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Visitors view "Do the Good: The Sisters Who Shaped America" at the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton on opening day, March 19. (Courtesy of the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton)



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A new museum exhibit at the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton highlights the role Catholic sisters have played during more than two centuries of American history.

"Do the Good: The Sisters Who Shaped America" opened March 19 with a ribbon cutting ceremony at the Emmitsburg, Maryland museum. The exhibit coincides with the upcoming celebration of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the formation of the United States of America.

Battlefield nurses, school teachers and justice advocates in more modern times — the work of U.S. sisters will be on display at the self-guided exhibit through the spring of 2027, as the endeavor "is dedicated to telling the stories of more than 20,000 religious sisters whose orders trace their lineage to Mother Seton," according to a press release from the shrine.

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"The exhibit explores how these sisters, following Mother Seton's example, served the poor, responded to crises and helped shape education, health care and social services across the United States for more than two centuries and up to the present day," the press release said.

Seton (1774-1821) founded the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's, the first community for apostolic religious women established in the United States. She was also a pioneer in the creation of parochial education in the new country.

In 1975, Seton became the first native-born American to be canonized a Catholic saint.

The exhibit is organized around key periods in American history, the announcement said, noting that the exhibit "begins in the early years of the American republic and follows the sisters' work through the Civil War."



Artifacts from Sr. Anthony O'Connell's medical bag on display in "Do the Good: The Sisters Who Shaped America" exhibit at the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. (Courtesy of the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton)

In that epochal event, sisters served as nurses on the battlefield, while in the 20th century sisters "cared for the sick during pandemics, expanded nursing education and responded to the challenges of industrialization, immigration and global conflict."

In more recent times, the sisters' ministries have expanded to include "global missions, health care innovation, advocacy for civil rights and outreach to communities affected by poverty, illness and displacement."

Rob Judge, executive director of the Seton Shrine, said that the narrative of the exhibit — told through stories and historical artifacts — "remind us that the charitable work Mother Seton began is still unfolding."



Sr. Regina Bechtle of the Sisters of Charity of New York delivers remarks at the opening of "Do the Good: The Sisters Who Shaped America." (Courtesy of the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton)

"The women featured in this exhibit responded to the challenges of their times — war, disease, poverty and social change with love and compassion," Judge said in a statement.

"Their example reminds us that the call to serve Christ in the poorest among us through direct, personal service, does not end with them. It continues in every generation, inviting each of us to carry that spirit of service forward."

Among those attending an opening ceremony on March 19 were members of the Sisters of Charity Federation. Others included Sr. Regina Bechtle, representing the Sisters of Charity of New York, which donated many of the artifacts on display.

"The Sisters and Daughters of Charity have served people from the whole panorama of languages, colors and cultures that make up these United States of America," Bechtle said.

Others attending the ceremony included Barbara Bozzuto of the National Leaders Council of the Seton Shrine, and Robyn Kress, president of the Ascension Foundation and a member of the National Leaders Council.

Ascension, one of the largest Catholic health care systems in the United States, is the presenting sponsor of the exhibit.