Les influences françaises sur Elizabeth Ann Seton et la fondation des Soeurs de la Charité aux États-Unis (1809-1850)

John E Rybolt
The culture of France that formed Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac and their two congregations also played a part in the union of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s, founded by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821), with the Daughters of Charity. This paper intends to examine some of those influences. Methodologically speaking, however, it is generally hard to prove influences, but there are many convergences that lead us to draw such conclusions. This presentation will examine the culture in which the French Sulpicians lived before and after the Revolution, the French milieu in which Elizabeth lived, the transfer of French cultural influences to the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the main French figures who influenced her vocation, the adaptation of the French rule of the Daughters of Charity in the New World, her heritage and the Sulpicians’ decision to unite her community with Paris, and the continuing effects of this union. In any case, this union with France brought into the Daughters of Charity in 1850 the largest group of Sisters in history ever to join, and the group farthest away from Paris.

I. The Sulpicians

The Society of St. Sulpice, the Sulpicians, began in the same spiritual and reformist spirit that moved Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, and Vincent’s supportive and friendly relationships with the founder, Jean-Jacques Olier, are well known. By the time of the Revolution, the Society had grown and was having a positive impact on the French church, mainly through seminary education. When this ceased, the superior general, Jacques-André Emery, urged his confreres to continue their work elsewhere. John Carroll, first bishop of the United States, invited the Sulpicians to his diocese to form young men and establish native clergy. They began their foundation in Baltimore, St. Mary’s Seminary, in 1791. One or two of them also served at the college in Georgetown, the forerunner of today’s Georgetown University in Washington. Among them was Louis Guillaume Valentine Dubourg, born in Cap Français, Saint-Domingue (today’s Haiti) of French parents and he grew up in Bordeaux. He was the third president of Georgetown (1796-1798), and he gave the institution a decidedly French culture, preferably hiring French professors.

At this time, however, American sentiment was strongly anti-French because of the years of the Revolution and Dubourg’s emphases led to his resignation. He returned to the seminary in Baltimore. As he and his confreres analyzed the American scene, they realized the need for workers in many apostolates, especially for teaching girls in the faith. The only religious in the United States engaged in an active apostolate were the Ursulines, who had been in New Orleans since 1727. Since the Sulpicians had known the Daughters of Charity in France, they thought of inviting them to begin new works in America, but the Company was in such conflict and disruption that a new mission was not easy to accomplish. Besides, cultural differences between the New World and the Old were developing, and it would have been a major challenge to overcome them after importing a French congregation.

Even American-born John Carroll had received his theological education in Europe, studying at Saint Omer and then in Liege. He became a Jesuit shortly before the suppression of
the Society and then returned to America. In his own life, he adapted what he had learned in Europe to the realities of the New World, such as an emphasis on lay participation in Church life, elections, and trustees, the *marguilliers*, such as had existed in France.

II. Elizabeth Ann Bayley

Betsy Bayley, as she called herself in her early life, was born 28 August 1774 in New York City. Her father, Richard Bayley, was a physician, an Anglican, but not very religious. Her maternal grandfather, Richard Charlton, was an Anglican priest, originally from Ireland. This led her to be baptized in the Anglican Church. On her mother’s side, however, the family was French Huguenot. They were centered in New Rochelle, New York, a name indicative of their Huguenot origins in La Rochelle. The attitudes that she encountered, therefore, were antagonistic to the Catholic Church, since both sides of her family had, at least in their collective memory, revolted against the Church in Europe.

Her early schooling, probably from age eight to twelve, took place in New Rochelle, and had a definite French emphasis. She learned French, although there is little French in her surviving copybooks, and what remains is not very accurate. Nevertheless, she continued to read and even translate French throughout her adult life. As a young woman devoured Rousseau’s *Emile* and imbibed its ideas concerning religion and reason. In later life, she showed an openness to Protestants by accepting non-Catholic students in her school.

She married William Magee Seton on 25 January 1794 and they had five children. William, a businessman, suffered from tuberculosis as did others in his family and gradually lost both his wealth and his health. To recover, Eliza, as he called her, and her oldest child, Annina, took him to Italy in 1803, where William had visited and where he had experienced improvement while hosted by the Filicchi family in Pisa. They stayed with the same family, but unfortunately for her, William died there on 27 December 1803. She was then virtually alone with her eight-year old daughter, and not speaking Italian. The two married Filicchi brothers, Filippo and Antonio, proved to be important for her conversion to the Catholic faith.

