



Remembering Mother Mary Michael

Special Issue

The Genesis

In the beginning, Arnold Janssen, the Founder of the Steyler Missionaries, as they are popularly called in Europe,—the cradle of their foundations situated as it were in Steyl in the Netherlands—thought of establishing a congregation of priests, Brothers and Sisters under a common superior general with general vicars for the Brothers and Sisters. The whole congregation should be known therefore as the Society of the Divine Word.¹ There was no basic change in this model during the 1st General Chapter of the SVD (1884/86) at which Arnold Janssen was elected superior general for life.² When the Founder died, the administration of temporal affairs of the three congregations was still centrally organized. On the other hand, it was only natural that the three branches would have to stand on their own feet one day. In the Founder's time there was hardly any move towards disengaging the Sisters from the men's branch. This occurred mainly during the administration of the Founder's successor, Fr. Nikolaus Blum.³

A Step Forward

While the structure of a common superior general for the Missionary and Cloistered Sisters proved to be sensible enough during the lifetime of the Founder, after his death it seemed some changes had to be made.⁴ SVD procurator Fr. Karl Friedrich hinted too that a double congregation, which in fact existed in Steyl, would hardly get final approbation from the Holy See. Hence, Fr. General Director auf der Heide, commissioned by Fr. General Blum, took over the job of working out the new rule for the Adoration Sisters, which was officially approved on July 10, 1917. Since then the Cloistered branch became an independent congregation bearing the official name: “Congregation of the Sister-Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration” (SSpSAP).⁵ About this important development, Fr. Herman Fischer, SVD made a praiseworthy compliment to Mother Mary Michael: “Working tenaciously and praying unceasingly, she brought the matter an important step forward, indeed, gave it its final form. The favorable consequences soon manifested themselves: the young Congregation now had the necessary independence and solidity so that within a few years new foundations were rapidly and successfully established.”⁶

¹ Cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 20

² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 44

³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 50

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 119

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 124

⁶ Cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, pp. 124-125

Indeed, it took eleven challenging years from its foundation before the fledgling community could finally live out its vocation and mission independently. Next to the Lord, the Congregation owed in great measure this significant development to her, who held the helm of the cloistered branch with exceptional prudence and sound practicality.

Chapter Tradition in the Church

The name chapter derives from the custom of convening monks or canons for the reading of a chapter of the Bible or a heading of the order's rule. In the 6th century, St. Benedict directed that his monks begin their daily assemblies with such readings, and over time expressions such as “coming together for the chapter” (*convenire ad capitulum*) found their meaning transferred from the text to the meeting itself and then to the body gathering for it. The place of such meetings similarly became known as the “chapter house” or “chapter room.” Similarly, a general chapter is a general assembly of monks [religious] typically composed of representatives from all the monasteries of an order or congregation.⁷

The First SSpSAP General Chapter

OPENING AND MEMBERSHIP—Winding fast forward the timepiece of cloister events since the time the young Congregation received its definitive canonical status, a good twelve years still elapsed before the 1st General Chapter took place. This was preceded by a preparatory retreat, which began on October 11 in the Motherhouse. Finally, the day of its solemn opening dawned on Monday, October 14, 1929. General Director Fr. auf der Heide celebrated the High Mass in honor of the Holy Spirit at 7:45 a.m. At around 8:45 a.m. the capitulars went in solemn procession to the chapter room accompanied by the singing of the *Veni Creator*.⁸ Fr. auf der Heide then opened the chapter with the Founder's motto: “May the holy and triune God live in our hearts.”⁹ Along with M. M. Michael, the capitulars were as follows: as general councilors: Sr. Ma. Gertrudis, Sr. Ma. Vita, Sr. Ma. Constantia, Sr. Ma. Hildegard; as superior of the non-European province: Sr. Ma. Baptista; as representatives of the European province: Sr. Ma. Scholastica and Sr. Ma. Ignatia. Since Sr. Ma. Scholastica as superior of the newly-founded house in Leobschütz was for the time being unable to attend, Sr. Ma. Gregoria took her place up to the 20th session. Sr. Ma. Ancilla was appointed chapter secretary and Sr. Ma. Gregoria and Sr. Ma. Paula scrutators. The following Sisters were elected members of the chapter commission: Sr. Ma. Gertrudis, Sr. Ma. Hildegard, Sr. Ma. Baptista and Sr. Ma. Ancilla.¹⁰

