

## CELEBRATING THE FEASTS and SEASONS

### *Winter Ordinary Time: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton*

Our first Winter Ordinary Time saint this year is Elizabeth Ann Seton—her feast is celebrated on January 4<sup>th</sup>. She is the first American-born person to be declared a saint.

She was born in New York City in 1774, just before the beginning of the American Revolution. Her family, the Bayley's were members of the Episcopal church and her father was a professor of anatomy at Kings' College [now Columbia University]. At age 20 she was married to William Seton and their family grew to include 5 children. As a young mother Elizabeth took note of the plight of widows and children in New York City and became involved in social work, starting the *Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Children* in 1797.

In 1803 their circumstances changed-William Seton's shipping business went into bankruptcy and he became ill with tuberculosis. He and Elizabeth, along with their eldest daughter sailed to Italy, in search of a sunny climate to assist his recovery. However, weakened by the voyage, he died shortly after arriving. In Italy Elizabeth was befriended and cared for by an Italian Catholic family. Her friendship with this family and the witness of their faith was a catalyst for her search and after returning to the United States, she asked to be received into the Catholic Church. Her movement to Catholicism was not well-received by her family and friends at home; in addition she found herself without financial resources. She took assorted jobs and opened a boarding house for schoolboys in New York City. Hearing of her plight, the rector of St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore invited her to begin a school for girls there.

The school opened in 1808 and in the following year she and four other women founded a new religious order dedicated to the education of poor children. Her *Daughters of Charity of St. Joseph* was the first American religious society. The "Charity's," as they are often called, are credited with laying the foundation for the Catholic parochial school system in the United States. When Elizabeth, known now as "*Mother Seton*," died in 1821 her Sisters of Charity had foundations throughout North and South America and Italy.

*St. Ignatius of Loyola* once remarked that most of us don't imagine what could happen if we ever opened ourselves fully to the workings of God's grace in our lives.

In the life of Elizabeth Seton, we can see grace at work, first in the friendship of another family, from whom she "caught" a deepening of her own faith. Secondly, in letting herself "see" the plight of poor children, "seeing" herself responding to it, and being "seen by others in such a way that they were moved to join her. Person to person- and heart to heart- it's the way of grace.

What do you see? Who sees you?

Here is the prayer for her feast:

*Lord God, you blessed Elizabeth Seton  
With gifts of grace As wife, mother, educator and foundress.  
Through her example and prayers May we learn to see all men and women as brothers and sisters,  
showing to all the loving mercy that comes from you.*

*Amen.*