Filippo had wed an American, Mary Cowper, and they took an interest in her Catholic awakening. It was Filippo, in particular, who worked with her, drawing up a kind of catechism of the faith. Antonio’s wife, Amabilia, lived up to the meaning of her name and showed great friendship to Elizabeth and Annina during the four months they lived there. The Filicchis’ piety was neither Vincentian nor French but Italian. Elizabeth enjoyed visiting churches, and seeing the Italian art that she loved. She accompanied her hosts to the shrine of Our Lady of Grace at Montenero above Livorno and grew in her devotion to the Sorrowful Mother. The two brothers also gave her Catholic books in English and French, which she would bring back with her to America.

Antonio Filicchi accompanied Elizabeth and Annina back to New York in June 1804, and he would continue to help her with her finances. She officially embraced the Catholic faith on 14 March 1805, but this had the effect of alienating her from her family. She was now a widow with five children, with no visible means of support except for Antonio’s largesse, with few friends to support her. These years after her conversion were among the darkest of her life.
III. French influences in American Catholic life

The earliest missionaries in the north and east of the United States and Canada were Jesuits from France. They laid the groundwork for Catholicism in those regions, and their impact on Native Americans was profound. The Indian people kept Catholic beliefs and practices, along with some prayers said in French. This foundation amazed later missionaries.

Among the leading figures were the Sulpicians, as already mentioned. They were French, born either in France or of French families, and had received a French formation, and studied French authors. At the same time, they came to understand the realities of the New World. That is, they understood that it was not possible to easily graft French life and practice on the wild and undeveloped American scene. One need stood out in particular, general Catholic education, and this became part of their pastoral approach. Others in America, like the former Jesuits, also had this same interest. There were other French clergy who were not Sulpicians, a total of about twenty-five.12 In general, their mission was to émigrés from France at the Revolution. These émigrés came from several backgrounds. Some arrived seeking a new life, but the majority fled their homeland because of the Revolution. The story of the foundation of Gallipolis, Ohio is indicative. In 1790, several hundred French immigrants, mostly from Paris, were persuaded by representatives of a development company to come to the United States. They built a settlement in Ohio, called Gallipolis, but they soon discovered that the company had deceived them. They lost their investment and some of them simply returned to the East. Other French people immigrated to escape the slave riots in St. Domingue. In 1793, for example, some 1500 arrived in Baltimore from there.13 In general, French Catholics went to French colonies, whereas French Huguenots went to non-French colonies. By 1820, between 30,000 and 40,000 French citizens had come to America.14 By 1833, interestingly, six out of the twelve American bishops were French.15

In the theological world, the “Enlightenment Catholicism” espoused in France found strong resonance in the United States. The developing American character felt at home with its openness, pluralism, rationality, intelligibility, self-sufficiency, flexibility, adaptability and optimism.16

This was the French context in which Mrs. Seton was living.

IV. The French in Baltimore

Now that Elizabeth Seton was a Catholic, she would need a new support system. She saw Father Dubourg at Mass in New York.17 and then met him formally at a dinner with her friends the Barrys. These Irish Catholics also had relatives in Baltimore who would be part of this new system. She also had children to raise and considered moving to Montreal in Canada to get her children properly educated in her new faith. Besides, she could use her French language skills, but she was not interested in entering the Ursuline community there. At the same time, Dubourg went ahead with his plan to begin a Catholic school in Baltimore. He had investigated enlisting Ursulines for this work—they were already in New Orleans—but this did not work out. As a result, he wanted anyone he could find for this purpose.
Elizabeth’s advisors among the clergy in New York and elsewhere were mainly French. We may add the names, besides Bishop Carroll, of Fathers Cheverus, Matignon, Tisserant, and Sibourd.\textsuperscript{18} With their encouragement, Elizabeth Seton agreed to help Dubourg in Baltimore. Although Bishop Carroll himself did not invite her to come to Baltimore, he approved Dubourg’s initiative. This decision was the one that ultimately led to the foundation of the Sisters of Charity and eventually to the Daughters of Charity. It should be recalled that it was the same Dubourg, now named the first bishop of the Louisiana Territory, who secured the Congregation of the Mission for his new diocese. He was responsible, therefore, for the beginnings of both Vincentian congregations in the United States.

Elizabeth arrived in Baltimore 15 June 1808, where she flowered, enjoying the social life there, especially its French aspects. She confided her happiness to a friend, Eliza Sadler, and her hopes that her daughter Annina was now to be formed “in the true style of the French system for young girls and a model for all who wish their daughters to be religious and discreet.”\textsuperscript{19} A member of her new support system was Mme. Françoise Victoire Fournier, Dubourg’s sister. She had come from Bordeaux to Baltimore in August, 1805 to assist him. She also offered practical assistance to Mrs. Seton in the establishment of her school on Paca Street.\textsuperscript{20} Mme. Fournier, eleven years Elizabeth’s senior, would move back to Bordeaux, and offered similar hospitality to the first Vincentians preparing to move to America—yet another indication of the web of relationships that bound the two communities together.\textsuperscript{21}

