

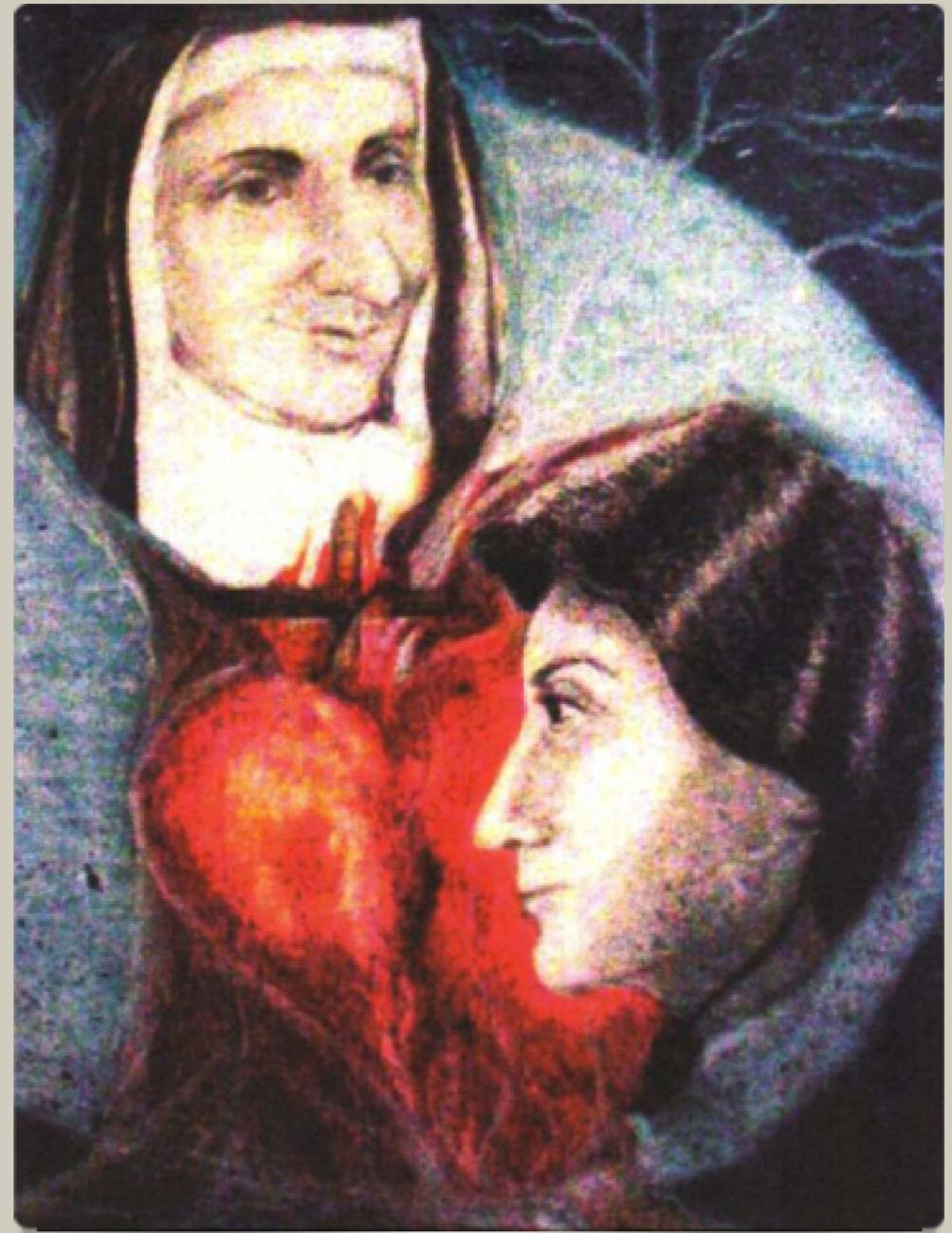


UNDERSTANDING HEARTS— ELIZABETH SETON AND LOUISE DE MARILLAC

excerpts from McNeil, Betty Ann D.C. (1999) "Understanding Hearts—Elizabeth Seton and Louise de Marillac," Vincentian Heritage Journal: Vol. 20: Iss. 2, Article 5.

WIVES, MOTHERS

[Although they were] formators of the charism of charity for apostolic women, these two foundresses searched for and found God as lay women. They were wives, mothers, and widows before they founded communities.



