



## *Remembering Mother Mary Michael*

### *Pen in her hand<sup>1</sup>*

When the Founder, Arnold Janssen, gave the papers to the first four Sisters who were to write—independently of one another—a convent chronicle, he wished that each one would begin with the story of her own vocation. Sr. Michael (Mother Mary Michael's name as a Missionary Sister), who was among those chosen for this task, kept this wish of the Founder and wrote down her own vocation story.

The chronicle she wrote covered the period from July 26, 1895 until the beginning of October 1896, i.e. about fourteen months. It is filed in between the chronicle written by Sr. Magdalena Huthmacher, which she started in 1893 and that of Sr. Raphaelae Bruns, which ended on April 28, 1901.

Worthy of mention and of significant interest is that, Sr. Magdalena, Maria Huthmacher, was a cousin of M. M. Michael, two years her senior. She joined the group of aspiring Sisters three months before M. M. Michael's entrance in Steyl. Her mother, Elisabeth, was also an older sister of Fr. Herman Wegener, SVD.

Regarding the coming of her cousin, Sr. Magdalena wrote in her convent chronicle: "For about three months I was the youngest postulant, then on May 1, 1891 Adolphine Tönnies, now Sr. Michael, entered... Our Sr. Michael had wanted to enter the convent for a long time but she also experienced a number of hindrances and there was nothing else for her to do but to wait quietly and patiently until the good Lord prepared the way and removed all obstacles that kept her from following his call. On May 1, 1891 she finally reached the goal of her desires. She found everything so strange and unfamiliar on the first few days after she entered; and she appeared to be sad and depressed—I think homesickness had a great deal to do with all that. I comforted her and encouraged her but secretly I was laughing at her. However, it did not take long and her sadness rapidly melted away and finally

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<sup>1</sup> The entire article of this issue is based on the booklet "Sister Michaelae Tönnies SSpS, Chronicle of the Missionary Sisters", Ortrud Stegmaier SSpS, Quellen 20, Published on behalf of the General Administration. For the purpose of brevity and clarity some entries, headings and footnotes had been revised. Other footnotes not found in the original manuscript were also inserted.

disappeared altogether, replaced by a joyfulness and merriness that we all marvelled at.”<sup>2</sup>

In her chronicle Sr. Michael made a reference to that passage without further comment and that would appear to confirm Sr. Magdalena’s words. With that reference she depicted herself more by the impression she gave to the Sisters rather than by her own interior struggle.

The two postulants came to know the Founder of Steyl personally on the same day—on his arrival in Steyl from St. Gabriel after the session of the SVD 2<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter. He came to greet the future Sisters for the first time in Notre Dame Convent, where they transferred on September 27, 1890. Sr. Magdalena, however, did not live to see the full blossoming of God’s work in Steyl. She died on May 22, 1895, the second Sister to die in the Congregation.

Starting off her chronicle entry, M. M. Michael wrote these lines in her introduction. “The hand that wrote so gladly and so industriously the above lines (in the chronicle) now rests in the grave. Last Monday, on the feast of St. Magdalene, just two months since her death, our good Sister Superior asked me to continue the work began by Sr. Magdalena.” Like Sr. Magdalena’s chronicle, Sr. Michael’s chronicle was incomplete. It was terminated in the autumn of 1896 because the preparation for the opening of the cloistered branch, scheduled on December 8, 1896, brought with it other tasks.

### *The Times of her Life*

Mother M. Michael saw her life in four broad stages or stations. The first was her home in *Horst an der Emscher*, which today forms part of the extended district of Gelsenkirchen, Germany. She grew up there, attended the elementary school and helped her family. She wrote almost nothing about her time at home.



*Parental home of M. M. Michael*

During the summer of 1879 Adolphine<sup>3</sup> embarked on the second stage of her life. She began her studies at the teachers’ training college in Münster, completing the course in the summer of 1881. After completion of her training she was offered a good position, a fact that can be taken as a proof that she was a good student.

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<sup>2</sup> Sr. Magdalena Huthmacher, convent chronicle C II/5, 9.

<sup>3</sup> M. M. Michael’s baptismal name

From September 1881 until April 1891 her activities were confined in her third station, as a teacher in Rendsburg in Schleswig-Holstein.

