At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church in the United States was a despised and barely tolerated minority. A century later it had become a respected ecclesial body influencing the thought and moral fiber of the nation, an acknowledged leader in human services. A strong factor in this development was the Community of Sisters of Charity founded in 1809 by Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton.

The Providence of God brought together those who would be instruments in the foundation of this Community:
the first American bishop;
two Italian merchants;
a young widow with five children;
Sulpician priests in exile from France;
and a convert studying for the priesthood.

The Ground Is Prepared

The Catholic Church in America

The Catholic Church in the United States numbered fewer than thirty thousand when the nineteenth century began. Most Catholic families were of the laboring class. The few overworked priests spent exhausting days on horseback between settlements, offering Mass outdoors or in private homes.

Although the federal government supported freedom of religion, individual states still retained discriminatory laws. *Congregationalism remained the established religion in New England.*

When John Carroll was named first bishop of the United States in 1789—the year George Washington became first president—his

*American law had been based on English law, and the Catholic Emancipation Act would not be passed in England until 1829.*
diocese covered the whole nation. Baltimore was his see city.

British and French interference with American shipping made communication with Rome difficult. Filippo Filicchi, an Italian merchant from the port of Livorno (called Leghorn in English), admired Bishop Carroll and wished to help. He sent his younger brother Antonio to talk over the problem with Father John Thorpe, agent in Rome for the American Church. Accompanying Antonio was William Magee Seton, a young merchant from New York. Seton, an Episcopalian, offered the services of his father's shipping firm to channel Church correspondence to Baltimore safely. So it was arranged that communications from Rome would be sent to Bishop Carroll through the Filicchi firm in Italy and the Seton-Maitland firm in New York.

The Seton Family

In 1794 young Will Seton married a petite New Yorker named Elizabeth Ann Bayley, daughter of a prominent doctor. Their marriage was happy and fruitful. Anna Marie, born in 1795, was followed by William Vincent in 1796 and Richard in 1798. That year the elder Seton — Will's father — died, leaving to Will and Elizabeth the care of his seven youngest children, ranging in age from eight to eighteen, as well as the Seton firm, which was on the verge of bankruptcy because of losses at sea. Will had also inherited the family illness, tuberculosis.

The next two years were a nightmare of anxiety. As the ten Seton children grew, the family resources dwindled. In 1800 — the year Elizabeth gave birth to her fourth child, Catherine Josephine (Kit) — the threatened bankruptcy became a reality. The house, the furniture, even the children's clothing were included in the inventory given to the commissioners. Rebecca (Bec) the youngest Seton child, born two years later, was born into poverty.

Will's health continued to deteriorate. When the doctor suggested a sea voyage, the Filicchi invited him to winter in sunny Livorno. Preparing to take him there, Elizabeth entrusted her frail Bec to her sister Mary Post, whose husband was a doctor, and left William, Richard, Kit, and the other Seton children under the care of Rebecca, Will's sister, then twenty-three years old. Anna Marie, eight, was considered old enough to accompany her parents on the journey.
Leaving New York 2 October 1803, they arrived at the port of Livorno 18 November "while the Ave Maria bells were ringing," Elizabeth wrote to Rebecca. But news of yellow fever in New York made the port authorities wary, and the Setons were not permitted to land. They were quarantined in a stone lazaretto south of the city, where the cold dampness destroyed all hope for Will's recovery.

When visiting poor widows in New York, Elizabeth had prepared others for death. Now she was faced with the challenge of doing the same for her own husband. As they shared new depths of prayer and acceptance of God's will in the chill of the lazaretto, Elizabeth's faith was strengthened; she and Will were drawn together in the closest of marital bonds. A week after their release from the lazaretto—hastened, perhaps, by the Filicchi—Will died 27 December 1803 and was buried in Livorno.

The Seeds Are Planted

Sojourn in Livorno

The year 1804 marked significant changes in Elizabeth Seton's life. Widowed at twenty-nine in a strange land, faced with the need to support and mother her five children—ranging in age from one to nine—Elizabeth found in the Filicchi a charity richer than she had ever before experienced. Moved by their kindness, impressed by their all-pervasive faith, and envious of their daily participation in the Eucharist, she began to question and received strong answers. Filippo gave her books explaining the Catholic faith. Amabilia, Antonio's wife, took her to the nearby shrine of Our Lady at Montenero, where she experienced to the depth of her soul the living faith of a Catholic people. Anna's bout with scarlet fever and her own illness delayed their departure until April, giving time for these impressions of faith to sink deeper. Elizabeth wrote to her sister-in-law Rebecca:

How happy we would be if we believed what these dear souls believe: that they possess God in the Sacrament, and that he remains in their churches and is carried to them when they are sick.
The Return to New York

The time was to come when Elizabeth would believe in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, and this faith would be the cornerstone of her spiritual life. But she had first to return to New York and pass through the crucible of alternate doubt and faith, the struggle to support her children, and increasing rejection by family and friends as her leaning toward the Catholic faith alienated those who might have helped her.

The decision finally made, Elizabeth and her children were received into the Catholic Church in March 1805. She received the Eucharist for the first time as a Catholic 25 March. A year later, on Pentecost 1806, she was confirmed by Bishop Carroll in Saint Peter's Church, New York. It was their first meeting.

The Move to Baltimore

Catholic education was a priority of John Carroll's episcopate. He had founded Georgetown College near Washington for the education of laymen. He welcomed Sulpicians,* displaced by the French Revolution, to begin Saint Mary's Seminary in Baltimore for the formation of priests.