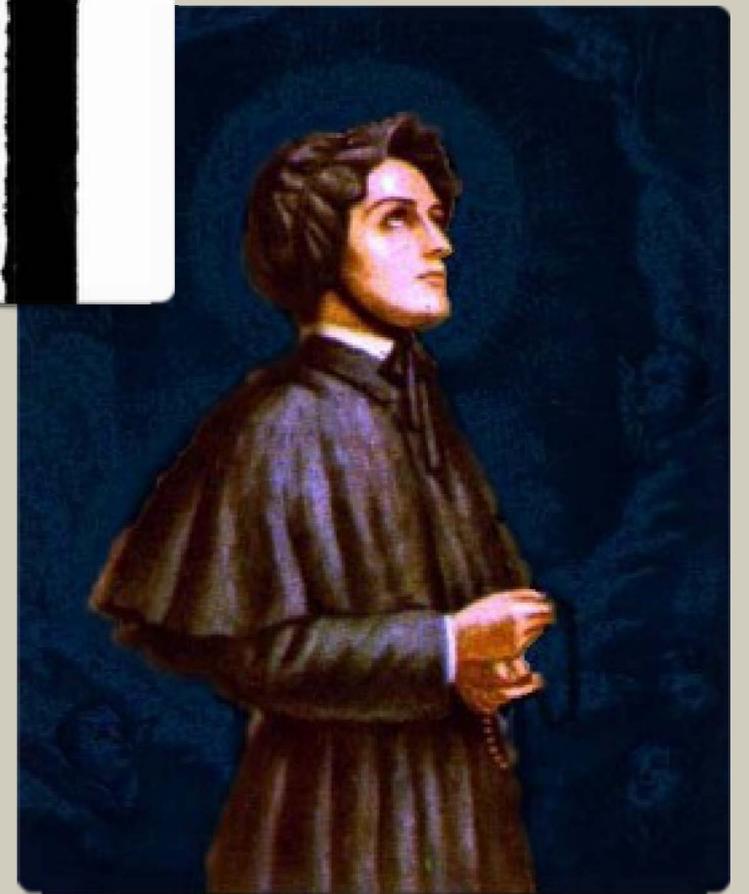
SIMILAR EXPERIENCES

Both women had similar experiences that led them into a process of personal conversion. Both experienced early maternal loss, had half-siblings, knew rejection by stepmothers, relied on a favorite uncle as a paternal figure, nursed terminally ill husbands, coped with parenting alone as widows, [and] cared for children of relatives.



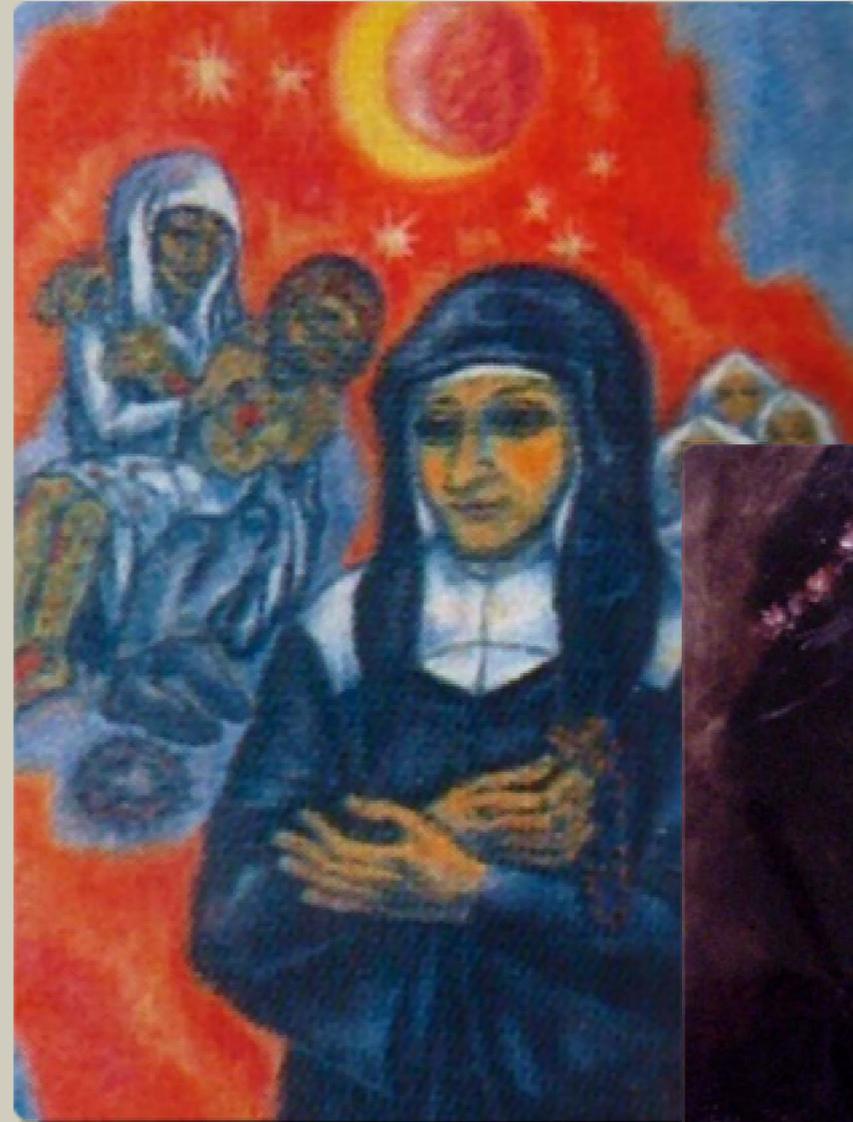
SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

