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Elizabeth Bayley Seton, Teacher: A Legacy of Charity Education

By

Alice Ann M. O'Neill, S.C., Ph.D.

Elizabeth — daughter, wife, mother, friend, widow, convert, religious woman, teacher. It is easy to identify with Elizabeth Bayley Seton through one or more facets of her life, or through the many roles she assumed while she walked this earth. The myriad ways in which people connect with Elizabeth Seton is remarkable. For 26 of Elizabeth’s full but brief life of 46 years she was a mother; however, she served in the role of teacher for nearly 40 years. Elizabeth Ann Seton is popularly considered the patron saint of American Catholic Education. Her pioneering role with the Sisters of Charity at the beginnings of an effective system of holistic, values-based Catholic education in Emmitsburg, Maryland, will forever be remembered in the United States. This work considers Elizabeth’s evolving role as teacher and uses her own words to tell the story, offering quotes to aid in imagining the scenes and deepening the reflection experience.

As was often the custom in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, children taught children. Children and older siblings regularly checked the studies and taught lessons to their younger siblings and boarders. Herself a motherless child, Elizabeth was instructed well by her father, Dr. Richard Bayley, and by the schools which she attended for brief periods both in New York City and New Rochelle, New York. In the memoir of her childhood, Dear Remembrances, Elizabeth Bayley recalled her initial awareness of what later she referred to as her calling to be a teacher:

1780, New York City – At 6 [years old, I remember] taking my little sister Emma up to the garret window [of our house and] showing her the setting sun [over New York harbor. My stepmother was calling us to come down to dinner but I felt I must first... out of love for Emma... let her know where God lived so she could find the great comfort of our Almighty that I enjoyed. I] told her God lived up in heaven [above the clouds where sunbeams always glowed. I took her hand in mine to help her to understand the importance

2 This paper was originally presented on 1 February 2009, at the motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati as a part of the Sundays of Reflection series.
of what I was about to say...] and good children would go up there [to be with God when the time is acceptable. I knew my stepmother would not approve of my little imparts of knowledge to Emma, but I wanted to help her by sharing what our father had told me. Emma was a good little girl, and I was] teaching her her prayers [too].

Several years later, Elizabeth Bayley became Mrs. William Seton, a married woman with five children, raising seven additional children from her Seton in-laws. Heavy responsibility for a woman so young, but Elizabeth, ever joyful, took much in stride, and delighted in all the children in her and her dear Will’s home. Elizabeth organized her household around a daily schedule of schooling for all the children in her care. She described the routine, with updates on the children’s progress, to her friend Julia Scott:

1801, State Street House – [By] ten o’clock all is arranged and the round table [in our sitting room] is covered with different Books used by my Darlings; [ten year old] Cecilia begins Grammar, reading, writing, Spelling of large and small words, marking, sewing, and figures. You doubtless smile at the idea of my being her Directress, but certainly she makes very great progress and learns thoroughly whatever she applies herself to – her disposition cannot be excelled for mildness and assiduity rare qualities united, and Miss Shipton, with an attention she herself cannot conceive the value of, has furnished me with books of every kind that are useful in the Education of Children. Anna Maria [six years old] follows Cecilia as nearly as her inferior age allows and discovers a capacity and amiability of mind that gives me a peaceful satisfaction, for a Mother always “rejoices with trembling.” William and Richard say their lessons: little pieces [of poetry], names of the United States, Divisions of the Globe, some of the Commandments.4 Suppose yourself a teacher of Reading, writing, sewing for I devote the whole Morning – that is from ten till two – Going to school thro’ snow and wet will give me more trouble than keeping them at Home[.] I have tried it one week, and as yet it has been only a pleasure at all events....5

For Elizabeth the combination of teaching with mothering seemed to come naturally. Multitasking was certainly a necessity. Between caring for nurserlings, supervising the household help, arranging for meals, teaching young children basic skills, monitoring the older children in their daily activities, and assisting her father and her husband with their affairs, Elizabeth’s daily life was full.