Another Catholic family that befriended her was Elizabeth Patterson and Jerome Bonaparte, the brother of Napoleon. Madame Bonaparte would become involved in numerous efforts to retain her husband and her title, and for this purpose she spent many years in Europe. Their son Jerome would attend Mount St. Mary’s College in Emmitsburg and had some contact with Elizabeth Seton.\textsuperscript{22}

She also had friends among the French Sulpicians. In Baltimore, she was supported by Pierre Babade (or Babad), a priest of the archdiocese of Lyons. During the Revolution, he was imprisoned for not taking the Constitutional oath, was taken to Nantes, but made his way to Spain, then to Cuba, and finally to the United States. In Baltimore he became her director and confessor. The first postulant came through Babade. He died 13 January 1846, after Elizabeth’s death, but before the union with France. Another was Francis Charles Nagot, the Sulpician superior, with whom she had disagreements.\textsuperscript{23}

Above all, John Dubois had a strong influence on her development. He was born in Paris in 1764, and after his education, he was ordained a priest in September 1787 in Paris. (He would join the Sulpicians in Baltimore in 1807, until forced out in 1826.)\textsuperscript{24} He was attached to the parish of St. Sulpice, but his work was with the Daughters of Charity at the Petites Maisons, a hospital specializing in the care of children and patients with skin diseases. He would work there for four years.\textsuperscript{25} At the Revolution, he realized the need to flee. By chance, he had been a classmate of Robespierre at Louis le Grand in Paris, and Robespierre gave Dubois some falsified papers allowing him to leave the country.\textsuperscript{26} The Marquis de Lafayette also wrote a letter for Dubois to use in the United States, and this introduced him to James Monroe, the future American president. Dubois traveled in lay clothes, letting his tonsure grow, since only non-
juring priests would be leaving the country. He arrived in Norfolk, Virginia by July 1791, without any English. Nonetheless, he was able to learn it well.  

The culture shock must have been great, but Dubois was flexible. He met and appreciated Protestants, and developed friendships with ministers in Richmond. Like Carroll, he also came to understand the role of lay leadership in American church life. His ministry began with recent French-speaking arrivals living in Norfolk, Alexandria, and Harper’s Ferry, besides Richmond. In this setting, Dubois preferred to have something new in this New World (in other words, not French but American). One example of this is that the émigré French clergy brought with them the expectation that they would work with the government, as they had done in France. Dubois rejected this and, besides, it was against the American constitution. Dubois took over as superior of Elizabeth’s community following Jean-Baptiste David, an office he fulfilled from 1812 until 1826. He continued to support Mrs. Seton with his good sense and managerial skills until her death in 1821. He became bishop of New York, where he served from 1826 to his death in 1842.

All through her years in Baltimore, Elizabeth did not think about founding a religious community one, since her interest was to serve the Church and to guarantee an education for her children. It appears that it was the persistent Dubourg who continued to pursue various possibilities along this line. He told Elizabeth of his ideas about inviting the Daughters of Charity to America. Although he knew of them, he had never really worked with them.

Dubois, with his American preferences, decided instead in favor of a community of American Sisters modeled on the Daughters of Charity for America. It was not out of the realm of the possible to have French Daughters of Charity in America to work with a new community, to help them in their first years. Another possibility was simply for American Sisters to join the Daughters of Charity. A major question here was the constitutional organization of the Daughters of Charity, who had as their superior general the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission. This would eliminate any role for the Sulpicians as well as for the American bishops. For the Sulpicians, this would be a good solution. Following a decree of the Sulpician superior general, Father Antoine Garnier, they were directed to get out of any work except seminary training. The Baltimore Sulpicians, where Garnier had once worked, realized that the founding of the new sisterhood was imminent. The priests met on 14 March 1809 and determined to hand over the direction of the future community to someone else. The matter was urgent since Elizabeth Seton took one-year vows of chastity and obedience to Bishop Carroll on 25 March, and she and the embryonic community began to live and work together in Baltimore on the following 9 June.

The problem with passing on the responsibility to others was that there were no Vincentians in the United States at that time; they arrived only in 1816. Until they arrived, if ever, the Sisters would be the responsibility of the bishop. In any case, the decision was put off but the official request was repeated in 1845, long after Elizabeth’s death. For the moment, the indispensable Dubourg became their first superior.

Another Sulpician to play an important role was John Baptist Mary David. He was born on 4 June 1761 in the diocese of Nantes. When Elizabeth came to Baltimore, David was already the superior of St. Mary’s College in Baltimore (1806-1810). It was his idea to adapt the rule of
the Daughters of Charity to the American situation, since it was, he believed, flexible. He had no special connection with the Daughters of Charity in France, although he had taught in the seminary in the city of Angers where the Sisters were staffing the hospital. Neither did he have any particular connection with the Congregation of the Mission, since he had attended the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris and entered the Sulpicians in France. David would succeed Dubourg as the superior of the new community from 1809 to 1811, when he moved to Kentucky.

