

# Mother Seton's Story

The Courier-Journal, in this fifth article, continues the Mother Seton story, as told by Edward Steimer, staff writer for the Pittsburgh Catholic. Episcopalian-born Elizabeth Bayley Seton may be the first native-born African 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

During the sea voyage home from Italy, as Elizabeth Seton realized that she was about to renounce her lifelong devotion to Episcopalianism and to embrace the Catholic faith, she braced herself to meet the opposition which she knew would come from relatives and friends.

Immediately upon arrival a fresh sorrow was given her. Her sister-in-law, Rebecca Seton, her dearest friend, was not there to greet her. The "friend of my soul" was stricken mortally ill, and about to die, seemingly waiting only for Elizabeth to turn. "My soul's sister," too had been journeying east to her heavenly home.

Again, for five weeks this time, Elizabeth devoted herself to preparing a cherished companion for passage to eternity. As best she could, she tried to share with the weak and exhausted Rebecca her newly found beliefs. The dying young lady then said: "Your people are my people; your God my God."

Rebecca died in July, 1801 and the time arrived for Elizabeth's spiritual struggle. Her greatest difficulty was with the Rev. John Hobart, her former Protestant pastor and friend.

He brought all the resources of his old faith to bear against her preference for Catholicism. She could have had no greater test of the sincerity of her new convictions as he tried to vindicate the claims of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

"Thy Grace impart!" Her prayer at this time of spiritual perplexity was: "If I am right, Thy grace impart still in the right to stay. If I am wrong, oh teach my heart to feel the better way."

Meantime, with the help of faithful friends and her own godmother, Sarah Starlin, she found a small house for her family. The others, John Wilkes and Dr. Wright Post, wanted to help support the young widow in memory of her father's hope for them in former times. Mrs. Seton was unable to go to work herself because baby Rebecca was too young to be in her care. Her husband's business had collapsed.

Through an introduction by Antonio Filicchi, she began to correspond with Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, whose letters together with those from Antonio in Boston and Phillip Filicchi in Lehigh, helped her to stand firm against the blandishments of the Protestant minister. Thus her struggle to reach the true faith coincided with the difficulties of material poverty that winter of 1804-05.

Soul a Battleground

Her soul was the battleground upon which was waged a contest between the true and the schismatic Churches for its possession; she was torn mightily between the claims of her early



MOTHER SETON

allegiance and the desire to grasp truth.

She asked Mr. Hobart two questions which he could not answer satisfactorily. "Is Jesus Christ truly and substantially present in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar?" "Is Mary truly the Mother of God?"

She also exchanged letters with Father John Cheever who later was to be Bishop of Boston, and was taking instructions from Father Matthew O'Brien, pastor of St. Peter's Church on Barclay Street, New York. There she was baptized by Father O'Brien in March 14, 1805, and received her first communion March 25. "At last God is mine, and I am His."

Years later in middle age she said that the greatest gift she had from God was her conversion.

To become a Catholic she had renounced a considerable inheritance and brought upon herself much social "disgrace." In the high society of that day she was regarded as an outcast. It hurt, but "patiently she remarked: 'Every day someone of the kind women shake heads for the poor sinner Mrs. Seton.'

She became a schoolteacher for some three years with her own children among the pupils of a small private school in New York. Meanwhile there came to her side five young sisters-in-law: Harriet and Cecilia Seton, her late husband's sisters. Standing out unconsciously against bitter opposition Cecilia determined to be a Catholic and was baptized.

One morning in August, 1807, Mrs. Seton went in her widow's weeds (the bonnet and gash she had brought from Italy) to Mass in St. Peter's.

At the altar fall she wept as she received Holy Communion, and her piety excited the interest of the cohortant, a visiting priest, as he gave her the Host.

He, was French-born Father William Valentine Dubourg, president of St. Mary College in Baltimore, who later became Bishop of Louisiana.

After Mass Elizabeth called on him at the rectory and asked his blessing. Learning that she might have to move in Canada to educate her daughters in a Catholic school, and that she hoped in some future time to retire into a religious community, the priest asked her to come to Baltimore and start a Catholic school.

Sails to Baltimore

In June, 1808, Mrs. Seton sailed for Baltimore with her three little daughters and all her belongings. They found happiness in the little two-story house on Paca street which Father Du Bourg rented for them.

There were many Catholics in Baltimore, and Elizabeth's little school was filled. The two Seton boys spent the summer at nearby St. Mary's Seminary in Father Dubourg's care. Then came a beautiful young girl, Cecilia O'Conway of Philadelphia. She wanted to become a nun, but would have to go to Europe to enter a convent.

Learning of the holy little widow in Baltimore she came to the little school to live in retirement with Elizabeth, thus informally becoming Mother Seton's first postulant, and assisted in teaching the pupils who were given religious instruction along with reading, writing, and arithmetic.

By the end of 1808 Mrs. Seton knew that she wanted to dedicate herself to the care and instruction of poor children. Just then, as if indicative of God's approval of her hopes, there came a windfall.

Samuel Sutherland Cooper was a wealthy young man studying for the priesthood at St. Mary's Seminary. Wishing to dispose of some of his fortune, he offered to provide a new and larger school. By this time everyone realized that a new religious community was soon to come.

With the delighted approval of Archbishop Carroll (Bishop Carroll had been elevated to Archbishop of Baltimore in 1808), Mr. Cooper brought property near the village of Emmittsburg, five miles west of Baltimore. There, a brick stone farmhouse known as the "Stone House" was to become the first mother house of the American Sisters of Charity.

