

Sisters of Charity Center
6301 Riverdale Avenue
Bronx, NY 10471-1093

Phone: 718.549.9200
FAX: 718.884.3013
www.scny.org



About Sisters of Charity & *Doubt*

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Q: Is *Doubt* a true story?

A: No. *Doubt* is a brilliant work of fiction.

The movie's Sr. James is loosely based on Sr. Margaret (Peggy) McEntee, S.C. She was known as Sr. Marita James when she was playwright John Patrick Shanley's first grade teacher. Sr. Peggy now teaches religion in a girls' high school in Manhattan.

The movie's Sr. Aloysius, the "tough love" principal, is not based on any particular Sister of Charity.

Q: Why do the Sisters in *Doubt* wear those clothes?

A: The Sisters in *Doubt* wear clothing ("the habit") that identifies them as Sisters of Charity.

In 1803, Elizabeth Seton's ailing husband, William, died in Italy, where he had gone in the hope of restoring his health. While there, the Setons were hosted by Italian business friends, the Filicchi brothers, in Leghorn (Livorno). Elizabeth adopted the mourning attire of Italian upper class widows of that time. When she returned home to New York City, she continued to wear the clothing, which included a mourning bonnet.

When she began the Sisters of Charity in Maryland in 1809, the first members wore their own clothing. However, by 1812, when they pronounced religious vows, they all wore an adaptation of Elizabeth Seton's mourning dress, including a cap or bonnet (not a veil). This became the habit of the Sisters of Charity and is what the women religious characters wear in the film *Doubt*, set in 1964. Our Sisters wore this habit until 1968.

Since then, Sisters of Charity have had the choice of wearing simple, appropriate, contemporary dress.

The Sisters of Charity also wear a simple circular pin that says "Sisters of Charity of New York" as an identifiable sign.

Q: Why are the Sisters in that school in *Doubt*?

A: The Sisters of Charity are recognized leaders in Catholic education.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the foundress of the Sisters of Charity, opened the first free school for girls in the United States, in Emmitsburg, MD, in 1810. She sent three Sisters to New York in 1817 to care for orphans. They opened St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum, the first of 20 child care institutions that would be established over the next 160 years. Among these is the The New York Foundling which was begun in 1869 by Sr. Mary Irene Fitzgibbon.

The Sisters opened a free school in 1822. Now known as St. Patrick Old Cathedral School, it is New York's first and oldest parochial school. It is still in operation on Mott Street. Over the next 100 years, Sisters of Charity opened and staffed almost every parish school in the Archdiocese of New York, as well as numerous high schools and academies. They also founded the College of Mount Saint Vincent (Bronx, NY).

Doubt takes place in 1964, when Catholic education was at its peak in the United States. At that time, the Sisters of Charity of New York administered and taught in over 90 schools throughout the five boroughs of New York City, and in surrounding counties: Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester, Rockland, and Ulster.

Q: What do the Sisters of Charity do today?

A: Today, the 380 Sisters of Charity and their 70 lay associates serve in education and many other ministries, including health care, child care, social services, pastoral care, spiritual development, justice and peace advocacy, and ecological concerns.

In education, the Sisters of Charity of New York:

- serve in 20 elementary schools, nine secondary schools, and five colleges within the Archdiocese of New York.
- are administrators at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton School in Shrub Oak; and Our Lady of Angels School, Sts. Peter and Paul School, St. Raymond's Academy, and Visitation School, all in the Bronx.
- along with the women religious in 12 other communities that trace their roots to St. Elizabeth Seton, continue the work of Catholic education in the United States, Canada, and abroad.

Some of the works sponsored by The Sisters of Charity of New York today include:

- St. Vincent's Hospital & Medical Center, New York
- St. Joseph's Medical Center, Yonkers
- The New York Foundling, New York
- Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center, New York
- Fox House, a Tier II shelter, East Harlem, NY
- St. Elizabeth's Manor, housing for the elderly, Staten Island
- Elizabeth Seton Women's Center, New York
- Sisters Hill Farm, Stanfordville, NY

Most Sisters of Charity of New York live and work in the greater New York area. They also serve the indigenous Mayan people in several missions in Guatemala.