



Remembering Mother Mary Michael

The Extravagance of Love

On September 8, 2016, as Pope Francis received the Benedictine abbots in an audience in the Clementine Hall, he spoke a message of faith both intense and challenging: “Do not be discouraged if the members of monastic communities decrease in number or grow old; on the contrary, preserve the zeal of your testimony, even in those countries which today face difficulties, with fidelity to the charism and the courage to establish new communities. Your service to the Church is very precious.”¹ Our Holy Father objectively defined the stark reality of a numeral decline of religious vocations, especially to the contemplative life. He posed however a path that traces the paradox of faith -- the challenge to remain faithful to the charism, even when confronted with difficulties, and the courage to establish new communities despite an obvious decline in membership.

Gifted with a remarkable intellect and keen foresight, Mother Mary Michael was obviously a contemplative religious who was way ahead of her time. Then, when vocations were yet flourishing, she had anticipated in faith and principle the words of Pope Francis for us today. In her letter to Archbishop Bertram of Breslau, asking him to open a convent in his diocese, she frankly stated her case: “To preserve the spirit of the Congregation, it would be good to have several convents. It is good to transfer some Sisters now and then. For these and other reasons, we urgently need a few more convents.”² Her biographer, Fr. Herman Fischer, SVD wrote of her, “M. M. Michael was happy as a queen whenever she could open a new convent of adoration, for it meant that in another place our Savior would always be adored. ‘It is better,’ she once said, ‘to have many convents with a smaller number of Sisters than few convents with many Sisters. In each convent there is another throne of exposition for our dear Savior.’ The thought of all the glory and love that would daily be offered unceasingly to him in the Blessed Sacrament overwhelmed her, especially the realization that in this or that place where formerly

¹ L’Osservatore Romano, Friday, 23 September 2016, p. 8

² cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 137

our Savior had not been adored, he would now always be loved and honored in the sacred Host. ‘How this thought impressed me,’ she said.’¹ It is in this context of a holy restlessness and of unrestrained yearning for the Eucharistic Presence in as many places as possible that as early as January 11, 1913, while as yet the work of building the Motherhouse was far from complete, M. M. Michael suggested to Director General Fr. Hermann auf der Heide, SVD, “We must sooner or later open another convent.”² Two months later, on March 6, she reiterated this same request.³ For her, time was of the essence. The call of love was too impelling to be put off for another moment. Like Mary of Bethany, she desired as it were, to fill the world with the fragrance of Eucharistic Adoration and the beauty of Jesus’ Real Presence.⁴ Cost what it may, she was willing to pay the price and to risk everything.

A New House Brings New Life

God could not be outdone in generosity! As great as her longing might be, swifter still was heaven’s answer. “To everybody’s great surprise – ‘apparently the hand of God, just now when we were looking around for a suitable place for a new convent and had been praying for such a place for ages’ – on May 10, 1913, the vigil of Pentecost, this letter came from the Procurator General, Fr. Carl Friedrich, SVD from Rome: *It seems that the Queen of May wants to give you a nice present. The day before yesterday Msgr. Willemsen invited me to come to him. Now he makes me the following offer: An archbishop from North America has commissioned a German priest to find a Congregation of Sisters dedicated to perpetual adoration for his diocese. The archbishop will do everything for the Congregation and promises it his full protection.... I believe a new house brings new life. A convent in a large city in North America would be a new base for your Congregation. So think about the matter and inform me as soon as possible about the following points: Is your Congregation ready in principle to go to North America?... How many Sisters would be ready to go to America?*”⁵

The thought of founding a convent in the then distant USA never for a moment entered M. M. Michael’s mind: she was too sincerely humble to even think of such a thing. But since the inquiry reached the Motherhouse on the vigil of Pentecost, one could readily discern therein the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁶ As a matter of fact, this was a surprising offer. Philadelphia was the capital city

¹ A-thought-a-day Guide in striving for religious perfection, July 8, pp. 73-74

² Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 130

³ *ibid*

⁴ cf. Jn. 12: 3 ff

⁵ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, pp. 130-131

⁶ Burning Lamps, p. 59

of Pennsylvania and after New York the most important industrial city of the United States.⁷ Further correspondence revealed that the original inquiry came from Msgr. Peter Masson, who was acting in the name of Archbishop Prendergast of Philadelphia.⁸ Msgr. Masson was a German priest born in Ochtendung, Koblenz who was an official of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. He was just as enthusiastic as the archbishop to have an adoration convent in the archdiocese.⁹