ELECTION AND THE 1ST GENERAL COUNCIL—On October 15 the election of the superior general was held. While the voting was going on, the other Sisters in the community were in the chapel praying for a positive outcome. Mother M. Michael was unanimously “re-elected,” with nine out of a possible ten votes, that is, all except

⁷ Cf. Wikipedia, “Chapter,” “General Chapter”

⁸ Cf. Chronik der Klausurschwester, Steyl, 1929

⁹ Cf. Contemplation and Mission, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, pp. 124-125

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.* p. 190

her own. She was elected on the first ballot. Subsequently, Sr. Ma. Gertrudis was elected assistant general, Sr. Ma. Hildegard as third general councilor and admonitor, Sr. Ma. Constantia and Sr. Ma. Ignatia as second and fourth general councilors, respectively. After the elections, Fr. auf der Heide proceeded to the chapel to announce the result, at which a real heartfelt “*Deo Gratias*” of the Sisters sounded.¹¹

NUNC DIMITTIS—Etched in the annals of this historic general chapter was the somber inscription of the unexpected death of Fr. auf der Heide, who died of a heart attack, on January 21, 1930 as he was on his way to the Sisters’ chapter.¹² Since May 1903 he was representative of the Founder for matters dealing with the Sisters. He resigned as director of the Missionary Sisters in 1922 but stayed with the Adoration Sisters till his death. The last and perhaps most important responsibility he had to fulfill for the Congregation was the presidency of the 1st General Chapter. Since he had accompanied the Sisters during their years of development, he exercised a great influence on the Congregation. Though he did not live to see the end of the chapter, he had finished all the important business connected with it. It was his “*Nunc Dimittis*,” and certainly, a loving act of Divine Providence too.¹³ On account of this unforeseen incident, the chapter was interrupted from January 21 to 29.¹⁴ Mother M. Michael took the chair after his death, that is, after the 55th session as the chapter resumed on January 29.¹⁵

CHAPTER DETAILS IN RETROSPECT—The Motherhouse chronicle noted that the 1st General Chapter had a profound effect on the non-participants. A glance at its minutes demonstrates its inner dynamic and reveals the spirit that pervaded the Congregation at that time and was to set a pattern for the future.

1. The reports of the superior general (who was also the superior of the European province) and the superior of the non-European province demonstrate “the good guidance of providence” and “the good efforts of the Congregation sustained by a solid religious spirit.” In fact the Congregation did not develop so quickly right from the start, and Fr. auf der Heide saw in it “an advantage and the hand of God.” In this way, “it could become stronger internally, more easily acquire and consolidate a good spirit and so lay secure foundations for its later growth and development.” He also saw as providential the establishment of the convents of Philadelphia, Lipa and St. Louis, which came into being “without the assistance of the Sisters, only through the providence of God and the generosity of noble benefactors.” After the war, Philadelphia in particular became a great help for the Motherhouse.¹⁶
2. All activities, such as religious instruction, education, care of the sick outside the community remain forbidden. In principle, dispensations could be given in individual cases.

¹¹ Cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, pp. 187-188/190

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 188

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 189

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 194

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 190

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 191-194 for the minutes enumerated here from No. 1 to No. 7

3. One of the principal exercises of penance for the Sisters is connected with the maintaining of perpetual adoration, especially the interruption of sleep during the night. As a commentary on this, the report of the 31st session read as follows: “It is very important that the Sisters have a proper understanding of mortification. They cannot be expected to perform the difficult acts of penance customary in the old religious congregations. These acts would not be practical nowadays. It is hard enough for some Sisters to observe the whole daily routine.”
4. It is important that the talents of the Sisters be taken into consideration. The superiors must see to it that they get to know the abilities of individual Sisters and respect the uniqueness of each one.
5. Going to another convent for convalescent purposes is only allowed by way of rare exception. Visiting health resorts is forbidden. In the course of a journey, the Sisters may not make excursions or visit art galleries, museums and such places. They may not go shopping in department stores. But on their arrival in a new city, they may take a look at churches or the local park. When arriving in Steyl, they may also visit the Founder’s grave. In mission countries, where it is sometimes difficult to find a domestic helper, some greater concessions regarding the cloister may be necessary. By and large, there was no easing of the strict enclosure regulations.
6. The older we get, the more we realize that much can be achieved by love and patience rather than with strictness. With regard to work, superiors should consider those who are less robust—the Sisters who are physically and mentally weak. They should make sure that the Sisters are content.
7. From the 70th session onwards, apart from the concluding discussion about the Constitutions, “the agreements between the Society of the Divine Word and the two congregations of the Servants of the Holy Spirit” were read and discussed.

