

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF SISTER MARY SETON WACKER

September 5, 1927—June 4, 2015

Reflecting on the life of Sister Mary Seton, I thought about her love for art and music. So many of us spoke of this last evening during our vigil. This musing led to how I want to remember her this morning as we say goodbye.



There are three ways to look at art: at arm's length, or up close or the long view. "Arm's length" gives one the general impression. "Up close" focuses on details. We need the long view to get what we call "the big picture." In community living, we know each other pretty much "at arm's length." Some we know "up close": This is what makes us call some sisters friends; it is also what makes us dislike some or even avoid them. At death, one of us offers a eulogy for the sister who has died. Depending on our "up close" view, some of us smirk at eulogies, and say, "Well, here we go with the canonization!" Maybe the Church makes this same mistake. Before we call you a "saint," you have to *prove* it with a miracle! (Something above and beyond the call of duty.)

I love being asked to do a eulogy. Preparing a eulogy requires one to look through the sister's public use file. Doing so shows me that this isn't a canonization. Rather, like looking at a piece of art, a eulogy is taking the long view: What's it all about? Last evening, at the vigil, we began to get the long view. As we say goodbye to Sister Mary Seton this morning, let's step back and see, as well as we can, the big picture.

A few days after Christmas in 1994, Sister Mary Seton wrote to Sister Sara Louise, our archivist at the time. She enclosed with her note a short letter she had received in 1975 from Sister Regina Clare Breig. In her note, Sister Mary Seton recalled how she became a student in the first class enrolled at Elizabeth Seton High School. She was doubly proud that she was the only student from West Liberty School to go to Elizabeth Seton High School. The first Elizabeth Seton High School, as we know, was housed in the former West Liberty School. In her 1975

letter, Sister Regina Clare was thanking Sister Mary Seton for her good work on a program on Mother Seton at Sacred Heart, for which Mary Seton was both scriptwriter and director. Sister Regina Clare wrote:

Both Sister Teresa Clare and I felt it was very well done. Of course, I wouldn't expect anything else from you. Sister and I were reminiscing about the day we came down from De Paul and found a little girl with two pigtails and a dollar and her registration card in her hand. Remember? We were thrilled over our first student.

I'm sorry you aren't so well. You drive yourself too hard. You have one of the finest minds I ever taught, but in thirty years, you've put on some mileage as we all have, and you ought to try to take things easier and get rest regularly every day.

Thanks to Sister Marie Corona's earnest work on the oral history project, we have an interview she did with Sister Mary Seton twenty years ago, in 1995. In the interview, we hear Sister Mary Seton proudly remember that she was among the first 80 students at Elizabeth Seton, where Sister Regina Clare was both principal and teacher. She was also proud that she had gone to West Liberty School, which our sisters had purchased to start Elizabeth Seton High School. She was the first one to register for the first class there, and the only Seton girl who gone to West Liberty Elementary. (She later went to Resurrection School). She described her feelings as she experienced her old grade school classrooms, now with other uses: the new "principal's office" a former coat closet! The small roberies that became the sisters' bedrooms. "I knew how small those roberies were because I had been thrown into them many times for giggling during music class." Joan Wacker was in the first Elizabeth Seton graduating class in 1945. After she graduated, along with nine of her classmates and eleven other girls, she entered the Sisters of Charity, and Sister Regina Clare was her sponsor.

Listening to the recordings of the interview, I was struck by a theme that threaded through her memories. Sister Mary Seton spoke joyfully about her years at Elizabeth Seton. The phrase she highlights several times is the "sense of bonding" she experienced. She remembers, "Our class was about as close as sisters." When

she describes her entering the novitiate with some of her own Seton classmates and several other eighteen year olds, she again, with a smile in her voice, speaks of the bonding she experienced in the novitiate and in the college classes they took. She chuckles remembering Sister Miriam Fidelis and her challenge (as Mary Seton recalls it): “We were like puppies; we were all over the place! Not disrespectful or anything, but we just weren’t as sedate as the girls she had known when she was dean of students at the college!” After making vows and at a later point, returning to Seton Hill after her seven years in Arizona, she notes, with a kind of resigned disappointment in her voice, how the sense of bonding had somewhat faded, as each of them had gone on to different missions and ministries.

We spoke briefly last evening of Sister Mary Seton’s final eight months here at Caritas Christi—where she swore she would never come! The memories and stories were wonderful. We heard how many quilts she made—each one special for a special person. One of the quilt stories struck me and gave me the closing frame for the big picture of Mary Seton’s life among us. Louise Grundish told us about inviting Mary Seton to spend a vacation with her in Florida. Louise thought Seton would enjoy the swimming, which she had said she really liked to do. But Mary Seton spent the whole time devoted to a quilt she was making. Louise recalled that the quilt contained gold fish in each square. One square showed a fishbowl, with one goldfish on the outside trying to get in. The image kind of broke my heart and will stay with me for a long time. How little we ever really know one another in community, even, and maybe especially, “up close.” Sister Mary Seton loved teaching. Perhaps she has unknowingly left us with an important lesson.

Here is a short poem that Mary Seton wrote that I think sums up a lot of the way we knew her “up close,” perhaps. We hear her sense of humor here, too. The ending, I think, hints at the big picture.

POEM FOR THE RETIREMENT COMMITTEE

*Morning shoves one into the day.
Gravity takes over.
The mirror tells it all:*

*chin,
jaw,
lower eyelid
sags.*

*arms,
breasts,
skin itself
sags.
All the way down sags.*

*Feet step doggedly,
Carefully.
Don't fall now.*

*Breakfast talk is all sickness,
death,
surgery
and the weather.*

*Way down below everything
children have to look up!
must chirp awake at dawn,
must dance all day—
up and down steps,
must burble their joy filled,
fast-racing thoughts,
have to chew “lemon” crayons
before breakfast.*

*Be a child—
at heart at least!*

Goodbye, dear Mary Seton. We hardly knew you. But thank you for being God's gift to us, as it always is, in surprising ways.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
Sister Gertrude Foley
June 9, 2015*