Both women sought strength from God's Word and sacrament, and had formative, spiritual experiences.



TEMPERAMENT

The impulsive and high-strung Louise worried when she felt insecure, while the high spirited and impetuous Elizabeth dreamed about ideals. Late in life Elizabeth reflected on her romanticism by writing, "all life is but a wish."* Louise's sense of organization caused her to attend to everyday details with precision, while Elizabeth's orderliness inclined her to be more concerned about future possibilities.



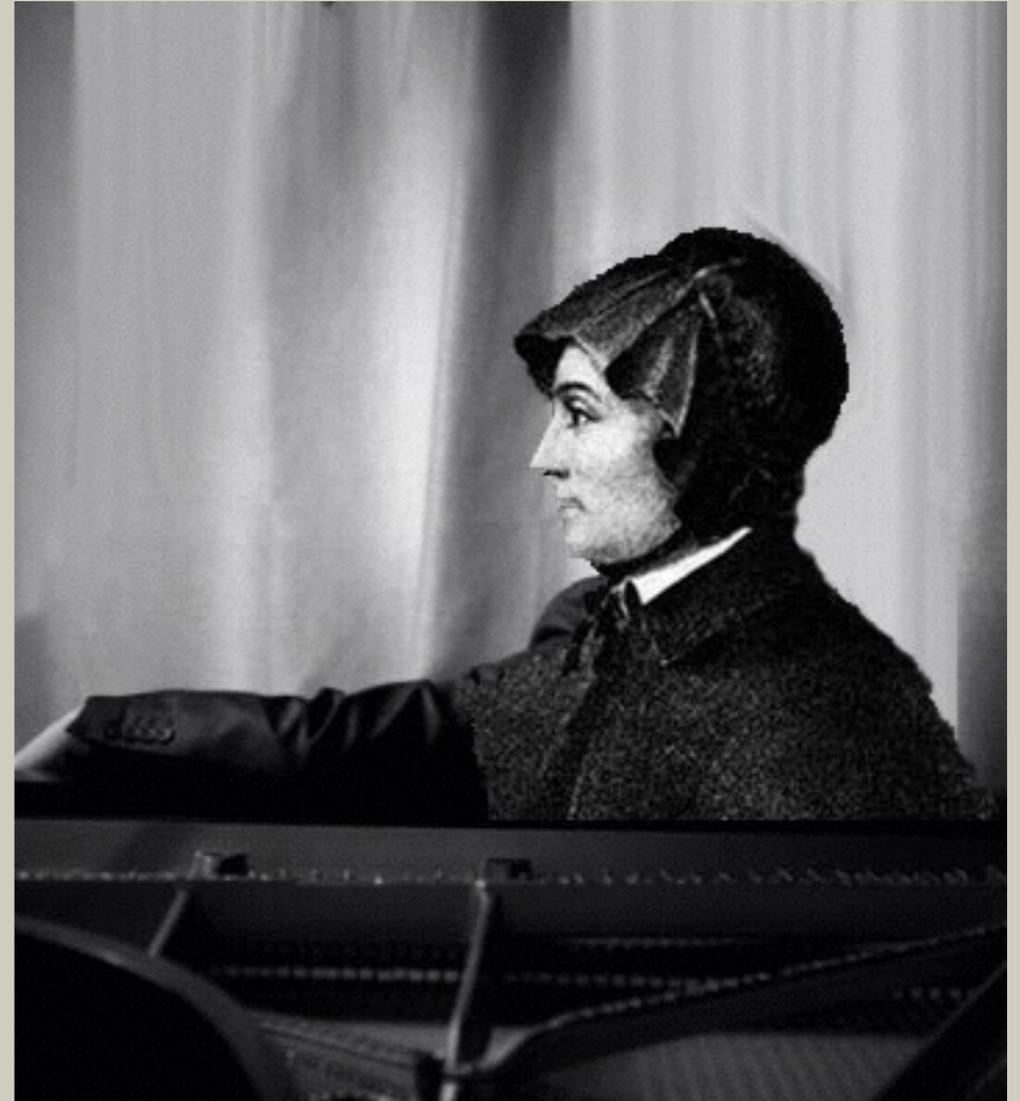
*Elizabeth Seton to Juliana Scott, June 1817, Joseph B. Code, Letters of Mother Seton to Mrs. Julianna Scott [New York: Father Salvator M. Burgio Memorial Foundation, 1960], 261.