CLOSING AND DEPARTURE—On February 26, 1930 the superior general moved that the chapter be concluded on the following day. The motion was approved by the capitulars. Highlights of the final address of M. M. Michael are as follows:

Dear capitulars, by the grace of God we have come to the conclusion of the 1st General Chapter of our Congregation. The task we had to accomplish was of the utmost importance. It involved a thorough revision of our Constitution—a definitive version—which we will now submit to the Holy See for approbation. The draft was the fruit of lengthy preparatory work, which began last year—our previous rule and the Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word and of our Missionary Sisters serving as a basis.

It is very comforting for us that Rev. Fr. auf der Heide was able to preside over the work concerning our rule. There was no better person to do this. He was closely linked with our blessed Founder. Having worked for many years with the Missionary Sisters and with us, he had a profound insight into our circumstances. I thank you, dear capitulars, for your loyal assistance—I was really inspired by your modesty, constructive reflections, and general attitude. May God grant that this good spirit remain in the Congregation, increase and take deeper roots. We

must do all in our power to pass on the precious heritage of the first spirit, the spirit of our blessed Founder, to those who will come after us.

And now, dear Sisters, with courage and trust in God let us carry on the great work entrusted to us. Asking God to bless you all, dear capitulars, I now declare the 1st General Chapter closed. Praised be Jesus Christ.¹⁷

The morning Mass at the conclusion of the chapter on February 27, 1930 was celebrated by Fr. P. Vaske, SVD in thanksgiving for God's assistance and blessing during the general chapter.¹⁸ It was a silent Mass—no music or singing. Though all were grateful to God, the absence of Fr. auf der Heide was felt. He was surely looking down on the proceedings from above. The first of the delegates left that same evening.¹⁹

Mother Mary Michael

ELECTION AND CELEBRATION—With the canonical election of M. M. Michael as the 1st superior general, rejoicing and jubilation hovered everywhere in the house. Actually, everyone was in anticipation of it, “an open secret” as the chronicler puts it. Following the announcement was the grand singing in the chapel of a festive *Te Deum*, a magnificent *Veni Creator*, a dignified *Adoremus* and a fine *Tantum Ergo*. Going out of the chapel to her room, M. M. Michael moved through the rows of kneeling Sisters and sprinkled them with holy water. Meanwhile, during the election, the Sisters had already nicely decorated her room. Mother M. Michael remained in the room a few minutes, emerged again while the community gathered once more in the chapter room. Here the Sisters kissed her ring and received her blessing. The following day was joyfully celebrated in her honor with a High Mass, followed by some presentations in the assembly room, which was festively decorated for the occasion.²⁰

THE SUPERIOR GENERAL—Undoubtedly, one can tell that M. M. Michael was a leader very well loved and greatly respected. How she was as superior general then until her death can best be deduced first-hand through the eyes and hearts of those who had experienced her up close and personally. As co-foundress she had only one goal at heart, that is, to lead the Sisters along the path of holiness, in faithfulness to the spirit of the Founder. She guarded this precious heritage without compromise and yet her discerning and motherly heart knew perfectly well just when love demands to be obeyed, how the law of the spirit precedes the written law and that truly mercy triumphs over justice. Let us allow ourselves to be surprised by M. M. Michael as we leaf through the precious memoirs of the earlier generations of the Congregation.

