

# Mother Seton's Story

The Courier-Journal, in this fourth article, continues the Mother Seton Story, as told by Edward Steimer, staff writer for the Pittsburgh-Catholic. Elizabeth Bayley Seton may be the first native-born American citizen raised to sainthood in the Catholic Church. Following her role as wife, mother (of five children), and widow, this onetime belle of New York society embraced the Catholic faith and founded the American Sisters of Charity.

By EDWARD STEIMER  
On Christmas Day, 1804, two days before his death, William Seton sent for Captain O'Brien from the Shepherdess, the ship on which they had come to Italy, and solemnly charged the seaman to see that Elizabeth and Anna Maria got back safely to the United States.

William was aware of his impending leave-taking. His last days at Pisa were marked, in spite of constant suffering and weakness, with a serene and even joyous anticipation of release from his miseries into the presence of God and everlasting life.

He talked cheerfully about his loved ones, and to little Anna he said, "Oh, if your father could take you with him!"

Mrs. Seton was constantly with her husband that last week. Daily on her knees by his bedside, she read for him the Psalms and other parts of the Bible, and her prayers he followed with every anxiety for the salvation of his soul.

She was later to write: "Every promise of the Scriptures and every suitable prayer I could remember I continually repeated to him, and this seemed to be his only relief."

With the words, "My Christ Jesus, have mercy and receive me," he died in her arms. She thanked God for relieving him of his misery and "for the joyful assurance that, through our Blessed Redeemer, he had entered into life eternal."

## Vision Before Death

This "joyful assurance" of Mrs. Seton's is a reference to a vision she had the night before William's death. Writing home to his sister Rebecca, she describes it:

"... after praying, I continued on my knees, laid my head on the chair by which I knelt, and insensibly lost myself.

"I saw in my slumber a little angel, with a pen in one hand and a sheet of white paper in the other. He looked at me, holding out the paper, and wrote in large letters 'JESUS.'"

"This, though a vision of sleep, was a great comfort. He (William) was very much affected when I told him; and he said, a few hours before he died. 'The angel wrote, Jesus; He has opened the door of eternal life for me. He will cover me with His merits.'"

## 'She Would Be a Saint'

At his burial in the Protestant cemetery of Leghorn the next morning, Elizabeth overheard someone among the many sympathetic Italians (nearly all Catholics) whisper to another: "If she were not a heretic, she would be a saint."

Elizabeth now assumed the dress of the Italian widow. This black habit, with its traditional bonnet, is the same dress which she was to adopt for her nuns at a later day when she became the foundress of the American Sisters of Charity.

Philip Filicchi and his brother Antonio, merchants of great wealth, took the young widow and her daughter into their immense mansion, a 100-room palace with hundreds of servants. In the private chapel Mass was said every day for the family; were devout Catholics. Daily the poor of Leghorn came to their doors for alms.

## Married Boston Girl

Philip, who had often been in America on business, had married Mary Cowper of Boston. He was a personal friend of Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, America's first Catholic Bishop, and of President Washington, who had named him American consul at Leghorn.

Antonio, and his wife, Annabella, became very close friends of the American widow, who was deeply affected by their intense spirituality. They attended Mass every day, and their practice of strict fasting and other mortifications; in contrast to their wealth, made Elizabeth marvel.

Writing of Annabella, she noted: "She says she offers her weakness and pain of fasting for her sins, uniting this mortification with Our Savior's sufferings."

Soon Mrs. Seton and the Filicchis began to discuss religion, a subject she herself brought up time and again as she observed the many daily Rosaries and other devotions of this saintly household. In it she found a routine

and rule of charity, gentleness, and peace.

## 'Introduction to Mary'

On a journey to Florence she was "introduced" to the Blessed Mother, in that she saw a veritable pageant of the glories of the Virgin, for the Madonna is especially revered by the Florentines. There, in the Church of the Annunciation:

"I shed a torrent of tears at the recollection of how long I had been a stranger in the house of my God..."

