



**Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774–1821)**



**Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850–1917)**

The Face of  
**Sanctity,**  
the **Human**  
**Face**

The Lives of  
**Elizabeth Seton**  
**Frances Cabrini**

The saint is a *true* person, Luigi Giussani once wrote, because the saint holds fast to God, and thus, to his heart's Ideal. Elizabeth Ann Seton and Frances Xavier Cabrini were two ordinary women of their times, yet their lives were made great by following the Ideals their hearts were made for. To say our hearts are '*made for something*' sounds strange to the modern ear, for we no longer believe that creation in any way suggests some higher purpose. Indeed, the term *sainthood* can seem just as antiquated, a relic or remnant of some distant past.

Even today, however, the relationship with God remains the most adequate working hypothesis for the growth and full realization of the personality. This is so because life *is* a vocation, a call to greatness that gives human existence a decisive direction and an infinite horizon. The whole problem of life, then, lies in our willingness to follow that call.

We live in an age of increasing uncertainty. Doubt has a strange hold over the human spirit; it forms a sort of existential quicksand such that every move we make only entrenches us further. The life of faith, instead, frees a person from the crippling effects of doubt by providing the stable ground upon which to walk upright, confident of the goal. The proof of this lies precisely in the capacity to welcome all things we meet along the way – even obstacles – as opportunities for growth and maturity. Indeed, one of the tried and true anthems of Mother Frances Cabrini was, "I can do all things in Christ who gives me strength" (Phil 4:13). The purpose of this exhibit is to give witness to sanctity as the full expression of human life in every age and place, including our own.

The exhibit is divided into four themes: *faith, obedience, friendship* and *fruitfulness* – taken from the first volume of Monsignor Luigi Giussani's *Is it Possible to Live this Way. An Unusual Approach to Christian Existence: Faith*. In this work, Giussani contends that the most vital human faculties – intelligence and affection – reach a climax in the life of faith.

## I. On Beginnings and Maturing of Faith

The first theme treats of the beginning of Faith, where the horizons of human reason are broadened by the "intrusion" of an extraordinary claim. For Elizabeth Seton, this event came early in life when at the tender age of 4 she was told that her late mother and sister were both in heaven. From that moment forward, she desired to join them and to drag all her loved ones with her. Frances Cabrini was equally impressed by the stories of missionaries in exotic lands read to her as a child. The desire to bring the love of Jesus to the ends of the earth defined the face of this saint.

## II. On Obedience and Freedom

Placing the words Obedience and Freedom side by side, as we have in the second section, can seem rather disconcerting. Yet, what we consistently witnessed in the lives of both of these women is the ability to face even difficult circumstances with extraordinary courage, creativity and compassion. Elizabeth Seton, who had been at a loss for human companionship as a child, found she was capable of boundless love as wife, mother and friend to the point of accompanying her dearest ones to their eternal destinies. Frances Xavier Cabrini's attentiveness to the slightest sign of her Master's call emboldened this slight figure to do God's bidding in factories, fields, mines and hospitals all over the world – at one point even crossing the Andes by mule during a winter storm. Freedom is here shown to be the energy to adhere to the Good, not to shy away from it.

## III. On Following and Friendship

The third section explores the role of friendship in the Christian life. Friendship is the virtue by which one finds a true companion on the road toward the Ideal. In this sense, there is a strict connection between friendship and following because a friend is someone who recalls you to your own destiny, therefore, you are bound to obey, as you would your own soul. Elizabeth Seton had a special gift for friendship. She had many close friends and relatives with whom she held lifelong correspondence. We are only able to touch on a few examples here including Elizabeth's sister-in-law, Rebecca, whom she called, "My soul's sister." The preferential affection Pope Leo XIII showed to Mother Cabrini over the years was for her a most tangible sign of the sweet friendship of the Heart of Jesus.

## IV. On Fruitful Lives

The fourth and final theme highlights some of the fruits of their lives which were visible even in their own times.

### **A note on methodology**

While an exhibit of this size can hardly do justice to the rich lives and legacies of either St. Elizabeth Ann Seton or St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, it can serve to make them better known. It was our hope to illuminate the crucial turning points in their respective faith journeys and to document, as much as possible, their growth in awareness *in their own words*. Both women were prolific and poetic writers, and their combined papers contain tens of thousands of pages of diaries, letters and retreat notes. The text is, therefore, composed in large part of quotations, the most illustrative given prominence on a parchment offset.

**The search for the human face is something each person must undertake. We hope that the paths of these women who found their true faces by keeping their Beloved ever in sight can contribute to that search. In an age where finding one self often means severing familiar ties, we witness how the dynamic of Faith, Obedience and Friendship led Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini and Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton to become America's first saints.**

### *Credits*

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