AS LEADER—Mother M. Michael fulfilled her duties as leader and guide faithfully and conscientiously. For the Sisters, she was the most beautiful example of any religious virtue. Hence, her exhortations and teachings made a deep impression on them for they came from a genuinely pious heart and were accompanied by her own

¹⁷ Cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, pp. 194-195

¹⁸ *Chronik der Klausurschwester*, Steyl, 1930

¹⁹ Cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, pp. 189-190

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 188

striving for virtue. She herself carried out what she taught. Many times she would tell them that “We should consume our strength in the service of God.”²¹

HER SPIRITUAL INFLUENCE—Her whole life was a silent, simple life hidden in God. Outwardly she avoided attracting attention; she worked quietly and unassumingly at the side of Father Arnold and had no other ideal than the glorification of God alone among all people. How she prayed and sacrificed for the lukewarm and perhaps also for fallen priests, which is known to the good God alone, is worth mentioning also.²²

ON FORMATION—It was very important to her that the Sisters had a thorough knowledge of religion. In the early years, when the number of Sisters was still small, she herself gave the weekly religious instruction. Until her old age, she supervised the teaching.²³ All the older Sisters had been formed by her. She took the education of the Sisters very seriously and, as in all things, was also very simple with it.²⁴

HER APOSTOLIC HEART—In order to influence greater veneration of the Holy Spirit among wider circles of Catholics, she founded the Eucharistic Mission League (EML), which has the dual purpose of glorifying the Eucharist and greatly venerating the Holy Spirit.²⁵

HER EQUANIMITY—Mother M. Michael’s trust was completely anchored in God; and her will was at all times in accordance with the divine will. Therefore, nothing could upset her; come what may. In fortune and misfortune, everywhere and in all things she saw the loving, all-knowing guidance of Divine Providence. With holy equanimity and with admirable patience, she was able to cope with the trials and blows of misfortune. The following is an example: “It was in Sept. 1930, when there was a heavy thunderstorm. Our cattle were in the pasture and one of our cows had been struck by lightning. A Sister came quite excitedly to report it to Rev. Mother. But she remained calm and said in the evening in the dining room: ‘It is good that this has happened to us and not to a poor family, which has only one cow and thus would be in great need. We want to thank God from our heart for everything.’ Mother M. Michael’s holy equanimity was always very edifying.”²⁶

LIVING INCULTURALITY—The following incident happened when M. M. Michael was visiting one of the convents in the U.S. “It was a feast day when speaking was permitted at meals. The refectory was humming with cheerful conversation when a Sister, who had just finished her adoration period, entered the dining room. One of the Sisters seeing her, jokingly said, ‘O here comes an American who likes sweets.’ Mother M. Michael was conversing with the Sisters sitting near her. However, she heard the remark and rang the table bell for silence. When all was quiet she said, ‘I just heard a Sister refer to another Sister as an American. Sisters, I do not wish to

²¹ Cf. Sr. M. Andrea, Generalate Archive, 050009

²² Cf. Br. Eugenianus Wachter, SVD, Steyl, April 20, 1943, Generalate Archive, 050140

²³ Cf. Sr. M. Agnes, Generalate Archive, 050003

²⁴ Cf. Sr. M. Andrea, Generalate Archive, 050009

²⁵ Sr. M. Agnes, Generalate Archive, 050003

²⁶ Sr. M. Alfonsa, Generalate Archive, 050007 / Sr. M. Adoratrix, Generalate Archive, 50001

hear such remarks nor will I permit them. We are neither this nor that kind of Sister, but we are all Sister-Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration. And that is the only way in which we are to regard one another.’ There was absolute silence in the refectory as she spoke. When she felt that the lesson had been taken to heart, she said, ‘The Sisters may continue speaking.’²⁷

HER LARGE-HEARTEDNESS—Gratitude was one of M. M. Michael’s outstanding virtues, something very dear to her heart.²⁸ Seldom was a benefactor of an SSPSAP convent bestowed with so many spiritual privileges as Mrs. Kulage, the great patron and co-foundress of Mt. Grace Convent in St. Louis, Missouri. Mother M. Michael presented her with a document listing extraordinary privileges. Aside from the prayers and Masses offered for her, M. M. Michael also received special ecclesiastical permission to allow her to enter the cloister, either to visit the chapel or to ascend to the veranda to contemplate the majestic Mississippi River. 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. Mrs. Kulage was immensely pleased with this.²⁹

