

Five-Day Spiritual Journey

Walking in the Footsteps

of Sisters Rose White, Cecilia O' Conway, and Felicity Brady

from Emmitsburg to New York City

August 13 to August 20, 1817 (2017)



New Beginnings

The Journey

AUGUST 1817

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Introduction

In 1809, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and her companions began the first community of women religious in the United States. Their primary ministry was the education of young women, a priority for the Catholic community in the early US republic. They opened an academy and then a free school and both prospered.

In 1817, Bishop John Connolly of New York wrote to Mother Seton begging her to send him three Sisters for a different kind of ministry: caring for the orphaned children of his city.

The reflections we offer during the next several days are invitations to go on a “spiritual journey” with the three Sisters as they prepare to start what would become a vast network of care for the poorest of God’s children in Mother Seton’s native city.

Each day we will use Scripture and our imagination to help us walk with these “valiant women.” The short reflections are meant to be a tool for individual or group prayer.

We have few recorded facts about the journey taken between August 13 and 20, 1817. The three Sisters, Rose White, Cecilia O’ Conway, and Felicity Brady, were too busy about God’s work to take time to record their thoughts and feelings.

But have we not all taken spiritual journeys of our own? Let us see what our journeys have in common with theirs and learn from them a new way of fidelity to God’s work in our lives.



New Beginnings

Leave-Taking

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The Story

Let us imagine Mother Seton as she stood at the door of the White House in Emmitsburg on the morning of August 13, 1817, and wished Cecilia and Felicity God-speed.

She, a native New Yorker, knew what neither Sister could have imagined; indeed, she understood well the challenges they would face. New York at the turn of the 19th century was a daunting place for those caught in the grip of poverty, or who were new to the country. There were few “safety nets” to relieve the suffering of those who had scarce resources on which to depend.

And the Sisters themselves?

Surely they were curious, excited and a bit anxious about what they were about to undertake. They needed Mother Seton’s assurance they would find affirmation and support from the Catholic community who were longing for them to come.

“Do the best you can and leave the rest to our dear God,” was Mother Seton’s advice.

Picture a time in your own “life’s journey” when you had to leave a place you had called home. Was the leave-taking hard? Spend a few minutes recalling the scene.

Scripture

Acts 1: 6–9, 11

Now having met together, they asked him, “Lord, has the time come for you to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know times or dates that the Father has decided on his own authority, but you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come to you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to earth’s remotest end.”

As he said this he was lifted while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight.

“Why are you Galileans standing here looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come back in the same way as you have seen him go to heaven.”

Reflection

The Book of Acts suggests we must experience leave-takings to become witnesses. Recall a time when you were a witness to the truth of Jesus’ presence. Perhaps it was when you engaged in a new ministry, or when your life circumstances changed. What were the blessings found there for you?

Words of Vincent

“So, give yourselves to God, my dear sisters, humble yourselves profoundly and never be afraid...Is it not this very confidence in God which should induce you to undertake all those charitable deeds in which you are to be employed? You are aware, Sisters, that it is not you who give yourselves the strength and courage to undertake all that you do through charity.”



New Beginnings

Dying

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The Story

Robert Fox, a New York Catholic whose children attended the Academy in Emmitsburg, volunteered to accompany the Sisters to New York. He met Cecilia and Felicity at Emmitsburg. Their first destination was Philadelphia. There they would meet Sister Rose White, director of the Philadelphia orphanage started by the Sisters in 1814. They would continue their journey together.

As the caravan made its way northward into Pennsylvania, they passed the small town of Gettysburg, which would become the site of the bloodiest battle of the Civil War, still some distance in the future. Before it ended 46,286 Union and Confederate soldiers would lose their lives.

When has death become real for us? We experience the deaths of family members and friends and this is always sad and difficult. There are other kinds of death as well: relationships that are marred by misunderstandings, or ministries or work that end through no fault of our own. In African-American culture when a person dies he or she is said to have “crossed over” or “passed.”

Recovering from grief is hard. How have you crossed over the “deaths” in your own life? We know we must die to ourselves and to all that separates us from the love our God wants us to have.

Scripture

Matthew 27: 45–47, 54

From noon onward, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The centurion and the men with him who were keeping watch over Jesus feared greatly when they saw the earthquake and all that was happening, and they said, "Truly, this was the Son of God!"

Reflection

Fear paralyzes us and limits us in our ability to move ahead in our lives and relationships. What are my fears?

In time, we find that the answer may be, in part, to look beyond where we are, or answer someone's need, or say yes to a project or mission.

Words of Elizabeth

"You know I grow fearless, for you know where, and how strong, is my trust."



New Beginnings

Leadership and Support

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The Story

When Sisters Cecilia and Felicity arrived in Philadelphia, they went immediately to the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum of St. Joseph's where Sister Rose was director. Mother Seton had named her Sister Servant, leader of this fledgling group of missionaries. She was an excellent administrator, capable of building a firm foundation for the new enterprise.