Father Louis William Valentine DuBourg, one of these Sulpicians, met Mrs. Seton on a visit to New York. Recognizing that she could support her family better in Baltimore, while serving the Church's need for the education of girls, he invited her to relocate in Baltimore near Saint Mary's Seminary. As founder and president of the lay college attached to the seminary, he offered her a house for $250 a year rent, free education for her boys at the college, and the possibility of land for a school. The yearly $400 given by the Filicchi for the boys' education could then be used to support her family and the school. Bishop Carroll heartily endorsed the plan. The Setons sailed for Baltimore 9 June 1808.

The house on Paca Street adjoined the seminary chapel, affording Elizabeth and her family the privilege of daily Mass and

---

*Jean Jacques Olier founded this community in 1641 for the formation of priests according to the norms laid down by the Council of Trent. The community takes its name from the large parish and seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris.
Divine Office. Ann Nabbs, a hired servant, did the cooking, cleaning and washing for $4.50 a month, leaving Elizabeth free to attend to her children, the four boarders, and the day students. She would have been content to stay there forever if Providence had not indicated other designs for her.

In a letter written twenty years later, DuBourg recounts what happened next: he told Elizabeth of the Daughters of Charity, founded in France in 1633 by Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac, and confided to her his dream of seeing them established in the United States. Mrs. Seton "expressed a fervent wish to see the dream accomplished and to become part of it." In keeping with this intention, Elizabeth made vows for one year in the presence of Archbishop Carroll 25 March 1809 and was given by him the title "Mother." By June, four young women had joined her, and others were asking to come.

**On the Banks of Tom’s Creek**

The Paca Street location had the advantages of being in Baltimore, where the need for Catholic education for girls was recognized, and of being near the seminary with its sacramental opportunities and the direction of the Sulpicians. But it had disadvantages too. One of these was lack of space. Another, evident to Carroll and to Francis Charles Nagot, Superior of the Sulpicians—though Elizabeth seemed to be unaware of it—was the availability of a number of priests willing to consider themselves directors of the sisters, some less prudent and wise than others. The principal drawback to the establishment, however, was lack of funds, lack of a place for the seedling to take root.

**Samuel Cooper’s Offer**

Samuel Sutherland Cooper, former sea captain from a prominent Virginia family, a convert to Catholicism, came from Mount Saint Mary’s College, Emmitsburg, Maryland, to continue his studies for the priesthood at Saint Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore. He offered $7,000 for the foundation of the sisterhood on three conditions: that it be located in Emmitsburg, fifty miles from Balti-
more; that it include a free school for poor children of the neighborhood; and that other services to families be offered, such as a factory or workroom where parents could make a living.

The proposal met with varied responses in Baltimore. Nagot highly favored it, and hoped to resign his presidency of the seminary to accompany the sisters to Emmitsburg as their first superior. Carroll would have preferred the sisters to remain in Baltimore and focus on education as their main apostolate. The affable Pierre Babad, whom many of the sisters favored as a confessor, thought the distance too great. Elizabeth herself considered Cooper's terms as a manifestation of God's will, and DuBourg came to share her point of view.

**Purchase of the Emmitsburg Farm**

The property selected by Cooper was purchased for the sisters, with the deed in the names of DuBourg, Cooper, and John Dubois. Dubois, pastor of the mountain parish near Emmitsburg and founder of Mount Saint Mary's Seminary two miles from the town, assumed supervision of the repairs of the farmhouse, in addition to his other duties.

Another priest exiled by the French Revolution, John Dubois had served more than a decade as a missionary in America before becoming a Sulpician in 1808. Although small in stature, he was a rugged pioneer of a man who felled trees, hauled logs, cleared land, and built his school on the mountain with his own hands, aided by neighbors and parishioners. His horse carried him in all kinds of weather to the sick parishioners in many counties of both Maryland and Pennsylvania. Because of this the people revered him. He lent his own cabin to the first group of Seton family members and sisters who arrived in June, long before the work on the farmhouse was completed.

The second group of sisters arrived from Baltimore, and on 31 July 1809 the sisters moved into the valley farmhouse, later known as the Stone House. This date is recognized as the beginning of the Sisters of Charity in the United States.
Life in the Stone House

Conditions were primitive. There were two rooms, used as class­rooms, workrooms, kitchen, chapel, and community room. The sisters slept in a loft so cold that snow, coming in through inade­quately boarded windows, would not melt and had to be carried downstairs and out of the house. There were two cots for the sick; the rest slept on straw pallets on the floor. Water was hauled uphill from a spring. Laundry was done in Tom's Creek, a flowing stream which separated Saint Joseph's Valley from Saint Mary's Mountain two miles away.

With Elizabeth were her three daughters, Anna (fourteen), Kit (nine), and Rebecca (seven); her two youngest sisters-in-law, Harriet and Cecilia Seton, who had followed her into the Catholic faith; two boarders; and her seven earliest companions: Sisters Cecilia O'Conway, Maria Murphy and Mary Ann Butler from Philadelphia; Rose White and Catherine Mullen from Baltimore; Susan Clossey from New York; and Sally Thompson from Emmitsburg. In September Sally's sister Ellen was accepted, and after the new year, Martina Quinn. It was close quarters—sixteen women and children in two rooms and a loft—but when the first Mass was cele­brated 10 August 1809, the Eucharistic Lord took possession of the house. Then the crowdedness only made the Real Presence more immanent, for the chapel doubled as classroom and workroom and even community room, with a folding door screening the altar during the day. Elizabeth brought with her the freshness of discovery that is characteristic of the faith of a convert, and it was her charism that she could communicate this wonder and enthuziasm to the sisters. Joy in the Eucharistic Presence became the keynote of their fraternal life.