Though keenly interested in Catholicism by then, she was obliged to return home, and early in February, 1805, she and Anna again boarded the "Shepherdess," setting sail for America. But just a few hours out of port the little ship met a driving storm and crashed into another boat, Captain O'Brien had to turn back into Leghorn harbor.

Anna still frail from her long confinements, became desperately sick with a high fever. Back with the Filicchi family, a physician told Mrs. Seton that she must give up the voyage or risk the child's life. Then Elizabeth fell ill with the same malady. They remained in Leghorn for two months' recovery.

This additional stay in that Catholic environment still further brought Mrs. Seton close to the two mysteries which so much attracted her: the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin.

## Antonio Comes to U.S.

The second departure in early April was to be on another boat, the Flamingo, but without the



MOTHER SETON

protection of the gallant and trustworthy O'Brien. As Spain were a tough lot in those days, and Elizabeth no longer in the care of her husband, Antonio Filicchi decided to accompany her on the voyage, she being the only woman aboard.

Sensing her imminent conversion to the Catholic faith, Philip Filicchi presented her with books about Catholicism to aid her search for religious truth. They all attended Mass before the travelers boarded ship.

During the two-week 26-day voyage, Mrs. Seton and Antonio often discussed the tenets of Catholicity. Daily she read the lives of the saints. By early June, entering New York harbor, she was quite disposed to embrace the faith.

In the next installment this week continues with Mrs. Seton's new profession as a widow with children, her entry into the Catholic Church and her work as a dedicated housewife.

# SERMONETTE

By REV. PAUL COURTNEY

"Where There is Hatred, Let Me See Love"

There is always a crop surplus of hatred. There is never enough love to go around.

Hatred is a weed that needs no sowing. It grows in the lightest breeze of rumor, hearsay, suspicion, its seeds take hasty root and flourish easily in the wayward human heart.

Love is different. It is delicate and hard to cultivate. And there are few who sow it freely. We are jealous and miserly with our love and fear to waste it, perhaps because we have so little. We hoard the seeds of love, and wonder why the harvest is so small. The kindly words we mean, but fail to say; the generous act we plan, but dare not do;—these are the unsoaked seeds of love, and they bear no fruit.

Better that love be wasted on unlikable soil than die untown.

Love cannot be saved. To live, it must be given away. Love will not always find a welcoming soil. Sometimes the kindest gesture, the best intended act, is harshly met and love dies aborning.

With St. Francis we should ask of God the courage and the vision to be generous with our love. It does take courage to risk the harsh rebuff love sometimes earns. It does take vision to realize that the answer to hatred is not a stronger hate but love. It takes the strange wisdom of the saints to see that love needs to be wasted, that it is far too good a thing to keep.

# Onetime Atheist In Foxhole Now Franciscan Brother

(NCWC News Service)

San Juan Bautista, Calif. Franciscan Brother Giles Collins commented: "Don't tell me there are no atheists in the foxholes during wartime. With Nazi 88-shells breaking all around me during World War II, I didn't believe in God."

Brother Giles is secretary to the Franciscan Fathers who conduct St. Francis Retreat House in the hills bounding this community. He claims it was a visit to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico which eventually changed his mind—but it took him 12 years to find his way into the Catholic faith.

HE WAS THEODORE Eugene Collins, an alumnus of San Jose State College, when he went to Mexico in 1938 to take a commercial job. A Mexican friend with whom he was vacationing invited him to visit the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the outskirts of Mexico City.

"I entered the shrine just to be agreeable," the Brother recalled. "I felt self-conscious, doing it too. We happened to be the only visitors at the moment, otherwise I'd never have knelt down. But I looked at her image above the altar, the one she imprinted in beautiful colors on the inside of the cloak of Juan Diego, the Indian to whom she appeared in 1531, and I found myself praying to her for help. Why? I don't know. Once I got outside, I was an unbeliever."

