in private homes, the majority of Catholic immigrants during the colonial period gave up the practice of their religion. This resulted from the difficulty of practicing their faith as well as the social, economic, and political repercussions.

With the new climate of the 1780s Catholics' status changed. The new state constitutions abolished established churches. For instance, in New York the Anglican Church was disestablished in 1784, and all religious bodies became eligible for legal incorporation. At the same time New York City's anti-priest statute was repealed, and Charles Whelan arrived as the city's first resident priest. The congregation, numbering about 500, was for the most part poor Irish but also included foreign diplomats and businessmen. They met in a small building near the North River until 1786 when Saint Peter's church opened with a board of trustees composed of all laymen.<sup>8</sup>

In this new time John Carroll emerged to offer leadership to the Catholic community. He organized the clergy, sent a report on the status of the Church to Rome, and ultimately was elected the first bishop in the United States, being installed in 1789, the same year George Washington was elected president of the country.

This ecclesiastic's presence dominated the Church from the early 1780s until his death in 1815. Having experienced a Jesuit education in

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<sup>8</sup>James Hennessey, S. J., *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York and Oxford: 1981), 75.

Europe and subsequently joining the order, he embodied classical humanism and represented a kind of Catholic Enlightenment in his person. Carroll advocated a constitutional and conciliar structure for the Church, supported the rights of individual and conscience in society, and held a deep appreciation for American pluralism and denominationalism.<sup>9</sup> This pioneer enthusiastically accepted the concept of separation of church and state and embraced an open hearted ecumenism. He had a strong sense of community spirit and openness to social and cultural engagement. For instance, he was active on the board of two secular colleges, played a leading role in the founding of the Library Company of Baltimore, the Maryland Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge, the Humane Impartial Society for the relief of indigent women, and the Baltimore General Dispensary. He stressed the dignity of the laity and the importance of their participation in the Church. This American citizen and Catholic bishop was sensitive to the need for the American Church to maintain a measure of autonomy in its relationship with the Holy See and was successful in achieving a balance that was acceptable to both Rome and U. S. Catholics.<sup>10</sup>

Carroll was an ardent patriot and booster and often praised the virtues of the religious climate in the new nation. In 1785 he wrote to the cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, "Indeed, I truly believe that such solid foundations of Religion can be laid in these American States, that the most flourishing portion of the Church, with great comfort to the Holy See, may one day be found here."<sup>11</sup>

In his early years, Carroll supported the use of a vernacular liturgy and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. He proposed the formation of a national body of clergy authorized to nominate bishops, and he respected the lay trustee system that was in prevalent use in Catholic parishes.

Catholics of this period followed the congregational model of church which most of their Protestant neighbors practiced. The atmosphere and usually the incorporation laws favored this.<sup>12</sup> Under it the

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<sup>9</sup>Patrick W. Carey, "American Catholic Religious Thought: An Historical Review," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 4, no. 2 (1985):125, 126; Christopher Kauffman, *Tradition and Transformation in Catholic Culture: The Priests of Saint Sulpice in the United States from 1791 to the Present* (New York: 1988), 97.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas W. Spalding, C.F.X., "The Maryland Tradition," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 8, no. 4 (Fall, 1989):52-54.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>12</sup>Kauffman, *Tradition and Transformation*, 94.



laity purchased property and built a church without a resident priest. Parish congregations held title to the property, which was administered by trustees elected by the parish members. As long as congregations were satisfied with the priests assigned to their parish, there was no conflict between congregation and pastor or congregation and bishop. But this system led to some major disputes within the early Church where the lay trustees challenged the authority of the local priest as well as Bishop John Carroll himself. There were even instances where Carroll was forcibly expelled from churches during these disputes.

Other tensions within the newly established Church arose from antagonisms among different national groups and the uneven quality of foreign priests. One of Carroll's priorities was the fostering of a national clergy to offset these difficulties.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the founding of Georgetown and Saint Mary's in Baltimore in the early 1790s.