The fourth station commenced with her entrance in Steyl on May 1, 1891. She spent this fourth stage, which lasted until December 8, 1896, as a Missionary Sister. With her transfer to the cloistered branch she approached her true life's task, namely the leadership of that branch until its development into the autonomous Congregation of the Adoration Sisters of Steyl. By then she was already thirty-four years and eleven months of age. In the new Congregation she was to live another thirty-seven years and three months, until her death on February 25, 1934.



## *Her Life Story Begins*

Before I continue with the history of the Congregation, I just have to recount how and when I came here. Thanks be to the Lord who, in his grace, called me to his service; I will never abandon him.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to all who helped me to attain this goal! Led to this house by the adorable guidance of Divine Providence, I humbly adore the divine will and leave it up to him to dispose of me as he wishes in time and eternity.<sup>5</sup>

Steyl is the fourth station of my life's journey. Born on January 7, 1862 in *Horst an der Emscher*, I lived in my parental home until 1879, then spent two years at the teachers' training college in Münster, graduating in 1881.

I had not yet left the college when I was offered a position, far, far away from my home area. It appealed to me and my parents agreed to it, and on September 8, the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, I first began to teach in Rendsburg, Schleswig-Holstein, where a few hundred Catholics lived among 12,000 Protestants. I had a group of thirty-nine children, mixed boys and girls, big and small. It was, indeed, a fine task but no easy one. In spite of that I grew to love them and I only realized how much the mission<sup>6</sup> meant to me when I had to leave it. That was on March 7, 1891, the feast of Bl. Hermann Joseph.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Based on a German hymn.

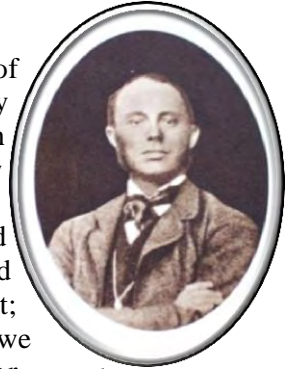
<sup>5</sup> Based on the vow formula.

<sup>6</sup> The diaspora was called the inner mission to which the St. Boniface Association was committed. In the contemporary language there was also the external mission referring to pastoral work among migrants to North America and the pagan missions.

<sup>7</sup> Hermann Joseph of Steinfeld (\*1155 in Cologne-+7 April 1241 in Hoven by Zülpich) was a mystic who became known through his hymns. Since August 1958 he could be venerated as a saint. Hermann Joseph was the name of Sr. Michael's uncle, Fr. Hermann Wegener, SVD.

## *Hovering Darkness*

In the nine years I spent in Rendsburg, the number of pupils increased to sixty. During the first year of my stay there, God demanded a great sacrifice from me, the death of my dear, good father<sup>8</sup> to whom I owed so much; I saw him for the last time, when I left for Rendsburg. The blow was heaviest for my good mother who found herself in an extremely difficult situation. But the good Lord knows how to make everything turn out for the best; he allows us to sink low but not to drown<sup>9</sup> and today we look up to our dear father in heaven with thanksgiving for his fatherly care. Each year I went home for a five-week vacation and that was a great joy for my relatives. Although they would have been happy if I had remained there with them, I was drawn back to the north year after year and I did not know myself when I might say farewell to it.



*Johann Tönnies*  
*M. M. Michael's father*

## *The Crossroad*

In the meantime my sister Elisabeth<sup>10</sup> — we were 11 children<sup>11</sup> — had also graduated as a teacher in Münster. I had to begin to think seriously about the future because the Catholic school in Rendsburg was not a public school and thus I could not remain there forever. What to do? To stay in Rendsburg? Go back to Westphalia? Or enter a convent? Has God perhaps called you to the religious life? These last questions urged themselves on me again and again—was that not pure grace? And I could not put them out of my mind. I shrunk back from the thought. And yet religious life was a more perfect state than that of a lay teacher. It seemed incomprehensible to me that others could be completely happy and content and could die in peace without choosing the more perfect way.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Johann Tönnies died on January 12, 1882, at the age of fifty-five. Adolphine was just twenty years old and had been in Rendsburg for three months. She stated the cause of his death as heart disease.

<sup>9</sup> An old German proverb.

<sup>10</sup> According to Sr. Michael's personal data, Elisabeth was a teacher in Horst.