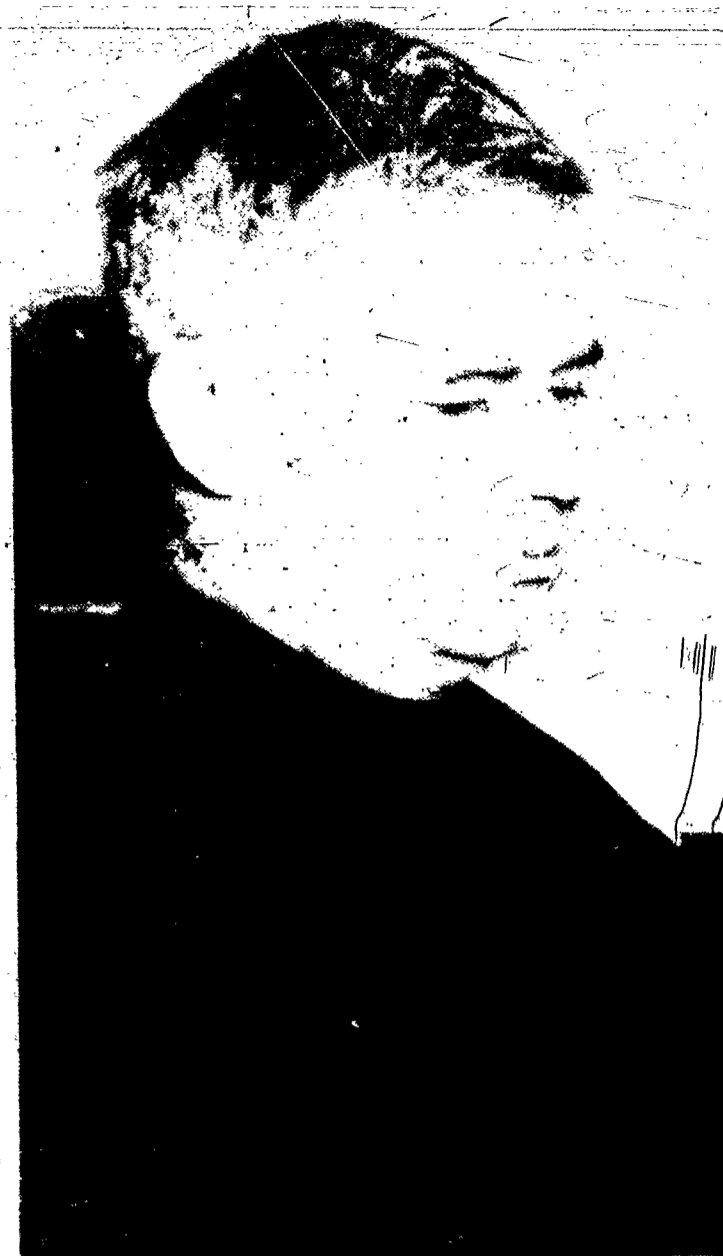
The following year Brother Giles said he went to Mass three or four times, but "hadn't the remotest idea what the Mass was all about." He didn't know the meaning of the Blessed Sacrament, but "the Mass faintly attracted me although the farthest thing from my mind was to become a Catholic."

BROTHER GILES at that time wanted to be a writer. He had some success turning out stories for the "pulp" magazines and sold about 50 of them, mostly westerns. Still an unbeliever, he enlisted in the Army in 1941 and saw plenty of combat in Europe.

"Once, very tired, I fell asleep in an orchard, although the birds were only half a mile away," Brother Giles said. "I woke up with 88-shells breaking all around me and kicking up the dirt. Instinctively, I suppose, I started praying. But suddenly I stopped, realizing I didn't believe in God; that for me there was no one to pray to."

The war over in 1945, he returned to the States and went with the War Assets Administration. He became chief of the agency's Arizona office, established 27 branches and disposed of \$135 million worth of war surplus materials. In 1948 he went into the produce brokerage business in Charleston, S.C.

