

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Jan 4th 2016

Memorial of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Religious

“The mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a “visceral” love. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy. . . . Jesus introduces us to [a spectrum of] works of mercy so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. Let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead.”

Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, April 11th, 2015

In the document quoted above, Pope Francis establishes the 2015-2016 Liturgical year as a “Jubilee Year of Mercy.” It is wonderfully appropriate that today we celebrate the feast of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton during this jubilee year because, with the “the visceral love” referred to by the Pope, she is a powerful witness to Mercy, the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy in particular.

Elizabeth Ann Seton, commonly referred to as “Mother Seton,” was born in New York just prior to the Revolutionary War in 1774 and died in 1821. She was canonized in 1975 by Pope Paul VI, becoming the first native-born United States citizen to be recognized as a Saint by the Catholic Church.

This remarkable woman spans the full spectrum of human experience. She was a New York socialite, a devoted wife, the mother of five children, a widow, a grieving parent, a dedicated volunteer in charitable organizations, a convert to Catholicism, an educator, a social minister, and a catechist. She established the first Catholic school in the nation at Emmitsburg, Maryland, thus spear-heading the American Catholic commitment to maintain our Catholic school system. She founded the first American congregation of Religious Sisters, the Sisters of Charity, which has subsequently divided into six autonomous branches with more than 5,000 members. All of them recognize their origin in their first group, personally established by Mother Seton in the Archdiocese of Baltimore (July 31st, 1809). Since then, Mother Seton’s followers in religious life have established hundreds of schools, social service centers and hospitals throughout America and around the world.

One of the mysteries of our Faith is “The Communion of Saints.” We believe that we are all united in a profound solidarity, a solidarity which represents our union with those who have gone before us in Faith, together with those who make up our Christian community today world-wide. In this communion and solidarity, let us pray for the Church, that we may enjoy the graces testified to so powerfully by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton – to invest ourselves in works of Mercy as she did: to invest in them our time, energy, what we have, and what we are in gratitude for the abundance of Mercy God gives us continually in his unconditional love.

