

Reflections

by the
Most Reverend Thomas J. Murphy



The Feast of Elizabeth Seton and the Role of Women in the Modern Church

This Thursday, January 4th, we celebrate in the liturgical life of the Church a very important feast. It is a new feast because it is a day on which we honor a person who only recently was declared a saint. January 4th is the feast of Elizabeth Ann Seton, an American Nun, and a person considered by many to be the foundress of the Catholic School System in our country.

St. Elizabeth's feast day is a good time to focus in on the contribution which religious women are offering to the Church today, and to our own Diocese of Eastern Montana. Much has changed since the time St. Elizabeth worked for the cause of Catholic education. At that time, the only ministries in which religious women were involved were in schools and hospitals in addition to the prayer ministry of cloistered religious.

The education of young children and the care of the sick in hospitals still remain primary apostolates of many religious women. But recent years have witnessed the expansion of the presence of religious women into almost every facet of Church life, and the Church has become better because of it. Religious women today are involved full time in the parochial ministry of many parishes, in the direction of religious education programs not only for the young, but for an entire parish, in spiritual direction, and in administrative positions of parishes and dioceses. With laymen and laywomen, religious women share in the ministry of the Eucharist and proclaim the Word of God in Eucharistic celebrations.

To all these positions and roles of leadership in the Church, the religious woman brings a unique witness and faith dimension. Religious communities of women, and individuals within a religious community, will choose different modes of dress, but all religious women today share in the core essential gift of a life dedicated to the Christian community. Some changes in the accidental features of the religious women's witness to the Church may be an occasion for reaction, but the far more important fact is to remember the diverse and varied ways in which religious women are contributing to the life of the Church today.

I suspect that when St. Elizabeth Seton began her ministry to society, a number of questions were raised. But today Elizabeth Seton is a saint. May she be a reminder to all of us of the witness offered by religious women in our Church today. As we begin a New Year, as the Bishop of the Diocese of Eastern Montana, may I express my gratitude to all of the religious women working in diverse ministries of the diocese. I want not only to thank them for what they do, but I especially want to thank them for the witness they offer to the values of the Gospel. My prayer is that many other young women in our society might consider a vocation to religious life.

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By the time this will be read, the holidays will be over and I hope to have been able to visit all the parishes on my itinerary during the Christmas weekend. In so many ways, I tried to be like the Wise Men and go chasing stars across the Montana plains. I know I will discover the rich treasure of people who comprise the Church of our diocese.... The beginning of a New Year brings a host of activities for myself. However, I look forward to this first week when I join with the Bishops of the Northwest for a directed retreat to Spokane. Please pray for me during this retreat and I will pray for you...The second weekend in January will find me in Havre for a pastoral visitation, and the end of January will be the occasion for my first Confirmation in the Diocese when I will travel to Plentywood. The end of January has a two-day meeting scheduled in Ashland...In between, there are a host of other activities... As the holiday season comes to a close, may I express my gratitude for all the kindness of people in different missions and parishes to me.

To all the parishes that I visited over the Christmas Weekend, thank you. To Clyde Park, a special thanks for the privilege of being a part of a Communal Penance Service before Christmas. And to all who extended Christmas greetings to me, I am most grateful – 1979 promises to be a great year. It is a year of jubilee for the diocese. It is a year to become aware of our call to greatness. Thanks for the privilege of being able to be the Bishop of this great diocese.