"In 1949 I was successful but unhappy," Brother Giles recalled. "I had an idea God wanted me to do something else, just what, I didn't know." Brother Giles continued. "But in my heart I had become convinced that I owed by conversion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, so I finally decided to go back to her shrine in Mexico and thank her. I could have driven there, but I decided to go on foot."



FRANCISCAN BROTHER GILES "Mass attracted me"

Brother Giles said he started on July 31, 1955, hitchhiked, got a few rides and traveled on a few buses when his feet became sore but "did plenty of walking." He reached the shrine early in October. He didn't ask for anything, he said, but "had complete faith she would know what was best for me and would direct my life."

Brother Giles added: "On New Year's Day, 1951, I decided to start the year right, yet somehow I was scared. I drove past Blessed Sacrament Church in Charleston and around the block three times before I got up courage to knock on the door. I was 'met' by Father Berberich, who asked: 'What can I do for you?' I said: 'I want to be a Catholic.' He smiled and asked: 'Why?'"

Brother Giles related he took instructions for six weeks and on Passion Sunday, 1951, received the sacraments of Baptism, Penance and Confirmation. He said: "I don't make my First Holy Communion until later. Father Berberich wanted me to wait. Why? I still don't know."

SOON AFTERWARD he came back to California and visited his mother, sister and half-sister, who are non-Catholics. He found a job as a property clerk at the Navy Post-graduate School in Del Monte, but resigned a couple of years later.

"I had an idea God wanted me to do something else, just what, I didn't know," Brother Giles continued. "But in my

## Judge To Decide

# Must Girl Quit Role In Convent At Father's Order?

Hillsboro, Ore. — (NC) Circuit Judge Glen Hieber has been called upon to decide whether a 19-year-old Portland girl must leave the Sisters of St. Mary Convent at Beaverton at the insistence of her father.

Judge Hieber has under advisement a ruling on a writ of habeas corpus action brought by Ivan L. Miller against the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon and Mother Collette, mother superior of the community.

Mr. Miller's daughter, Alice Miller, joined the Catholic Church and a few weeks ago entered the convent as a postulant.

The father, who says he is a Protestant, at first refused to let his daughter join the convent. He has since changed his mind and now she is a postulant.

JUDGE HIEBER filed a writ of habeas corpus action against the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon and Mother Collette, mother superior of the community.

Still to be ruled on are the questions of whether the girl had been emancipated from her father's control, and whether it would be in her best interest to remain in the convent.

The question of emancipation was argued by Albert Kenner, of Portland, one of the attorneys representing the girl.

Legally emancipation is described as "the act by which one who was under of under power and control of another is set at liberty and made his own master."

THIS WAS acquired by the girl, Mr. Kenner said, when she was told by her father she had to choose between the Catholic church and her home. She chose to remain a Catholic.

Mother Collette testified at the hearing that Alice was free to leave the convent at any time and had taken no vows.

Alice told the court she did not want to leave the convent and, if forced to do so, would return as soon as she could.

Her 20-year-old sister, Lois, also a convert to Catholicism,

testified they left home when their father objected to their joining the convent.

But, Mother Superior Collette said, she and Sister Pauline, a nun from Beaverton, St. Agatha's school, told postulant that their father, if he appeared to have left her girl, she should join the school. The question arose because the school was a Catholic school and the girl was a Catholic. They appeared on school.

William H. Hark, attorney for the Sisters of St. Mary and Mother Collette, argued that as a result of her sojourning it was only natural for Alice to join the convent.

Judge Hieber agreed and ordered Alice to be discharged from the convent if no evidence of undue restraint in her entry into the convent. He said he would take the question of emancipation under advisement because "there is a good bit of law involved."

"We are not dealing with religious concepts here," the judge said. "Only points of law." William Hark's attorney for the father, contended that emancipation may be revoked by a parent at any time until a child reaches majority.

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