



Remembering Mother Mary Michael

An Everlasting Corpus Christi Sermon

“Was hell protesting against the advent of the Sisters?” runs the inquisitive entry in the house chronicle of the then SVD St. Xavier’s Mission House, as it described in a down-to-earth manner the arrival of our Sisters in Bad Driburg. “They were welcomed by the mayor and benefactors at the station and driven in a number of cars through the dirty, rain-washed streets to the convent on the hill. Because of the muddy conditions, the group had to leave the cars and walk in single file through the mud to the convent. It rained cats and dogs.”¹ The actual move took place on September 27, 1924, and a Bad Driburg local paper carried a similar report: “Colored flags waved from the rooftops of the new Adoration Convent in Bad Driburg, for today, the first fourteen Adoration Sisters, from the Motherhouse in Steyl in the Netherlands, came to take up residence in their new home ... No more significant place than Bad Driburg could be found. The Iburg castle towering over the city is the symbol of the victory of Christianity over paganism and the source of Christian blessing flowing into the ancient pagan land of Saxony ... It is an everlasting Corpus Christi sermon to all those who know what is magnificent and hopeful in this most exalted Sacrament of our faith. Fortunate is the city and the diocese which has such a jewel in its midst.”²

Then and Now

The most important place in the history of Bad Driburg is the mountain Iburg, which rises 1,246 feet above sea level. The Franconian imperial annals mention an Iburg in the year 753 when the archbishop of Cologne, Hildegard, was killed there by the Saxons.³ From 772, the Frankish king Charlemagne led his campaigns against the Saxons and destroyed *Irmingsul*, the sanctuary of the pagan Saxons. Well-known historians assume that *Irmingsul*, a mighty pillar of wood, which according to the beliefs of the Saxons bore the gods of heaven,

¹ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 143

² cf. *ibid.*, p. 143

³ cf. Wikipedia, “Bad Driburg”

stood on the mountain Iburg. Charlemagne conquered Iburg in a hard fight. He took possession of the conquered castles and goods of the Saxons and declared them to be "royal estate." On the Iburg Mountain, this former Saxon fortress,¹ the king built a church dedicated to St. Peter. It became a "mission church" for the area between Egge and Weser. When Pope Leo III was in Paderborn from July to October 799 to establish there, together with the Frankish King Charlemagne, the diocese of Paderborn, the King donated, at the expressed request of the Pope, the Church of St. Peter with all its attachments to the newly created diocese of Paderborn.² Around the year 1256/60, the Paderborn Prince-Bishop Simon de Lippe transferred the seat of the parish, from St. Peter's Church on the Iburg to the city church he built and dedicated to St. Peter in Bad Driburg (until 1919 Driburg),³ a city that he himself founded.⁴ The long Catholic history of Bad Driburg would finally reach its remarkable repute in the reconstruction of the former Romanesque parish church, St. Peter, built in 1260, to the present Church of Sts. Peter and Paul, consecrated on May 4, 1897 by Bishop Hubertus Simar of Paderborn.⁵

A Piece of Heaven on a Hill

At the foot of the hill of the once pagan stronghold, now stands the little Adoration Chapel (*Anbetungsklösterchen*). Then, the sacrificial fires blazed and filled the air with smoke; now the light of eternal love burns, enveloped by delicate clouds of incense that aspire to heaven. The sacrificial stones of the gods had long fallen into ruins; at the altar of the Most Blessed Trinity, the Victim of eternal worship is celebrated. Certainly a piece of heaven! How real and excellent! This piece of earth, which has become so historical for Christianity, now carries an altar in honor of the holy triune God!⁶ The first community had for its superior superior Sr. Ma. Scholastica, from Steyl, together with thirteen other Sisters also from the Motherhouse: Sr. Ma. Cäcilia, Sr. Ma. Stanisla, Sr. Ma. Katharina, Sr. Ma. Evangelista, Sr. Ma. Ambrosia, Sr. Ma. Innocentia, Sr. Ma. Emmanuelle, Sr. Ma. Juliana, Sr. Ma. Antonia, Sr. Ma. Fortunata, Sr. Ma. Helena, Sr. Ma. Bonifatia and Sr. Ma. Benigna.⁷ In hindsight, a revealing narrative is laid before us that this this beloved foundation of M. M. Michael has been sheltered from its beginnings beneath the shadow of the cross.