When John Carroll assumed his new office in 1790, his diocese encompassed the entire nation, from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi River, from Massachusetts to Georgia. It is estimated that there were 30,000 Catholics and thirty-five priests, residing primarily in Maryland and Pennsylvania. He chose as his episcopal see Baltimore, a city one-fourth the size of New York. It was a charming seaport that serviced the plantation economy of the south. This choice reflected the fact that Maryland had long been the center of the Catholic community.

The "Catholic aristocracy" resided in Maryland. John Carroll, a native of the state and a member of one of the most distinguished, old-line Catholic families, enhanced Baltimore's status by choosing it. Solid, stately, and aristocratic in appearance and operation, the Catholic Church of Baltimore was, at this time, the "crown jewel" of Catholicism in these United States of America. And it was, of course, to this Catholic center that Elizabeth Seton would be drawn in her search for peace, acceptance, and security. It was here that she was to discern the next steps on her journey that resulted in important developments for the growing Church.

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<sup>13</sup>Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History From Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, New York: 1985), 73-91.

## Part 2: The Early Years of the Sisters of Charity

When Elizabeth Seton moved from New York in 1808 she was leaving a city where the Roman Catholic Church had experienced a stormy path in its early years. Trustee battles between clergy and bishop were coupled with local prejudices toward the largely immigrant make-up of the congregation. As she arrived in Baltimore she came into contact with a very different Church. Here Roman Catholic clergy were highly regarded, and Catholic laity were educated and successful. Saint Mary's Seminary in Baltimore and Georgetown Academy in Washington, D.C., had been in operation for over fifteen years and were respected institutions of higher learning. John Carroll was esteemed in religious and secular circles for his learning, ideas, and leadership role.

This was the Church, and this was the circle of people who welcomed Elizabeth and her family to their new home on the feast of Corpus Christi as the chapel at Saint Mary's was being dedicated. In her journal for Cecilia Seton Elizabeth exudes, "human nature could scarcely bear it—your imagination can never conceive the Splendor—Glory of the Scene all I have told you of Florence is a Shadow—after Mass—I was in the arms of the loveliest woman you ever beheld Mr. D's sister—surrounded by so many caresses and blessings—all my wonder is how I got thro' it the darlings confounded with wonder and delight."<sup>14</sup> As the new Baltimore residents became settled, Elizabeth continued to revel in her new surroundings. Through her friendship with John Carroll, she became acquainted with the leading Catholic families, the Pattersons, Catons, Harpers, and Barrys among them.<sup>15</sup>

Another longstanding friend and resource was Samuel Cooper. Elizabeth made his acquaintance shortly after her arrival in Baltimore. She had been aware of this prominent Philadelphia merchant's conversion in 1807 and had referred to him in a letter to Philip Filicchi as a man of "great intellectual attainments." "He is of a family and fortune and it therefore makes a great noise," she commented.<sup>16</sup> Cooper was in Baltimore at the time, contemplating entering a seminary. Within a few months of Mrs. Seton's arrival, he offered to furnish

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<sup>14</sup>Elizabeth Seton: *Selected Writings*, ed. Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York and Mahwah: 1987), 235.

<sup>15</sup>Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 180-81.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 181-82.

\$10,000 in support of education for Catholic girls. This donation was channeled to the purchase of the Emmitsburg property which became the home of Saint Joseph's Academy and of the nascent religious community. Cooper's generosity continued as he offered sustenance to the community during their struggling beginning days at Emmitsburg and continued to be a friend to those in the valley in subsequent years.

Cooper's interest in supporting education for Catholic young women was not unique. For John Carroll, education had been a priority from the beginning of his episcopate. He had established Georgetown Academy as early as 1791 and that same year welcomed the Sulpician priests to the United States to establish Saint Mary's Seminary. He was equally interested in women's education. The bishop had been disappointed in the Carmelite nuns' lack of interest in opening a school in the 1790s. His correspondence with Elizabeth Seton, even before she came to Baltimore, indicates his support for her plans to open a girl's school.