They were a wonderful assortment of Catholic womanhood. Cecilia O'Conway, daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, served as secretary, sacristan, and teacher of languages. Irish-born Maria Murphy, niece of Matthew Carey, the nation's first Catholic publisher, was so gentle that Elizabeth nicknamed her "Dove"; yet so fearless that once with her bare hands she removed a snake from the sanctuary of the mountain church.

Susan Clossey came from Ireland by way of New York, where her name appears on subscription lists for Catholic books, suggesting that she was mature and educated. She found creative ways to soothe pain as she nursed the sisters, the Seton children, the
people of the neighborhood, even poor German Deddi, the gardener, who in his broken English called her “Sister Sus.” When she was missioned to Philadelphia, Elizabeth wrote to a friend there:

...There is one of the sweetest souls gone to Philadelphia from this house...more than an own sister to me...If ever you have a wish to find a piece of myself, it will be in this dear Susan Clossy. 5

Rose Landry White was a Baltimore widow, age twenty-five. Her infant daughter died shortly after her husband had been lost at sea. Charles, her young son, was enrolled in Dubois’ school at Mount Saint Mary’s. Elizabeth, chronically ill with tuberculosis even in the Paca Street days, found Rose’s brisk efficiency and penetrating intellect somewhat exhausting, but loved her and relied on her. Rose was elected assistant and later chosen to pioneer the new missions in both Philadelphia and New York. She was to succeed Elizabeth as Mother, being elected to this office four times.

Mary Ann Butler, daughter of Captain Edward Butler of Philadelphia, was “so frail that she looked like the wind would blow her over.” 4 Nevertheless, she taught a younger class, did much sewing, and was an artist and poet who expressed the devotion of the Community in several hymns.*

Gentle Sister Catherine Mullen, known as Kitty, was an effective teacher. Elected treasurer in 1812 and appointed mistress of novices in 1813, she held both offices until her death Christmas Day the following year.

Sally and Ellen Thompson came from a local family; their mother worked at the college on the mountain. Sally, who knew all the farmers around and could purchase the needed provisions, was elected procuratrix or housekeeper for the community. Big, strong, generous, she was also baker and leader of the laundry crew. Ellen, though weaker, was overjoyed to spend her life among sisters. She once wrote to Elizabeth that she climbed the hill each day to watch for the sisters’ arrival from Baltimore and to gaze at the place where she would soon be living as one of them. Martina Quinn, a talented

---

*Hymns listed as her compositions are “O What Could My Jesus Do More,” a Eucharistic hymn of thanksgiving; “Holy Patron, Thee Saluting” to Saint Joseph; and an unnamed hymn to Saint Vincent. See n. 4.
teacher loved for her simplicity, arrived soon after the move to the White House in the spring of 1810.

The new building, even then called "The White House," was really a log house with room for about thirty in dormitories (with a bed, table and chair for each). There was a chapel, a dining room, a large infirmary, the schoolroom, parlor and Mother Seton's workroom near the chapel, which doubled as a bedroom for her and Bec, her youngest daughter. From the window Elizabeth looked upon the little wood selected as the sisters' last resting place, where her sisters-in-law Harriet and Cecilia Seton had already been buried.

Consumption, the Seton family ailment, was rampant in the Valley in these early days, aggravated by crowded conditions and severe hardships. In the Community's first six years the disease claimed the lives of twelve, all under twenty-five years of age. At the bedside of their companions the sisters acquired the nursing skills they would later use in serving the sick poor. They also learned to live on the threshold of eternity.

The Community Finds Its Identity

When Elizabeth Seton chose Samuel Cooper's idea—the Emmitsburg location, a poor school and service to country people—in preference to the sheltered life of boarding-school sisters in Baltimore, a change of identity was implicit in her choice. The name "Sisters of Saint Joseph" gave way to "Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph." The new settlement in the valley was still under Saint Joseph's patronage, but Elizabeth had chosen the availability to all human needs, the character of "Servants of the Poor" that Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac had instilled into their Daughters of Charity. To effect this same character in her American daughters, the Community needed the Rule of Saint Vincent de Paul. Sulpician Father Benedict Flaget,* leaving for Paris

*When the Diocese of Baltimore was divided in 1808 with four suffragan sees erected in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Bardstown, Flaget had been named for the Bardstown (Kentucky) diocese. Wishing to decline the honor, he set out for Paris to appeal the matter to the Sulpician superior general, Jacques Andre Emery, who added his command to the Holy Father's.
late in 1809, was commissioned to obtain from the superiors of the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity a copy of the Rules and Statutes of the Daughters of Charity, and more sisters for the United States.

_Sulpician Superiors: DuBourg, David, Dubois_

Meanwhile, Archbishop Carroll had confided the direction of the new Community to the Sulpicians, many of whom had known the Daughters of Charity in France. The saintly Francis Charles Nagot, superior of the Sulpicians, had planned to resign his position and accompany the sisters to Emmitsburg as their first superior; but a severely fractured leg made this impossible. He therefore appointed DuBourg, who had first suggested to Elizabeth the idea of founding Daughters of Charity in America. DuBourg, however, soon resigned. Nagot and Carroll next agreed upon John Baptist David, a man learned, dependable, experienced in religious life and much sought by the laity, both slave and free, for spiritual direction. But since David lacked the outward charm of a Babad or DuBourg, and Elizabeth lacked experience in the religious life, he seemed rigid to her. She found it hard to communicate with him or accept his direction. His work as seminary professor in Baltimore kept him too far from Emmitsburg to be fully aware of the situation in Saint Joseph’s Valley. Since David had volunteered to accompany Flaget to Kentucky — where he founded the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in 1812 — his term of office was as brief as it was frustrating.

