



Remembering Mother Mary Michael

Grace on the Horizon

The beatification process of our Founder, Arnold Janssen, was initiated in 1932 as commissioned by the 6th SVD general chapter. The Sisters showed great interest in it and Fr. Grendel kept the Sisters informed about the individual stages. Mother Mary Michael herself commended this important intention to the Sisters: *“I am confident that all the Sisters will cheerfully and zealously try to comply with the wishes of Fr. Superior General. What a great grace it would be for the whole Congregation if our blessed Founder would be raised to the honors of the altar in the not so distant future. Let us do all in our power to achieve this aim through the practice of virtue and steadfast prayer.”*¹

Some eighty-three years have passed, and today her words come alive again as guiding thoughts at this significant moment of our history as a Congregation; namely, the opening of her own beatification process. What does M. M. Michael care about earthly honors? She once said: *“We need not think that the Church will canonize us, but we should live in such a way that our Sister companions will canonize us after our death.”*² The step now taken leading to her beatification is our way of reaching out into the horizon for that grace, uniquely her own, by which the holy triune God, through her, will unreservedly enrich the lives of many. With expectant faith, we claim her words as our own: *“What a great grace it would be for the whole Congregation... Let us do all in our power to achieve this aim through the practice of virtue and steadfast prayer.”*

Æ Heart totally for God

M. M. Michael lived in an atmosphere of faith, in a world of supernatural values. God was the sun of her life and it was around him

¹ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 199

² Burning Lamps, p. 133

that her thoughts and love revolved.¹ Her practice of walking in the presence of God deepened this union and she frequently recommended this exercise to the Sisters, together with the sanctifying practice of ejaculatory prayer.² Whenever she walked through the cloister corridors or in the garden she usually had a rosary in her hand; she was either saying the beads or ejaculations. She belonged to those graced, fervent souls who encircle the world with the mighty arms of prayer.³

The making of a Saint

Heroism in the practice of Christian virtues is the touchstone of holiness. M. M. Michael strove for perfection in religious life; her practice of virtue was utmost,⁴ hence, she never ceased emphasizing the importance of this constant striving for holiness: “...of course we can never hope to be holy like God but we can strive for it -- not for the holiness of a saint but for the holiness of God himself.”⁵ In one of her exhortations she pointed out the attitude of the Founder, who, in the course of time, acquired the reputation of being a mild, kind, just and genial father: “by consciously striving and working on his character he brought it to a really heroic and serene state so that he accepted all with mildness and geniality and treated requests with fairness.”⁶

As a mentor and guide of souls, M. M. Michael herself knew that striving for holiness was no easy path. “The passions can be very troublesome, but wherever there is true humility and sincere striving for virtue, there the Holy Spirit and his love reigns.”⁷ To this striving for holiness also belonged renunciation and spiritual battle.⁸ “We must put up with all kinds of individuals. We should even seek out those who are least appealing to us. We may not like this about one Sister and that about another. God created everybody and arranged all things so we might have an opportunity to practice self-control.”⁹ Finally, it also involved sacrifice, even joyful sacrifice.¹⁰ “Sisters who have to struggle with faults of character can become the best Sisters,

¹ Burning Lamps, p. 117

² *ibid.*, p. 118

³ cf. *ibid.*, p. 119

⁴ H. Fischer, Mutter Maria Michaela, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitbegründin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/ August 2013), p. 9

⁵ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 172

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 170

⁷ Burning Lamps, p. 129

⁸ cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2015

⁹ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 170

¹⁰ cf. *ibid.*, p. 172

provided they make no truce with their faults and earnestly try to get rid of them."¹¹

We can perceive how much she herself had to struggle in this exercise of heroic love from a letter to Arnold Janssen (undated ca. Oct/Nov 1893). Here she writes about the Sister in charge: *"Dear Fr. Superior, No wonder I lack natural respect, love, and trust. But Your Reverence should try to put himself in my place. I just force myself and battle against my feelings because I should not and will not offend God."* On the other hand, she wrote in a report (22 January 1893): *"Sister in charge is remarkable for hard work, goodness, friendliness and wisdom."*¹² On a slip of paper we find these jottings in M. M. Michael's handwriting: *"O God whenever my heart grows restless or anxiety oppresses my soul, let me not cease to say, 'Jesus meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto Thine! Veni, Sancte Spiritus! Lift up your eyes to the mountains, whence help shall come to you!'"*¹³ The Sisters wrote of her thus: *"As far as striving for virtue was concerned, she was our best model. All the Sisters agree that we had a saintly Reverend Mother."*¹⁴

Gratitude, the Hallmark of her faith

Gratitude was one of M. M. Michael's outstanding virtues, something very dear to her heart. Just as she never forgot the least good deed that others did for her, so likewise she was ever grateful to her divine Benefactor. *"Oh how grateful we must be..."* were words frequently found on her lips. One morning at breakfast, she reminded the Sisters of the many gifts God gives them daily and of their duty to be grateful. Mentioning that part of the blessing at meals, *"We thank you, almighty God, for all your benefits,"* she told them always to say it with devout attention. After breakfast, when she led the prayers and came to these words, she was so touched that she could scarcely continue.¹⁵

In her memoirs, a Sister wrote: *"Whenever M. M. Michael received anything for the convent she thanked the benefactor profusely and then asked us to thank God."*

¹¹ Burning Lamps, p. 161

¹² cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 170 – see footnote

¹³ Burning Lamps, p. 126

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 145

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 120

Furthermore, she trained the Sisters to be grateful not only for the pleasant, but also for the unpleasant things of life. She urged the sick especially to sincerely thank God for suffering; God intends suffering to be a gift.”¹

Cheerfulness is holiness

It often happened that visitors remarked about the Sisters’ cheerfulness; “*That comes from perpetual adoration, especially from nocturnal adoration,*” was the ready reply of M. M. Michael. “*That’s what makes the Sisters so happy and so cheerful.*”² Joy was another thing that played an important part in M. M. Michael’s training program. “*A dark countenance has no place in the convent. Our holy habit is a garment of joy, not of sadness.*”³ Her cheerfulness seems to have been outstanding, for all the Sisters made mention of it in their reminiscences, assuring us that it contributed greatly to their happiness in the cloister.⁴ She was happy with the happy, delighted in telling humorous stories, and her hearty laugh was contagious. This hearty joyousness which made her radiate sunshine and happiness was but a consequence of her unconstrained naturalness, sincerity and uprightness.⁵ “*A cloistered Sister never has any reason to be sad... rather she must cultivate a cheerful spirit and always remember that the only thing she has to do is to give joy to the good God and to rejoice in his goodness.*”⁶ Many of the Sisters tell that it was only in the cloister that they first came to know and to appreciate the important role that pure joy plays in human life.⁷

Endnote

This maiden issue of “*Remembering Mother Mary Michael*” aims at drawing up sketches about the life, spirituality and legacy of our beloved Co-foundress, whose beatification we look forward to with eager faith. The more we get to know her, the more we will appreciate her person and her teachings. Grace will have us be surprised at the exceptional blessing we have in our noble and praiseworthy Co-foundress and first Superior General, Mother Mary Michael.

¹ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 174

² *ibid* p. 170

³ *Burning Lamps* p. 106

⁴ *ibid* p. 169

⁵ *ibid*, p. 106

⁶ *ibid*, p. 170

⁷ *ibid*, p. 170