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Elizabeth Bayley Seton Writings: Current State and Future Plans

BY
REGINA BECHTLE, S.C., AND JUDITH METZ, S.C.

The publication of the complete writings of Elizabeth Bayley Seton is a major milestone for those interested in this significant figure in American Catholic history. Though the journey to accomplish this task was lengthy and tedious, it is already producing significant benefits. Elizabeth Seton has become more accessible for those who wish to pray with her and come to know her through her own words. And, researchers now have a source with which to conveniently locate her writings and study various aspects of her life, spirituality, and relationships.

1810 view of St. Joseph’s Academy by Edward Augustus Seton. Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Archives, Emmitsburg, Maryland

As the committee collected and compiled Elizabeth Seton’s writings and developed footnotes to amplify the texts it became aware that having access to correspondence addressed to Elizabeth, and to letters among her family members and associates, would provide a better picture and enhance readers’ understanding of her life and times. As we completed the Collected


Writings, committee members indicated their willingness to continue, moving into collecting and compiling “the other side of the story.”

Presently we are conducting a search for documents and have begun the process of organizing, transcribing, and translating these letters. We are also developing guidelines and criteria for the inclusion of documents and excerpts of documents in the next phase of the Seton Writings project.

The deeper we get into our work, the more convinced we are of its value. One incident in particular in Elizabeth Seton’s life demonstrates how the examination of letters written by a variety of persons provides new insights and fresh perspectives. This example occurred at the very birth of the Sisters of Charity and involves misunderstandings that led to the resignation of the first priest-superior, Sulpician Reverend William Dubourg, soon after the Sisters began their venture, 31 July 1809.

Elizabeth left Baltimore on 22 June 1809, for her new home in Emmitsburg, a small town about 50 miles west, with her daughter Anna Maria, her Seton sisters-in-law Cecilia and Harriet, and Sister Maria Murphy Burke. When they arrived the next day, they temporarily moved into Reverend John Dubois’s log cabin on St. Mary’s Mountain until the farmhouse they were to occupy in St. Joseph’s Valley was ready for them.

By 29 July the rest of her family and companions – Reverend William Dubourg, Elizabeth’s other four children, two female boarding students, and six more women who had joined her fledgling community in Baltimore – had made the journey to Emmitsburg. The Sisters, family members, and students moved into the four-room, two-story stone farmhouse that had belonged to the Robert Fleming family before Samuel Cooper bought it for Elizabeth’s

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3 The Sulpicians (Society of St. Sulpice, S.S.) were founded by Jean-Jacques Olier in Paris in 1641. Their purpose was the spiritual renewal of the diocesan priesthood, and they were known for their fine seminaries. At Bishop John Carroll’s request they came to the United States in 1791 and established the nation’s first theological school at St. Mary’s in Baltimore. In 1808 Reverend John Dubois founded Mount St. Mary’s in Emmitsburg, which was also operated by the Sulpicians into the 1820s until they withdrew and Mount St. Mary’s became a diocesan ministry. These priests served as directors of the Sisters of Charity in the United States from their foundation in 1809 until 1849, when the Vincentian priests took over this responsibility.

4 William Dubourg, S.S. (1766-1833), a French émigré Sulpician priest, founded St. Mary’s College in Baltimore. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Sisters of Charity and the first superior of the community. In 1812 he was named the first bishop of Louisiana, and in 1826 he returned to France where he became bishop of Montauban and later archbishop of Besançon.

5 John Dubois, S.S. (1764-1842), a French émigré Sulpician priest, founded Mount St. Mary’s College and Seminary in Emmitsburg in 1808 and served as superior of the Sisters of Charity from 1811 to 1826. In 1826 he was appointed bishop of New York and remained there the rest of his life.

6 Samuel Cooper (1769-1843), was a wealthy sea captain who resided in Philadelphia. He converted to Catholicism in 1807, studied for the priesthood at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, and was ordained in 1818. As a seminarian he became a significant benefactor of Elizabeth Seton and the Sisters of Charity through his donation of money to purchase property in Emmitsburg, Maryland.
new venture. They began living their Provisional Rule on 31 July 1809, which is considered the founding of the Sisters of Charity.