Flaget meanwhile had succeeded in obtaining the Rules and Statutes of the Daughters of Charity, as well as the promise of sisters for the United States. In the spring of 1810 he sailed with five other priests from Bordeaux, carrying a letter from three of the sisters there who were waiting for the approval of the government to follow them. The priests’ departure was just in time. Before the group reached Baltimore, Napoleon Bonaparte had suppressed both the Sulpicians and the Vincentians in France, and was interfering in the government of the Daughters of Charity: to the extent of separating them from their Vincentian superior general, deposing and appointing superioresses, changing vows, service, and basic Vincentian identity. Father Dominique Hanon, vicar general of the Congregation of the Mission in France, was imprisoned for opposing Napoleon’s plan for the Daughters of Charity. The situa-
tion in Paris had changed drastically in the few months since Flaget had obtained the promise of sisters in America.

Simon Gabriel Bruté, one of the young Sulpicians who accompanied Flaget to Baltimore, received a letter from a priest who quoted Sister Celeste as hoping to come even without Napoleon's permission. This letter suggests that as many as eighteen had been named to come. But the sisters never arrived; they were not permitted to leave France.

In mid-May of 1811 Flaget and David left for Kentucky. For a few months the sisters were without a superior. Then John Dubois—who already bore the responsibility for Mount Saint Mary's College and the mountain parish, which extended into Pennsylvania—was given the additional charge of superior of the sisters.

Adoption of the Rule of Saint Vincent

The growing menace of British interference with American ships, which was soon to explode into the War of 1812, had already cut off aid from the Filicchi family and sent prices in Baltimore skyrocketing. It also put an end to uncertainty about the arrival of the French sisters: until this crisis was resolved, it would be virtually impossible for them to reach America.

Dubois, therefore, undertook immediately the translation of the Rules and Statutes of the Daughters of Charity. Modifications were kept to a minimum, referring chiefly to the education of girls of all classes, not only the poor, and provision for Mrs. Seton to be a full member of the Community while still caring and providing for her five children. The modified Rules and Constitutions were then reviewed and approved by the Archbishop, and adopted by the sisters on 17 January 1812.

The principal end of the Company was the same as that of the Daughters of Charity in France:

To honor Jesus Christ Our Lord as the source and model of all Charity by rendering to him every temporal and spiritual service in their power in the persons of the poor either sick, invalid, children, prisoners, even the insane or others who through shame would conceal their necessities...
The Rules, as translated by Dubois and adopted by Elizabeth and her sisters, added a secondary end of the Company which does not appear in the original:*

*In the Rules of St. Vincent de Paul, the only distinction of sex in those to be served appears in Article XVIII of the "Particular Rules for Schoolmistresses," who were told that no boy was to be admitted to their schools, though they could teach the principal mysteries to poor beggars when they had time and opportunity.

...to honor the Sacred Infancy of Jesus in the young persons of their sex whose heart they are called to form to the love of God...while they sow in their minds the seeds of useful knowledge.8

The Constitutions recognized that in America tuition was necessary to support the schools; yet added that such education “they will endeavor to extend gratis to poor orphans as far as their circumstances will permit them.”9

Dubois was well acquainted with the Daughters of Charity in France, having served as chaplain of the Hospice des Petites Maisons in the Rue de Sevres, Paris, where forty Daughters of Charity cared for the blind, the insane, orphans, and the homeless poor in a group of “little households” that today would be called cottages. From this experience Dubois knew well the Rule and spirit of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise as lived before the French Revolution. In writing the Constitutions of the American Sisters of Charity during those autumn months of 1811, he declared unequivocally in Article I:

The Sisters of Charity in the United States of America, known by the name of Sisters of St. Joseph’s—are daughters of St. Vincent de Paul, whom they acknowledge as their chief patron & founder; their institute is the same as that of the Sisters of Charity in France...10

He then noted the principal difference: that the American Sisters will educate female children in all stations of life, not only those who are poor.

He next settled the uncertainty about the sisters expected from France:

Although this institution is the same in substance as that of the Sisters of Charity in France, it will have no connexion whatever with
the Company or government of the said Sisters in France, or any European country, except that of mutual charity & friendly correspondence...\textsuperscript{11}

Because of the newness of the Community, qualifications of age and length of membership were dispensed with for the first several elections. Therefore if any sisters arrived from Europe recommended by persons who could be trusted, they would be admitted to the Community at Saint Joseph's, but would not necessarily be preferred for office.*

In order to give the American Sisters of Charity the same guarantee of stability and the preservation of Vincentian spirit that was assured the Daughters of Charity by their relationship with the Vincentians, Dubois wrote into the Constitutions of the American Sisters a similar relationship with the superior of the Sulpicians at Baltimore:

The Sisters of Charity are inseparably under the paternal superintendence & protection of the Superior of St. Sulpice in Baltimore, which Superior shall have the right of nominating and presenting the Superior General of the Sisters to the Archbishop... The said Superior of St. Sulpice shall be also the guardian & protector of the Constitutions, but without interfering with the government of the Sisters further than is necessary to see the Constitutions maintained...nothing shall be added to or retrenched from them afterwards without the authority of the said Superior and the concurrence of the Archbishop of Baltimore.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{*Dubois' strong statement of "no connexion whatever" with the government of the Community in France, and the acceptance only of those French sisters recommended by "persons who could be trusted" obviously refers to the situation in the Community at that time, with the lawful superioress deposed and Napoleon's appointee replacing her. Some sisters had compromised with this situation; others had withdrawn from what they saw as no longer Vincent's Community. Dubois wanted any French influence on the Community to be authentically Vincentian.}

