



## *Remembering Mother Mary Michael*

### *Twilight's Awakening*

Age has many purposes that are good and holy. Michelangelo, who lived to be almost ninety, often used to repeat this motto as he chiseled marble that almost spoke: "I still learn."<sup>1</sup> Age therefore becomes an unparalleled mentor that never runs out of wisdom for imparting and experience for edifying. Through the years, Mother Mary Michael, a teacher herself by profession, was not only eager to teach, but also to learn. Prudent as she was, she never considered herself too old to learn from others. Without hesitation she would consult even the youngest postulant, if she believed that the latter knew more about the matter in question than she herself did. She would readily forego her own opinion and gladly accept the advice of one of the hired help, if she deemed it advisable. Before building the Motherhouse, she visited many other convents in order to ask advice and to learn from the experience of others. It was the same with regard to the inner government of the Congregation. She wished to be advised by her councillors and by the house superiors and she frequently asked their advice. This enhanced her authority in the Congregation.<sup>2</sup>

The Berlin foundation could well be reckoned as M. M. Michael's marble piece, chiseled long and hard. The lengthy years of deliberation and negotiation were to be her twilight's awakening, not only because the plucking time of her fruitful life was imminent, but also because from these years she was able to gather precious treasures of wisdom for imparting and numerous heartening experiences for edifying.

### *Turning point*

It all began during a trip. As M. M. Michael was traversing the splendid city of Berlin, on her way to negotiate for a new convent in Silesia, she conceived the idea of establishing a chapel and convent of perpetual adoration in the capital of Germany.<sup>3</sup> A postcard, which she sent from Berlin on July 1, 1926 to her assistant,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sheen, Fulton J., Guide to Contentment, Mumbai, Society of St. Paul, 2003, p. 44

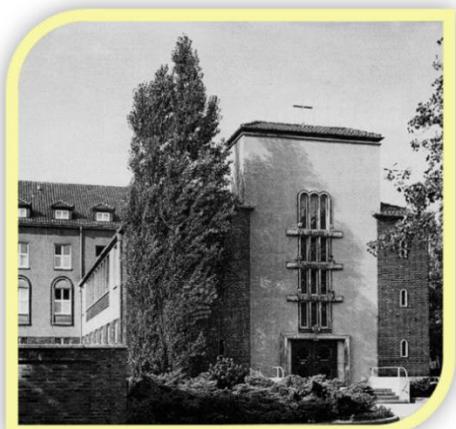
<sup>2</sup> Cf. Burning Lamps, p. 100

<sup>3</sup> Cf. ibid., p. 55

Sr. Ma. Gertrudis, heralded the dawning of her dream; "We are now in Berlin on our return trip. A little convent in Berlin would perhaps be great."<sup>1</sup> A year later, she decided on this matter, held on to it, prayed and worked for it until her death. This foundation was so important to her, for she believed that nowhere was the atoning and intercessory prayer more urgent and pleasing to the Lord than in this city, the heart of the Protestant world. It was precisely here that fervent prayer must be offered for the reunification of Christians to the one Church of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

## *Blessed by a Blessed*

Mother M. Michael was warmly seconded in this by a Berlin prelate, Msgr. Bernhard Lichtenberg, who, after attending the Eucharistic Congress in Chicago, was convinced more than ever of the need of perpetual adoration in his native Berlin.<sup>3</sup> Msgr. Lichtenberg, a deeply religious priest and model pastor, was a fervent lover of the Blessed Sacrament and a great supporter of M. M. Michael's plan. He could well be called the co-founder of our Berlin foundation. He himself blessed the convent before the chapel was completed.<sup>4</sup>



It was during her last illness in 1934 that M. M. Michael negotiated for the purchase of the property. This was her last official transaction.<sup>5</sup> The foundation stone was laid nine months after her death, on November 28, 1934, by SVD superior general, Fr. Joseph Grendel. The first Sisters sent to Berlin were, from Steyl: Sr. Ma. Baptista (superior), Sr. Ma. Antonia (assistant), and Sr. Ma. Crescentia (councilor); from Leobschütz: Sr. Ma. Fides and Sr. Ma Luitgardis. Later, five more

Sisters were appointed, two from Steyl and three from Bad Driburg. Because of the Sisters' reverence for M. M. Michael, they would have wanted to dedicate the new convent to the Archangel Michael but Msgr. Lichtenberg, the great

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mother Mary Michael, Letters, File 020721

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. Fischer, Mutter Maria Michaele, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitgründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/August 2013), pp. 128-129

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Burning Lamps, p. 55

<sup>4</sup> Cf. „Aus dem Klosterjahrbuch“ in: Geisteswehen Aus Stillen Klosterhallen 11 (1936/37), p. 11