V. The Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s

Elizabeth was now called Mother Seton after her vows of 1809. She had evidently resolved her questions about providing for her children and about her own role in the Church. By 9 June she and four other candidates for the new community had begun to dress alike in religious attire, similar to her simple black dress, shoulder cape, and white cap trimmed with a black band. They were living temporarily in Baltimore, in a house provided by the Sulpicians.29

It had already been decided, however, that they would move to Emmitsburg, a small town north and west of Baltimore. This town already had a school, Mount St. Mary’s, which would eventually become a seminary. Janet and Robert Fleming sold their property to Dubois, Dubourg, and Samuel Cooper, who jointly held the title, for the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s until the community was incorporated in the State of Maryland in 1817. Unlike many of the others who supported her in her previous life, Cooper was not French but American. He had been a sea captain who had lived in England and in the United States, became a convert to the Catholic faith, and he and Elizabeth were brought together by the resourceful Dubourg. Cooper and Elizabeth had similar ideas about religious life as well as the care of the poor, and Dubourg put them in contact, thinking that Mr. Cooper could be a financial support of the new undertaking.30

Elizabeth and the first group of Sisters arrived in Emmitsburg on 22 June 1809, followed by a second group one week later. On 31 July 1809, the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s formally began, living under a provisional rule of life. Dubourg was their first superior.

Since their provisional rule was not sufficient to guide their development, David, as mentioned above, urged the adoption of the rule of the Daughters of Charity.31 It must have been hoped that the French Sisters would come to America to work with the new community. For this reason, Benedict Joseph Flaget, another Sulpician, was asked to obtain a copy of the Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity. He had been named bishop of Bardstown, Kentucky, in 1808 but before his episcopal ordination he went to France. In Bordeaux he interested three Daughters of Charity in joining the American mission, and they wrote to “Our Sisters of Mount Saint Mary’s aspiring to be of the company of the Daughters of Charity.”32 This address is important, inasmuch as it shows that Flaget (and other Sulpicians) held that the future of the Sisters of Charity lay in a union with France.

It is sometimes said that Flaget received the rule, constitutions, and conferences of St. Vincent to the Daughters of Charity from Dominique Hanon, the Vincentian vicar general in Paris. This was impossible, since Hanon was under house arrest in Saint-Pol-sur-Mer and did not return to Paris until 1811. Flaget himself says that “with the permission of your General,
Monsieur Hanon, all the Rules, the Constitutions, and even the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul—all precious treasures—were given to me by the Sister Superior of one of the hospitals in Bordeaux.”

Probably John Mary Tessier, Sulpician superior 1810-1829, had Dubois translate the documents into English.

On this same trip Flaget recruited a Sulpician from the diocese of Rennes, Simon William Gabriel Bruté de Rémur. They left France in August 1810, and, with others, came to America. Bruté taught in Baltimore and Emmitsburg and took a great interest in Mother Seton. He would be important for her spiritual development. His aunt had been a Daughter of Charity for forty-four years before the Revolution, but she did not return afterwards when the Community was reconstituted. The pious Bruté family, especially his mother (the sister of the Daughter of Charity), sheltered the Daughters during the Revolution, as well as other refugees. Bruté knew the spirit of the Sisters well, but less about their rules. He also supplied Elizabeth with copies of Gobillon’s life of Louise de Marillac and Abelly’s biography of Vincent de Paul. Of all those who played a part in the transfer of French spiritual and ecclesiastical culture, the closest connection with the spiritual family of St. Vincent de Paul comes through Bruté.

The three Sisters in Bordeaux did not accompany Flaget and Bruté to America. Napoleon refused to grant the Sisters permission to leave, since it was during this very period that the Daughters were experiencing a schism among their members. Some were giving obedience to one superior general and the rest to another one, a crisis not resolved until 1816. Despite this prohibition, the Bordeaux Sisters still hoped to come to America, as the pioneer Vincentians coming to America discovered in that year. Felix DeAndreis, the superior, wrote: “They are prepared to follow us to Louisiana,” that is, to the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase and not to Emmitsburg. This did not happen, either.

Did Mother Seton want to be a Daughter of Charity? It seems that she did not. She had never met a Daughter, even in Italy, since the Company had not been established there at the time of her visit. She also feared conflicts between the Sister Servant of the French Sisters coming from Bordeaux and herself, a not unreasonable reaction. Besides, the New World of America was now independent, and to want to have a French community would run counter to the new ethos. She also had conflicts with the arrogant and controlling David, the second superior, about matters of life style and details. She was relieved when he left to accompany Flaget to his diocese of Bardstown, Kentucky.