As soon as word reached the United States of Napoleon's defeat, the restoration of the Sulpician and Vincentian communities, and the release from prison of their superiors, Dubois wrote 18 April 1816 to Antoine Garnier, Sulpician superior general in Paris, asking him to speak with the Vincentian superior about sending a French Vincentian to take over the role of superior of the American sisters. "If the Rev. Superior approves," he wrote, "I will try to enter into correspondence on the subject with the Superior of the Fathers of the Mission, formerly Lazarists, to see if it were not possible to form a union between the Sisters here and those of France..."\textsuperscript{13} Members of Saint Vincent's Congregation of the Mission were known as Lazarists in Europe. In America they are more commonly called Vincentians.
Article XXVIII reiterates this:

The Superior of the Seminary of S. Sulpitius of Baltimore is the head of the whole Company: nothing can be done in it, no solution can be carried into effect without his approbation... in matters of importance such as would be the forming of new establishments, receiving foundations, legacies or donations, buying, lending or selling real property, borrowing money, dispensing for a time with any point of the Rules or Constitutions, etc. he must be consulted in person...\textsuperscript{14}

Article XXIX gives the role of the “Mother” who “shall have the direction of the whole Company, with the Superior” and shall give detailed accounts to him of the state of the Company and of her own conduct.

She shall carefully watch over all the members of the Community, and particularly the officers, in order that they may faithfully discharge their respective offices. She shall endeavor to be the soul and life of the whole body, animating her Sisters as much by her example as by her words... She will employ them in the exercises of the institution, send them to the separate establishments, or recall them when thought expedient; the whole with the advice of the Superior or Delegate and of the officers.\textsuperscript{15}

The officers included the assistant, the treasurer, and the steward or procuratrix. These formed the Council, and were elected by the sisters from a list prepared by the superior and the Council of the Community, two names having been proposed for each office. The term of office was three years. It was the Mother’s responsibility to appoint a mistress of novices, a head schoolmistress, sacristans, housekeepers and sister servants of distant missions.\* Ad

Admission to the Company was reserved to “virgins and widows of sound mind and body, between the ages of 16 and 28, disposed to serve God all their lives in the persons of the poor and in the education of young girls.”\textsuperscript{16} Widows were to be legally exonerated from responsibility for their children, with the one exception of Mrs. Seton, whose vow of poverty was limited to allow her to

\*“Sister Servant” was the term adopted by Vincent and Louise to describe the superior of a local house.
administer their property, receive gifts for them, even beg for them if needed.*

Candidates were to pay their board for the first year; otherwise no dowry was expected of them. Candidacy was normally three months, followed by a novitiate of one to two years.** At the end of this time, vows were made for one year, renewable annually. Like the Daughters of Charity in Europe, the Sisters of Charity in America took only annual vows throughout their lives.

Soon after the adoption of the Rules and Constitutions, Elizabeth Ann Seton was elected Mother, with Rose White as her assistant, Kitty Mullen as treasurer and Ann Gruber as procuratrix. After completing their year of novitiate, eighteen sisters pronounced their first vows on 19 July 1813. In addition to Mother Seton and her early companions—Rose, Kitty, Cecilia O'Conway, Susan Clossey, Mary Ann Butler, Sally and Ellen Thompson and Martina Quinn—there were: Angela Brady, Julia Shirk and Fanny Jordan, brought by David from Baltimore in the summer of 1810; Elizabeth Boyle, a Baltimore convert; Ann Gruber, a native of Switzerland; Adele Salva and Louise Roger whom DuBourg brought on his return from Martinique in 1811; and Teresa Conroy and the young widow Margaret Farrell George, candidates who came in 1812. Though only a novice, Elizabeth's oldest daughter Anna Marie (Sister Annina Seton) had been permitted to pronounce her vows before her death early in 1812; she was the first in the Community to do so.

The year 1812 marked the beginning of "pensioners" at Emmitsburg. These were boarders, mostly widows, who shared the prayer life of the Community without becoming members. Three came that year: Mary Landry, Rose White's mother; Bridget Farrell, mother of Margaret George (whom Elizabeth loved for her Irish simplicity and promptly dubbed "Ma Farrell"); and Madame Guerin (Elizabeth called her "the Frenchwoman") who came with DuBourg's Martinique candidates: Adele Salva, her sister, and Louise Roger, her dressmaker. A widow, Madame Guerin had a young son whom she placed at Mount Saint Mary's.

*Other widows in the Community, notably Rose White and Magdalen Guerin, had young sons in school at Mount St. Mary's. The mothers saw their boys twice weekly, but did not have to be concerned about their support or their futures since the boys had patrimonies and legal guardians.

**In 1835 this Constitution was modified to require two years of novitiate for all.
When Kitty Mullen was named mistress of novices and eight sisters began their novitiate, "Ma Farrell" at forty-seven was the oldest of them. Others in the group were Sisters Victoria Brady and Agnes Duffy, Benedicta Corish and Jane Frances Gartland (boarders from the school), Mary Joseph Llewellyn and Scholastica Bean, and Ann Nabbs, the housekeeper who had proved such a treasure in the house on Paca Street, and who was to be known in the Community as Sister Anastasia.

Before long the petite and modish Madame Guerin also applied for admission, taking the name of Sister Magdalen. Besides teaching French, she preferred lowlier household tasks; her beautiful hands were soon red and raw. An old journal relates that she once met Dubois on the narrow infirmary steps when he was bringing up the Blessed Sacrament to the sick and she was carrying down a chamber pot to be emptied. When she later apologized, he reassured her: "My child, the God of Charity met a Sister of Charity performing an act of charity."17

**Burgeoning of the Apostolates**

**Education at Emmitsburg**

In one of her notes Elizabeth wrote: "This morning in my Communion I thought: If You would but give me the care of poor little children, no matter how poor!"18 Always a mother by vocation and a teacher by profession, she desired to offer free education to the children of the poor. But being poor herself, she was forced to concern herself also with the education of the children of the rich.