As if moving and organizing a semblance of daily routine were not stressful enough, Elizabeth soon had to face the first of many clashes with her clerical advisers and superiors. In a 6 August letter to Archbishop John Carroll, she provided a glimpse of the frustrations that attended these first weeks. Since their “first arrival... so many things occurred to disappoint and distress [her],” but she did not want to upset Carroll with them. She could not, however, hide from him the fact that she and all but two of the Sisters were “greatly chagrined” by a letter from their superior, Reverend William Dubourg, prohibiting the Sisters from corresponding with Reverend Pierre Babade (also a Sulpician), their favorite confessor and spiritual director in Baltimore. Babade had taught religion at Elizabeth’s Paca Street school and befriended everyone from the start. Mincing no words, Elizabeth complained that Dubourg’s “severe regulation” deprived her of the advice of the only priest-confessor to whom she had truly opened her heart, a heart now “torn to pieces.” Moreover, in “acting like a tyrant,” Dubourg had confused and upset the Sisters needlessly. She also complained that there was conflict in the community because of “some very busy persons making exaggerations to our superior about my writing large packages to Fr. Babade,” a charge she denied.

In previous encounters Dubourg and Babade had clashed in their approach to method and policy both in a school in Cuba and at St. Mary’s College in Baltimore. Their styles and personalities seemed at variance on many levels. Dubourg, 37, was an energetic man of many ideas, an initiator, a builder with a gregarious personality, while Babade, 49, a romantic with a poetic and tender soul, evoked an ardent response from Elizabeth Seton, her daughters and sisters-in-law, and several of the early Sisters. Jacques-André Emery, the superior general of the Sulpicians, described Babade as a man “who says all he thinks and says it badly – in a word, he hasn’t enough experience, enough tact, enough discretion.”

But an understanding was reached, for on the very day of her letter, Elizabeth wrote that Dubourg gave the Sisters “a copy of the rule relating

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7 Collected Writings, II, 76-78. The original spelling and punctuation in all of the letters cited have been changed to reflect contemporary usage. Reverend John Carroll (1735-1815), was born in Maryland and ordained a Jesuit priest in Europe. He was named the first Catholic bishop in the United States when the diocese of Baltimore was created in 1789. John Carroll was the leader of the American Catholic church, a friend of Elizabeth Seton, and instrumental in the beginnings of the American Sisters of Charity.

8 Pierre Babade, S.S. (1763-1846), a French émigré Sulpician priest, was a close friend of Elizabeth Seton, her daughters, and some of the early Sisters of Charity.

to correspondents which permits every one to write once in two months
to the Director they prefer, on subjects of direction which are designated.”
Elizabeth commented dryly, “If this had been understood at first, much un-
easiness would have been spared.”

Reverend Dubourg gave the Sisters their first retreat, opening 10 August,
and then returned to his duties in Baltimore, which included serving as pres-
ident of St. Mary’s College. Meanwhile, Babade was away doing missionary
work in the Philadelphia area during August. He received letters from both
Dubourg and Carroll instructing him to go to Emmitsburg as soon as possi-
ble to receive Harriet Seton into the Church. He wrote to Elizabeth telling her
that to defend himself he had felt the need to “explain the mystery of their re-
lationship,” and in a note attached to this letter he told Harriet that he would
hasten to “the sacred place which encircles what is dearest to my heart.”
Several days later he again wrote to Elizabeth telling her that he would go to
Baltimore first to consult with the Archbishop, who had requested that they
discuss the regulations pertaining to the sisters.

Examining correspondence to Elizabeth, or between other parties, sheds
further light on the thorny situation and its problematic aftermath. For ex-
ample we learn that through these unsettled months, Babade, the target of
his fellow Sulpicians’ ire, still wrote regularly to Harriet, Elizabeth’s sister-in-
law, continuing to instruct her in the Catholic faith. Certainly he knew that
Harriet would share his letters with Elizabeth.

Babade’s letter to Harriet, 8 September 1809, directs “Mother” [Seton] to
share with the Sisters the same instructions he gave her the previous year.12
His letter of 16 October refers to a “big package” he has sent to Emmitsburg,
adding pointedly that he has not written to Elizabeth. He tells Harriet: “[I]n
case of insidious question, Mother may answer truly that I did not write to
her, that she did not receive letters from me, and yet she will know whatever
I wish her to know.” He encouraged Elizabeth to keep a journal to be ex-
changed with his own at intervals.13 By 11 November he tells Harriet that he
is again writing to Elizabeth but is disappointed he has not heard from her.14
Letters regularly flowed back and forth between Babade and Elizabeth’s
daughter Catherine, as well as Sister Maria Murphy Burke.