Teaching, together with the role of mothering, was how Elizabeth’s life developed. She viewed herself, during these busy years of managing a household, as a mother who was able and more than willing to also be a teacher for her children. Elizabeth gained much experience in caring for and instructing children of different ages, managing essentially a multi-level, multi-subject one-room school setting – challenging but fulfilling experiences for a young mother. Proud Mama, she praised her children’s accomplishments and spurred them on when necessary. Her pride and encouragement are illustrated in a letter she wrote to her six-year-old son, Richard:

4 Ibid., I, 150.
5 Ibid., I, 54.
1803, The Lazaretto, Leghorn, Italy – My Dear Richard,
your own Mother loves you dearly and is delighted to hear
you are such a good Boy – and are so fond of going to school.
Oh how pleased Papa will be to hear you spell…..
your mother EAS⁶

The busiest times are often when much is learned and useful life experience gained. There can be an energy gathered in the flurry of activity. Learning to balance a number of responsibilities gracefully, while trying to expand upon abilities, improving knowledge, and attempting to live a prayerful daily life is the conundrum of a Sister of Charity. Little did Elizabeth realize that during these busy years as mother and teacher, she was being prepared for her future life as a Sister of Charity.

After her conversion, the widow Seton desperately tried to find a means to provide for her children with very little support from her extended family. She was offered a position as teaching assistant in a seminary and described the offer in a letter:

1805, small house near St. Peter's Church New York – A Mr. [Patrick] White an English gentleman of very respectable character and a compleat (sic) scholar but in reduced circumstances is endeavoring to establish a school for young Ladies, and perhaps Boys also, in which his wife will assist – He has seen my children and is interested for us – he has offered to teach them, and receive me as an assistant in his school in case it succeeds, of which there is every prospect as he is well recommended, and a school such as he proposes is very much wanted – I should have a good prospect for the education of my boys [and] quiet my conscience by doing something if ever so trifling towards our maintenance – and my Anna would receive more instruction than I can give her. [M]y profits are to be a third of whatever this plan produces [and] as I shall have no responsibility or trouble in organizing the plan, I could certainly find no situation more easy.⁷

Unfortunately, the plan for the success of this school did fail. Over the next few years Elizabeth tried several other strategies in an effort to provide for her family. She sewed and mended, and took in boarders, to help

⁶ Ibid., I, 246.
⁷ Ibid., I, 359, 361.
cover her rent while continuing to try to find work as a teacher in New York. Protestants thwarted every opportunity Elizabeth had in New York, campaigning against her in the belief that she would convert all students to Catholicism. These are among the reasons Elizabeth was so relieved to be given the opportunity to move her family to Baltimore, Maryland, to begin a new life as a Catholic teacher.

In Baltimore Elizabeth cared for and taught her daughters and several other girls, again in a one-room setting. Her sons had been studying in Georgetown but transferred to St. Mary’s, Baltimore, to continue their studies. Elizabeth was enjoying her vocation as teacher, and the simple life of her small house, when she wrote to describe a new opportunity to Julia Scott:

1809, Paca Street House — [Mr. Cooper] has purchased a very valuable farm forty miles from this place on which all the conveniences of life are abundant. [I]t is true also that I shall be at the head of a community which will live under the strictest rules of order and regularity. Much as this offer

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delighted me, I urged my want of talents.9 ...but to speak the joy of my soul at the prospect of being able to assist the Poor, visit the sick, comfort the sorrowful, clothe little innocents, and teach them to love God.10

On 22 February 1810, the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s in Emmitsburg, Maryland, opened a free day school and St. Joseph’s Boarding Academy. The students were daughters of distinguished English nobility and wealthy Catholic and Protestant families from New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and many other areas along the East coast. The student body also included girls who were poor “Mountain children”11 from near St. Joseph’s Valley and African-American children, both free and enslaved. Black girls were not formally admitted to the academy but learned basic skills and religion from the sisters.12 In the academy poor and orphaned girls were taught in separate classrooms from the paying boarding students. The varied classroom curricula were designed to prepare the girls with the skills, beyond basic education, needed for their future stations in life. The general admission requirements of students to the day school were that the children, orphaned or with parents, should be poor and their family unable to pay for their education. Also, the child should demonstrate promise as a student.13 A sense of equality and mutual respect flourished among the sisters and students at St. Joseph’s.