As early as 22 February 1810, a free school was opened at Saint Joseph's for the children of the town and the mountain parishes. Often food and clothing as well as books were provided; some took home provisions for their hungry families. This free parish school is often cited as the nucleus of the parochial school system in the United States.

When roads became passable in May 1810, the first boarders came from as far away as Frederick, twenty-five difficult miles from Emmitsburg. The White House was soon filled, and the dire poverty of that first winter was somewhat relieved by income from
the boarders. Boarders, schoolchildren, pensioners, parishioners, sisters, priests and seminarians all referred to Elizabeth as “Mother Seton.” Having missed a mother's care in her own childhood, she gave freely to others the love, encouragement and tender corrections of a mother's heart. She offered timely sympathy to homesick students, encouraged seminarians to persevere, communicated her ideals to young Father Bruté, and admonished the newly ordained John Hickey about carelessly prepared sermons. Gradually she left the actual work of teaching in the valley school to others, limiting her role to supervision of classes and training of the sisters as teachers. When visiting classrooms, she would observe the methods and skill of the teachers, take notes, and later talk over with them how they might be more effective.

A curriculum dating from about 1813 indicates that there were four levels of instruction. From primary spelling, reading, writing, ciphering, sewing and mending, the children advanced into grammar, parsing, bookkeeping, history, geography, and French. The school day was filled from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. with time included for meals, prayers and two recreation periods.

Discipline was firm but gentle. A point system graded students on the quality of their recitations, with awards for work well done. Unruly students were led to reflect on God's goodness to them and how they could better return his love. Mother Seton reminded the sisters that “what is good for one pupil is not good for all, because all do not have equal talents.”

The sisters also helped with the work of the parishes, caring for the sacristies, visiting the sick, leading the singing and teaching Gregorian chant, and offering the girls catechetical instruction on Sundays while the priests and seminarians instructed the boys. On the mountain these classes were held outdoors or in the laundry building at the college, and included all the girls of the parish, black and white, slave and free.

Saint Mary's of the Mountain a Separate Mission

In July 1815 Dubois asked for sisters to take charge of the kitchen, laundry, clothes room and infirmary at Mount Saint Mary's College. Sisters Bridget Farrell, Ann Gruber and Anastasia Nabbs were sent, and later Sister Angela Brady as sister servant. This service was offered gladly until 1846, a return for the many
services the sisters in the valley received from the priests and seminarians on the mountain.

Besides helping the college by their economy, the sisters brought a touch of womanly warmth to homesick young students, and reduced the ravages of illness with good food and nursing care. Dubois delighted in their presence and at first attempted to supervise their work as he did every other phase of activity. When he came once too often to the kitchen to lift the pot lids and inspect the supper being prepared, Sister Ann silently removed her apron and held it out to him. From then on the kitchen was her domain.

Sister Angela's stay on the mountain was brief. One bitterly snowy day she helped an old Negro woman back to her cabin after Mass and caught a cold which persisted. Her lungs were already weakened, and she became another of the sisters to die young of tuberculosis.

Philadelphia, 1814: The First Catholic Orphanage

The first call to establish a mission outside of Emmitsburg came from Philadelphia in 1814. The Council decided to accept the invitation of Father Michael Hurley, to direct a parish orphanage which was sixteen years old and $5,000 in debt. Provisions were costly—it was wartime and the British were still in Chesapeake Bay—and the allowance for maintenance of the household and the thirteen orphans was low—$600 a year. Sister Rose White was chosen to direct this new establishment. When Archbishop Carroll objected to her being sent so far away from her family, Dubois responded that her mother and son had already made their sacrifice, and she was needed in Philadelphia:

Her age, her zeal, her prudence are known to you. She is in fact the only one who could be at the Head of an Establishment there... In case of anything happening to Mrs. Seton she may be recalled to the helm in a few days.20

Rose was accompanied by Sisters Susan Clossey and Teresa Conroy. They left Emmitsburg by carriage 29 September 1814, begging hospitality along the way from Catholic families known to Dubois. It was a two-day trip over roads that were mere rutted tracks. One trunk contained all their baggage. Arrived in Phila-
delphia, they had some difficulty finding Holy Trinity Church and the orphanage, but were warmly welcomed by Father Hurley, who had known Elizabeth Seton in New York.

The matron who had been caring for the children left, taking with her most of the furniture, which belonged to her. On 6 October 1814 the sisters assumed charge of Saint Joseph's Asylum—a service they were to continue in Philadelphia for one hundred seventy years. They found the children in rags, running the streets like little beggars, and the number of beds not half sufficient. Boys and girls were housed together, but Rose reported to Elizabeth in her letter home, “Assurance was given that as soon as practicable, it was the intention to form separate establishments.”

For the first year their principal food was potatoes, their drink a “coffee” made from corn with sugar, and their fuel the bits of bark the sisters and children were allowed to glean from the tanyards. But they soon made friends. Mrs. Rachel Montgomery, a convert and president of the Lady Managers, knitted twenty-seven pairs of stockings for the children that first winter; an unknown benefactor paid a $48 grocery bill; and the old woman at the covered market, to whom an orphan was sent with 12½¢ for a soup bone, sent him back with the money, some beef, and 50¢ more. Sister Rose proved herself a good manager. Within three years the debt was paid and the institution prospering, with twenty-five orphans.