10 Archives St. Joseph Provincial House (hereafter cited as ASJPH) 1-3-3-1:63, in French, Pierre
Babade to Elizabeth Seton, 20 August 1809, as cited in Annabelle Melville, Elizabeth Bayley Seton
(New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 168.
11 ASJPH 1-3-3-1:64, cited in Melville, Elizabeth Bayley Seton, 168. Babade arrived in Baltimore
on 16 September.
12 ASJPH 1-3-3-1:82.
13 ASJPH 1-3-3-1:85.
14 ASJPH 1-3-3-1:89.
Letters to and about Elizabeth also reveal the tangled role of authority as Archbishop Carroll and various Sulpicians struggled to decide just who was ultimately in charge of the Sisterhood. Not surprisingly, considering the church and society of that time, the women affected were not consulted. Elizabeth, however, did not hesitate to speak up and voice her concerns and preferences to those making the decision.

In a letter of 8 September, Elizabeth told Archbishop Carroll that their superior, Dubourg, was finally going to let Babade visit Emmitsburg, but Carroll’s permission was needed to allow Babade to hear the Sisters’ confessions. She begged Carroll to give his approval. Even though he had apparently made his position on the matter clear, the needs of her Sisters drove Elizabeth to risk incurring his displeasure by asking him again.15

Despite his chagrin at Elizabeth’s resisting his authority, from September through December 1809, Dubourg continued to write to Elizabeth, almost as though nothing had happened between them. On 13 September he wrote: “I wish to be with you tho’ absent, share in every distress, be edified in every good action, assist in every doubt.” He gave directions about how often the Sisters could receive Communion each week, sent regards to Sisters, boarders, and students by name, and inquired about the progress of the new house being built for the community.16

Meanwhile Babade traveled to Emmitsburg in the latter part of September. He received Harriet Seton into the Church on 24 September, and returned to Baltimore, 30 September.

Apparently, no written record of when Dubourg resigned his position as superior of the Sisters exists, but it seems to have occurred in the latter part of September. In her biography of Dubourg, Annabelle Melville writes: “Whatever happened between Dubourg’s paternally concerned letter of the second week in September and Dubois’ of the first week in October remains a mystery. What emerges is that Dubourg resigned and that Mother Seton was aghast at the dénouement.”17 Elizabeth wrote a pleading letter to Dubourg, the man who had busied himself for so long in her interest, asking him, as a “real Father,” to resume his “place with us.”18

Receiving no assurance that Dubourg would return to his former duties Elizabeth penned a letter to Reverend Charles Nagot,19 the superior of the Sulpicians in Baltimore, which she then sent to Reverend John Dubois at

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15 Collected Writings, II, 80-81.
16 Archives Mount St. Vincent (hereafter cited as AMSV) 100, 115, 1:21.
17 Melville, Louis William Dubourg, 1, 200.
18 Collected Writings, II, 87.
19 Charles Nagot, S.S. (1734-1816), was the first superior of the Sulpicians at St. Mary’s in Baltimore, and superior of the Sulpicians in the United States from 1790 to 1810. In this capacity he was instrumental in helping form the Sisters of Charity.
Mount St. Mary’s for his opinion. Writing to Elizabeth on 6 October, Dubois sent the letter back after underlining the parts he considered “rather too harsh coming from you.” He told Elizabeth he had received a letter from Tessier, and one from Babade, mentioning David’s appointment as superior of the Sisters “without any reflection whatever on that subject.” He writes that he suspects she received a letter from Mr. David and advises her: “Give it no immediate answer but wait for the answer of Mr. Dubourg or rather for the visit of the bishop. Both, with what your own reflections will suggest to you, will enable you to form a final opinion on a subject of too much consequence to be treated slightly.”

According to Annabelle Melville, Dubois also wrote to Babade offering to ask for him as an assistant at Mount St. Mary’s, but, Dubois warned, he might not be able to serve the Sisters immediately. It seems that the matter of who would be superior was not settled in everyone’s minds.

