



Sister-Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration

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Remembering Mother Mary Michael

Grace beneath the Arch

With wisdom that only a genius artist could graphically express, Leonardo Da Vinci declared thus, “*An arch consists of two weaknesses which, leaning one against the other, make a strength.*” While this line was quoted to refer to “The Gateway Arch,” the extraordinary monument built on the west bank of the Mississippi River in St. Louis, Missouri; the tallest man-made monument in the U.S. (630 ft.) and the second tallest freestanding monument in the world after the Eiffel Tower;¹ allegorically, an allusion to Da Vinci’s analysis could also be traced in the unique story of the heroic feat of two seemingly insignificant women, who leaning one against the other in mutual support of a shared pious vision, founded Mount Grace Convent of Perpetual Adoration, also in St. Louis, Missouri.

A Story within a Story

Mount Grace Convent, among all the foundations of Mother Mary Michael, bears a distinctive history, not only for its exceptionally fine structure and adornments, but especially for its story of extraordinary graces behind the establishment of this Eucharistic Throne of impressive beauty. The foundation is very closely linked with the name of Mrs. Theresa Backer Kulage, a wealthy St. Louis widow,² who had a great devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and was a generous benefactor of the Church.³ Mrs. Kulage was a daughter of German immigrants. Her father arrived in the U.S. with next to nothing in his pocket. His first investment was in a wheelbarrow, which years later culminated in the Backer fortune. A like success story could be told of the immigrant Kulage family, whose son Joseph married Theresa Backer. They were childless and so used their combined wealth for charity.⁴ Through their kindness and generosity, they became a shining example to those who are blessed with material riches. In recognition thereof, Pope Pius X made Mr. Kulage a Knight of St. Gregory in 1908 and his wife a Marquise of the Holy Sepulcher. She also received the Papal Award “*Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice.*”⁵

¹ cf. The Gateway Arch - Its History and Architecture (St. Louis, Missouri), By Richard Grigonis - April 9, 2011

² Burning Lamps, p. 69

³ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 145

⁴ cf. Burning Lamps, p. 69

⁵ cf. „Die Liebe der Tat, St. Louis, Nordamerika,“ in: Geisteswehen Aus Stillen Klosterhallen 9 (1934/35), pp. 13-14

When Mr. Kulage died in 1909, his wife continued her good works. A daily Mass-attendant, she herself lived frugally, not out of miserliness, but so that more would be left over for the works of God. She supported seminaries, orphanages, churches, missions and monasteries. In her will she left large sums of money to more than thirty ecclesiastical institutions. Even during her lifetime she had her parents' home converted into a school and bequeathed her own house to a convent. Her great love for the Eucharist and high respect for the priesthood were her outstanding traits, which increased through the years. With the exception of one, she had attended all the International Eucharistic Congresses, not - as many may do for the sake of the enjoyment of the trip - but sometimes at the cost of great personal sacrifice.¹ It was while attending the International Eucharistic Congress in Montreal in 1910 that she conceived the idea of establishing perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in her native St. Louis. Eighteen years were to elapse before this became a reality.²

Knocking hard at Heaven's Door

In 1921 Mrs. Kulage came into contact with the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD). She heard from Fr. Provincial Bruno Hagspiel, SVD that M. M. Michael had in mind a second foundation in the U.S. This appealed to the pious benefactress. She discussed the matter with the archbishop of St. Louis, who gave an evasive reply. Then Mrs. Kulage approached the Adoration Sisters in Philadelphia, who asked their great friend, Msgr. Masson, to put in a good word for them. Msgr. Masson did this, but at first without success.³ In 1923, Msgr. Masson requested Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia to write to Archbishop Glennon of St. Louis in behalf of the Sisters. This he gladly did and the Cardinal's letter was effective. A month later Mrs. Kulage came to Philadelphia to meet the Sisters personally.⁴ In July 1924 she traveled to Amsterdam for the International Eucharistic Congress with Sr. Ma. Ancilla, superior in Philadelphia (later 2nd superior general), and another Sister as her travel companions. Mrs. Kulage took this opportunity to visit Steyl as well. She was so deeply impressed by the Eucharistic Congress in Amsterdam, and the detailed tour of the Motherhouse in Steyl, including the cloister, that she repeated her offer to the archbishop to found an adoration convent in St. Louis. At last Archbishop John Glennon was convinced and wrote on October 23, 1924 to the superior in Philadelphia. "Prompted by the Fathers of the Society of the Divine Word some years ago, Mrs. Theresa Kulage of St. Louis was corresponding with you concerning a foundation in the city. I hesitated giving permission for her project at the time, not because I had doubts about the noble religious character of your Congregation or the generous reasons behind Mrs. Kulage's intentions but because I doubted whether a congregation with strict enclosure and without a significant source of income could maintain a house in this city. We already have so many charitable and

¹ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 146

² Burning Lamps, p. 69

³ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 146

⁴ cf. Burning Lamps, p. 70

other institutions here dependent on the generosity of the population that I hesitated adding to this burden. Now I have recently met Mrs. Kulage again and she repeated her generous offer. Then again the many recommendations I have received from Philadelphia have persuaded me to set aside any misgivings I had about the matter.” Mother M. Michael in Steyl promptly replied to the archbishop by return mail, “We agree with your kind offer and we are ready to start the foundation on your property.”⁵