Subjects in the curriculum of St. Joseph’s Academy included sewing, embroidery, grammar, spelling, reading, writing, foreign languages – such as French, German, Spanish, and Italian – music, including composition, vocal, and instrumental, geography, history, arithmetic, drawing, and housekeeping. General tuition covered these studies, but for extra fees private music and dance lessons were also available. The sisters also managed a spinning, weaving, and knitting school for the “country people” around Emmitsburg. As the basic life skills considered necessary for an early nineteenth-century woman were sewing and knitting, spinning, housekeeping, and basic handicrafts, St. Joseph’s Academy’s curriculum was indeed challenging and a fine, wide-ranging education for a young woman.

Elizabeth Seton was the matron or superior of the Academy and taught

9 Ibid., I, 506. This sentence is used fictionally herein, it was originally written in New York City (1808) regarding the offer to teach in Baltimore.
10 Ibid., II, 62.
11 Ibid., II, 329.
French, music, and religion though she claimed she need only “use the talent of smiling and caressing while the excellent mistresses have all the trouble.”

She was responsible and cared for the sisters, the students, her own daughters, and many others who would arrive at their doorstep. All strangers were welcome and many besides were invited to stay for dinner. Every Wednesday boys who studied at Mount St. Mary’s had an outing to visit St. Joseph’s. As a result of these visits, many of them developed a deep affection for Mother Seton. Elizabeth shared her thoughts on the school and her responsibilities in letters to friends:

**1811, Log House Emmitsburg** – I have a very very large school to superintend every day, and the entire charge of the religious instruction of all the country round. All happy [due] to the Sisters of Charity who are night and day devoted to the sick and ignorant.

[The promising and amiable perspective of Establishing a House of plain and useful Education, retired from the extravagance of the world.... so simple and unpretending is our Object. [W]e cannot fail of success if not crushed in our Beginning.

[I]t will gradually succeed, as it is committed solely to [the] providence of Almighty God.

My life is a very happy one spent entirely between my school and the chapel which joins our dwelling.

Everyone in the school, both sisters and students, followed the daily schedule together and collectively participated in picnics, outings, and other recreational activities. The organization St. Joseph’s Academy developed was no doubt a result of Elizabeth’s teaching and supervisory experiences. The students of the school were divided into groups of ten called a “decury,” with supervision by a sister-prefect or “angel.” Much emphasis was placed on mentoring and character development within the school. This organizational

14 Collected Writings, II, 172.
15 Ibid., II, 127.
16 Ibid., II, 206.
17 Ibid., II, 19.
18 Ibid., II, 46.
19 Ibid., II, 620.
approach aided with the efficient orderliness in the daily activities of the school, and it helped older students review their studies. Elizabeth explained:

[A]n excellent way to make children steady [is] to show them you confide in them, and put the younger ones in some degree in [the] charge of the older – [The older girls] go over the same lessons many times which they have carelessly learnt, and being obliged to give good example it has a good effect.\(^{20}\)

Elizabeth’s young daughter Kit, only ten years old, heard lessons of the younger children and conducted herself with such grace “that girls twice her age show[ed] her the greatest respect.”\(^{21}\) Regular review of materials and character development were to Elizabeth the foundation of a fine education and the way she helped her students strive for excellence.