CREATIVITY



Painting of the Good Shepherd by Louise de Marillac

Both enjoyed the arts: Louise painted and was well-read, while Elizabeth played the piano and wrote poetry.



DIPLOMACY

Both women were well schooled in diplomacy. Louise, ever cordial but persuasive, could communicate her convictions decisively and persistently. Elizabeth, always gracious and compassionate, could also manifest a feisty determination and issue spicy remonstrances when justice or charity warranted firmness.



LOUISE DE MARILLAC

Born in the environs of seventeenth-century Paris, Louise never knew the comforting security of a mother's love because of her out-of-wedlock birth. She was placed at an early age, perhaps as a preschooler, in a convent where a paternal aunt lived. There she received the foundation of a classical education until her father transferred her to a boarding home for a more practical training in domestic arts. Active in politics and government because of the influential Marillac family, Louis de Marillac remarried but his new wife did not accept his four-year-old daughter into their home.



LOUISE DE MARILLAC

At age twenty-two, Louise entered an arranged marriage with Antoine Le Gras. Their only son Michel-Antoine Le Gras (1613-1696), was always a source of concern for his mother. After only nine years of marriage, Louise's husband became terminally ill approximately three years before his death in 1625. A religious woman, though anxious and scrupulous, Louise met Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), and involved herself with the works of charity which he was beginning in the nearby parishes of Paris.



LOUISE DE MARILLAC

Vincent saw her potential and soon assigned supervisory responsibilities to Louise. Following her keen feminine intuition, Louise recommended that the village girls coming to volunteer in the confraternities of charity be trained. Her goal was for them to provide quality service to persons who were sick and poor. This insight led Louise and Vincent to co-found the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor, in 1633. That initiative became the prototype for communities of apostolic women not bound to the cloister.



ELIZABETH ANN SETON

Born an Episcopalian in New York, Elizabeth knew the searing pain of loss at the tender age of three. Her mother had died and she already had been rejected by her step-mother by the age of four. However, her father saw that she was educated in French, music, literature and the arts according to the standards of the day. Before turning twenty, Elizabeth Bayley Seton, married William Magee Seton (1768-1803), in 1794. Blessed with three daughters (Anna Maria, Rebecca, and Catherine Charlton), and two sons (William and Richard), the couple was healthy and happy.



ELIZABETH ANN SETON

They enjoyed the comforts of social status and prosperity but soon encountered bankruptcy and illness. When tuberculosis threatened her husband, Elizabeth and their eldest daughter, Anna Maria, desperately embarked on a sea voyage for his health. Authorities feared his disease and quarantined the family for a month. During that period William's fragile health rapidly declined under such harsh conditions, and his death thrust Elizabeth into circumstances that changed her life and history.



ELIZABETH ANN SETON

The Filicchi family, William Magee's business associates, befriended Elizabeth and extended gracious hospitality to the Setons in Italy. The Setons learned about Roman Catholicism from them. After returning to the United States, Elizabeth converted to Catholicism (1805), struggled unsuccessfully to support her family in New York, and came to Maryland (1808), to begin a school for girls in Baltimore. The following year she established the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's (1809), and founded Saint Joseph's Academy Free School (1810), in Emmitsburg.



