



Remembering Mother Mary Michael

Portrait and Sketches

Still lifes are interesting pieces of art work. They challenge artists to create vitality and movement from what seems to be static and dull. Equally challenging for the viewers is the experience of a lively dialogue and dynamic rapport with the masterpiece. The rendezvous of these ideals spells out success in which a bond of affection emerges, making the piece of art an impetus of noble ideals, genuine altruism and holy aspirations.

In the maiden issue of *Remembering Mother Mary Michael*, it was explicitly expressed that the aim of this series was to draw up sketches about the life, spirituality and legacy of our beloved co-foundress, whose beatification we look forward to with eager faith, so that the more we get to know her, the more we will appreciate her person and her teachings.¹ For the past year we made random sketches of her life and person, her struggles and virtues, her charisma and spirituality. To those among us who have read extensively about her, it may rightly be an experience of a rediscovery and a greater appreciation of her remarkable giftedness and concealed greatness. For some of us who knew her only by name and readers who may have encountered her for the first time, the initial sketches may aptly be like sample portraits of our future saint at different angles, half-finished yet sufficient enough for us to have a glimpse of her inner beauty and holiness. Together we are assured that in the dear Servant of God, we intuit the attractiveness of Grace, the Artisan of holiness.

Akin to still lifes in an art exhibit, the upcoming series will present in succession the different lifeworks of M. M. Michael, beginning with the nine foundations that she established during her term of office, which ended quite unexpectedly at her death after a brief liver ailment.

A Grand Panorama

An important step in the development of the Sisters' Congregation was the construction of a convent. On July 14, 1888 with Maria Stollenwerk (Mother Maria Virgo) as leader, the four "maids," who wanted to join Arnold Janssen's

¹ Remembering Mother Mary Michael, Endnote, Vol.1, No.1, November 2015

foundation moved into the dilapidated double house near the mission house.¹ The seminarians invented the name, the little convent of the “Three Lindens,” for these trees were close by their new home.² On December 7, 1889 together with new candidates, they moved into their second home, the former Villa de Rijk, which had been a Capuchin monastery since 1882. The following day was then regarded as the foundation day of the Missionary Sisters.³ On September 27, 1890 the Sisters moved again, this time into the Notre Dame Convent near the village church, which had been used by the Augustinians of Essen since 1876.⁴

Meanwhile, on May 1, 1891 Adolfine Tönnies (M. M. Michael) joined the fledgling community as one of the 16 postulants of a religious congregation that did not yet exist, without habit or rule, but full of trust in the spiritual leadership of the Father Founder of the Society of the Divine Word. She gladly put up with the poverty of the house and later stated: “I believe I have never laughed so much as in the first year of my religious life.”⁵

In the meantime, the plan concerning the cloistered section did not gather dust. Even at the time of the very first profession ceremony on March 12, 1894, the number of Sisters and candidates was so large that an extension of the house was necessary. The extension was all the more urgent as at this time the plans for a cloistered section were already fixed. On November 15, 1894 a part of the new building could be blessed. For the second stage of construction an upper church was planned, as well as two chapels on the ground floor, the bigger one for the Missionary Sisters and the smaller for the Cloistered. The two chapels were planned face to face with the two high altars on either side of a dividing wall. There was one sacristy for the two chapels. The cloistered Sisters should live on the eastern side of the Church, the Missionary Sisters on the west. On December 7, 1896 the two chapels were blessed and the Founder celebrated the first Mass in the chapel of the future Cloistered Sisters. The day after, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the cloistered section was formally established. This marked the foundation day of the Adoration Sisters.⁶ As the two young communities steadily increased in number, a new building was constructed; this was now the fourth house and eventually, this became the Motherhouse of the Missionary Sisters, the Sacred Heart Convent. The Missionary Sisters moved into this new building on October 22, 1904; and on the 31st of October, the

¹ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 27

² cf. Josef Alt, *Journey in Faith, The Missionary Life of Arnold Janssen*, Rome 2002, p. 337

³ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 27

⁴ cf. *ibid.*, p. 28

⁵ cf. *ibid.*, pp. 41-42

⁶ cf. *ibid.*, pp. 29-30

Cloistered Sisters moved into their Holy Spirit Convent, which was then situated on the other wing of the building. *Both convents remained under the same roof.*⁷

