



Sister-Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration

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Remembering Mother Mary Michael

Treasures of Faith

Then, when photographs were yet new, expensive and rare, snapshots were carefully taken and ingeniously mounted in photo albums as valuable family heirloom for posterity to see and remember. More than just a cherished legacy, each picture in every timeworn photo album has a story to tell. It bears a narrative of a special moment creating nostalgia in the heart, for that reality, though past and gone, lives on in one's memory...in one's own life history.

The Church's vast collection of artworks, music, manuscripts, books, and the like has served posterity through the years. From them we have learned the truths of our faith. For many centuries and for countless generations they served to instruct, to educate and to translate heavenly realities closest to that which our hands could touch and our minds could grasp. Among these stand the images of Saints with their remarkable example of goodness and holiness. Communion with them intensify the longing in our heart for that heavenly promise which we believe to be certain but is not yet ours to have. Frequent gazing and remembering of these Saints, especially those with whom we bear spiritual kinship by reason of experience, devotion and intimate friendship give us the firm assurance and steady courage in this journey called life.

Friendship with Mary

Love for the Blessed Virgin Mary accompanied Mother Mary Michael from childhood on through young womanhood and into the cloister; in fact, it even led her into the religious state. How very often the example of Mary was the strongest magnet which drew her to virginal surrender to God. Mary in her humility, hiddenness, and purity, in her spirit of sacrifice and charity toward God and mankind, was M. M. Michael's model in the spiritual life. She regarded it as a special mark of Mary's favor that she had received the religious habit of an Adoration Sister on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, December 8, 1896, and

that the same feast in 1899 had become the holy day of her first profession.¹ With all her strength she fostered devotion to our Blessed Mother among her Sisters. She often pointed out to the Sisters: “All of us bear the name of Mary, and on this account we are so close to the most Blessed Virgin. She called herself the handmaid of the Lord, and we are handmaids of the Holy Spirit. Let us show by our deeds that we are hers, that we follow and imitate her. This should not be difficult for us, since our cloistered life is so very similar to her hidden life.”²

Everything speaks of Jesus

“Over the centuries, the Church has always looked to Mary as the *summa contemplatrix*. From the annunciation to the resurrection, through the pilgrimage of faith that reached its climax at the foot of the cross, Mary persevered in contemplation of the mystery dwelling within her. Following Mary’s example, the contemplative is a person centered in God and for whom God is the *unum necessarium* (cf. Lk 10:42), in comparison with which all else is seen from a different perspective, because seen through new eyes. For the contemplative, everything ‘speaks’ of the Most High!”³

For M. M. Michael the cloister is an icon of Nazareth and she encouraged the Sisters to be “busy with Jesus and for Jesus.”⁴ In utter spontaneity she contemplated on Mary as having “lived a peaceful, hidden life in the little house at Nazareth. Nothing outstanding has been recorded about this life, and yet it was the holiest life ever lived.”⁵ Steeped in prayerful silence, M. M. Michael could open her heart for that heroic and apostolic love for the world and the mission. Therefore she could inspire the Sisters and express her conviction of faith that “in the silence of the cloister, we too can and should, after Mary’s example, become holy, please God and assist Jesus in his work of saving the world.”⁶

A Cloister for Mary

In 1882 the China Mission in South Shantung was assigned to the Society of the Divine Word as their field of labor. Later this province was divided into two

¹ A Thought-a-day Guide in Striving for Religious Perfection, May 9

² *ibid*, May 11 & 12

³ Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere* on women’s contemplative life, Pope Francis, June 29, 2016, n. 10

⁴ A-thought-a-day Guide in striving for Religious Perfection, May 13

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

vicariates of Yenchowfu and Tsingtao, which celebrated its golden jubilee in 1932. At that time the two vicars apostolic, Bishop Augustine Henninghaus and Bishop George Weig, told M. M. Michael that the finest jubilee gift they could receive would be the establishment of a convent and chapel of perpetual adoration in the mission district. Mother M. Michael was quite enthusiastic about the idea, and she promised the bishops to send Sisters to China at the earliest opportunity. The opportunity was not long in coming. The Franciscan Sisters Missionaries of Mary, desired to sell their student's vacation house in Tsingtao. Bishop Weig advised M. M. Michael to buy the house which was being offered very reasonably, and she readily followed his advice.⁷

