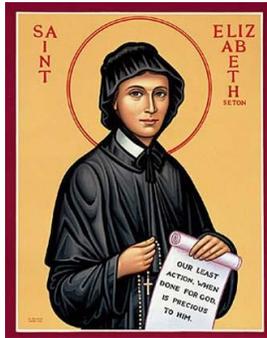


## The Mystery of Charism

By S. Janet Gildea, SC



St. Elizabeth Seton, founder of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, was a wife, mother, widow, teacher, convert to Catholicism and woman religious. She was given the rule of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in France to adapt to the realities of the newly independent United States of America. Elizabeth was a native New Yorker. She lived her religious life in Maryland. How then has her particular gift for living religious life sparked again and again in women from countries and cultures as diverse as China, Guatemala, Korea, Nigeria, the Philippines and more? That is the mystery of charism!

Charism is more than a cult of personality. There might be something about the founder that attracts followers. Especially in the early days of a community's life, the faith and commitment of the founder can draw others to join them and to share in the special focus of the congregation. Think of the rapid growth of communities around dynamic figures like Francis of Assisi or Teresa of Calcutta. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary the word "charism" signifies a powerful gift of the Holy Spirit for the good of the Church. The gift of a particular founder includes their spirituality, their way of discerning and responding to the needs of the times and the way of creating a common vowed life.

The charism is the founder's gift but it is also present in each person called to the congregation. It creates a sense of being one's best self within a specific community. One writer expressed it as being "lit from the same candle." Even without knowing the story of the founder or being able to relate to her/his historical or cultural reality, the mysterious connection of charism draws a community of diverse members into one body. It is something that can be discovered by spending time with those who live the charism today. So Elizabeth Seton's charism has blossomed in fields far from St. Joseph's Valley, in women who have fanned the spark into a flame of Charity all around the globe!

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