What was the importance of St. Louise and St. Vincent on Mother Seton and the early community? There is little evidence about the influence of Louise de Marillac, except for Mother Seton’s translation of Gobillon’s biography of Louise, the first translation into English, and keeping Louise’s anniversary of death, 15 March, as a special day on which the members of the community could receive communion. As for St. Vincent, Elizabeth translated part of Abelly’s biography for her Sisters, and they understood that in some way they were “numbered among the children of Saint Vincent.” He was their patron. Elizabeth spoke of “our dear father Saint Vincent,” and in her time, two Sisters took varieties of the name Vincent for their religious name (Vincentia, and Mary Vincent), but both withdrew. (One Sister was named Louise, but this was her baptismal name.) Elizabeth composed a meditation on Vincent’s life. She was comforted by the fact that he was (about) fifty years old when he began to develop the Daughters
of Charity, whereas she was only thirty-five. In the community, the first profession of vows took place on Vincent’s feast day, 19 July 1813.42

A major problem to be faced in 1845 with the adoption of the rules of the Daughters of Charity was the issue of teaching boys. The Regulations of the Sisters of Charity of the United States of America mentioned the teaching of girls in article one: “A secondary but not less important one is to honor the Sacred Infancy of Jesus in the young persons of their sex whose heart they are called upon to form to the love of God, the practice of every virtue, and the knowledge of religion, whilst they sow in their minds the seeds of useful knowledge.” As for the Daughters of Charity, the “Particular Rules for the Sister who teaches school” refer only to little girls, equivalently ruling out the education of boys.43 In the case of the foundlings, however, it was permitted to admit both boys and girls, but the boys were to be put into other works by age twelve.44 Nevertheless, the Sisters of Charity continued their care for boys.

Another difference was that the Daughters of Charity in France did not charge tuition for the girls under their care. However, it was precisely to provide support for the new American community that the Academy at Emmitsburg was begun, since the members had few other sources of income besides tuition.

A third difference was the vows taken by the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s. They were determined to be of the same type as the vows of the Daughters, that is renewable yearly.45 Instead of obedience being made to the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, it was made to the Sulpician superior in Baltimore being the “head of the whole company.”46

The Sisters understood, of course, that they were independent, as the opening article of their Constitutions stated: “But although this Institution is the same in substance as that of the Sisters of Charity in France, it will have no connection whatever with the Company or Government of the said Sisters in France or any European country, except that of mutual charity and friendly correspondence.”47 This paragraph had been added to the French rules.

Although the members of the little community were principally American or Irish in origin, two Sisters (also siblings) were born in Martinique, and hence French-speaking.48 This might have been helpful since several French names are listed among the students at the schools, 1809-1821. There is no indication that the girls themselves were French, however, but their names were: Carrere, Chatard, Delarue, Dupestre, Deveraux, Lameneis/Lamennais, Le Grand, Le Roy, Le Breton, Le Clerc, Moranvillé (Moranvilliers), and Seguin.49 All these indications show that the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s were aware of their Vincentian roots and that they had imbibed a certain level of French culture and language. On the other hand, they were also clear that they were an American foundation with a distinct identity.

VI. Toward union with France

Mother Seton died in 1821, at age forty-six. Bruté, her confessor, was there and sketched her on her deathbed. Sr. Mary Xavier (M. Eugénie Mestezzer Clark)50 also recalled the following: “Then I drew near the bed, and knowing how much she loved the French language, above all French prayers, and knowing also the manner in which she liked them said, I repeated
softly, and at intervals, the Gloria in Excelsis and portions of the Magnificat.”51 This sentence is very valuable for the information it gives about Elizabeth’s French connections, particularly the fact that her Sisters knew “how much she loved the French language, above all French prayers.”

After her death, the issue became, as with any new congregation, how to maintain the charism of the foundress or founder. Some elements remained the same. The Sisters lived under St. Vincent’s rule, modified for America, and read or heard his conferences on the rule. However, their Sulpician superiors, particularly Louis-Regis Deluol, continued to press clandestinely for their union with France.

