



Remembering Mother Mary Michael

A GIFT FROM THE FAR EAST

The world was yet in turmoil. The years of World War I and the depression that followed brought many cares into the heart of Mother Mary Michael.¹ After the completion of the construction of the Motherhouse in 1914, followed by the opening of the second foundation in Philadelphia in 1915, her urgent and cherished desire for expansion and for possible transfer of Sisters to the U.S.A. was just not possible.² Faced with a dark and uncertain future, she would calmly say, “God has always helped us in the past and his power is not lessened today. It seems to me that we have every reason to be satisfied with God’s way of doing things; let us honor him by our confidence. God will take care. He will help us in his own good time.” The higher the waves of tribulation rose, the more firmly she trusted in God.³ The obstacles did not dissuade her at all from pursuing her vision of the Congregation; on the contrary they deepened her love for the Church and increased her zeal for the mission. She firmly believed; and her faith was resolute, determined, not one of passive waiting, so that even before the war ended, she continued to explore the possibility of opening new convents. Her inquiries directed her, among other places in Europe, to Breslau, Münster, Duisburg, St. Wendel, Siegburg (Wolsberg), Bad Driburg, and an offer also came from Utrecht (Soesterberg) in the Netherlands. There was hope for a positive reply from Breslau.⁴ However, before a decision could be made about a house in Europe, a suggestion came at the beginning of 1921 from a country M. M. Michael hardly thought of, namely, the Philippines, where the Divine Word Missionaries and the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters had been working since 1909.⁵ The suggestion came from the regional superior, Fr. Bürschen, SVD, who wrote from the Philippines to Fr. Hermann auf der Heide, SVD, the director general of the Sisters. The latter, however, had some reservations about it and remarked: “The suggestion has much yet to be considered, especially since there is no word about how the project will be financed.” Yet, there was a hint of openness when he added, “In any case, we want to wait calmly first.” Mother M. Michael on the other hand, received the suggestion

¹ cf. *Burning Lamps*, p. 125

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

³ cf. *Burning Lamps*, pp. 125-126

⁴ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, pp. 137-138

⁵ cf. Mutter Maria Michaela Tönnies, Mitgründerin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern, p. 76

with interest and sought for more information; but the matter took quite a time, on account of the great distance and also because the SVDs could not obtain from any of the bishops a definite proposal.¹

THE PEARL OF THE ORIENT, RE-CONQUERED

At the outset, the first one who showed personal interest in an adoration convent in the Philippines was Bishop Alfredo Verzosa of Lipa, Batangas, a small but dynamic diocese forty miles south of Manila. It was then a city of 10,000 inhabitants nearly all Catholic.² Mother M. Michael wrote a letter to Fr. Bürschen with more detailed inquiries on practical matters, concluding it with the assurance, “We would like very much to go to the Philippines with their nine million Catholics, for we heard that the Church there is losing so many of her faithful. Yes, it would be a privilege for us to be able to support there with our prayers and sacrifices the building up and spread of God’s Kingdom.”³

Providence had arranged everything well, even the play of events within this plan. Historically, the country was still struggling for autonomy. Some years back, on June 12, 1898, it proclaimed its independence from the three-hundred years of Spanish colonial power, followed immediately by the annexation of the country by the U.S.A., so that the old ecclesial structures were paralyzed. About 700 parishes were left without priests, for the Spanish friars, who exercised most of the pastoral ministry, left the country. A new system of total separation of Church and State in accordance with the U.S. model was implemented. The local clergy were not yet adequate to fill the gaps. With the American occupation came also the flood of protestant sects with their vast resources in personnel and money. Furthermore, the Church needed help because of the schism caused by a Filipino secular priest, Gregorio Aglipay, who while serving as vicar general of Segovia in 1902 broke with Rome. The Aglipayan sect, officially called the Philippine Independent Church, began with the political goal of independence from Spain and then from the U.S.A. Nevertheless, it was consoling to know that the Catholic life of the nation was still strong and full of missionary zeal.⁴

Bishop Verzosa kept his original promise. In the summer of 1922 he promised the Sisters two hectares of land with a chapel, convent and enclosed garden. He was even willing to invest between ₱30,000 and ₱40,000 from his own fortune, the interest of which the Sisters could use as long as they needed it. He also pledged to pay half of the traveling expenses of the ten Sisters to be appointed. Towards the end of July 1923 he informed the Sisters that everything was ready. Fr. Gier, SVD, then superior general, encouraged the Sisters to accept the offer. On August 21, 1923, M.

¹ cf. Mutter Maria Michaela Tönnies, Mitgründerin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern, p. 76

² cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 138

³ cf. Mutter Maria Michaela Tönnies, Mitgründerin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern, p. 77

⁴ cf. *Journey in Faith*, Josef Alt, SVD, 2002, pp. 894-895

M. Michael wrote to the bishop: “I am now happy to inform Your Grace that at last your dream will be realized. Though it is no easy undertaking for us we gladly decided to do so as we know that Your Grace is making a great sacrifice to ensure that this noble work may come to fruition. We were moved by your generous offer and for this token of your episcopal benevolence we wish to express our sincere gratitude. May the new sanctuary become an inexhaustible source of blessing not only for the city of Lipa, but for the whole diocese, even for the whole archipelago. I hope that the Sisters may never lack zeal and devotion and give much joy to Your Grace. Here in the Motherhouse we will remember Your Grace in our prayers in a special way.”⁵ How these words of M. M. Michael expressed the finest quality of her virtue of gratitude, likewise her profound, trusting faith, turned into vision, ultimately becoming a reality in the establishment of six convents to date.