A Refuge of Divine Love

The Irish-born Archbishop Edmund Francis Prendergast who had invited the Sisters was the third Archbishop of Philadelphia and was an excellent pastor.¹⁰ Not many months after he was consecrated archbishop on July 26, 1911, he disclosed to an intimate friend, Fr. Benedict Guldner, SJ a desire he had cherished for many years, namely, the establishment of perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in Philadelphia. Fr. Guldner welcomed the archbishop's plan as an inspiration from on high.¹¹

Meanwhile, in Steyl, there was great rejoicing among the Sisters when M. M. Michael broke the news to them on Pentecost Sunday. After an exchange of letters, Archbishop Prendergast and M. M. Michael came to a perfect understanding. Not only did the archbishop guarantee that the Sisters would be well provided for, spiritually and materially, but he also offered to pay half of their travelling expenses. This was M. M. Michael's first encounter with American generosity and she never forgot it.¹² Since the Sisters were contemplatives and so did not have connections to find the means for the purchase or building of a convent, they wondered where the money would come from. But their worries were unfounded. A rich American layman, Cornelius A. Lane, had left a large sum of money to the archbishop for the building of a cloistered convent. It was more than enough for purchasing the land and building the convent. Thus the archbishop, even before he read the careful questions of Superior General Fr. Nikolaus Blum, SVD, had bought the expensive building site in the city and was also willing to build the convent and a fine large chapel and guarantee the maintenance of the Sisters. Though the archbishop expressed the wish that the chapel should be built in such a way that the Sisters could be seen during adoration by the people, he was otherwise open to the wishes of the Sisters. The negotiations proceeded rapidly.¹³

⁷ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 131

⁸ Burning Lamps, p. 59

⁹ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 132

¹⁰ cf. Burning Lamps, p. 59 & Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 131

¹¹ Burning Lamps, p. 60

¹² *ibid* p. 61

¹³ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 132

Love's Abode in the City of Brotherly Love

Those who were chosen for this new mission received their appointment on April 13, 1914, to the delight of all; then for almost a year there was no mention of Philadelphia. Surprisingly on March 12, 1915, an assuring letter from Philadelphia arrived. A modest farewell celebration was then held on April 21. At 8:15 a.m., those going to the US either made their first profession or renewed their vows. In his homily Fr. Blum remarked that the archbishop of Philadelphia surely had enough convents in his diocese, and if he invited the Adoration Sisters and was generous to them, the reason must have been that “he wanted a convent where people would pray day and night before the Blessed Sacrament to implore the blessing of God on his archdiocese. It was a great, indeed a divine idea.” Fr. Blum recommended the journey – due to the war it was quite dangerous – to the protection of St. Joseph, the patron of the Church.¹ On May 18, 1915 the nine Sisters who were appointed: Sr. M. Baptista, superior, Sr. M. Ancilla (later 2nd superior general), Sr. M. Lucia, Sr. M. Caritas, Sr. M. Dolorosa, Sr. M. Johanna, Sr. M. Paula, Sr. M. Magdalena, Sr. Anna, a postulant, and as portress, Elizabeth Weber, a laywoman left Steyl and boarded ship for the US.² With mingled joy and sadness, M. M. Michael watched this first departure from the Motherhouse. The voyage was not without danger, for the steamer had to pass through the mine-infested English Channel and the Irish Sea.³ The travelers arrived safely in New York on May 28, where Msgr. Masson warmly welcomed them. They reached the City of Brotherly Love just as the evening Angelus was ringing. The Sisters were warmly welcomed to their new convent home by Mother Borgias, IHM and her community. The morning after the Sisters’ arrival, the archbishop himself offered Mass in their chapel. On the Feast of Corpus Christi, June 3, 1915, the archbishop solemnly enthroned the Blessed Sacrament in a precious monstrance, a gift from the generous Drexel Family, whose most distinguished daughter was Saint Katharine Drexel. A second costly monstrance was presented to the chapel by the late Cornelius A. Lane, Jr. Then Archbishop Prendergast solemnly closed the cloister of the “Convent of Divine Love”, as the place was henceforth called.⁴

From the Motherhouse, M. M. Michael wrote a letter to the archbishop dated July 2, 1915. “I wish to express my deepest gratitude for all the evidence of your fatherly graciousness. May the Divine Love to whom the new sanctuary is dedicated reward Your Grace... Here in the Motherhouse we will continually remember Your Grace in prayer.”⁵

¹ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 134

² cf. *ibid* p. 135

³ *Burning Lamps*, p. 61

⁴ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 135 / *Burning Lamps*, pp. 62-63

⁵ *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 136