American-born Samuel Eccleston, the Sulpician archbishop of Baltimore from 1834 to 1851, was responsible for the community ex officio. On the occasion of a visit to Emmitsburg (perhaps in 1840 for the fourth provincial council of Baltimore), Eccleston discussed with the Vincentian provincial superior, John Timon, the possibility of Vincentian direction of Mount St. Mary’s, the seminary in Emmitsburg. Included with this offer was the direction of the Sisters of Charity. Timon drew the line at this, since, regarding them as American Daughters of Charity, he could not allow them to continue to charge tuition at their boarding schools (except for the one in Emmitsburg). The archbishop was probably attempting to solve two problems, the direction of both the Sisters and the seminary. In fact, Timon did not accept his offer, probably because Timon’s province was insufficiently supplied with personnel.52

The Sulpicians continued to promote the union with France. As mentioned above, they had been ordered to give up the direction of Sisters, and Jean-Marie Tessier, the Sulpician superior for the United States (1810-1829), had backed away from exercising any government of the Sisters. In 1826, however, with Dubois’s departure for New York, he felt it necessary to renew his responsibilities. For this reason he appointed his Sulpician confrere Deluol as the superior. Archbishop Maréchal gave his agreement.53 Deluol took his responsibilities seriously and began to guide the Sisters more clearly in a Vincentian direction. At first, he was superior 1826 to 1829, but since he lived in Baltimore, he was somewhat inaccessible. His successor was John Hickey, 1829-1841, but Deluol returned to be their final Sulpician superior, 1841-1849.

He saw to it, for example, that Sulpicians coming from France would supply the American Sisters with Vincentian publications, and the Sisters were kept informed about the development of the Miraculous Medal. In 1835 Bishop Chanche of Natchez, Mississippi, yet another Sulpician, brought to Emmitsburg the first medals of the Immaculate Conception (already known as "miraculous medal" in France). Deluol also preferred to engage Vincentians as confessors for the Sisters and preachers of their retreats, thus familiarizing both groups with each other.54

So far as is known, the Sisters had little input into the discussion about union with the Daughters of Charity, and hence the majority of the negotiations took place behind the scenes. Even after the decision was made, there remains very little documentation about the reactions of the Sisters to the plans for union with France. The most telling of these, however, was the decision for the Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati to form their own Congregation, under the guidance of Bishop John Baptist Purcell, a former student at the Emmitsburg seminary. The
separation was led by Mother Margaret George, who entered the Sisters of Charity in 1812. She held that this union was a betrayal of the vision of Mother Seton.

Another issue was a perennial one affecting new communities. If a community was to be a diocesan community, under the direction of a bishop, problems would arise as soon as its Sisters were sent into other dioceses. The government of the community understood this problem and, following the model of the Daughters of Charity, initiated the system of visitatrixes. These Sisters were given delegated powers to make immediate changes in their regions and, in an era of difficult communications, they could represent the superioress general with bishops and pastors. What the community lacked, however, was the papal approval that would free them in some way from local jurisdiction.55

This question also affected their relationship with the Sisters of Charity in Nazareth, Kentucky, begun under the leadership of Father (later Bishop) David, who wanted both control and union. Flaget, the bishop of Bardstown, seemed to think that the Kentucky Sisters were in the same community as the Maryland Sisters, although their habit differed somewhat, as did their rule. Flaget preferred to have them in the same habit everywhere. As early as 1841, he anxiously sought information as to whether the Emmitsburg Sisters were about to adopt the French cornette.56 He asked Deluol whether the two communities were one and the same. Clearly they were not under the jurisdiction of the Daughters of Charity in France, but he understood the conflicts that could arise with houses outside the diocese of origin.57

VII. The union with France

The movement toward a union with France developed, as has been seen, over several years and on several fronts. It was Flaget, although not in a role of authority, who took the initiative to ask Dominique Salhorgne, the Vincentian superior general, to incorporate “our American Sisters” into the Daughters of Charity. The answer was negative, since the Sisters had not made their formation in Paris. Flaget asked again in 1835 since he knew that were already formation programs (the séminaire) in several countries. The answer was a tentative one, since Jean Baptiste Nozo, superior general since 1835, had thought vaguely about a visit to America, during which he could review the situation.58 By 1842, however, his future was doubtful and the matter was deferred again.59

The question of the union of this American community with France was to be discussed at the sixth provincial council of Baltimore, held in 1846. Strangely, Father Deluol, in a memoir prepared for the bishops, claimed that John Carroll founded the Sisters of Charity, under the direction of the “members of Saint Sulpice, Directors of Saint Mary’s Seminary and College of Baltimore, who in the beginning assisted them both in their spiritual and in the temporal concerns….60 There is no evidence in the official acts of this council that the bishops acted on the union. Nevertheless, something must have happened, since Bishop John Joseph Chanche of Natchez in 1848 brought to Paris an official document requesting the union. This personal delivery by a bishop, already traveling in Europe, evidently influenced the outcome of the decision.
The superior general, Jean Baptiste Etienne, and his council reviewed the request in December 1848. According to the minutes, Bishop Chanche reported that there were about 1000 Sisters of Charity, a wildly exaggerated figure. In any case, the council was favorable but asked the Vincentian provincial superior, Mariano Maller, to investigate and prepare a detailed report. In a few weeks, the provincial met with Deluol in Baltimore and the plan moved ahead. Maller visited Emmitsburg, interviewed most of the Sisters individually in October 1849. The approval of the council of the superior general in Emmitsburg was received and the requisite approvals from Paris followed. The Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s, about three hundred in all, took vows as Daughters of Charity on the traditional day specified by St. Vincent de Paul, 25 March 1850. Legally, the American province began on 1 November 1850. This was a major event, since the Sisters of Charity were the first native American sisterhood and by far the largest congregation in the United States, with 368 Sisters in all (followed by the Visitandines with 162 and the Sisters of Loretto with 156.) This history and these numbers emphasize the importance of the union to the rest of the Daughters of Charity.

