

In a week, we'll start Catholic Schools Week, where we celebrate not just our school but Catholic schools all over the country.

The history of the Catholic school system is pretty incredible when you think to how Catholics were very much a minority at the start of our nation, one that were at best tolerated and in many instances persecuted. But the reason the Church and the schools that are a part of the Church were able to succeed was due to people having a vision, and also willing to pay a price for that vision.

Among these was the woman who founded the first Catholic school, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Elizabeth was born two years before the American Revolution and grew up in the upper class of New York society. She was the daughter of Dr. Richard Bayley, a generous man who cared deeply about the poor in New York,

She married William Seton in 1794, a man who, like her, was an Episcopalian. When her father-in-law died, her husband took over the family business, which caused him a great deal of stress. They also welcomed five children, and Elizabeth lived out her vocation as a wife and mom. But in 1804, William became very sick with tuberculosis, and it was urged by doctors he try to get to a warmer climate.

Kind relatives urged them to leave the younger children with them, and Elizabeth and William set sail for Italy with Anna, their oldest child. William had spent time there as a young man so was familiar with the country. But when the ship got to port, William was placed under quarantine. The family was stuck in a dirty, cold and damp building and Williams condition grew even worse. They were stuck here for a month before being released to a nicer home provided by friends of the family. But it was too late; William became weaker and weaker and passed at the young age of 35 two days before Christmas.

The family though asked Elizabeth and Anna to stay for a few weeks, and one day she went with them to something new: a mass. She was there, and when she saw the Sacred Host elevated by the priest, she thought of the words of Saint Paul who spoke of "discerning the Body of the Lord," and she began to cry. She thought to herself is Jesus, Himself, actually present? She was also moved by a procession of the Eucharist, as it was common in Italy at the time to carry the Blessed Sacrament through the streets. And she began to feel God's presence. She said "My God, bless me if you are truly present. My soul desires you."

The Holy Spirit kept tugging on her heart. When she saw a prayer book open that belonged to Mrs. Filicchi, she found a prayer to the Blessed Mother. Elizabeth prayed slowly, and she felt that the Blessed Mother was her mother - a tender, compassionate Mother, and she felt a sense of relief and hope.

Returning to New York as the mother of 5 with no husband, Elizabeth put her trust in God and believed He would see her through whatever lied ahead. But she was also thinking about her experience Italy, and felt the call to become Catholic. She was convinced Jesus was present in the Blessed Sacrament and wanted to receive Holy Communion.

Her husband's family though hated the Catholic Church, and said they would have nothing to do with her if she converted. But she continued to pray, and through this prayer she knew what she had to do. On March 14, 1805, the 30-year old widow was received into the Catholic Faith at Saint Peter's, which was the only Catholic Church in New York at the time. And sure enough, her relatives did abandon her, and she was now left with 5 kids and no income. But she was at peace. She took a job as a teacher. And then she came home and was full-time mom. And each day began with a walk to Mass. Her husband would criticize her when he was alive for working so hard, but her response was "love makes all effort easy."

Moving to Baltimore, she started a school there, which was a secular one. Despite being a great teacher, when word got out that she was a Catholic several girls were removed from her school. It was then at the urging of a priest she knew that she became a religious sister, and started a new congregation, the Sisters of Charity. They established the first free Catholic school in America. When the young community adopted their rule, they made provisions for Elizabeth to continue raising her children.

She was the superior and became Mother Seton, and by 1812, there were 20 sisters who shared a common life and became known as the Sisters of Charity. But again, just as there were difficulties that emerged from her following God's call to become Catholic, there were plenty of difficulties that emerged from her saying yes to this new challenge. Several sisters died because of hardships of the War of 1812. Her oldest daughter died of tuberculosis at 16 after she pronounced her vows as a Sister of Charity. Another child became ill too who died at just 10 years of age.

But through all of this, she never walked away from her mission. She gave the other sisters an incredible example of prayerfulness, calm, generosity and self-sacrifice. Still connected to New York society, many told her to leave the new life she had created. But she knew her mission. There was also the growing pains of her new order; the new sisters had occasional disagreements among themselves, but she guided them with love. She also continued to promote Catholic education, to teach and work, and by 1821, her little order had 20 communities. She died that year at the age of 46,

Her story is one shared by so many of the saints in that she heard God calling her, she responded, and despite the response leading to difficulty, she persevered and because of it she changed the world for the better.

This week in our first reading and Gospel, we are invited to reflect on mission in our life. We meet Jonah, a short but rich book of the Old Testament, who goes to Nineveh to preach repentance. But of course our two readings just give us snippets of a much larger story of discipleship that we can also incorporate into our own lives.

With Jonah, earlier on in the book we get the background. In the first chapter, he is called. The book of Jonah begins by saying "The word of the Lord came to Jonah: set out for the great city of Nineveh, and preach against it; for their wickedness has come before me." Note in the Gospel Jesus is the one who approaches the disciples and gives them the invitation. And for Mother

Seton, it was seeing Jesus in the Eucharist where she heard his voice. That's the work of God and the Spirit. And it's important we first and foremost be open to that. As the saying goes, if you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans. We can plan and have a list and want to do everything our own way, but there is something far greater at work. That's why it's important to reflect on our lives, and listen for God's voice. Because He has all kinds of plans for us; maybe it's a new career, or maybe it's trying something new at the parish, or just changing some aspect of our lives. But we need to listen to where He is calling us.