Archbishop Carroll came to Emmitsburg on 20 October to administer the sacrament of Confirmation, but there is no record of his comments on the matter of the superior of the Sisters. However, when Dubourg traveled to Emmitsburg for his health later in October, Elizabeth resumed her pleading that he return to his post as superior. On 2 November 1809, Elizabeth reported to Archbishop Carroll that Dubourg had been at Emmitsburg for a while, and she held out hope “that he will again resume his charge as Superior.” She offered first a logical reason for her hope: If, as it was rumored, David was soon to accompany Bishop-elect Benedict Flaget to Bardstown, Kentucky, he would need to be replaced, and “we shall have three changes in one year.” Another reason was more personal: “The truth is I have been made a Mother before being initiated.” A recent convert, “very much left to [her] own devotion,” she had no experience of living a religious life; Dubourg had been her early and faithful guide and teacher.

Carroll replied to her request a week later. Since the Sisters had chosen to live under the protection of the Sulpicians he stated that he as Bishop held

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20 John Mary Tessier, S.S. (1758-1840), was superior at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore and second superior of the Sulpicians in the United States (1810-1829).
21 John Baptist David, S.S. (1761-1841), was a French Sulpician missionary priest. He served briefly as the priest-superior of the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg before joining his friend Reverend Benedict Flaget in founding the Bardstown, Kentucky, diocese in 1811. He was instrumental, with Catherine Spalding, in founding the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. He served briefly as bishop of the Bardstown diocese in 1832-33.
22 Melville, Elizabeth Bayley Seton, 170, citing ASJPH 1-3-3-1:65.
23 Flaget, S.S. (1763-1851), was a French Sulpician missionary priest who initially served in Baltimore. In 1808 he was named the first bishop of Bardstown, Kentucky. On a trip to Europe in 1810 he obtained a copy of the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity which was used in the formulation of the first rule of the American Sisters of Charity at Emmitsburg. He was deeply revered as “the saintly Flaget.”
24 Collected Writings, II, 87.
no responsibility for their government. If the Sulpician superior in Baltimore, Reverend Charles Nagot, and his Council decided to restore Dubourg, Carroll would concur.26

On the same day, 9 November, Elizabeth received a letter from Reverend Nagot telling her that he was “persuaded that it [was] God’s holy will that M. David be the Superior of your house.” Nagot mentioned that her letter to him included testimonies in favor of Dubourg, but he urged her to accept his reasons for appointing David. He wrote: “I have great confidence that you will submit yourself completely to the wishes of Divine Providence as you sacrifice your own pride.” Nagot told her he would have preferred that Bishop Carroll communicate this to her, but it was at his request that he was doing so himself.27

But even before Carroll or Nagot had written their letters to Elizabeth, John Dubois wrote to a friend, Charlotte Melmoth in Philadelphia, that “the resignation of the late Superior, Mr. Dubourg, and the appointment of Reverend Mr. David in his place is finally concluded upon.”28

26 AMSV, 110, 115, 1:1, 9 November 1809.
27 ASJPH 1-3-3-2:7.
28 ASJPH 1-3-3-5:3.
The newly appointed superior, Reverend David, had strong opinions and unlike their first superior, Dubourg, he sought to shape the school and the Sisterhood according to his vision. He and Elizabeth clashed from the start.

Conflicts with authorities were not Elizabeth’s only trials that first winter. The young community and students were rapidly outgrowing the Stone House. Until the new house was finished, there was no room for additional boarding students and the steady income they would bring. Without the promise of income, new candidates could not be admitted nor bills paid. In the drafty farmhouse and harsh winter climate, sickness repeatedly visited the children and the Sisters. Elizabeth put on her rose-colored glasses, 14 December 1809, telling Carroll, “Every one of the Sisters vie with each other to make light of every inconvenience so surely the poor Mother must not lose courage.”

Unexpectedly, in late November, Harriet Seton became ill, rapidly worsened, and died on 23 December.

Dubourg wrote on 15 December 1809, that he commiserated with Elizabeth in her many trials. As her relationship with David grew more strained, Dubourg tried unsuccessfully to intervene: “When I saw that Providence had fixed things contrary to your wishes, I spoke in favor of your deliverance.” But deliverance would not come for quite some time.