Friendship and assistance from these wealthy and prominent people were an important ingredient in Elizabeth's success when she began her new venture in the Maryland countryside. The community did not achieve financial stability easily. The first winter in Emmitsburg, before the boarding school opened, was a hard one. Suggestions were made for a begging tour or a letter writing campaign to raise funds. The sisters augmented their resources by sewing for the students and priests at Mount Saint Mary's. It was only when boarders, some from the families mentioned above, began to come that matters were gradually alleviated.<sup>17</sup>

When Saint Joseph's Academy did open in 1810, it became a training ground to prepare young women to take their proper place in society. Although Mother Seton's hope, as she expressed it to Antonio Filicchi "was [for the school] to have been a nursery only for our Saviours [*sic*] poor country children, but it seems it is to be the means of forming city girls to Faith and piety as wives and mothers."<sup>18</sup> Catholic families from around the country sent their daughters. In addition, Protestant girls whose parents were seeking to prepare them for their role as "moral guardians," always made up a percentage of the enrollment.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 273-74.

<sup>18</sup>Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 287.

During this period the private home was the cradle of education and the woman's responsibility was central. In this "age of domesticity," the female was seen as morally superior and expected to be the guardian of her family in the realm of value formation, rearing the children and instructing them in the religious as well as the secular sphere. The promotion of women's education was part of the pursuit of this goal.<sup>19</sup>

The curriculum at Saint Joseph's included secular subjects and offered instruction in appreciations and skills found in any finishing school, but its overall complexion was spiritual and religious. "The principal part," stated Father John Baptist David, one of the early superiors, "is to form the tender minds of the pupils to piety and sound morals."<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth herself told her students, "Your little Mother, my darlings, does not come to teach you how to be good nuns or Sisters of Charity, but rather I would wish to fit you for that world in which you are destined to live: to teach you how to be good . . . mothers of families."<sup>21</sup>

The Academy was not the only educational endeavor in Saint Joseph's Valley. As indicated earlier, Elizabeth Seton had a desire to serve "poor country children." Day students were always part of the school in Emmitsburg. "Saint Joseph's Class" was set up to receive orphans and those making partial tuition payment. Opportunities for private instruction were made available for the more talented of this group.<sup>22</sup>

By June, 1811, Elizabeth was able to write to Antonio Filicchi, "Our success in having obtained the confidence of so many respectable parents who have committed the whole charge of their children to us to the number of about fifty, besides poor children who have not means of education, has enabled us to get on well without debt or embarrassment, and I hope our Adored [*sic*] has already done a great deal through our establishment."<sup>23</sup>

In addition, Elizabeth and the other sisters taught catechism to children of the parish on Sundays. After mass at Saint Mary's Mountain, Elizabeth would seat herself on a small rock near her beloved

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<sup>19</sup>Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 243.

<sup>20</sup>Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 275.

<sup>21</sup>Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton*, 356.

<sup>22</sup>Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 288.

<sup>23</sup>Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 24 June 1811, from Emmitsburg, quoted in *Numerous Choirs: A Chronicle of Elizabeth Bayley Seton and Her Spiritual Daughters*, ed. Ellin M. Kelly, 1: *The Seton Years 1774-1821* (Evansville, Indiana: 1981), 150.

grotto. Here the young Christians would assemble around her for instruction. She relates to her dear friend Simon Bruté, "So many of our mountain children and poor, good Blacks came today for first communion instructions . . . and I have all the Blacks . . . all the blacks for my share to instruct—excellentissimo!"<sup>24</sup>

Boarders, orphans, and day pupils received their education at the hands of priests from Mount Saint Mary's, a few lay women and the sisters. Mother Seton was at the head of the school with Kitty Mullen in charge of discipline. Other school sisters were Cecilia O'Conway, Fanny Jordan, Margaret George, and Elizabeth Boyle. Who were these women who were partners with Elizabeth during these foundational years? A look at the background of some of these early members of the Sisters of Charity offers a profile of a group of educated American women, well prepared to take on the task of conducting a school and of becoming the backbone of the first American religious congregation.