We are then reminded of a caution: once we discern God's plan, we can't run away from it. And this is important, because God is always going to win. The book of Jonah continues and after his call, unlike Mother Elizabeth, he runs from the call. He gets on a ship to head to Tarshish, a city probably in modern day Spain, which was the ends of the earth essentially. But you can't outrun God. A storm is caused by God and the ship is about to break up. Jonah sleeps during the storm; the other sailors learn who Jonah is, and he gets tossed overboard by them after Jonah admits he is running from God and says the only way to end the storm is to throw me over. The sea then calms down. Now God more than likely isn't going to cause a literal storm, but the symbolism here is if you resist God, there will be trouble. Not the kind of trouble that may necessarily ruin your life, but what you won't find is happiness. You'll have a restless heart; you won't be reaching your potential or growing as a person; you'll look back and wonder "what I had just said yes to God at that moment." Fortitude is a virtue, but cowardice is a vice. Jonah had a big job to do, and maybe he just didn't want to do it. We've got big jobs to do as well. It's called our vocation whether it's to a profession, being a parent or getting married, serving others, whatever it may be. Mother Seton could have said "this is too tough" and never become Catholic, been accepted by friends and family, lived a relatively comfortable life. But every time she walked past the Catholic Church, every time she thought of the Eucharist, she would have felt sadness inside because she hadn't listened to God. So once God calls us, we have to let him take over. This is symbolized when Jonah spends 3 days in the belly of a big fish. Again, not meant to be taken literally per se, but the symbolism is that of Jesus in the Garden: "not my will, but your will be done." Like Jonah, we have to have our plans taken over by those of God.

As we do that, it's important to remember that God is always going to be with us on our mission. God literally brings Jonah to Nineveh having the big fish expel him onto the shore. God will be with us through thick and thin, and sometimes even a very bad experience will lead us to where God wants us to be.

When Jonah gets to where God wants him to be, which is the focus for our reading, we are told it is a "great city" and "so large it took three days to go through it." Nineveh was a very large place, and the symbolism here is God gives us a big job to do. Imagine Elizabeth Ann Seton sitting there across from the priest thinking "sure, I can become a teacher if that's what he thinks I should do, I'm familiar with that line of work" when instead she is asked, oh, can you become a religious sister, set up a new order, and help set up a school where there isn't one yet? It must have been overwhelming. But she set out on her mission. God's plans for us can be very big. Think of parenting. As my dad once said to me one of his first thoughts when I was born was "okay so now what do I do?" Well he and mom figured it out and learned as they went along. Sometimes when we look at something we discern is important, like going to a particular school to study the profession we feel called to, getting married, or become a priest, whatever it is, as

we dive in, it can seem overwhelming. As one of my teachers said in seminary when you said yes to priesthood you said yes to everything else - the studying, the prayer, the evaluations, the hard work to get there. Whatever God has called you to do, it is going to take commitment. But it's important to keep our eyes fixed on the goal, and to remember that it might take a lot more than the 3 days it took Jonah. But celebrate the small victories, and persevere by seeing the big picture, reminding yourself you are doing what God has called you to do, and it takes time to see the mission through to it's completion.

One final thing to be aware of: self-righteousness. It can be easy to get a big head, or once we complete a mission to want to take over. Jonah we are told is surprised that the people actually do repent. He's even more surprised that the city isn't destroyed by God; for in Nineveh are some enemies of Israel. Jonah at the end of the book goes on a hill to watch the city destroyed and when it isn't, he sulks and gets moody. As she started her order, Mother Seton could have become a control freak, gotten a big ego, but she never did. She lovingly served the other sisters, she continued to be a woman of deep prayer, and she humbly served her God. Following your vocation is great, but if you say now I know it all and no one is going to give me advice or correct me, that's a problem. I'm continually learning how to be a better priest from other people and from experience. I want to be a fisher of men, but I need to know where the best fishing spot is and what lure to use on the line and that only comes from listening to the Master and the other wise fishermen he has put in the boat with me. So no matter what God has called you to do, continue to listen to Him, continue to seek advice, be open to criticism and recognize that plans change and evolve, and we need to learn how to change too if we are going to truly do God's will.

Saint John XXIII was known to say before bed each night "good night God, it's your Church," because He knew who was in the driver's seat. Good Pope John was elected in the eyes of some as a caretaker pope who wouldn't do much. Then the Holy Spirit came to him and gave him a mission: to let in some fresh air and update the Church by calling the Second Vatican Council. Said one cardinal the old boy doesn't know what he's doing. But he did. He was listening to the will of God, and then he followed it through, just like Mother Seton and so many other of the great Christians throughout the ages. So what has God called you to do? What is He calling you to do next? Listen to Him, let Him take you where He may, and live out His mission as a fisher of men. For when you do, you'll one day stand with Him in heaven and be amazed at what together the two of you have caught.