PROPHETIC VISION—In her letter to Archbishop Bertram of Breslau, asking him to open a convent in his diocese, M. M. Michael frankly stated her case: “To preserve the spirit of the Congregation, it would be good to have several convents. For these and other reasons, we urgently need a few more convents.”³⁰ Furthermore, she once said, “It is better to have many convents with a smaller number of Sisters than few convents with many Sisters. In each convent there is another throne of exposition for our dear Savior.”³¹ Pope Francis echoed in our times this same brave and audacious faith of M. M. Michael when on September 8, 2016, as he received the Benedictine abbots in an audience, he offered them words of both hope and challenge: “Do not be discouraged if the members of monastic communities decrease in number or grow old; on the contrary, preserve the zeal of your testimony, even in those countries which today face difficulties, with fidelity to the charism and the courage to establish new communities. Your service to the Church is very precious.”³²

NEW FOUNDATIONS—The most beautiful days of her life comprised those in which the golden monstrance with the holy Host was raised to a new mercy throne and a new Eucharistic sanctuary was opened. The good God alone knows how much work, effort and worries M. M. Michael bore in founding eight new branches. Her apostolic spirit did not allow her rest until Adoration Convents for the Congregation were established in the Philippines and in China too.³³

DIVINE OFFICE—With all her soul, she zealously cared for the prayer in choir. In earlier years, she herself led the prayers. She had a good-sounding voice for this and

²⁷ Cf. *Burning Lamps*, pp. 176-177

²⁸ cf. *ibid.*, p. 120

²⁹ cf. *Contemplation and Mission*, Karl Müller, SVD, 1998, p. 150

³⁰ cf. *ibid.*, p. 137

³¹ *A-thought-a-day Guide in striving for religious perfection*, July 8

³² Cf. *L’Osservatore Romano*, Friday, 23 September 2016, p. 8

³³ Cf. Sr. M. Baptista, Generalate Archive, 050021

put all her devotion and soul into it. No other Sister could intone the *Te Deum* in so dignified a way as she did.³⁴

CORPUS CHRISTI—Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was especially dear to her heart. With her fine taste for all that was good and beautiful, she spared no sacrifice and effort to personally put her hand to work to decorate the altar and the church worthily. She did the same thing when preparing dignified decorations for the Corpus Christi procession; and she did this well into her old age.³⁵

A HEART FOR THE YOUNG—Once she was told that a novice had sung loudly near an open window facing the street. Some of the Sisters felt that this was unbecoming and incompatible with the spirit of the cloister. Not M. M. Michael however. “Let the Sisters sing,” she said, “and let the people hear them and know that they are happy. Surely the novice sang only good songs, and that must not be forbidden.”³⁶

HER FAMILY SPIRIT—It was very important to her to maintain a good relationship with the SVD and the Missionary Sisters. She preferred to renounce her own advantage rather than let it become tarnished. Often she told the Sisters, “We are greatly indebted to the Society; what would we be without it? Where do you find Sisters who are so well off with regard to liturgical services and spiritual direction, solid conferences, and help in many business matters as we are? There is something very beautiful about this togetherness of our three Congregations in Steyl and we want to ensure that the good relationship will also be maintained in the future. God’s special blessing will rest on us if, in the spirit of our late Founder, we work together, sacrifice and pray for the great tasks he has given us.”³⁷

SHE SPREADS JOY EVERYWHERE—When she was in Philadelphia for visitation, one of the Sisters, remarked, “I am astonished that Rev. Mother is so simple, humble and condescending, although she holds the highest office in the Congregation. That deserves very high esteem.” The Sisters there, who until then had only known her by picture, felt attracted to her. Without inhibition, they surrounded her at recreation like happy children, which made her very happy. They talked to her in German, and although the funniest mistakes were made, they received unreserved praise from her for their interest and progress in the German language. Yes, M. M. Michael was able to make the Sisters happy because she herself had a joyful disposition.³⁸

Here and Now

Counting the years and the blessings as well, ninety years have passed since the 1st General Chapter, and what untold graces have been strewn along the way. Now the Congregation turns a new page in the history of her mission. The 12th General Chapter will soon commence. For all that has been—thanks! For all that is yet to be—yes!

³⁴ Cf. Sr. M. Andrea, Generalate Archive, 050009

³⁵ Cf. Sr. M. Agnes, Generalate Archive, 050002

³⁶ *Burning Lamps*, p. 170

³⁷ Cf. Sr. M. Baptista, Generalate Archive, 050021

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*