<sup>11</sup> On the data sheet she enumerated ten brothers and sisters of whom the third, (Franz) and the second to the last (Anna) must have died because she gave no further information about them.

<sup>12</sup> She must surely have had to correct that belief because it is not the path in life that sanctifies but the way one lives, and each one has to follow the path to which God calls him or her. However, the sentence shows what demands she made on herself and what ideals she taught to the children in school and later to the young Sisters.

I loved and highly esteemed my vocation as a teacher. Now I would like to pass the word to Fr. Stockhoff, the parish priest in Rendsburg, under whose fatherly guidance I spent so many years. Congratulating me on the day of my first profession on March 12, 1894, he wrote, “You always felt that your happiness was not quite complete, you always wanted to break out of the narrow bounds (very true),<sup>13</sup> sometimes you were not content with the fact that you had not been given a larger area of work, (yes, certainly very proud and ambitious) now, with the grace of the Holy Spirit whose servant you have become, you can develop your wings (they have already been well pruned) and find a broader and graced area of work—whenever and however it pleases God.”



## *The Search*

*M. M. Michael as a young teacher*

For me, it is enough that I have sincerely searched for and, therefore, found that something had been lacking in my happiness. “I sought him whom my soul loves, I will hold him fast and never let him go.”<sup>14</sup> How did I find him? The good Lord brought it about in his goodness and care that during the Pentecost holiday, from Monday to Friday of Pentecost week, the teachers in the northern mission were offered a retreat at the convent of the Ursulines in Eutin. It was given by Fr. von Geyr, a Jesuit.<sup>15</sup> This priest was the first one to whom I entrusted my thoughts and questions about my future and asked for advice. He said, “You would be happy if I were to say you do not have a vocation for the religious life?” Yes and no. “If I remember rightly,” he continued, “I entered religious life at the age of twenty-one and I found peace there.” Then he advised me to pray the *Memorare* daily for six months and then to discuss the matter with my confessor, Fr. Stockhoff, the parish priest. I implored the dear Mother of God from the depths of my heart to intercede and obtain for me the grace to recognize my vocation. The good Lord knows how much I owe her.

I said nothing of what I was thinking, not even during the vacation at home, and I also ensured that a position as a teacher remained open for me in Westphalia. At the end of the six months I told my confessor of my wish; it was Christmas. He was totally surprised and said I should speak about the matter again after a few weeks. I did so on the Feast of the Presentation. He did not make a decision, however, as my mother had to hear about the matter first.

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<sup>13</sup> The comments in parenthesis were inserted by Sr. Michael herself.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Canticle of Canticles, 3:1-4.

<sup>15</sup> Fr. Albert von Geyr-Schweppenborg SJ (9 April 1834-3 March 1902).

Then, fortunately I remembered my priestly uncle here in Steyl, whom I greatly respected and whom I trusted almost without limit. And since he was well informed about mother's situation, I wrote a letter to him at the beginning of March 1890 and poured my heart out to him. My priestly uncle wrote back on March 12, "I have prayed and had prayers said in this important intention. Now I say to you with great certainty: Your vocation to the religious life is genuine. It is God's holy will that you serve him in this high state and to the best of your ability, according to the given circumstances, work for your own sanctification and for the salvation of others, etc."



*Mathilde Tönnies*  
*M. M. Michael's mother*

Now I was saved and my decision was made: on March 22, the day before Passion Sunday, I asked my dear mother, after she had been prepared beforehand by a letter, to give me totally to the good Lord in religious life. I sensed acutely the greatness of the sacrifice that the good Lord was asking of her and of me but he who gives the will, also gives the completion (cf. Phil 2:13).



*M. M. Michael*

My uncle also made a suggestion for me to consider. He wrote, "We have made a small start with the foundation of a women's Congregation (we already have seven Sisters): To cultivate the veneration of the Holy Spirit, partially take care of our laundry, to support the missionaries through prayer and, when the time comes, also to work in the missions in the education of children etc." I was immediately won over by this suggestion and I do believe there was also a little natural pride involved. Contrary to my uncle's and my own expectations, this plan did not meet my mother's approval and there was a general protest against it. This opposition cost me many a tear but my resolve stood firm and the more people tried to shake it, the firmer it became. I could not take any further steps and had to wait patiently until vacation time. But even then the matter stuck fast; mother and my brothers and sisters thought they could not do without me. And that is not surprising, when one considers the cross and sufferings they had gone through.