New York, 1817: Second Catholic Orphanage

Two years later Bishop John Connolly of New York requested sisters to staff an orphan asylum like the one in Philadelphia, which one of the trustees had visited. When the request came, Elizabeth, with her knowledge of New Yorkers, said, “So much depends on who is sent...” Dubois wrote the reply in which he said that the decision of the Council was to send “at least for a time the excellent Sister Rose.” Accompanying Rose were Sisters Cecilia O'Conway and Felicite Brady. Arriving in August 1817, they stayed with the family of Robert Fox, who had three daughters in school at Saint Joseph's, until the little frame house on Prince Street was ready to receive them with the first five orphans. Within a year the five had become twenty-eight. Again the promise of a separate establishment for
boys was exacted; however, thirty years were to pass, and the number of orphans be counted in the hundreds before that promise would be kept.

In New York as in Philadelphia the sisters made friends who supported their work. Mrs. Fox was interested and helpful. A certain Madame Larue, before her return to France, used to collect donations for the orphans, assisted and later succeeded by the saintly slave Pierre Toussaint, New York's most talented coiffeur. Having no money of his own to contribute, since his earnings belonged to his owner, he collected from his fashionable clientele and kept careful lists of donors and their gifts. On the first Tuesday of each month he would bring to Sister Cecilia at Prince Street what he had collected for the support of the orphans.

The wisdom of Dubois as superior is shown in the contracts drawn up with the boards of trustees of both these orphanages. The sisters were to be free to manage the house according to their Rules, making reports of receipts and expenditures to the trustees. No salary was paid to the sisters, but they were to receive shoes and a clothing allowance of $36 a year. The trustees were also to pay their traveling expenses. The sister in charge was to be consulted in regard to the number of orphans as well as the admission and removal of each. To help the sisters, an association of Ladies of Charity should be formed, whose members could be admitted to the house more freely than the men of the board.* The similarity of these contracts, even in expression, to the agreements found in the correspondence of Vincent and Louise, indicates how thoroughly Dubois had studied all that was available regarding the establishments of the Daughters of Charity in France.

The orphanage in New York was incorporated under the title "New York Catholic Benevolent Society." Here too an attempt was made to form Ladies of Charity, but Cornelius Heeney, one of the trustees, was heard to say, "I know no lady but Sister Rose; and she never appears more like a lady than when helping the little orphan boys to move the wheelbarrow through the streets from market."24

---

* Dubois had known the Ladies of Charity in France, and probably intended these organizations to follow their Rule, which Flaget had brought and Dubois had translated. But the Sisters were not familiar with Ladies of Charity at this time, and the organizations took on the character of Lady Managers instead. A few individuals—Rachel Montgomery in Philadelphia and Margaret Haughey in New Orleans, for example—stand out as living the spiritual ideals demanded of Ladies of Charity by Saint Vincent.
In both cities the sisters gave basic instruction to the orphans, including in their classes such children of the parish or neighborhood as wished to attend. Among the sisters sent to Philadelphia to teach was Sister Fanny Jordan,* a native of the West Indies, who knew several languages and was soon asked to open a free school for German-speaking children of Holy Trinity Parish. Severe illness caused Sister Fanny to be recalled to Emmitsburg in 1819; whether the German school continued beyond that date is not known.

Saint Joseph's Valley in 1818

Growth of the Community

At Saint Joseph's in Emmitsburg, meanwhile, the number of boarders had been increasing. After 1816 this included a number of orphans boarded and educated gratis. By the autumn of 1818 a new building was needed to accommodate the increased number of pupils in the day school. Elizabeth selected the site and went with Dubois one damp day to inspect the foundations of the new building. The outing brought on a new and more severe attack of "lung fever" which was the beginning of her last illness.

Ambrose Maréchal, third Archbishop of Baltimore, visited the Valley about this time and noted that there were sixteen vowed sisters, eighteen novices and two postulants there, besides three sisters in New York and three in Philadelphia—a total of forty-two in the Community, as well as sixty-seven boarders. In his report to Rome 16 October 1818, he described the religious houses of his Archdiocese:

...The third house is that of the Daughters of St. Vincent de Paul...who live holy lives according to the rules of their Holy Founder, with the exception of the modifications demanded by American customs and dispositions. They do not take care of hospitals, nor could they since the administrators of these hospitals are Protestant. Their principal work is the pious instruction of Catholic girls, those of the poor as well as those of the rich.25

*Sister Fanny's full religious name, Sister Francis Xavier, was rarely used.
There were new faces in the valley. Sister Augustine Decount, a woman of remarkable musical ability, was teaching vocal and instrumental music. Her niece, Sister Martina Butcher, had accompanied her to the Community from Philadelphia. Another widow, Sister Xavier Clark—daughter of French refugees from Santo Domingo—taught French. Elizabeth found in her a kindred spirit, soon named her mistress of novices, and was delighted when in 1820 the sisters elected her assistant. The shy Samuel Cooper, ordained and assigned to the parish in Emmitsburg, would speak only to Sister Mary Paul Dougless, who for years cared for the farm in the Valley. Former students had remained to join the Community: Martha Daddisman, Mary Stanislaus McGinnis, Benedicta Parsons. Felicitas Delone, daughter of a Pennsylvania farmer, would soon be followed by her younger sister Rebecca; and Sister Genevieve Tyler, oldest daughter of a convert family of New Hampshire, had pioneered the way to Emmitsburg that her three younger sisters would soon follow.

But there were faces missing too: Magdalen Guerin, the Frenchwoman; Ellen Brady; Mary Elizabeth Wagner, Elizabeth’s “good Dutch girl”; Mary Joseph Llewellyn and others had joined those who slept in the little woods.

