

**Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord and the
Bicentennial Anniversary of the Death of St. Elizabeth
Ann Seton, Religious (1774-1821)**

Homily of Bishop John O. Barres

St. Agnes Cathedral

January 3, 2021

On this Solemnity of the Epiphany, we remember and celebrate the journey of the three Wise Men who with great humility, boldness and fortitude follow the Star that leads them to Christ. They present to the infant gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

In *Divine Intimacy*, Carmelite Spiritual Theologian Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, OCD writes: “A star often appears in the heaven of our souls; it is an inspiration from God, clear and intimate, urging us to greater generosity and calling us to a life of closer union with Him. Like the Magi, we too must always follow our star with faith, promptness, and selfless generosity. If we allow it to guide us, it will certainly lead us to God; it will bring us to the One whom we are seeking.”¹

Tomorrow, January 4, 2021, we will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the death of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821), one of the great native-born American saints, evangelizers and champions of Catholic Education. Mother Seton was beatified by Pope St. John XXIII in 1963 and canonized by Pope St. Paul VI in 1975.

Mother Seton herself followed the stars of God’s guidance in a truly compelling and fascinating way. She is honored at the Basilica of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland where her Tomb is. She is honored at the Saint Mary’s Spiritual Center and Historic Site in Baltimore.

She is honored at the Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton in lower Manhattan at the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary at 9 State Street across the street from the Staten Island Ferry. There are plaques honoring her at historic St. Peter’s Church

¹ Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, OCD, *Divine Intimacy*, (New York: Desclee Company, 1963), 121-122.

on Barclay Street close to the World Trade Center where she was received into the Church and Old St. Patrick's Cathedral Church on Mulberry Street near Little Italy.²

There are many facets to the life and ecclesial mission of Mother Seton. She is a foundational figure of not only American Catholic Church history but of American history in general.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was a Daughter of Protestant America and Catholic Convert who was drawn to the Catholic Church through the Church's doctrine and experience of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

She is so fundamentally a lower Manhattan New Yorker who grew up and lived the life of early America in the Battery. She and her husband William Seton were married in January of 1794 by the rector of Trinity Episcopal Church.

They lived in a row house on Wall Street and their neighbors included Alexander Hamilton (buried in the Trinity Church cemetery) toward one end of Wall Street and Aaron Burr down the other.³

She was a Wife and a Mother with five children. She was a sharp International Merchant and Commerce Business Woman who weathered financial crisis and bankruptcy. She was a Widow and a Single Mother.

She was a Women's Religious Community Founder. Celebrating this Bicentennial of Mother Seton together helps us to understand so powerfully and appreciate so deeply the "mystic chords of memory" of our women's religious communities and all they have done to follow the stars of Christ's guidance and share the Light of Christ in American history with such courage, charity and prophetic missionary daring.

Please join me, as we celebrate the Bicentennial of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's death, in thanking every woman religious, both living and deceased, who has ever served the mission of the Church in the Diocese of Rockville Centre from 1957 to the present and every woman religious who has served the Church on Long Island prior to 1957 in the Diocese of Brooklyn.

This Bicentennial of Mother Seton's death reminds us to draw faith and strength from the great and prophetic women religious in American history who followed the Stars of God's guidance with such faith, fidelity and boldness. Think today of the

² See Elizabeth O'Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton: American Saint*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2018), 7.

³ See Elizabeth O'Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton: American Saint*, 56.

charisms and ecclesial missions of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850-1917), St. Marianne Cope (1838-1918) and St. Katharine Drexel (1858-1955) and so many, many more. They were Elementary School and High School Teachers, University Presidents and Professors, Pioneers of Health Care, Social Work, the Gospel of Human Life, Social Justice, Racial Justice, Environmental Justice, and so much more.

I personally give thanks today for Sister Kathryn Sullivan, RCSJ (1905-2006), one of the great religious women pioneers in American Catholic Biblical scholarship. She was a Professor of History, Religion and Scripture at Manhattanville College, the first woman member of the Catholic Biblical Association, and a founding editorial board member of the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. She was a good and loyal friend to my parents Oliver and Marjorie and modelled for the Church in the United States how to follow the biblical stars of God's guidance.

At this historic moment, our Church gives thanks for the prophetic leadership of women religious and our Nation recognizes its debt to these great women religious who have served the common good of our country graciously and relentlessly.

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton was an accomplished Writer and faithful Correspondent. She was a pioneering Catholic Educator and Evangelizer. She was a Feminine Genius Saint and pivotal figure in American history.

One beautiful way to commemorate this Bicentennial Celebration is to read Arizona State University Professor Catherine O'Donnell's biography – *Elizabeth Seton: American Saint* – published by Cornell University Press in 2018.

Professor O'Donnell is not only a top flight early American historian but she has many of the gifts of a novelist in her ability to distill historical research with a compelling plot, development of character, theme and imagery. I personally could not put this book down and I continue to ponder and draw inspiration from it!

Msgr. James Vlaun, CEO of the Catholic Faith Network, and I conducted two Catholic Faith Network *Encounter* interviews with Professor O'Donnell which are airing throughout the month of January on the Catholic Faith Network and are available on demand at CFNtv.org.

I would also bring to your attention a newly issued Pastoral Letter entitled: "Attentive to the Voice of Grace" which celebrates the contemplative and missionary legacy of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. The Pastoral Letter is available at drvc.org. I express my gratitude to Fr. Joseph Scolaro, the Pastor of Notre Dame

parish in New Hyde Park, for the fine research and writing he did that made this Pastoral Letter possible. Thank you Fr. Scolaro!

We ask St. Elizabeth Ann Seton to intercede for our own spirit of “holiness and mission” as we seek in our time to bring the Joy of the Gospel and the Splendor of Catholic Truth from Elmont to Montauk to the ends of the earth!

In a special way, I ask this great saint and pioneer of Catholic Education to intercede for our innovative, entrepreneurial and evangelizing *Morning Star Initiative* and all our Catholic schools on Long Island and throughout our country.

Mary, Mother of the Church, pray for us!

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, pray for us!

All Women Religious Saints, pray for us!