In a detailed circular M. M. Michael described all negotiations in connection with the foundation and concluded with these words of encouragement: "God willing, next year a number of Sisters will make a small beginning in Tsingtao. This will mean new sacrifices for the Congregation not only in a material sense but also – what will be felt most of all – by parting with our Sisters. But we are willing to make these sacrifices for the love of God and souls. It is a matter of importance which can no longer be postponed. If anywhere, it is in China we wish to have a place of perpetual prayer. There we must send adorers who day and night raise their hands to the Eucharistic King of Peace so that he will draw all to himself and grant them peace under his tender scepter."⁸

It was fortunate that the superior of Philadelphia, Sr. M. Baptista, had to go on visitation to the Philippines. On September 29, 1931 she left Philadelphia, visited St. Louis and, accompanied by Sr. M. Custodia who was appointed to the Philippines, boarded the steamer for the Far East. On November 6 they were in Shanghai and a few days later in Tsingtao. The report of the visitatrix was generally positive but was sharp enough to see that much had still to be done before the building was ready to function as an Adoration Convent. The Sisters remained three weeks in Tsingtao so as to prepare as well as possible for the arrival of the Sisters appointed to the new foundation.⁹

On June 5, 1932 the appointments for the convent in Tsingtao were published: Sr. M. Confirmata (superior), Sr. M. Ursula, Sr. M. Samuele, Sr. M. Bartholomäa, Sr. M. Paulina, Sr. M. Adoratrix and Sr. M. Wendelina. The official "sending-out" ceremony took place on August 7. On this occasion Fr. Gier, the SVD superior general, pointed out that such a departure ceremony for

⁷ Burning Lamps p. 85

⁸ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 165

⁹ *ibid*, p. 165-166

contemplative religious was something new in the Church: “We welcome this modern development all the more when we are convinced that the most important means of saving souls does not consist alone in external organization but chiefly in prayer and penance exercised by those who are loyal and totally consecrated to God. Being sent out to the mission is something very beautiful. It is like the breath of the Spirit as it was at the first Pentecost at the beginning of the Church.” The Sisters left on the 1st of September, and on October 19 the telegraphic message “Happily arrived” came back to Steyl.¹

On October 20, 1932 the convent was officially blessed by Bishop Weig.² It was dedicated to Mary, the Immaculate Spouse of the Holy Spirit. Built on a hill from where one had a fine view of the China Sea, the little chapel was a beacon of hope for the missionaries working down in the lowlands of that vast mission-field, China.³ For M. M. Michaela, the China foundation was her greatest joy in her long years of service to the Congregation. Together with the Motherhouse it was the ninth and the last convent she established.⁴

The end of World War II however did not bring peace to China. As the Red danger became ever more imminent it was deemed best for the safety and welfare of the Sisters to recall them.⁵ January 26, 1949 saw the end of the China Mission, for the Sisters were ultimately expelled from the country.⁶ Seventeen years in that most cherished mission country, the Sisters took along with them many happy memories of these all too few years in China.⁷

A few existing photo collection of the China foundation confirms in utter clarity the two-fold essence of our Eucharistic vocation: contemplation and mission, which before our Eucharistic Lord, who is himself the center and goal of mission, transcends all physical boundaries. Invoking the holy triune God we often pray: “May we, like Mary, be constantly open to the Holy Spirit’s action. Strengthen us for fruitful dedication in the service of the Church and for the needs of mankind, that thus we may share in Christ’s mission of salvation. Amen.”⁸

¹ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 166

² *ibid*, p. 167

³ cf. Burning Lamps p. 86

⁴ cf. H. Fischer, Mutter Maria Michaela, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitgründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/August 2013), p. 128

⁵ cf. Burning Lamps p. 86

⁶ date: Generalate Archives / cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 288

⁷ cf. Burning Lamps p. 86

⁸ Vow Formula