### *Entrance in Steyl*

Once again I wrote to Steyl, to my helper in the hour of need, and it pleased God to let him come and help me, he spoke out authoritatively and I was free. The only question now was "where." I felt drawn to Steyl but I was afraid to make my own decision. I wrote to ask my confessor in Rendsburg for advice. He wrote, "It would be a pity if you were not able to continue your work as a teacher and that is my full conviction. You will be able to do that in the Congregation of Steyl however, even if not immediately." Once

more I turned to my priestly uncle Hermann. This was his answer, “You wished a decision in the burning question of: Where? I did not wish to pre-empt the judgment of your confessor, therefore I have only expressed my opinion in the matter with great reserve. Now, however, that your confessor has left you completely free, I say to you clearly and decisively: Come to Steyl. That and only that seems to me to be the holy will of God. Fear nothing, continue calmly on the path you have already begun,” etc.

Then I submitted the required papers to Fr. Superior and asked for admission, which was granted on August 28, 1890, the feast of St. Augustine. I could only enter, however, the following year. There was still no one to take my place in Rendsburg and I still had to wait. I gave classes for the last time on April 4, 1891 and informed the unsuspecting children that I would soon be leaving them. The following day, the Sunday after Easter, was the children's first Communion day.

On Monday I prepared my departure and on Tuesday, April 7, feast of Bl. Hermann Joseph, name day of my priestly uncle, to whom I owe so much, I left the beloved mission in Rendsburg. The date of my entrance had been left up to me and so I chose May 1.



The three weeks left to me, until then, were spent among my loved ones. Finally the day of leave-taking arrived, it was a Friday, May 1. Indeed, it was not an easy thing to leave all that is beloved and dear, it is almost like a death; yet I was more composed than in Rendsburg, although my mother was my dearest possession on earth. Since it was too difficult for my mother, my sister Elisabeth accompanied me. We went first to St. Michael's Mission House and after dinner our priestly uncle took us to the Sisters. It was the hour at which our Savior bled to death on the cross, the sacrifice was made. Praise and honor to God in all eternity!

The following is a note of M. M. Michael, which was later added in the margin: *I cannot neglect to add here, with deepest gratitude to God, that my mother, after a long struggle, now (1896) no longer grieves about my being here. The good Lord has also blessed her from a temporal point of view, thus she wrote the following lines in January of this year to Fr. Prefect, "I could not wish things to be better and I often do not know myself how we managed to get where we are, and I can only say: All is due to God's blessing. And I am firmly convinced that Sr. Michael is very well placed there, and that is enough for me."*



M. M. Michael  
as a Missionary Sister

## Conclusion

The vocation story of M. M. Michael shows that she had acquired a good preparation for the consecrated life in her family. Even so, entering religious life was not a self-evident move from one state to another. She made it clear that she had tested herself thoroughly and at length, and had trusted good spiritual guides to help her with her decision.

The account of her life discloses also that her family was not unknown in Steyl. Her mother Mathilde was an older sister of Fr. Hermann Wegener, SVD, who at the time of Adolphine's entrance was the prefect in St. Michael's Mission House of Steyl. Mathilde was married to the businessman Johann Tönnies and lived in Horst Emscher, now called Gelsenkirchen. Among the brothers and sisters, Adolphine, born on January 7, 1862, was the fourth daughter.



Finally, the chronicle that she wrote reveals an independent, conscientious woman who was able to keep many things in view, capable of making decisions, building up and taking the lead. The Missionary Sisters, like the Adoration Sisters, are grateful to her for all that she contributed to the building up and development of both Congregations and nonetheless for what she recorded about the beginnings.

Inasmuch as Sr. Michael belonged to the first group in Steyl, she heard Arnold Janssen's ideas about his second foundation and what he expected of it and she saw where and how he made changes. In the same way she shared in the deliberations of the Sisters. That gave her a certitude that proved an advantage later on when, as co-foundress of the Congregation of the Adoration Sisters, she needed to make decisions.



*Miracles or favors received through the intercession  
of the Servant of God, M. M. Michael may be communicated to any of our convents.*