Toward the close of December Dubourg wrote again, playing the role of mediator: “I have communicated to the Reverend Superior [David] your ideas concerning the school and many other reflections of mine concerning the latitude we should allow you to direct with your own council what is to be done in your house, communicating only when you feel at a loss, with your Reverend Director.” He added that he and David concurred that a day school should be opened as soon as possible.

Carroll wrote Elizabeth that same day, situating her trials in a spiritual framework: “It seems to be the order of divine providence to lead you to perfection thro’ the road of sufferings, interior and exterior.”

By an odd coincidence David also wrote Elizabeth on 28 December with condolences on Harriet’s death, offering his assessment of her recent experience: “Crosses, privations and afflictions seem to be the lot which our Blessed Lord has apportioned for your Soul.” These lessons were precious, said David, who advised Elizabeth and the Sisters to hold them deep in their hearts. After offering spiritual consolation, he could not resist giving directives about the proposed school: Elizabeth should take care to set up “very strict regulations” for the pupils’ exercises and see that they were observed.

Collected Writings, II, 93.

AMSV 100, 115, 1:22.

AMSV 100, 115, 1:23, 28 December 1809.

AMSV 100, 115, 1:2, 28 December 1809.
He noted that he had begun to write regulations for the school’s organization, which he would send to her for revision after asking his Sulpician brothers for their approval. One can only imagine Elizabeth’s mounting exasperation as she read this no doubt well-intended letter.33

Elizabeth finally bared her soul to Carroll on 25 January 1810: “I have endeavored to do everything in my power to bend myself to meet the last appointed Superior [David] in every way but after continual reflection on the necessity of absolute conformity with him, and constant prayer to our Lord to help me, yet the heart is closed....” With great candor she told the Archbishop that she felt “unconquerable reluctance and diffidence” toward David.34

By September of 1810 Archbishop Carroll could finally hold out hope to Elizabeth for a change in the government of the Sisterhood. Reverend David would indeed go with Bishop-elect Flaget to the new diocese of Bardstown,

33 AMSV 100, 115, 1:18.
34 Collected Writings, II, 106.
Kentucky. Other crosses lay ahead for Elizabeth, however, before David finally left in May 1811. That story, told through correspondence to her and between other parties, as well as through her own letters, remains to be explored in another article.

Finally, a letter of Dubourg to Elizabeth, 29 October 1817, gives us a sense of their relationship coming full circle. Dubourg had been appointed Bishop of Louisiana, and it appears Elizabeth reached out to him by letter. Dubourg replied first in a “stiff and dignified” way, but then he “followed the impulse of [his] heart” and wrote with more warmth. He recalled those earlier, happier days when he and Elizabeth “were in perfect unison of feelings,” assuring her that he had never intended to do anything “inconsistent with the truest friendship,” but “some inexplicable opposition of either views, humours, or manners... commanded from [him] a distant reserve, particularly when [he] ceased to be in a Situation of being useful to [her] institution.” Even though they had not communicated, Dubourg told Elizabeth: “[I] followed you close in every stage of your progress, sympathized in all your trials, and partook in all the favors of God on you and your dear family.” He was much consoled by the “reopening of that affectionate and frank correspondence” with Elizabeth.

In a touching and self-revealing passage, Dubourg then described his sensitive nature, no doubt evident to Elizabeth from the start: “My disposition must be known to you: a Sensibility, perhaps too great for my happiness, an openness of heart rather bordering on indiscretion than on reserve.” He asked her to pray that, as he began his new ministry as Bishop in the vast territory of Louisiana, he might avoid “all those faults, which perhaps were the cause of my failure in my first attempts.” We can imagine Elizabeth reading this letter and nodding, ruefully remembering those difficult months in 1809, and blessing God for the intervening years that brought wisdom and reconciliation to both Dubourg and herself.35

This exploration of correspondence among a variety of individuals involved in a particular question demonstrates the wealth of insights and perspectives now available. Elizabeth Seton’s experiences can be understood and appreciated in new ways when these additional viewpoints are accessible — our deepening understanding of the unfolding events of her life enhanced. Those of us on the Seton Writings committee have come to understand these added dimensions, and we look forward to the day we can make them available to a wider audience.

35 AMSV 100, 115, 1:28.