In the meantime, four Sisters were sent from Emmitsburg to France to become imbued with the spirit and the customs of the Company. They were followed in 1851 by Mother Etienne Hall, the superior, and another Sister. The first four returned to America by October 1850 and presented the habit of the Daughters of Charity. Called “the French costume,” it was formally adopted 7 December 1851, and by 1852 it was worn universally, despite some misgivings.

X. Continuing French influence after the union

Unlike other unions with the Daughters of Charity, the American Sisters were always under local leadership. This was probably not a decision taken in advance, but the realities of American life differed from those across the Atlantic and, besides, the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s already had more than thirty years of experience as an independent foundation. The community continued to be called the Sisters of Charity, and only gradually did they adopt the name “Daughters of Charity.” This was conditioned partly by the legal name of the community in the State of Maryland, but also by the need to maintain their American identity in view of antagonism among the clergy between the French (the older French-dominated episcopacy and the Sulpician-trained clergy), and the Irish (the increasing numbers of Irish priests and eventually bishops.)

Also unlike other provinces, there was no significant French presence among the Sisters. Sr. Desirée Dubreuil was born in St. Lô in 1820, but entered the Community in Emmitsburg in 1851 after the union. It is unknown whether she took vows, since she died on 12 October 1853 in Emmitsburg, where she is buried. She came, undoubtedly as a postulant, with Mother Etienne Hall who was returning from Paris to Emmitsburg.

The only other French Sister was Adelaide Voisin. Born in 1818, she entered the Company in France in 1860 and was sent to Emmitsburg 1864. She returned to France after only three years.

The formation given the American Sisters was not entrusted to French Daughters of Charity either, although the first two had French roots. The first seminary directress was Sr.
Mary Xavier Clark, directress of the original community from 1845 to 1850, and after the union until her death in 1855. She had been born in St. Domingue of French parents. Her successor, Sister Genevieve McDonough, was born in England. However, she entered the Company in 1847 in Paris and had experience of the Community in France (Metz) and in the Francophone mission in Alexandria before coming to Emmitsburg in 1856. She remained there until her death in 1864.  

After the union, whether they appreciated it or not, the Sisters found themselves joined to the Congregation of the Mission, whose members would be their directors, and whose superior general was their superior general. They numbered about forty priests, and were at the time the second largest community in the country. There were some French-born Vincentians in the United States, but few had contact with the Sisters. Of the nineteen American Vincentians in this period born in France, some died before 1850 or left the Congregation before that date. Instead, the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission were mainly of other origins, especially Italian, Spanish and, increasingly, Irish and American. As with the Sisters concerning the Vincentians, so it is virtually unknown what the Vincentians thought about this new addition to their family. Some had worked with the Sisters of Charity before the union, such as at Mullanphy Hospital in St. Louis from 1828 (the connection here is with its Vincentian bishop, Joseph Rosati, who was in charge of the hospital.) He wrote: “I perceive that the Daughters of St. Vincent in America have succeeded perfectly in acquiring the virtues which he bequeathed as a precious inheritance to his Daughters of France.” Other possible connections existed where Vincentians and Sisters of Charity worked in the same place: Charity Hospital in New Orleans, from 1833 for the Sisters; and Donaldsonville, Louisiana, and from 1838 for the priests and from 1845 for the Sisters.

XI. Conclusion

This study has attempted to show the many French influences on Elizabeth Seton and on the union of her community with the Daughters of Charity. They were numerous, such as her own French heritage and the dominance of French clergy, mainly the Sulpicians, in American Catholicism in the first decades of the Republic. These influences undoubtedly eased the way toward the union of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s with the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