At least once a month a whole school day was devoted to the art of letter writing. Most of these letters were written to parents. The sisters checked the letters for correctness and caught up on general household chores. Elizabeth herself maintained frequent correspondence with parents of St. Joseph’s students.

There were occasional interruptions to the orderly conduct of students at St. Joseph’s. Incorrigible students were asked to leave the academy regardless of birthright or connections. One such example is Eleanor (Ellen) Hickey, the sister of Reverend John Hickey, S.S., a priest missioned at St. Mary’s, Baltimore. Elizabeth wrote to Reverend Hickey in June 1819 regarding, among other things, his younger sister Ellen:

Ellen you will find, after living in clouds of divine light goes away in darkness, quite eager to escape from his torrents of Grace, and who makes the difference, who but our God – not your merits or mine my Brother.... only in this case of Ellen whom you can only serve by drawing their love and Veneration, and being their elder Brother you might deviate a little almost without thinking of it – I never had a heavier heart for a child that left us than for Ellen, but who knows how it may turn to the GREATER GLORY of our only beloved.\(^{22}\)

Apparently God’s plan for “Greater Glory” involved Ellen returning to

\(^{20}\) Ibid., II, 141.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., II, 137.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., II, 615.
St. Joseph’s in September 1830 to join the Sisters of Charity as Sister William Anna, an event Elizabeth did not live to see.

As with most schools, there were needy children and children with discipline problems. In a letter to her spiritual director, Reverend Simon Gabriel Bruté, S.S., Elizabeth offered a reflection on difficulties in teaching and dealing with parents:

I will tell you in what I know American parents to be most difficult – in hearing the faults of their children – in twenty instances where you see the faults are not to be immediately corrected by the parents, but rather by good advices and education, it is best not to speak of them to Papa and Mama who feel as if you reflected on their very self – and while to you it will be “Yes Sir, I know, I perceive,” in the heart they think it is not so much, and they will soften and excuse to the child what they condemn to us, and our efforts afterwards avail very little.²³

“All This and Heaven Too” by Rebecca Pearl.
*Courtesy, Rebecca Pearl and James Ziegler*
*The Pearl Gallery, 24 West Main Street, Emmitsburg, Maryland*

Elizabeth maintained frequent correspondence with former students, whom she considered friends and extended family after they left St. Joseph’s. Alumnae were welcomed and encouraged to visit and even join in the annual community retreat. An example of Elizabeth’s strong relationships with former students can be seen in a letter written to Mary Diana Harper that described the intimate details of the death of Elizabeth’s daughter, Rebecca:

**1817 December, the White House, Emmitsburg** –
My ever dear Mary –
How many remembrances pressed on my heart on reading your letter (20 May 1817) and when your dear Mama related the difficulty you had had to reconcile yourself with the separation so truly painful…. but you know all that is in order, a part of our fine Education in this pretty World where the first step to happiness is to subdue our feelings – by this time I am sure you are well convinced that your situation [of living in France] affords you a thousand advantages you could never meet in our American Schools…. [My] Bec was more lively and playful to the last than you ever saw her, after sitting up so many months night and day, never able to lie down, and the three last days of her life in expectation of Death every moment, she yet had so much peace and fortitude that when we offered her [something] to lull her pain, she said, “may be I shall get away in my sleep if I take it, so I will bid you all good bye, give my love to everybody” – yet she had made such earnest preparation for Death and was in such truly heavenly dispositions of mind that her cheerfulness evidently was but the effect of a pure heart and good conscience – she dozed away her life like a sweet baby; returning from a stupor which had lasted some time, she said, “it seemed to me I have been with our dear Lord and he showed me my little cup almost full, only a few drops more can go in it dearest Mother” – she breathed her dear Soul on her Mothers bosom I hope indeed in fullest security of Eternal rest for the dear one had so little rest in this world and united so constantly with the sufferings of our Savior. Dearest Mary how different your life from hers, her early hopes crushed in the bud – yours all cherished with the fairest promise[;] every hour of hers marked with pain – yours a succession of ease and pleasure[;] sweet Bec – the crucifix which she had always before her was her strength and
support to the last, in her severest pains she would look at it with rolling tears and press my hand in silence – that crucifix you will blush to own, and find it oftener your reproach than your consolation – Yet through all your dangers of Salvation, God will be a faithful God to you, if you are faithful to him as you well know. Your [little sister] Elizabeth will tell you how she loves her Sister Margaret [George] who is always the favourite, and truly a most useful and true friend to the little darling [and] who promises every thing your heart can wish. You are dearly remembered here by many, my dear Mary, and ever most tenderly loved by your own friend in best hopes of our eternal reunion.

