

## HOMILY AT BICENTENNIAL VESPERS, ST. PETER'S BARCLAY ST.

September 13, 2009

Oh, the grace of a place! If you close your eyes and imagine a favorite place – the seashore, a lake in the mountains, a park in the heart of a city, a porch swing on a summer morning – can't you taste the grace of it? Can't you touch again the feelings that surround the setting?

This church is that kind of place. So much happened here in the life of the Catholics of New York, beginning in 1785. So much happened here in the life of Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton. And how vividly she remembered all the emotions she felt in this place. Let me reflect on five of those emotions with you today.

1. **HERE SHE SURRENDERED TO GRACE.** After months of wrestling with the pros and cons of leaving her Episcopal communion, here she made her profession of faith as a Catholic on the 14<sup>th</sup> March, 1805. In her words, it was like coming home.

She said that she left behind all her hesitations, and took this fateful step “*with a mind grateful and satisfied as that of a poor shipwrecked mariner on being restored to his home.*” (to Rev. John Cheverus, after March 25, 1805, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings* I:346)

2. And in that quite solemn moment of her profession of faith, **HERE SHE LAUGHED.** Called into the little room next to the altar to give her assent of faith to the teaching of the Council of Trent, Elizabeth **laughed** in her heart to God, who saw that she didn't really know what the Council of Trent believed or taught! Those months of study and searching for her truth had left her “*quite tired out.*”

Far from being anti-intellectual, Elizabeth was rather a woman who knew that hers was the heart's road. She knew what many of us here have spent our lives teaching children and adults, that faith is much more than assent to doctrine; it is first and last an intimate relationship.

3. **HERE SHE FELT THE COMFORT OF BELONGING.** Here she became part of the Catholic communion, the communion of saints and saints in the making. And a motley company it was!

She worshipped with the mostly poor, mostly Irish immigrants – “offscoured” was her first impression of them. Later she recounted how her own sister looked down her delicate nose at the congregation of St. Peter’s, calling them “dirty filthy red faced ...the church a horrid place of spits and pushing - ragged...”

Yet here she felt she belonged. She was befriended by many who tried to help her and her five children as she tried to make her way in life as an impoverished widow, a state to which she was hardly accustomed.

Here at daily Mass she may have even met the kind and dignified Pierre Toussaint who would later become a major benefactor to the orphans at St. Patrick’s Asylum and to Elizabeth’s Sisters of Charity who cared for them.

**4. HERE SHE WAS SURPRISED AND DELIGHTED BY GOD.** Here she received her First Communion on March 25, 1805, Annunciation Day, and the movement of the Spirit **surprised and delighted** her. You remember how, after a night of vigil, she intended to offer Christ “*a humble tender welcome,*” but instead the words of Psalm 68 erupted from her soul: “*Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered!*” She felt **triumph** – “*a triumph of joy and gladness*” – that God had come as her deliverer. In the core of her being, she knew – she *felt* – God as her Shield and Strength and Protector and Shepherd. She was held fast in God’s embrace; nothing could shake her here or hereafter. “*Happen now what will,*” she wrote, “*I rest with GOD... so now I can pass the Valley of Death itself.*”

**5.** But it was not only in the comfort of Communion that she found wholeness. Here, in this place, she also **KNELT IN AWE BEFORE THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS.**

Elizabeth was always moved by the power of art, of beauty. As she gazed on this very painting of the Crucifixion by the Mexican artist Vallejo, she must have remembered the paintings that she saw in Florence, Italy, especially one of the descent from the Cross that reduced her to tears.

She was drawn to this image of the Cross. It moved her deeply. When she first saw it, her heart “*died away in silence. Ah My God here let me rest said I.*” Then, after her profession of faith she begged Jesus to wrap her heart “*deep in that opened side so well described in the beautiful Crucifixion.*”

Just as Jesus made room in his heart for her, she made room in her life for the Cross, and she teaches us to do the same.

What did she mean – what did she *feel* – in the shadow of the Cross, in this place? Here she experienced Christ’s staggering gift of himself, his very body given over, poured out in love, even in the tragedy of betrayal and condemnation. In the deepest part of herself, she understood that **his** gift gave meaning to **her** suffering – for her sufferings were one with his, and being baptized into his Body meant that she shared his dying ***and*** rising.

Here, in this sacred space, she claimed the Cross of Christ as the standard that she would follow. Filled by the mystery of life through death, she could meet poverty and sorrow as her dearest friends. No stranger to the pain of loss, she experienced the power of the Cross to free her.

Here, in imitation of the crucified Christ she contemplated so often, she was surely led to forgive those who shunned her, who slandered her, who persecuted her – “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Lk 23:34). The power of the Cross freed her to live, to forgive, to let go, to move on. “*Who can bind the soul that God sets free?*”

Here she claimed the hope that like him, she also would rise to new life. In all the hard and empty places, she came to discover that God was making space for something new. The Spirit was sowing seeds of new life. And for followers of Jesus, life, not death, always has the final, victorious, triumphant word.

How fitting that Elizabeth Seton was declared a saint of the universal Church on September 14, the feast of the Triumph of the Cross, the feast we celebrate tomorrow.

She did not yet know the specifics of where Providence would lead her, did not yet know that the spirit of the Lord would send her and her followers “*to assist the poor, visit the sick, comfort the sorrowful, clothe little innocents, and teach them to love God*” throughout this growing country. But she knew that the hand of God was upon her, and God – her Strength, her Protector, her Shepherd – would never let her go.

With Elizabeth, parishioner of this local church, we too yield to grace, we feel the comfort of belonging, we laugh, we are surprised and delighted by God.

With Elizabeth we “*meet our grace*” in the mystery of life’s reversals, misunderstandings, contradictions, failures, even persecutions.

With her we choose to be children of the Church and claim our birthright as members of God’s family. We understand – perhaps even more deeply than Elizabeth did – that our Church is flawed and broken, like ourselves. We know that being adult, faithful and responsible children compels us to keep calling our Church – and ourselves – to become what the Spirit calls us to be.

And with Elizabeth we celebrate the triumph of the Cross, for God’s way is always to raise to life what seems dead – in us, in our communities and families, in our church, in our world.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, our sister and our mentor, pray for us!

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