John E. Rybolt, C.M.
1 She was beatified by John XXIII, 17 March 1963, and canonized by Paul VI, 14 September 1975, the first native-born American to be so honored.
2 Research into St. Elizabeth Ann Seton has been greatly facilitated by the publication of *Elizabeth Bayley Seton Collected Writings* (3 vols. in 4), as cited below. Also important is the revised edition of her biography by Annabelle M. Melville, ed. Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., 2009, to whom the author is indebted for her insights and suggestions. Melville’s 2 volume biography of Louis William Dubourg (Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 1986), although not cited here, has been important for its references to his life and character. See also Joseph I. Dirvin, *Mrs. Seton. Foundress of the American Sisters of Charity*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962.
4 There were two contemplative groups, Carmelites at Port Tobacco, Maryland, 1790 (still in existence), and Trappists near Pigeon Hill, Pennsylvania, 1802-1805.
10 For example, Bossuet’s *An Exposition of the Doctrine of the Church and his History of the Variation of the Protestant Churches*; sermons of Louis Bourdaloue; Jacques Marsollier, *La Vie de Saint François De Sales, Evêque et Prince*, Paris 1774; Francis de Sales, *Introduction à la Vie Dévôte*, Rouen, 1802.
13 Shaw, *Dubois*, p. 25.
15 Flaget (Bardstown), Cheverus (Boston), Dubourg (New Orleans), Maréchal (Baltimore), David (Bardstown coadjutor), Dubois (New York).
20 Melville, Seton, p. 182.
22 Melville, Seton, p. 182.
23 Herbermann, Sulpicians, p. 221.
24 Shaw, Dubois, p. 104.
25 Shaw, Dubois, pp. 8-9.
26 The source for this is a note from Bishop Bruté, who recalled a conversation he had with Dubois. See Shaw, Dubois, p. 176, note 12.
27 Shaw, Dubois, pp. 16-17.
28 Shaw, Dubois, pp. 20-21.
30 Dubourg, from Montauban, to Henri Eleves, 15 July 1828, copy in ASJPH 1-3-3-2, #102.
31 For the various adaptations of the rule, see Ellin M. Kelly, “The Rule of St. Vincent de Paul and American Women’s Religious Communities,” Conference paper, “Perspectives on American Catholicism, The French Influence on American Women Religious,” Notre Dame University, 20 November 1982; copy in ASJPH.
32 Cited in Melville, Seton, p. 218.
33 Flaget to Etienne, 25 August 1843, original in USA papers, AGC Rome, original in French.
34 Rybolt, Frontier Missionary, p. 60.
44 “Duties of the Sister Servant at the Foundling Hospital,” CCD, 13b, pp. 216-21, especially article 12, p. 219.
47 Constitutions, A-12.4, chap. 1, art. 1, CW, vol. 3b, p. 541.
50 MX Clark was born Eugénie Mestezzer of French parents in Saint-Dominique. The family fled the violence of slave uprisings. Eugénie married a Captain Clark in New Orleans.
51 Mother Seton. Notes by Rev. Simon Gabriel Bruté (Bishop of Vincennes), ed. [Sr. Loyola Law]. (Emmitsburg, MD), 1884, p. 34.
53 Tessier, in Baltimore, countersigned by Maréchal, to Sr. Rose, Emmitsburg, 7 August 1826, 2 pp., original in ASJPH, 7-1-4.
55 Hannefin, Daughters of the Church, pp. 61-62.
56 Flaget, Bardstown, to Deluol, Baltimore, 6 June 1841, original in Sulpician Archives, Baltimore.
57 Flaget, Bardstown, to Deluol, Baltimore, 20 July 1841, original in Sulpician Archives, Baltimore.
58 Flaget to Etienne, 25 August 1843, original in Congrégation de la Mission, Archives of the General Curia, Rome, American papers.
59 Congrégation de la Mission, General Council minutes, vol. 1, p. 204, meeting of 27 June 1842; see also Rosati, Rome, to Timon, at the Barrens, 9 July 1842, transcript in ASJPH, 7-4-2-1; original in American Catholic Archives, Notre Dame University, Timon papers; microfilm version, series F, roll 3, no. 190, original in English.
60 “Sketch of a memoir to be presented to the Fathers of 6th provinc. council of Baltimore held in 1846,” ASJPH, 7-1-4, original. Dubois wrote Propaganda Fide, however, that Bruté was the “real founder.” See Shaw, Dubois, pp. 160-61.
62 Deluol’s diary: entry of 27 April 1849; typed copy in ASJPH 7-1-4, from original in Sulpician Archives, Baltimore.
63 The council approved the union and made the necessary legal decisions on 6 November 1850; these were approved by the archbishop of Baltimore, 15 November 1850; Council Minutes, Daughters of Charity (Emmitsburg), ASJPH 3-3-5: 1843-1853(67).
66 See Shaw, Dubois, pp. 144-45.
67 Source: Mother Etienne’s travel diary, original in ASJPH.
68 These three are mentioned in Lives of the Deceased Sisters, 1890-1898, circular of 1 January 1894 for Voisin; 1852-1869, circular of 1 January 1865 for McDonough.
70 Hannefin, Daughters of the Church, p. 44.