ALL GOOD THINGS CAME TO BE

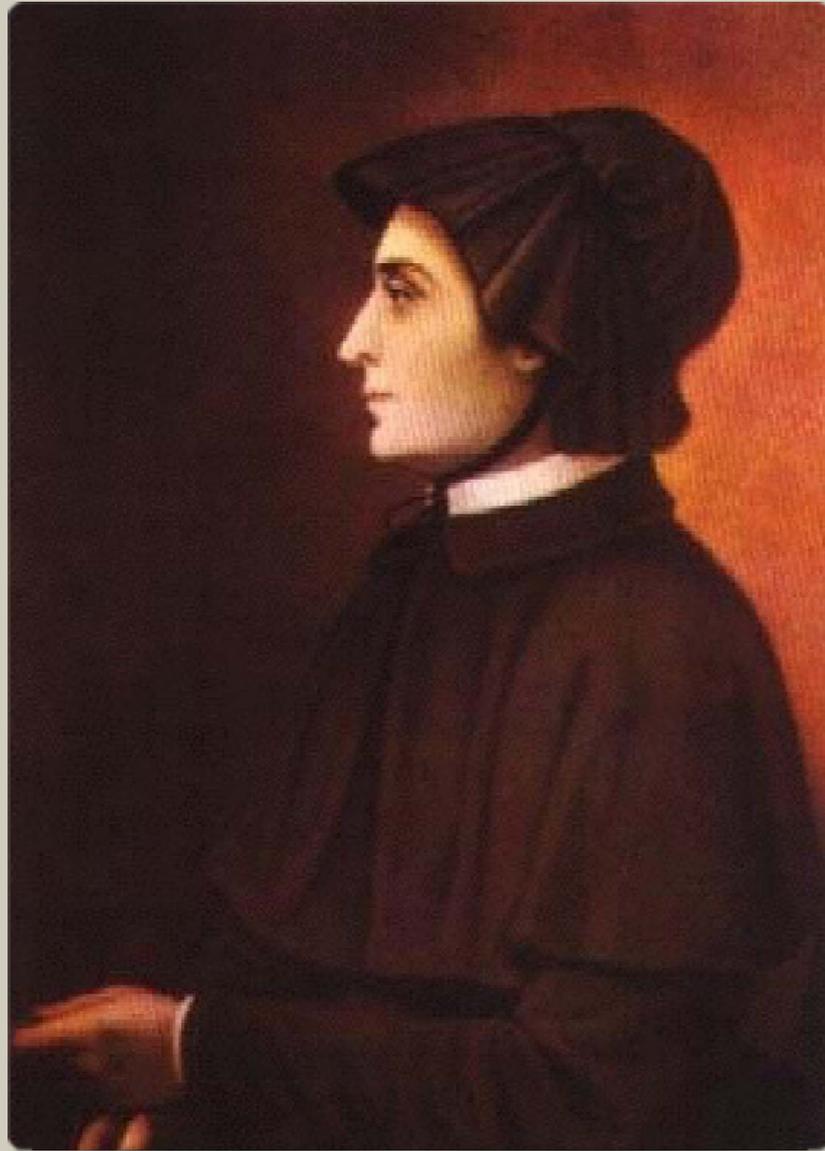
The charism of charity first blossomed in Louise de Marillac, along with her own inner healing and personal growth, as her insecurity lessened and self-reliance increased. Her attention to detail, gentle persuasion, and understanding heart helped form the communal and service dimensions of the Daughters of Charity. Louise de Marillac died in Paris at age 68 and was canonized in 1934. Pope John XXIII declared her patron of Christian Social Workers in 1960.



ALL GOOD THINGS CAME TO BE

Elizabeth Seton's steadfast hopefulness on her own journey planted the charism of charity in the United States. Her courageous determination, openness to new possibilities, dynamic vivacity, and understanding heart shaped the Company of Charity in a new culture. The communities of her spiritual daughters trace their roots to the foundation Elizabeth made in Emmitsburg, and are now united in the Sisters of Charity Federation. Elizabeth died in the midst of her little community at age forty-six, and was canonized in 1975. She is the first citizen born in the United States to be declared a saint, and is considered a pioneer Catholic educator and patron of American Catholic schools.





Elizabeth and Louise are women who knew the hurt of childhood rejection and adolescent conflicts, the happiness and struggles of marriage, the joys and concerns of motherhood, the challenges of parenting alone, the anxiety of spiritual conflict, and the love of a generous God in whose Providence they put all their trust. God spoke to Elizabeth and Louise through events, circumstances and companions on their journey.

A wellspring of wisdom generates the pulse of charity,
which arises from “the heart of one who has
understanding.”

- Proverbs 15:23

Source:

McNeil, Betty Ann D.C. (1999)

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