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Burning Lamps, pp. 55-56

patron of the convent, preferred the name St. Gabriel. The Motherhouse chronicle states: "On August 15 the name of the new convent in Berlin was settled. It was decided to call it after St. Gabriel. Considering the prevailing circumstances, Reverend Mother would have agreed."<sup>6</sup>



Msgr. Lichtenberg was also a true confessor of the faith during the Nazi Regime.<sup>7</sup> He protested in person to Nazi officials against the arrest and killing of the sick and mentally ill, as well as the persecution of the Jews and the cruelties of the concentration camps. He fearlessly warned at the Berlin Cathedral of Saint Hedwig: "The burning synagogue outside is also a house of God!" Until his arrest in October 1941, he would pray publicly for the persecuted Jews at the daily Vespers.<sup>8</sup> He spent two years in a concentration camp in Tegel<sup>9</sup> and on November 5, 1943 while in transit to the Dachau concentration camp, he collapsed and died in Hof, Bavaria.<sup>10</sup> On June 23, 1996, Pope John Paul II declared Lichtenberg a blessed martyr. The beatification ceremony took place during a Mass celebrated in the Olympic stadium in Berlin.<sup>11</sup>

## *Mission without Borders*

The Berlin foundation brought to light the character of the woman of faith that M. M. Michael was. It showed her wide view of the Church and the world and her generous mindset of the vision and mission of the Congregation. Schooled as she was in the spirit of Arnold Janssen, she could discern the signs of the time and deliver her positive response, even in the face of uncertainty, pessimism, meager resources and insufficient personnel. Her sole assurance was in the firm conviction that God wanted it, and that the interests of the Church and the mission of the Congregation would be served unstintingly. Fr. Fischer, SVD wrote of this distinct character in M. M. Michael, "Her glance always aimed directly at God, and in every situation she stood with constant, unchanging readiness at the disposal

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Müller, Karl, SVD, Contemplation and Mission, 1998, pp. 227-228

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Burning Lamps, p. 55

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wikipedia, The Blessed Bernhard Lichtenberg

<sup>9</sup> Müller, Karl, SVD, Contemplation and Mission, 1998, p. 227 (footnote)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Wikipedia, The Blessed Bernhard Lichtenberg

<sup>11</sup> Cf. ibid.

of the divine will. To her, surrender to the will of God in every situation was taken for granted.”<sup>1</sup> During her many years in the northern diaspora, working as a teacher in Rendsburg, Schleswig-Holstein, she had come to know and to understand, from her own observations, the misfortune of the schism of a divided Church, and how much blessing and gain it would be for her country if all the people would find themselves united again in the Catholic Church, their Mother.<sup>2</sup> Through the years, her concern for a united Germany proved to be prophetic. Less than ten years after her death, a perceptible division began to be manifest in Germany, not only spiritually but also politically, ideologically and ultimately physically, when on August 13, 1961, the guarded concrete barrier dividing Berlin was built. The Berlin Wall, or the “Wall of Shame,” as the west Berlin city government sometimes referred to it, a term coined by mayor Willy Brandt in reference to the Wall’s restriction on freedom of movement, would bring the rupture to its full assertion.<sup>3</sup>

St. Gabriel’s Adoration Convent in Berlin, though simple and inconspicuous, remained ever faithful to its mission as entrusted to it by M. M. Michael. Further on, during World War II, the Sisters remained in their convent throughout the terrifying bombardment of Berlin. Night after night, and often during the day, they sought shelter and safety in the convent basement. Every night, their chaplain gave them general absolution, for death was always imminent. A number of bombs fell into the convent, but only two exploded. When the war was over, the chapel and convent were still standing and the Sisters had come through the dreadful ordeal unharmed. More than once the Sisters had experienced the powerful and protecting arm of the heavenly Father,<sup>4</sup> a providential sign that God delighted to preserve and sustain this house of prayer, this oasis of spiritual repose, where Eucharistic Adoration had been faithfully kept even at the cost of many sacrifices.

The Berlin Wall may have fallen already and paved the way for the reunification of Germany on October 3, 1990,<sup>5</sup> but the small Berlin Adoration Convent will continue in joy its mission without borders in the heart of German soil through its hidden apostolate of prayer, penance and presence. It stands guarded now by two heavenly sentinels, Blessed Bernhard Lichtenberg and the Servant of God, Mother Mary Michael.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A-thought-a-day Guide in striving for religious perfection, February 23

<sup>2</sup> Cf. H. Fischer, Mutter Maria Michaele, Adolfine Tönnies, Mitgründerin und erste Generaloberin der Steyler Anbetungsschwestern (Steyl 1938/August 2013), p. 129

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Wikipedia, The Berlin Wall

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Burning Lamps, p. 56

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wikipedia, The Berlin Wall