During the general chapter of the Society of the Divine Word, on November 5, 1909, a few months after the death of Arnold Janssen, Fr. Nikolaus Blum was elected superior general. On December 9, 1909 the general chapter of the Missionary Sisters began. With the election of the superiors general, Sr. Theresia was re-elected for the Missionary Sisters and Sr. M. Michael for the Cloistered Sisters. In his speech Fr. Blum spoke about “the Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit in their two branches, Missionary and Cloistered Sisters.” He himself was the highest superior of all three branches. Though this structure proved to be sensible enough during the lifetime of the Founder, after his death it seemed some changes had to be made. The idea of a common superior general for both sections was practically abandoned with the early death of Bl. Ma. Virgo. Still the interdependence of the two sections remained strong. The long-term economic dependence of the Sisters on the SVD was a real problem. In August 1910, at the suggestion of Fr. Blum, discussions about the financial separation of the Missionary and Cloistered Sisters from the mission house began. For the very young Congregation of Cloistered Sisters especially this was a great burden because now they would have to pay their own way.⁸

The entire responsibility now rested upon M. M. Michael. She would then have to venture on her first major undertaking, which was the erection of a Motherhouse. This was absolutely necessary for expansion, and besides it was self-evident that the ever-growing missionary branch needed the wing that the Cloistered Sisters were occupying.”⁹

Nebulous Landscape

When M. M. Michael’s plan to build a Motherhouse became known, it met with criticism. Some thought it was too soon for the cloistered branch to build a Motherhouse, and that it would be far better to save the money for future needs. Others considered the proposed Motherhouse too big for a cloistered community, and so on. But M. M. Michael was a true follower of Arnold Janssen. She knew that a Motherhouse was necessary for her growing community; she prayed much; she asked advice; and then, trusting in divine providence, she built. The future proved how prudent she had been. The money

⁷ cf. Josef Alt, *Journey in Faith, The Missionary Life of Arnold Janssen*, Rome 2002, p. 342

⁸ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 119

⁹ *Burning Lamps*, p. 39

which others thought should be saved, would have been swept away in the economic recession following the First World War.¹

Recalling the difficult beginnings of the SVD mission house, it was easier for Arnold Janssen to write, “I am happy that people thought we were stupid. I am also just as happy as I was in 1875 (the year of the foundation of the Society) to hear that no one expects anything to come of our house. It often happens that some things are successful even though the majority say it is a hopeless case. People thought I was eccentric and almost mad and, nevertheless, I never gave up hope and with God’s help I was successful.”²

A Vista of Bright Hope

Formed in the school of Arnold Janssen, M. M. Michael realized in her person and in her faithful adherence to his spiritual heritage, the dreams and aspirations of the Founder of which the Motherhouse stands as a brilliant testimony. She counted herself only as an instrument and considered it honor enough for her to have been chosen to erect this beautiful dwelling for her Eucharistic God and his perpetual adorers. The Motherhouse is beautiful in its monastic simplicity and the building operations were entrusted to the SVD brothers, all skilled artisans in their various trades. Everything was in the best hands; nevertheless, M. M. Michael took the responsibility as overseer, for she knew what was practical and superfluous for the cloister. Certainly, the lovely Gothic chapel, where the sacred liturgy is celebrated in all its beauty, is the very heart of the Motherhouse.³

Mother M. Michael dedicated the Motherhouse to God the Holy Spirit, and from there, she guided the Congregation with a firm hand and with a kind understanding heart.⁴ In the course of the years, many ecclesiastical dignitaries visited the Motherhouse and offered the holy sacrifice in the chapel, among them was Pope Pius XII, then Archbishop Eugenio Pacelli, Papal Nuncio to Germany. At the traditional celebration of welcome he remarked: “Greetings to all of you here in the Motherhouse, a place of constant prayer and sacrifice. It gives me great pleasure to be in this sanctuary from which richest streams of grace flow daily to the mission, and be able to offer holy Mass. This is indeed a lovely convent.”⁵

*Miracle or favors received through the intercession
of the Servant of God, M. M. Michael may be communicated to any of our convents.*

¹ cf. Burning Lamps, p. 40

² cf. Josef Alt, Journey in Faith, The Missionary Life of Arnold Janssen, Rome 2002, p. 83

³ cf. Burning Lamps, pp. 39 - 40

⁴ cf. *ibid.*, p. 40

⁵ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 185