Cecilia O'Conway was the first of Elizabeth Seton's coworkers. Born in Baltimore, this young woman of twenty had been raised in New Orleans, Havana, and Philadelphia. Her father was a linguist, translator, and teacher of foreign languages, and Cecilia had the benefit of a finished education in Ursuline convents in several of the cities in which she had resided. This pioneer teacher was able to give instruction in French, Spanish, and Italian in the school. She served on the first council set up to assist with the governance of the new community and acted for a time as treasurer at Saint Joseph's before going to New York in 1817 as a member of the group who opened Saint Patrick's Orphanage.<sup>25</sup>

Elizabeth and Cecilia enjoyed a mutual love, and when the latter went to New York, she received endearing letters from her spiritual mother. In one, Elizabeth addresses her, "My loved and dear a thousand times dear Cecilia . . . Oh how my heart would long to meet yours if he would will it so, but at least our souls are inseparable in him."<sup>26</sup> And in another she tells her of her prayer, "My Cecil [*sic*] is in you my God I find her in you. Every moment she will be serving and loving you with me" and then continues by addressing Cecilia, "the only fear

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<sup>24</sup>Joseph I. Dirvin, C. M., *The Soul of Elizabeth Seton: A Spiritual Portrait* (San Francisco: 1990), 132; Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 316.

<sup>25</sup>Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton*, 276, 328.

<sup>26</sup>Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 302.

I have is that you will let the old string pull too hard for solitude and silence, but look to the Kingdom of souls . . . this not a country my dear one for Solitude and Silence, but of warfare and crucifixion."<sup>27</sup>

Maria Murphy, the second member of the community is described as "possessed of a singular sweetness of disposition and of great personal charms, she beheld a bright prospect before her in the world."<sup>28</sup> Another, Mary Ann Butler, is characterized as "pious, talented, and devoted . . . a most useful member of the rising community. . . . She was by nature a poet and a painter." Sometimes she would paint little pious designs for the school children to inspire them with devotion or as a reward for some good act performed.<sup>29</sup> These early sisters were dear friends and supports to both Elizabeth and her children. Susan Clossy accompanied Elizabeth when they made the trip to Baltimore in a futile attempt to restore Cecilia Seton's life. When Susan went on mission, Elizabeth wrote to Julia Scott, "There is one of the sweetest souls gone to Philadelphia from this house who has loved my very heart and been more than an own Sister to me since I have been here. She even slept always behind my curtain and has nursed Cecilia, Harriet, Anna, William and Rebecca through all their sufferings with unconquerable tenderness. . . . If you ever wish to find a piece of myself it will be in this dear Susan Clossy."<sup>30</sup>

Women seeking to enter the new community came from around the country; this first native community was truly a national project. Priests from various cities and states encouraged women they were directing to join Mrs. Seton in her new endeavor. Men like Anthony Kohlmann, John Moranville, William Dubourg, John Baptist David, and Pierre Babade sent a steady stream of applicants to Saint Joseph's Valley.

Rose White, Elizabeth Boyle, and Margaret George, among others, were well educated women who "had bright prospects in the world." Some were widows, some converts; some were native born, some immigrant. Whatever their background, they had experienced the free and open atmosphere of the United States and were products of the values and hopes of the new nation. Some entered over the

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 298.

<sup>28</sup>[Anonymous], *Rev. Simon Gabriel Brute In His Connection With the Community. 1812-1839* (1886), 5.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 253.

<sup>30</sup>Elizabeth Seton to Julia Scott, 1 December 1814, from Emmitsburg, quoted in *Letters of Mother Seton to Mrs. Julianna Scott*, ed. Joseph B. Code (New York: 1960), 240-41.

protests of family and friends; all brought a plentiful supply of resolve and talent to the Sisters of Charity. And all assumed important roles in the school as well as in the formation of the community.

The Constitutions adopted by these religious were straightforward and serviceable to their needs. Taking the rule of the French Daughters of Charity, they made changes appropriate to their circumstances. Importantly, they recognized the need for flexibility. Their document stated: "There will also be adopted such modifications in the Rules as the difference of country, habit, customs, and manners may require."<sup>31</sup> But the spirit of the rule was true to Saint Vincent's original. Charity was the principal aim of the institute. The sisters were to cherish and respect one another, and their spiritual exercises, while important, should not prevent them from being available to people in need.