¹ cf. Die 1200jährige Geschichte der katholischen Pfarrgemeinde St. Peter und Paul Bad Driburg, Pfarrer Diether Pöppel, 1990, p. 7

² cf. *ibid*, pp. 9-10

³ Wikipedia, "Bad Driburg"

⁴ cf. *ibid*, 1990, pp. 7, 17

⁵ cf. *ibid*, 1990, pp. 115, 124

⁶ cf. „Einst und jetzt“ in: Geisteswehen Aus Stillen Klosterhallen 1 (1927), pp. 10-11

⁷ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, pp. 142-143

A costly Jewel

Almost simultaneously with the work of founding a house in the Philippines, M. M. Michael made an earnest effort to establish also a foundation on German soil. Vocations were mostly coming from Germany, and Germany was the support of the Motherhouse in Steyl. Towards the end of 1921, M. M. Michael thought that the conditions of her home country were so far sure and secure for her to be able to pursue the work.⁸ The process of establishing foundations in Philadelphia and Lipa in the Philippines was relatively easy. Finding a suitable place for a convent in Germany was much more difficult. After several attempts, the efforts were concentrated on the then diocese of Paderborn, especially on Bad Driburg,⁹ a health resort with natural mineral and mud baths and well-known in the Westphalian province of Germany.¹⁰ As early as March 1920, the Sisters were offered a property in Neuhaus near Paderborn and in October of the same year M. M. Michael tried to buy a house on Pink Street in Paderborn. On October 30, 1920 the purchase contract was concluded – but with the stipulation: “If His Lordship the Bishop does not give permission, then the contract is null and void.” As a matter of fact, the bishop was not enthusiastic about opening a new convent in the city of Paderborn. From October 1921, the ever-active Fr. Anton Freitag, SVD and the mayor of Bad Driburg tried to find a piece of property. On November 16, 1921, M. M. Michael informed the rector of St. Xavier’s Mission House about the Sisters’ plans. The rector of the seminary, Fr. Hahn, was upset by the way the matter was negotiated and so too was the bishop of Paderborn, because the Sisters acquired the property in Paderborn before he actually gave his permission – even though the Sisters did indeed make the purchase conditional on the episcopal “green light.” On November 29, 1921 the official application to open a daughter foundation in Bad Driburg was sent to the bishop. Among the reasons given were: “To obtain German vocations we must open a convent on German soil and such a daughter foundation has to be near a house of the Society of the Divine Word.”¹¹ Bishop Caspar Klein generously acceded: “I gladly agree to your expressed request for an approval of a foundation of the Sister-Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration.” Mother M. Michael heartily thanked the bishop: “Our joy was exceedingly great. When our Sisters will be in Bad Driburg, they will endeavor to give Your Grace and all the priests of the diocese only consolation and joy, but especially to their chief shepherd; and to

⁸ cf. H. Fischer, Mutter Maria Michaela, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitgründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/ August 2013), p. 86

⁹ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 140

¹⁰ cf. *Burning Lamps*, p. 53

¹¹ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 141

support them with their sacrifices, which is our special mission.”¹ But the permission from the bishop by no means solved the concrete difficulties of starting in Bad Driburg. The biographer of M. M. Michael remarks piously: “Since it was a question of opening a religious house, probably some cross had to be built into the foundation.” Months passed. Various sites around the city were examined. The rector of the SVD Mission House was almost losing patience, and the mayor seemed to be losing interest. Eventually in May 1922 the SVDs at St. Xavier’s Mission House said they were ready to part with five acres of their property. The SVD architect, Fr. Johann Beckert, drew up the plans, and the Föcking Building Company was commissioned to do the building. It may well be recalled that August 1922 was also the period of galloping inflation. That the building could be carried out at all during such a period of inflation was attributed by the Sisters to the fact that they were able to transact business with guilders and dollars via Steyl and Philadelphia. There was much rejoicing in the Motherhouse when on the Feast of St. Michael, September 29, 1922, a telegram from Bad Driburg arrived: “On Friday 8 a.m. we will have the groundbreaking.” On April 18, 1923 the foundation stone was solemnly laid, and Fr. Anton Freitag, SVD spoke in his typically enthusiastic manner of an “unforgettably memorable day.”² It could rightly be said of Bad Driburg that it was a prodigy among M. M. Michael’s foundations, not only for the difficult birth pangs she had to endure to bring it into being, but also and precisely because it is the “first cloister” in the land of her birth, indeed in her very own home province of Westphalia.

Destined for Greatness

Fifty years after its momentous beginning, a new story unfolded for Bad Driburg Convent. This inconspicuous and simple cloister on a hill received the honor of becoming a home for the central government of the Congregation on the event of its transfer from the Motherhouse in Steyl in 1974.³ Hence, M. M. Michael, in all her practical wisdom and foresight, had not only gifted the Congregation with a Motherhouse but also a home for the Congregation’s generalate as well. One cannot imagine how many graces this little cloister on a hill, now expanded, has been dispensing not only to the local residents and visitors, who liked to call the Adoration Chapel, their “spiritual bath,” but also to the Congregation, the Church and the whole world, as it bears the indispensable symbol of unity and leadership. May this city on a hill continue to be a beacon of light until eternity dawns and lamps will no longer be needed, for the Lamb is the Lamp of the City of God.

¹ cf. H. Fischer, Mutter Maria Michaela, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitgründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/ August 2013), p. 87

² cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, pp. 141-142

³ cf. *ibid.*, p. 354