THE SAVING LIGHTHOUSE

Ten Sisters were appointed to the new foundation, five from Steyl: Sr. M. Angela, Sr. M. Adolfine, Sr. M. Loyola, Sr. M. Alacoque and Sr. M. Eucharistica; and five from Philadelphia: Sr. M. Baptista, the superior, Sr. M. Paula, the assistant, Sr. M. Willehadis, Sr. M. Petra and Sr. M. Joachima. The Sisters left Steyl on October 5, 1923 after the 5:30 a.m. Mass, with the community singing the “Ave Maris Stella,” and the missionaries receiving a special blessing for the journey. Meanwhile, the Sisters in Philadelphia left for the Philippines on October 11. They landed in Manila on November 10, whereas the group from Steyl arrived on the 20th. All of them first lived with the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters in Manila and on November 25, accompanied by several members of the Manila Marian Ladies Congregation, they were brought in fourteen cars to Lipa where Bishop Verzosa gave them a fatherly welcome. The entrance of the Sisters into their convent in a grand procession with the Blessed Sacrament was a Eucharistic triumph. On December 9, 1923, the enclosure of the convent now called “*Convento del Divino Amor*,” was solemnly closed.⁶ The bishop was happy about the foundation and called it “the eternal light in the midst of the Philippine Islands.”⁷

THE COSTLY PRICE OF LOVE

The little adoration chapel had been widely publicized in the local papers and magazines. It attracted many visitors, among them a group of businessmen who faithfully kept an hour of adoration on the 19th of each month. And every day the children of the neighborhood brought fresh flowers for the altar. The Sisters felt very much at home, though not without missionary experiences like earthquakes and typhoons. They also found the climate very difficult, which necessarily affected their

⁵ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 139

⁶ cf. *ibid.*, p. 140

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 157

health. Yet, they remained undaunted because, “More priests for the Philippines,” was their motto.¹ Gradually, the tropical climate began to take its toll. In 1927, Sr. M. Alacoque died. She offered her terminal suffering for the priests of “her” country, the Philippines.² Then in 1930, another severe blow for the Sisters in Lipa came with the death of Sr. M. Petra. She suffered much from the tropical heat. Though sick herself, she cared tirelessly for the sick and helped others in their heavy work.³ Sr. M. Paula, the assistant superior, also contracted a terminal illness in Lipa. It was during her stay in Baguio for recuperation that she found a good site for the future adoration convent. In 1929, she was elected delegate to the general chapter in Steyl but for health reasons could not return to the Philippines. She died in Steyl in 1931.⁴ It was then quite clear that without some alleviation the Sisters could not continue with their apostolate. In 1928, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary graciously offered to the Sisters the use of their rest house in Baguio and M. M. Michael, who had great understanding for the suffering of the Sisters, permitted them to accept the kind offer. Later, M. M. Michael, with her usual good common sense, decided to build not only a recuperation house but a modest convent and chapel in Baguio on the hilltop of Santo Tomas.⁵ This would permit the Sisters to regain their health and strength, but also to continue their cloistered life of perpetual adoration.⁶ The work began in 1930, and Bishop Santiago Sancho of Vigan blessed it on March 24, 1931, naming it the Convent of the Most Blessed Sacrament. In 1936, two years after the death of M. M. Michael, the necessary decision to close the convent in Lipa was made, for then it was impossible to support both communities, and also the climate in Lipa was truly affecting the health of the Sisters. They hesitated for a very long time to make this definitive resolution,⁷ and indeed, it was not an easy task to convince Bishop Verzosa, who had been so good to them. The bishop keenly regretted the Sisters’ leaving but he realized that the move was necessary. Later, whenever he made a trip to Baguio he always visited the Sisters, and the Sisters in turn never forgot their first kindhearted shepherd in the Philippines. The Baguio foundation prospered until World War II. After the war, because of the great danger of landslides on the side of the convent property, it was deemed unsafe to remain there. The new convent of the Most Blessed Sacrament was built close to the center of the city, on Brent Road, where until now the Sisters continue their life of perpetual adoration. God has blessed the foundation in the Philippines with many native vocations in the years that followed, an expression of how much the faithful treasure devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, and how the Lord graciously blessed the generous and hidden sacrifices of the first missionaries.⁸

¹ cf. *Burning Lamps*, p. 78

² cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 158

³ cf. *ibid*, p. 160

⁴ cf. *ibid*, p. 162

⁵ cf. *ibid*, p. 159

⁶ cf. *Burning Lamps*, p. 79

⁷cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, 1998, p. 161

⁸ cf. *Burning Lamps*, pp. 80-81