NEXT WEEK this series will tell how Mrs. Seton began the Sisters of Charity in the United States and the beginnings of American parochial schools.



First prize to Monica McAlpine, Nazareth Academy, and second prize to Paul Weis, McQuaid Jesuit High School; Monsignor John S. Randall, Courier Journal managing editor, presents checks to winners in diocesan wide high school essay contest, "How the Catholic Press Helps Me in My Studies." The two students now stand a chance of winning national prizes.

## BOOK SHELF

Irish Folk Stories and Fairy Tales, ed. by William Butler Yeats. Grosset's Universal Library, Grosset & Dunlap, N.Y. 297 pp. Paper-back, 95c.

"Have you ever seen a fairy in such like?" asked William Butler Yeats of an old man in County Sligo. "An' I anoyed with them!" came the answer.

"I beseech you to tell me, Sorcerer, do you believe this tale?" asked Phaedrus. "I might have a rational explanation," answered Sorcerer, "but . . . he is not to be envied who has to invent such explanations. . . I say farewell to all this; the common opinion is enough for me."

IN THIS GAY and sympathetic spirit Yeats introduces his rich assortment of Irish tales and narrative poems, not a single one of which could be spared from the volume; not a one touches a false note, not a one is sham Irish, and came at least of the poems are written in every heart.

The stories are grouped as the genius of an old stonemason. First, the Trooping Fairies, the Solitary Fairies, then the Ghosts, then the Witches; and in the groups, special classes, like the changelings and the merrows (mermaids) and the shoemaker-leprechaun, and the Pooka, and the banshees of great families.

After that come some of the

## JOSEPH BREIG

## Are Catholics Mediocre?

### Daily Mass

### Calendar

Sunday, March 16 — Fourth Sunday of Lent (rose) Creed, Lenten-Preface.

Each weekday of Lent has its own special Mass. If a feast day also occurs, the priest may choose either the Lenten-Mass (purple) or the feast day Mass. On Wednesday, all priests will celebrate the feast day Mass of St. Joseph.

Monday, March 17 — St. Patrick, confessor (white), Gloria.

Tuesday, March 18 — St. Cyril of Jerusalem, confessor (white) Gloria, Creed.

Wednesday, March 19 — St. Joseph (white) Gloria, Creed, Preface of St. Joseph. (A new Mass text for this feast was published in 1956. Only Missals issued since then will contain the new text.)

Thursday, March 20 — Lenten Mass (purple).

Friday, March 21, St. Benedict (white) Gloria, Creed.

Saturday, March 22 — St. Isidore, farmer (white) Gloria.

Thus far in my discussion of the criticisms made by Msgr. John J. Cavanaugh, I have concentrated on exposing the unmingledness of the evidence they offered to support the charge of a Catholic intellectual mediocrity.



What do you think? Are Catholics Americans lagging in the intellectual life, or not?

I do not know. I don't think anybody knows. Nobody has taken the trouble to define what we are talking about.

What is the intellectual life? What is an intellectual?

What is meant by such loosely bandied words as "scholarship," "leadership," "accomplishment" and "prestige"?

Prestige in whose eyes? Accomplishment in what sense, and according to what standards?

Surely Catholics are in the forefront in America in the field of theology, queen of the sciences.

Surely we have produced the best thinkers in at least many of the best in philosophy.

Surely Catholics have been more productive and influential than any other American group in the vital field of social justice.

NOBODY EXCELS us in scholarship in the right principles of welfare work, hospitalization, marriage guidance and the like.

Nobody is even competing with us in producing a comparable literature of family life.

Our spiritual writers are without peer. We have given the world splendid new studies of the

central figure of history, Jesus Christ.

We have made giant strides in literary biographies of those great human beings, the saints, whose lives and motivations are immensely meaningful for everybody.

WE ARE publishing dozens of magazines devoted to various phases of the life of the intellect. Let me name some: World, Commonwealth, Jubilee, Worship, Benedictine Review, Ecclesiastical Review, Educational Review, Historical Review, Library World, Social Order, The Thomist, Thought, Renaissance, Art Quarterly, Biblical Quarterly, The Jurist, Review of Politics, Spiritual Life, Theology Digest, Thinkers Digest and so on.

What religious group in America is doing anything comparable?

WE MUST GUARD against over-emphasis on material success, too important though it is.

I do not want to take unsportsmanlike advantage of Father Cavanaugh's unfortunate rhetorical question: "Where are the Catholic Einsteins, Oppenheims, Salts?" But it has illustrative value.

Albert Einstein was born and educated in Europe. We might as reasonably ask: "Where is the American Jewish G. K. Chesterton?"

Robert Oppenheimer, born in America, was educated chiefly in England and Germany.

Jonas Salk developed the polio vaccine, and polio is enormously publicized; but an obscure Catholic nun developed a leprosy cure, and off hand I cannot remember her name, because she was little publicized.

## Coadjutor Bishop Dies in Wilmington

Wilmington, Del. (NC) — Bishop of the Mass was Archbishop John F. O'Hara, C.S.C. of Philadelphia.

Bishop Cartwright, a patient in Wilmington's St. Francis Hospital since February 15, was stricken with a heart attack on the morning of March 5 and died after a second attack the following day. He had entered the hospital suffering from pneumonia and pleurisy.

Bishop Cartwright was named Coadjutor Bishop with the right of succession by Bishop Edmund J. F. Maurice of Wilmington on August 22, 1956.

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