



Sister-Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration

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Remembering Mother Mary Michael

Mercy, the second name of love

While the fast-changing modes of our time are a welcome development in many aspects of life and living, some fundamental and pristine values, especially love, are losing their rightful place in the heart of man; “whom God has created through love, and through love continues to hold in existence. Certainly, man cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator.”¹

Love impels us to celebrate this Year of Mercy! Through it Pope Francis offers the global community new opportunities with far-reaching possibilities to reclaim this basic disposition of man’s being, called love. Ambiguous as it is often experienced, the Holy Father in this Jubilee Year leads us back to love’s primeval essence both in our understanding and practice of it. He paints for us a finer landscape of love, and that is: “mercy, as the second name of love.”² “God can’t help but love us.”³ “He has compassion for humanity and sent his Son to heal, to regenerate, to recreate and to renew it. God’s compassion is not pity: the two things have nothing to do with each other. Instead, God’s compassion is to place himself in the situation of the other, with his Fatherly heart, and this is why he sent his Son. God feels compassion. He presents his Fatherly heart to each of us. God forgives us from within; he forgives because he has placed himself in that person’s heart.”⁴ Where else can love be reclaimed at its purest than in the merciful heart of God?

¹ cf. *Gaudium et Spes* n. 19

² *L’osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 11 Sept. 2015, p. 7

³ Pope Francis, Homily, 29 Oct. 2015, *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, *L’osservatore Romano*, 6 Nov. 2015, p. 12

⁴ Pope Francis, Homily, 30 Oct. 2015, *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, *L’osservatore Romano*, 6 Nov. 2015, p. 12

The first school of mercy

Love, mercy and compassion were not unfamiliar realities for M. M. Michael. Her family was her first school of charity. Their way of life and the faith that bound them together offered her opportunities “to learn to care and take responsibility for others especially the young, the sick and the poor.”¹ “In her parental home in Polsum, the mother of our Adolfine (M. M. Michael’s baptismal name) imbibed the Christian spirit, which she, in turn, imparted to her children as a precious legacy. Her charitable mother had especially implanted in her a selfless, constantly beneficent love toward the poor and sick. Mother Wegener, this mother who was blessed with eleven children, always had the time, the means, and merciful love to help others.”²

“Later, when Adolfine finished the prescribed course to teach in the elementary school, she was offered a position in a little mission school in Rendsburg. Her parents were very much opposed to her accepting this position, for it meant that she would be living away from home, and the salary was a mere pittance. However, seeing that she was determined to accept the offered position, they reluctantly gave their consent.”³ “During the ten years that Adolfine taught at the mission school, she was given board and lodging but no fixed salary and she never asked for one. She was well acquainted with the poverty of the little parish and she gladly devoted her time and talents to the good cause, knowing that God would bless her for it.”⁴ “A mysterious power seemed to keep her there. Why did Adolfine remain so long in Rendsburg? She herself tells us the reason. For a long time she felt that she had a religious vocation and she did not wish to change positions until she was definitely certain about this important matter.”⁵

At the onset, one can easily recognize in M. M. Michael, a heart open and docile to God’s gift of mercy. The long years of her life would reveal the full blossoming of this godly attribute of which she not only became a

¹ cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 2208

² cf. H. Fischer, Mutter Maria Michaela, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitbegründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/August 2013), pp. 11 & 12

³ cf. Burning Lamps, pp. 4 & 7

⁴ ibid, p. 8

⁵ ibid, p. 10

trustworthy and convincing witness but an inspiration to others and an example worth emulating.

Imprints of mercy

“Mother M. Michael’s great love for holy Church sprang from her strong living faith. It was also the source of her filial reverence for the Holy See and of her high esteem for the priesthood.”⁶ In this, one discovers her great apostolic heart and the all-embracing compassion with which she supported the missionary work of the church. “Again and again she would prescribe special prayers to be said for the great needs and intentions of the Church of which her missionary activities stood at the head of the list. Whenever she received requests for spiritual assistance from missionaries at the front, she would immediately tell the Sisters, urging them to put forth their best prayerful efforts. She aided the mission not only spiritually, but offered also monetary help according to her means, even beyond her means.”⁷ “God alone knows the alms she sent to poor convents, churches, and families. If she could not help materially, then she energetically had recourse to prayer.”⁸

One need not look far to discover the tenderness of her compassionate heart. “Her motherly solicitude and her readiness to help others was a fundamental trait of her character. As a superior, she had a clear and penetrating eye of a mother and could see at once, and with certainty, if things were not going well with a Sister. At such times no pressure of work could deter her from doing all that she possibly could to help the Sister. A Sister wrote: ‘One day I felt very depressed and M. M. Michael noticed it at once. She called me to her office and in a true motherly fashion tried to console me. To her own words she added a short reading from the book *Joyful Paths to God*. Then making the sign of the cross on my forehead, she dismissed me. The result was that the dark clouds that had overshadowed me lightly rolled away.’”⁹

⁶ Burning Lamps, p. 123

⁷ cf. *ibid.*, p. 123

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 105

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 104

“Mother M. Michael’s example of love of neighbor reveals also her sense of delicacy and graciousness in dealing with others. She had a very fine feeling with regard to judging others. She refrained from saying anything that might discredit another. Again and again the Sisters were able to observe her indulgence in judging people and events and how readily and gladly she excused others. She always showed pity toward the failings of others and saw more error therein than malice. She once said: ‘We must always judge leniently, and we must show more love precisely to those who show less to us; very often they are just the ones who need charity the most.’”¹

“If at some instance she happened to admonish a Sister for something and later found that she had been mistaken, she would rectify her mistake at the first opportunity. If the correction had been given publicly, then she would tell the community that she had been mistaken and would retract what she had said to the Sister. If on the other hand, a Sister committed a fault and later on made up for it, then that was the end of it as far as M. M. Michael was concerned. She never brought it up again nor allowed others to do so. ‘We must forgive as the good God forgives,’ she said. ‘He never reverts to our repented sins but treats us just as if we had never failed.’”² Mutual acceptance and forgiveness was at the heart of her exhortation on sisterly love. “No Sister,” she said, “should retire at night feeling a grudge against another Sister. Compatibility is an indispensable prerequisite for conventual living.”³

Love, the final word

“It is not in our power not to feel, or to forget, an offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession. Forgiveness is the fundamental condition of the reconciliation of the children of God with their Father and of men with one another. Forgiveness is also a high-point of Christian prayer; only hearts attuned to God’s compassion can receive the gift of prayer. Finally forgiveness bears witness that, in our world, love is stronger than sin.”⁴

¹ Burning Lamps, pp. 108-109

² *ibid.*, p. 109-110

³ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 170

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 2843-2844