A Home for God

Mrs. Kulage now revealed her plans. She offered to build a chapel, complete in every detail, and to donate the ground on which the convent would be built,⁶ almost two acres.⁷ The Sisters however, should get a loan to build the convent - a daunting prospect for them,⁸ but not for M. M. Michael - with her undaunted faith and trust in God. The proposal was for her so munificent that she accepted it with profoundest gratitude.⁹ At this point the Sisters had no idea just how generous the good woman actually was; she always proceeded step by step.¹⁰ The task of building the convent placed a great financial burden on the Sisters, for they were obliged to heavily mortgage the very ground on which the convent was to be built. Hence, it took a long time before they succeeded in getting the necessary loan. In 1926 Mrs. Kulage attended in Chicago what has been called the greatest of all International Eucharistic Congresses. It made such a deep impression on her that she decided to begin working in earnest for the realization of her long-cherished desire.¹¹ Soon enough, the ground was broken on May 4, 1927 and on October 30, 1927, the solemn laying of the foundation stone. The name Mount Grace Convent was decided on by Mrs. Kulage, who had discussed the matter with a Jesuit. The place is on a height and was formerly called College Hill because a Jesuit College had been there. It is a historical place, for the famous apostle of the Indians, Fr. de Smet, visited Mrs. Kulage and some important treaties with the Indians were signed there. With Sr. Ma. Ancilla as the first superior. twelve Sisters were appointed for the new convent, six of whom came from Steyl: Sr. Ma. Custodia, Sr. Ma. Irmengardis, Sr. Ma. Epiphania, Sr. Ma. Mathildis, Sr. Ma. Hedwigis and Sr. Ma. Candida. The solemn blessing (not a consecration, as the debts had not yet been paid off) was held on June 7, 1928 officiated by Archbishop Glennon in the presence of M. M. Michael herself. Mrs. Kulage continued to build up her Eucharistic foundation. She gave the Sisters a magnificent monstrance adorned with her own personal jewelry. The top of the monstrance was a cross made of pure white gold, which she once wore as a first communicant. She also commissioned a magnificent high altar and communion rail out of white and pink marble, alabaster, and gold mosaic, which was made in Italy. The

⁵ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, pp. 147-148

⁶ Burning Lamps, p. 71

⁷ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 148

⁸ cf. *ibid.*, p. 148

⁹ cf. Burning Lamps, p. 71

¹⁰ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 148

¹¹ cf. Burning Lamps, p. 71

stained-glass windows of the chapel were produced in Munich. Choir stalls, church benches - everything had to be of the best quality. And that was not all. Since the convent debt was a great burden to the community, she paid off part of it on the Solemnity of St. Joseph 1929. In 1931 she paid off half the debt still outstanding and in 1933, two days before she fell ill, she paid the rest of the amount. As from a heart without guile, on December 7, 1933, shortly before her first stroke, Mrs. Kulage wrote to M. M. Michael: "My only desire was to establish a home for God, a place where he is undisturbed and where he is constantly adored. No one can deprive him of this home: now it is consummated."¹

Generosity begets Generosity

Gratitude was one of M. M. Michael's outstanding virtues, something very dear to her heart.² Seldom was a benefactor of an SSPS convent bestowed with so many spiritual privileges as Mrs. Kulage. When she visited Steyl in 1930, on the occasion of the International Eucharistic Congress in Carthage, M. M. Michael presented her with a document listing extraordinary privileges. Accordingly, Mrs. Kulage was to be included forever in the prayers of the Sisters at Mount Grace and remembered in every adoration hour. Every month a Mass was to be offered for her and after her death thirty Masses. She also received special ecclesiastical permission to enter the cloister, either to visit the chapel or to ascend to the veranda to contemplate the majestic Mississippi. In the convent two rooms from which she could see the Blessed Sacrament altar were reserved for her, and two Sisters were to attend to her needs and keep her company in her old age. These and other tokens of special recognition were mentioned in the dedication, and Mrs. Kulage was immensely pleased with this.³ These revealed the great-heartedness of M. M. Michael, who did not show her gratitude in small ways only, but in generous and practical ways, for she saw in the generosity of others, proofs of God's loving kindness and solicitude.⁴ Her thankfulness was also an expression of her gratitude to her Divine Benefactor, whom she could not thank enough for the gift of a new adoration chapel. In 1932 Mrs. Kulage attended the International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, Ireland. The next year saw her in Rome for the Jubilee Year of Redemption, and she visited Steyl again. This was to be her last earthly journey, for on May 13, 1934, she was called back to her true home at the age of seventy-two. Mother M. Michael had preceded her in death by three months.⁵ Mount Grace Convent, like a sheltering arch, for what M. M. Michael called the most beautiful and most sublime gift that our small earth and the whole world calls its own - The Most Blessed Sacrament - had been erected. The legacy has also become the gift of love and the testimony of faith - that human weakness reveals the power of God.

¹ Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, 1998, pp. 148-149

² cf. Burning Lamps, p. 120

³ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 150

⁴ cf. Burning Lamps, p. 120

⁵ cf. *ibid.*, p. 73