

Prayer of the Month • February 2011

Give me, O my God, that tenderness of conscience which will dread even the shadow of sin; make in me, or help me to obtain that severity and uprightness of soul which will not allow nor forgive in itself any thing that offends you. It is true that I must deny myself, retrench many things agreeable to my inclinations, and refrain from many gratifications which seem even innocent.

In many circumstances, I must humble my spirit, suppress the sentiments of my heart, weigh my words, restrain my eyes and mortify my senses. But Lord, can I purchase too dear this double advantage of offending you less and preserving my soul? The happiness of pleasing you and the peace of my conscience will make amends for all and supply the peace of all.

St Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, 1774–1821

In the modern or post-modern age we have a certain indifference to sin. We are part of a blame culture in which what is wrong is ascribed to other people's failings. If there has been an admitted failing then someone must be held accountable and heads must roll. The Christian faith sees things differently: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3.23). The question is, then, what do we do with this information. The answer, we see in this prayer, is not simply to be sorry for sin but to seek to avoid it at all costs. Rather than making excuses for ourselves, we should be more self-aware and self-critical. There is a degree of severity in this prayer which seems unnatural to the modern mind. And yet, this is a whole-hearted and thoroughgoing approach which leads to the creation of saints. Do we want to be saints in the making, or do we have lower aspirations?

Elizabeth Seton was the first native-born citizen of the United States of America to be canonised in the Roman Catholic Church. She was born on 28 August 1774, and grew up among the high society of New York. Despite this, though, her early life was simple, quiet, and often lonely. She was a prolific reader – of novels as well as the Bible. In 1794 she married William Seton, and enjoyed some years of happiness. However, within four years, Will's father died, leaving the couple with the responsibility for Will's seven half brothers and sisters, as well as the family's importing business. Will's health and business failed and he had to file for bankruptcy. Travelling to Italy for his health, Will died there of tuberculosis. Under the influence of Italian friends, and with deep concern for her family and its spiritual welfare, Elizabeth joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1805. Returning to America, she founded a school in Baltimore, Maryland, and a religious community, the Sisters of Charity, making her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience on 25 March 1809. Although afflicted herself with tuberculosis, she continued to care for her children. The rule of the Sisterhood was formally ratified in 1812, and was based on the Rule St Vincent de Paul had written for his Daughters of Charity in France. By 1818 the sisters had established two schools and two orphanages. Today, six groups of sisters trace their origins to Mother Seton. Elizabeth died on 4 January 1821 at the age of 26, and was canonised on 14 September 1975.

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