Your EASeton

St. Joseph’s was a school of love and care for the whole person exuded through Elizabeth Ann Seton. Elizabeth, now the motherly teacher, expanded her family through the community of sisters and students at the school and modeled a holistic approach to education through the organization and teaching style of St. Joseph’s. Elizabeth said, “Tenderness is the language children best understand,” which expressed how the Sisters of Charity lived out Jesus’ mission in Emmitsburg daily. As St. Paul exhorted, “You should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete, put on love.” In Elizabeth’s words:

I am as a Mother encompassed by many children of different dispositions – not all equally amiable or congenial, but bound to love, instruct, and provide for the happiness of all, to give the example of cheerfulness [sic], Peace, resignation, and consider individuals more as proceeding from the same Origin and tending to the same end than in the different shades of merit or demerit.

Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore, a strong advocate of St. Joseph’s Academy, wrote 11 September 1811, to praise and encourage Elizabeth Seton and the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s valley “on your prosperity in the important duty of education which will and must long be your principal, and

24 Ibid., II, 516-18.
25 Ibid., II, 173.
26 Colossians 3:12 & 14.
27 Collected Writings, II, 154.
will always be your partial employment.... Therefore [the Sisters of Charity] must consider the business as a laborious, charitable and permanent object of the religious duty.”

Elizabeth discovered her calling to be a teacher early in life as a gentle mentor and an organized, multi-tasking mother who taught her children at home. She continued to teach in New York City when she became a widow, struggling to support her newly Catholic family in a Protestant city. She blossomed as a Catholic matron and teacher both in Baltimore and Emmitsburg, Maryland. Finally, Elizabeth’s life ended while she was fulfilling her role as a motherly teacher and Sister of Charity. What is Elizabeth, our motherly teacher, teaching us today? What is her advice for continuing the legacy of Charity education?

Artwork: “St. Elizabeth and the Children” by landry Randriamandrosa. ©2000 Vincentian Center for Church and Society, St. John’s University, New York. Used with permission.

Four Sisters of Charity from Emmitsburg, at the invitation of Bishop Edward Fenwick, arrived in Cincinnati in 1829. Their first ministry was St. Peter’s Orphanage for girls, and an accompanying day school. The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati continue the mission of Charity education even today.

with the College of Mount St. Joseph, Seton High school, other traditional and non-traditional venues, and with a new Cristo Rey high school to open in 2010 – 200 years after St. Joseph’s Academy opened in Emmitsburg.

Elizabeth wrote a letter to Sister Margaret George, the founding mother of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, who was on her way to mission, 28 May 1819, with advice and blessing:

My Marg[are]t,
His Peace.... take care of Margaret exactly as you would of EAS – mind that [which was] my last injunction [to] remem-ber all the little things I told you in this corner [of St. Joseph’s Valley] about Kindness to Strangers in the true Spirit. You have so much to do for our Lord. May he bless you as my heart and Soul blesses you – 29

Elizabeth Seton’s advice and blessings as preparations for a new venture in Charity education continue for the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati – the daughters of both herself and Margaret George in the 200th anniversary year of their founding.30

29 Collected Writings, II, 612.
30 American Sisters of Charity, 1809-2009.