Upon their arrival Sister Rose took them through the orphanage, explained how it was managed, and shared with them what she knew would help the two younger sisters gain confidence in their ability to meet the needs of the poor in a new setting.

There would be a little time for catching up on the news from Emmitsburg as well. Sister Rose would want to know about Mother Seton and all the many activities in which she was engaged. There would be conversation about their future, too, and what was waiting for them in New York.

Scripture

Luke 6: 20-23

And raising his eyes toward his disciples Jesus said: "Blessed are you who are poor for the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude and insult you, and denounce your name as evil because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice and leap for joy on that day! Behold, your reward will be great in heaven. For their ancestors treated the prophets in the same way."

Reflection

It takes us all our lives to learn the lessons we need for our happiness. We learn much from the people God has placed there.

Who are my teachers? Who are the people who have influenced my choices? Who are the ones who have helped me become who I am today?

Words of Elizabeth

"But I find in proportion as my heart is more drawn to the summit, it looks backward with added tenderness to everyone I have ever loved, much more those who have long possessed in its entire and truest attachments."



New Beginnings

Planting Good Seed

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The Story

Sister Rose White had to say good-bye to the Sisters she had been on mission with for three years in Philadelphia, and to the orphans she had come to know and love. Sisters Cecilia and Felicity were given a lesson in how to respond in fidelity to the cost of the “yes” they had all said when they pronounced their vow of obedience years before.

The sisters traveled from Philadelphia through New Jersey, known to all today as “the Garden State.” It was high summer still, and they passed by many of the farms and gardens for which New Jersey is still famous. They were used to the simple fare of home-grown fruits and vegetables of their farm in Emmitsburg. In a few months, their diet would consist of soup, potatoes, and carrot coffee because they saved the good produce, bread, and meat to nourish the children for whom they would lovingly care.

And they were interested in planting in the children fruit of a different sort as well: love of God and neighbor, joy, kindness, and courage in the face of difficulties. We look back in wonder and gratitude at how well they succeeded.

Scripture

Luke 8: 5–7

“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path and was trampled, and the birds of the sky ate it up. Some seed fell on rocky ground, and when it grew, it withered for lack of moisture. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold.” After saying this, Jesus called out, “Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.”

Reflection

Recall the seeds you have planted over the course of your life. Reflect on your accomplishments and see in them the hand of God.

Words of Elizabeth

“God has given me a great deal to do, and I have always—and I hope always—to prefer His will to every wish of my own.”



New Beginnings

The Mass—Our Center

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The Story

Then as now, the Eucharist was the pivotal mystery for Elizabeth Seton and the Sisters of Charity. Her final prayer was that members of the community always remember that they are “daughters of the Church.” It is not hard for us, then, to imagine the three missionaries attending Mass together with the Sisters missioned at the orphanage at the local parish church, St. Joseph’s, a Jesuit church founded in 1733.

And we can take this opportunity to remember that the parochial schools started by Sisters across the United States were almost always connected to a local parish.

Recall your own parish and its many sacred moments: the place where you were baptized, received the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist, Confirmation, where you joined members of your family and friends at Sunday Mass. For many New Yorkers, our neighborhood parish was often the way we chose to identify where we lived.

Scripture

Matthew 26: 26–29

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father.”

Reflection

Recall all the special Masses you have been present for, the parishes where you have prayed. Bless all your memories, and be thankful.

Words of Elizabeth

“Jesus is everywhere, in the very air I breathe, yes, everywhere, but in his sacrament of the altar as present and actually and really as my soul within my body; in his sacrifice offered as really as once offered on the cross. Adored Lord, increase my faith, perfect it, crown it, thy own, thy dearest gift.”



New Beginnings

Anticipation

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The Story

The Sisters arrived in New York eager to see their new home on Prince Street and start to make it ready for the children they were privileged to assist.

The house, of course, was not ready. In the meantime, Robert Fox, his wife and daughters offered them the hospitality of their home. When they were finally able to move in, they discovered their 'home' had been part of a hospital dating back to the Revolutionary War. It was known as the "dead house;" there were still bloodstains covering the floors where autopsies were performed.

With the help of new-found friends among the Catholics of the city, the Sisters transformed these grim rooms into a home for the first orphans, five boys, ranging in age from eleven months to eight years. The Sisters lived for a time on carrot coffee, soup and potatoes to be able to provide the children with nourishing fare.

This humble beginning of the Sisters of Charity presence in New York anticipates the work—and works—the Sisters would carry out in their 200-year history. Orphanages, schools, hospitals, social service agencies, and more, would involve the Sisters and their lay colleagues in outreach and compassionate care for many in need, especially the poor.

Scripture

Matthew 25: 34–40

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me."

Then the righteous will answer him and say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?"

And the king will say to them in reply, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least of mine, you did for me."

Reflection

How have I reacted when I encounter a person caught in the grip of poverty? Can I recall a special relationship that I have been blessed with because I risked speaking or reaching out to a stranger?

Words of Elizabeth

"The joy of my soul at the prospect of being able to assist the poor, visit the sick, comfort the sorrowful, clothe little innocents, and teach them to love God!"

