



Sister-Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration

A Generalate Publication – Bad Driburg, Germany

Volume 1 | No. 3 | MAY 2016



Remembering Mother Mary Michael

Life's Canticle of Love

“Each day of our religious life must be a hymn of praise to the love of God.”¹

More as heart-drawn-words rather than a thoughtful counsel, this saying, from M. M. Michael discloses profoundly something of her inner life of faith.

“Each day...”

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is his faithfulness.” (Lam. 3, 32-33)

To welcome every new day as a gift of divine providence and as an opportunity for a new beginning is the hallmark of Christian faith. ***It is as it were the rhythm that sets the mood of Life's Canticle of Love.*** “We firmly believe that God is master of the world and of its history. But the ways of his providence are often unknown to us.”² We know however that in everything God works for good for those who love him.” (Rom. 8: 28)

“Mother M. Michael once wrote to the Sisters: ‘We must live by faith; and look upon everything that happens to us and around us with the eye of faith; for everything comes to us from God, either directly or indirectly.’”³ “The will of God was the guiding star, so to speak, of her life; come what may she always remained at peace. ‘What God does is well done,’ she would say.”⁴

“If severe trials or painful losses through death came to her, she at once referred all to the adorable will of God, as if to say, ‘Everything is in order and just as it should be.’ Not even sudden blows could disturb her peace and composure.

¹ Burning Lamps, p. 127

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 314

³ Burning Lamps, p. 117

⁴ *ibid*, p. 119

Hence, many have observed how these fortified her soul, gave her peace and courage, and made her generous and great-hearted.”¹ Certainly, her trustful faith resolutely affirmed that “every joy and suffering, every event and need can become the matter of thanksgiving which, sharing in that of Christ, should fill one’s whole life: ‘Give thanks in all circumstances.’ (1 Th. 5: 18)”²

“Each day of our religious life...

*“I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being...”* (Ps. 104, 33)

“For a servant of the Holy Spirit, every day should be a new Pentecost; every breath, ‘Come, Holy Spirit!’; every deed, ‘Send forth your Spirit!’; and every heartbeat, ‘Lord Jesus send us from the Father the Holy Spirit!’”³ With these words M. M. Michael revealed her exceptional, intense, personal and intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit. ***It is the unique melody by which her Life’s Canticle of Love is sung.***

“On the occasion of her 70th birthday, she reflected on her vocation to a Congregation especially dedicated to the Holy Spirit, on the outcome of the many difficulties she had encountered in life, and on the countless graces and blessings that had entwined her life like a golden chain. She humbly acknowledged that she owed everything to the Holy Spirit.”⁴

“Grace is first and foremost the gift of the Holy Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us. But grace also includes the gifts that the Spirit grants us to associate us with his work, to enable us to collaborate in the salvation of others and in the growth of the Body of Christ, the Church.”⁵ “All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. ‘*Christian perfection has but one limit, that of having none*’ (St. Gregory of Nyssa).”⁶

“A hymn of praise to the love of God...”

“My heart overflows with a goodly theme; I address my verses to the king;

¹ Burning Lamps, p. 119-120

² cf. CCC, n. 2648

³ Burning Lamps, p. 151

⁴ cf. *ibid*, pp. 151-152

⁵ CCC n. 2003

⁶ *ibid* n. 2013, 2028

my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe...” (Ps. 45, 1)

“The prefect of students, Fr. Herman Wegener, SVD, the uncle of Adolfine Tönnies, substituted for the founder, Arnold Janssen in giving spiritual instruction on religious life to the young community of Missionary Sisters whenever the latter is prevented. Training in chanting and the introduction to the liturgy was assigned entirely to him. This was actually Fr. Wegener’s area of expertise, and he was not easily contented in this field.

His niece Adolfine played the harmonium. She was the first organist of the small community. She played quite well already, but she had no formal training in harmony. That would now be made up for. Fr. Wegener saw to it that she received this training. He himself was present at the lessons and took care of the rebukes, reprimands, and corrections, for which he possessed more than the normal talent. For his part it was not an obsession for criticizing, rather, it was training in humility. Sr. Gregoria narrates: ‘Already in the first days after her entrance, Adolfine Tönnies had to lead the singing and also play during the communal singing lessons that Fr. Wegener conducted. Humiliations were not wanting for her during these lessons. But I never observed any agitation or sensitivity in her. Fr. Wegener trained us also in choral singing during this time. It was truly laborious. Since we were still so few, we all had to sing – with the voice that we had. Due to poverty there were not enough books, and so the notes and text of the songs had to be written on the blackboard and practiced until we mastered them. A discarded harmonium from the mission house screeched in between. Despite all the toil, however, we had much pleasure in practicing, and we practiced the Mass for the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul with great enthusiasm. Fr. Wegener himself celebrated the holy Mass. Afterwards he had his niece called to the reception room, and she and we received our first praise from him, whereby he said that we had demonstrated good will. Later, though, we often spoke about this first Mass in the cloister with much laughter.’

Even Adolfine’s teacher in harmony narrated how thorough Fr. Wegener was in reprimanding and humiliating his niece during the lessons, and so he – the teacher – felt compelled to cover up as best as he could the noticeable mistakes of his student. He marveled indeed at how simply and calmly her Westfalian temperament endured it all in patience. Unflinching, she showed only one interest: to learn, and with her ability to comprehend quickly, she made progress immediately. After six months she could take full charge of the choir.

As an ascetic and a keen observer of human nature, Fr. Wegener had only the spiritual benefit of his niece in mind. He knew that it was helpful to her, and that he could demand difficult things without having to fear of discouraging or even breaking her. Later she occasionally shared with humor about this rigid pre-novitiate under her reverend uncle; it had agreed with her very well. In 1885 she wrote about this time in retrospect: ‘I thank all who were helpful to me in attaining my wonderful goal! I thank God, who graciously called me to his service; I will never withdraw from him. Led to this house through the adorable guidance of Divine Providence, I adore the divine will in humility, surrendering to him in all that he ordains for me in time and in eternity.’”¹

Early on, M. M. Michael had already her Life’s Cantic of Love transcribed in pure and steady manuscripts of virtues. She was constant in these strivings at the same time surrendered trustfully her efforts to the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, who alone made possible for her what she was unable to do even with her goodwill and her best human efforts.

In all certainty it can be claimed that, “the moral life of Christians is sustained by the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.”² Charity on the other hand animates and inspires the practice of all the virtues and “binds them together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3,14). Charity therefore, which is the greatest and the one that never ends, upholds and purifies one’s human ability to love, and raises it to the supernatural perfection of divine love.”³

Through it all, M. M. Michael showed herself a faithful and zealous servant of the Holy Spirit. Her life was a telling testimony of the power and grace of the Holy Spirit and of his generous blessings to those who love and honor him. She chose as a second motto of her Congregation the liturgical aspiration, *Emitte Spiritum Tuum (Send forth your Spirit)*, and in the early morning hours of all the chapels of the Congregation, the beautiful hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus (Come Holy Spirit)* is sung with joyful enthusiasm, as a tribute of love and gratitude to the Creator Spirit, the God of eternal love.⁴

¹ cf. H. Fischer, Mutter Maria Michaela, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitbegründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/ August 2013), pp. 34-35

² cf. CCC n. 1830-1831

³ cf. *ibid.*, n. 1827

⁴ cf. *Burning Lamps*, p. 150