



Remembering Mother Mary Michael

Beneath the Shadow of the Cross

“Human life is not one of unclouded joy. A servant of the Lord must be prepared to have much vinegar poured into the wine of her life. But the cross of our Savior has the wonderful power of making all bitterness sweet.”¹ Such meaningful thoughts from St. Arnold on the crucial link between joy and suffering were fully evident in the establishment of the 6th daughter foundation of the Congregation. Although many young ladies from Silesia had already entered the Congregation,² yet in none of her foundations had Mother Mary Michael experienced so much work and disappointment as in that of the Convent of Divine Love in Leobschütz,³ a country town in Silesia, in East Germany.⁴ The cross manifested itself very distinctly right at the beginning and continued to cast its shadow, eventually revealing the painful path to which grace and providence had directed the ultimate fate of this new foundation: its temporary suspension, and a few months after the death of M. M. Michael, its final closure on November 11, 1936.⁵

Against All Odds

The critical period of the Reformation alongside the war years brought new challenges to the Church in Germany. Silesia with its good number of devout Catholics had to bear this sorrow and distress. Hence, efforts were made to renew the Christian life of the faithful, to enflame anew in them love for Catholicism, and to rebuild churches and convents as well. That East Germany then was in travail due to the scarcity of religious and that no Adoration Convent had been established there yet⁶ was reason enough for M. M. Michael to direct her aspirations toward the east, to pursue her longed-for wish to establish a convent in Silesia. Accordingly, much and constant prayer was offered for its realization.¹¹ The efforts to found one began

¹ St. Arnold Janssen, *A Thought-a-day Guide in Striving for Religious Perfection*, April 20

² cf. *Burning Lamps*, p. 54

³ cf. H. Fischer, *Mutter Maria Michaela, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitgründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/ August 2013)*, p. 107

⁴ cf. *Burning Lamps*, p. 54

⁵ Generalate record-file

⁶ cf. „Kloster der Göttlichen Liebe“ in: *Geisteswehen Aus Stillen Klosterhallen* 4 (1929), pp. 8-9

¹¹ cf. 079 Chronik des Klosters der Göttlichen Liebe, Leobschütz O/S, p.1

in 1917, but did not succeed until 1929.¹ There was no problem finding a plot of land, but building a house took a long time because of the severe shortage of money and high inflation at that time. An opportunity came in September 1928 for the community to rent temporarily a former convent, which over a period of years had served as a tax office, city kitchen and living quarters for several private individuals. Fr. Hettwer, the local SVD rector, who knew the condition of the house, warned the Sisters about what to expect: “The house looks so miserable. It will be difficult for the Sisters to move into such a pigsty after the long journey.”² Some Brothers from a nearby SVD seminary who were trying to put the house in order, called it a “thieves’ den.”³ The new foundation truly began in dire poverty and at a cost of great sacrifice.

The Urgent Call

Meanwhile, in Holy Trinity Convent in Bad Driburg, on the feast of St. Anne, a letter from the Motherhouse arrived, which brought the news of the appointment of the Sisters for the convent in Leobschütz and also the date of their departure, which should take place already on August 13. What a surprise! The newly appointed Sisters from Bad Driburg were first and foremost, the superior, Sr. Ma. Scholastika, now superior of Leobschütz. Other Sisters were: Sr. Ma. Katharina, Sr. Ma. Innocentia, Sr. Ma. Antonia, and Sr. Ma. Seraphia. From the Motherhouse in Steyl, only one Sister was appointed, Sr. Ma. Regia.⁴ It was suggested that the six Sisters should live at one of the convents in Leobschütz until their own convent was in a more livable condition. However, M. M. Michael would not permit it, for she did not want the Sisters to shrink from the hardships of poverty.⁵ She believed that a religious is true to her vocation only when she has embraced the spirit of sacrifice and is attentive to discover and utilize opportunities for sacrifice. It is precisely the sacrifice that makes one happy.⁶ Thus, she telegraphed Fr. Hettwer: “Fix up the place for immediate occupancy.”⁷

An Upsurge of Joy

Upon their arrival, a Sister wrote: “I do not need to describe what [the convent] looked like. Most of the Sisters who have had an experience of beginnings are not new to this. We felt like the prophet Jeremiah on the ruins of Jerusalem. Despite all the fatigue and poverty, we were happy to have left everything for the love of our divine Bridegroom, to live here in poverty and privation in order to set up a new sanctuary for the Eucharistic

¹ cf. H. Fischer, Mutter Maria Michaela, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitgründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/ August 2013), p. 107

² cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 154

³ Burning Lamps, p. 54

⁴ cf. 079 Chronik des Klosters der Göttlichen Liebe, Leobschütz O/S, p.4

⁵ cf. Burning Lamps, p. 54

⁶ cf. M. M. Michael, A Thought-a-day Guide in Striving for Religious Perfection, April 24 & 23

⁷ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 154

King. 'Poor in everything, rich only in you, we long for one single adornment, O King, your love!' We all want to be like the brave Simon of Cyrene, and consider ourselves fortunate to help carry a little bit the cross of the divine Savior."⁸ A further entry in the chronicle described well the poverty



and difficulties of their beginnings, but not without the true joy borne of their readiness for sacrifice and their great love for the Eucharistic Lord. "We were speechless when we first set our eyes on the dilapidated rooms. Long strips of wallpaper were peeling from the walls. Broken windows gaped at us like huge empty eye-sockets. Floors and walls had big holes; old dirty doors hung loose on their hinges. Though the floors were scrubbed, it seemed as if coal had been stored here, and from all the rooms emerged a terrible stench as if a tomb had been opened. We shuddered at the thought that we would have to live in this place. But the good Savior, who did not want to abandon us, did not mind taking up his abode the following morning in our chapel. On the Solemnity of the Assumption, Dean Müller celebrated the first Mass for us. As we looked at the dear Savior in the small white host during the consecration, we were filled with joy and heavenly peace. We placed the joys and sorrows of the beginning and ourselves on the paten, and with the Savior renewed our love and devotion to our Father in heaven, who would surely look after us, his children. Thus strengthened, we began our work."⁹

Truly, the chronicle report about this foundation is quite edifying. Though the situation seemed hopeless, the Sisters simply rolled up their sleeves and began to work. In the first weeks they had no adoration, no Divine Office, no definite daily routine. When the house was somewhat more comfortable, they began to observe some of the religious exercises – adoration, spiritual reading, Lauds etc. Bit by bit it became possible to observe the strict enclosure regulations in the chapel and reception room. On October 1 the chapel was officially opened to the public and on October 3 adoration of the Blessed Sacrament began, though only for some hours in the afternoon. Daily Mass and Benediction were well attended. The chapel was fully packed every day, and quite often people had to stand outside the door. One could sense the joy of the faithful for the presence of the community, and they often brought them generous donations.¹⁰

⁸ cf. 079 Chronik des Klosters der Göttlichen Liebe, Leobschütz O/S, p.7

⁹ cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, pp. 154-155

¹⁰cf. *ibid.*, p. 155

After months of privation, things began to brighten. More Sisters arrived from the Motherhouse, and on June 8, 1929, the Solemnity of Pentecost, perpetual adoration began in the temporary chapel. But this foundation did not develop like the others. The all-knowing and all-loving God had his own reason for this.¹



Human Foresight and Divine Providence

The question of building a new convent was discussed in earnest in 1933.² At the beginning of October 1933, M. M. Michael visited Leobschütz, which had already become strong. She could convince herself that this tree was in good soil. Therefore, she assured the Sisters of the hope that soon the construction of their own convent would be considered. It was still undecided though whether to build first in Leobschütz or in Berlin. The Sisters would have to pray fervently in this regard. In 1934 it was decided that Berlin should be built first, because this foundation could not be

started without a new building, whereas the convent in Leobschütz already had a temporary home in a rented convent and was in a secure existence. The letter with this message was to be the last of M. M. Michael's communication to her dear convent in Leobschütz. Seven weeks later, she was called to her eternal home.³

Since the Sisters in Leobschütz did not yet have their own convent until 1936 and the Berlin foundation, which was finally opened in March 1936, required a larger number of Sisters, the branch in Leobschütz was provisionally suspended. Vicar General Nathan replied: "It is with great regret that I accept the decision to suspend the foundation in Leobschütz. In recognition of the reasons given above, I, under the authority of the Most Rev. Archbishop, consent to this, and I certainly hope and expect that this change is only temporary. With this is also the assurance that the Church approval will be given for the reopening of the convent. "That the dear convent in Leobschütz will be closed," it says in a later letter, "has generally caused mourning. But one hopes and prays that the separation will not last long."⁴ God proved his care and guidance in the providential closure of the convent, when after World War II, East Germany was included in the communist bloc. The hovering shadow of the cross became the sheltering shade of deliverance and safety for the Sisters and the Congregation.

¹ cf. *Burning Lamps*, pp. 54-55

² *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 156

³ cf. H. Fischer, *Mutter Maria Michaela, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitgründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/ August 2013)*, p. 112

⁴ cf. *ibid.*, p. 112