The Seton Children

Missed most of all was Bec, Elizabeth’s youngest daughter, whom she called her “child of the Cross.” A fall on the ice in 1812, concealed from her mother because of Annina’s last illness, caused a tumor on her hip which developed into tuberculosis of the bone. The best doctors were unable to help her. Cheerful as a bird, she told her mother, “This leg will carry me to heaven.” Her favorite doctor was Bruté, then president of Saint Mary’s College in Baltimore, who had received his medical degree from the Sorbonne in Paris before seeking ordination and admission into the Sulpicians. He visited when he could, wrote letters, amused her with his little notes and sketches, and challenged her to look forward to heaven and treasure the sufferings that were her passport there. Inspired by his and her mother’s faith, Bec reached unusual heights of holiness before dying on her mother’s knee 4 November 1816.

Kit, Elizabeth’s only remaining daughter, also showed signs of the family illness. Having finished school, she taught music for a
while, then visited Elizabeth's friends and relatives in Philadelphia and New York before settling in with the family of General Robert Goodloe Harper in Baltimore, becoming like a daughter to them. She later lived with her aunt in New York, where at the age of forty-six she became the first American postulant of the Sisters of Mercy. After many years of devoted service to prisoners in New York, she died at the age of ninety.

William joined the navy. When he was assigned to the Cyane on duty off the coast of Liberia, his brother Richard worked as Captain's clerk on the same ship. Richard offered to assist Jehudi Ashmun, the agent attempting to found a free black colony in Liberia. Having nursed Ashmun through a virulent fever, Richard contracted it and died at sea in June of 1823, aged 26. William retired early from the navy to care for Kit, who was ill. He later married and fathered nine children, among them Archbishop Robert Seton and author William Seton. He died in 1868 and is buried at Mount Saint Mary's.

Bruté's Return to Emmitsburg

While in Baltimore, Bruté offered hospitality to the first Vincentsians who had come to the United States from Rome at the request of Bishop DuBourg of New Orleans. They were Felix DeAndreis, Joseph Rosati, and their companions. Bruté wrote to Elizabeth asking for prayers for the success of the seminary they hoped to establish in the West, noting that it is the duty of Daughters of Charity to pray for good priests. Elizabeth responded joyfully to news of the Missionaries, adding that the sisters had offered Mass and Communion on the feast of Saint Lazarus for them and their work.

In 1818 Bruté returned to Mount Saint Mary's to assist Dubois, whose many duties were overwhelming. The two worked together in deep spiritual friendship in spite of their differences in personality. The Community leaned on the stalwart Dubois in practical matters. As superior he guided economic decisions, insisted uncompromisingly on the Rule and spirit of Vincent and Louise, steered the Council to make choices according to "what our French Sisters do," and challenged them to have the daring of pioneers. Bruté nourished the spiritual life of the sisters through his role as chaplain, through retreats, conferences, and spiritual direction given to
Elizabeth and others among the sisters. A beautiful bond had developed between him and Elizabeth, each inspiring the other with enthusiasm for the spiritual life, love of Scripture and the Eucharist, and joyful acceptance of God's will manifested in the present moment. Elizabeth corrected his unique English and helped with his homilies; Bruté shared with her his copious library of the Fathers of the Church and masters of the spiritual life, from which she translated passages for the sisters.

Bruté, like Dubois, knew well the Daughters of Charity in France and could convey their ideals with all the ardor of his soul. In his words to the sisters he used such colorful imagery that his imperfect mastery of English only made the lessons more memorable:

O, that they beg humbly to be made true Daughters of Charity, true angels of the sick, the dying, the orphan, the widow; true sufferers with sufferers; true pitying, gentle condescending fellow-travelers with mortals not so easily weaned from things below...to be enabled to prepare well enough for their last hour!26

Humility, Simplicity, Charity. How well these blessed names of the three virtues marked out by St. Vincent will carry us through...27

**Death of Elizabeth Seton**

Years earlier Elizabeth had written to her friend Julia Scott about the Sulpicians:

I shall be always protected and taken care of as part of their family, and I cannot help wishing extremely that I may be so fortunate as to merit a continuance of their friendship.28

Both Elizabeth and her sisters valued this friendship. Besides the Sulpicians of Mount Saint Mary's and those of Saint Mary's, Baltimore, the Community counted among its friends in these early days four Sulpician Bishops: Marechal of Baltimore, DuBourg of New Orleans (later Montauban, France), Flaget and David of Bardstown. Because of their associations with the two seminaries, the sisters were acquainted with many more who would be counted among the hierarchy of the future, who were in 1820 still students or faculty members of the two seminaries—including Dubois and Bruté. Through their closeness to the Sulpicians, the sisters were
close to Church leadership in many American dioceses of the future.

Before 1820 the Church in America was composed of one archdiocese, Baltimore, and five dioceses: New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Bardstown, and New Orleans. The Community of Sisters of Charity, not yet a dozen years old and numbering only fifty sisters, was already serving in three of them and would soon spread to others. The calls of the Church and the needs of the poor would always be the criteria upon which the Community would base its acceptance of new missions.

"I thank God for having made me a child of His Church," Elizabeth Seton said more than once to the sisters around her sickbed. "When you come to this hour, you will know what it is to be a child of the Church."

When her last hour did come 4 January 1821, this was the message Elizabeth left with her Daughters: "Be children of the Church; be children of the Church. Oh, thankful..."
In 1828 four Sisters of Charity opened a hospital in Saint Louis at the request of Bishop Rosati. This log cabin was the nation's first Catholic hospital.

In the epidemics of 1832-1833 the sisters nursed cholera victims in all the major seaports, bringing the bereaved orphans home and caring for them.

The Sisters of Charity were put in charge of Charity Hospital in New Orleans, a state hospital, in 1833. The sister and slave doing the hospital laundry together in the sweltering sheds worked ankle-deep in mud.

After the First Provincial Council of Baltimore in 1829, a group of the Council Fathers visited Emmitsburg. The wagoner who brought them billed the sisters for "a load of bishops."