Their lives as Sisters of Charity put them in contact with the larger society on a consistent basis. Their little chapel in the Stone House was open from the start to villagers who worshiped with them. Visits to the sick and the poor in the neighborhood were a continual part of their routine. Teaching, travel to the missions, and dealing with the trustees of the institutions they staffed kept them aware of and sensitive to the happenings in society. All had experienced the problems of physical hardship, disease, homelessness, violence, and discrimination.

As managers as well as ministers, they became accustomed to asserting themselves and holding their own in a culture that did not always accept or appreciate them. When Margaret George opened the mission in Frederick, she wrote to the motherhouse describing the situation, "Never before last Thursday night did I feel so like a Sister of Charity who had made a vow of poverty . . . we are in want of nothing essential; true, we might have a little more covering for our beds to save us from the wind and cold, for our humble dwelling is very airy!"<sup>32</sup> When the school opened the sisters immediately faced opposition from the Lutheran minister. He warned his flock of the danger they were in from the "female wolves" and exhorted them not to expose the "innocent Lambs to the ferocious creatures the nuns."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>*Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity in the United States of America*, cited in Kelly, *Numerous Choirs*, 268.

<sup>32</sup>[Anonymous] *Mother Rose White* (Emmitsburg, Maryland: 1936), 116.

<sup>33</sup>Judith Metz, S. C., and Virginia Wiltse, *Sister Margaret Cecilia George: A Biography* (Mount St. Joseph, Ohio: 1989), 28.

Problems were not always with "outsiders." A letter of Elizabeth Boyle to the trustees of the Philadelphia Asylum points out not only some of the issues which the sisters faced but also the strength with which they were able to represent their position. After addressing criticism against her for dismissing the day scholars, she defends the work of the sisters by stating to the trustees:

Permit me to make known to you that I understand it is thought there are too many sisters here for the service of such a small number of children, if you can get a smaller number of persons who will use more economy, and be less expense to you than we are, to do what we do, you surely know you are at full liberty, we can quickly withdraw; but for me, to see my sisters [*sic*] days, rendered so unhappy here, by these painful and unmerited reflections, is out of the question; they must either cease or we must withdraw.<sup>34</sup>

The community built by Elizabeth Seton and her companions was one which represented a respected tradition in the Church and which answered the needs of the nation. In reflecting on the lives of the foundress and her Sister of Charity companions, it becomes apparent that they not only met the needs of the nation but represented in their persons many of the characteristics of that nation and the values of Enlightenment Catholicism that permeated their age. We can look at Elizabeth's struggles to hold her own and represent the sisters' interests to William DuBourg and John David, the first two priest-superiors. We can appreciate the openness, the social and cultural engagement that was part of the community's orientation. Examples of this can be seen in their insistence on accepting Protestant students or in Elizabeth's delight in having the African Americans as her own pupils in the slave society of Maryland. The acceptance of pluralism, the emphasis on reasonableness, intelligibility, and self-sufficiency, the insistence on flexibility and adaptability were all part of their milieu.<sup>35</sup>

The optimistic view of the human person and the belief in the accessibility of a loving God all point to these women as shining products of their age. When Elizabeth instructs the sisters, "Our free will is the noblest Gift of God," or reflects on how they are "made in his image to be like himself, our first, our last, our ONLY END," she

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<sup>34</sup>Elizabeth Boyle to Trustees of the Philadelphia Asylum, 17 September 1821, from Philadelphia, Daughters of Charity Northeast Province Archives, Albany, NY.

<sup>35</sup>Thomas W. Spalding, *The Premier See: A History of the Archdiocese of Baltimore 1789-1989* (Baltimore: 1989), 17-19.



is articulating the Incarnational spirituality of her day. And she continues in the spirit of her age, "The charity of our blessed lord in the course of his ministry had three distinct qualities which should be the model of our conduct. It was gentle, Benevolent, and universal."<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Seton and the early Sisters of Charity were a "good fit" in their Church and in their world.

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<sup>36</sup>Kelly-Melville, *Selected Writings*, 324, 325. Emphasis in original.