

Mary and Carmel's Life Of Prayer:

*The Carmelite Spirit of
Venerable Michael of St Augustine.
(1621-1684)*

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“Mother knows best” has often proven to be a fact. An egregious example of the opposite was the vocational orientation of Ven. Michael of St. Augustine (Ballaert). The 19-year old, in 1639, announced to his family that he felt called to Carmel. His devout mother was thoroughly contrary Not that she was against the religious life choice of her son. She was glad to give ten of her eleven children to the more intense service of God. Of the eight boys, three became diocesan priests of some renown, one a theologian, another a pastor and the third a Canon. Three became Franciscans, one of whom died in Jerusalem on his second pilgrimage to the holy places and was buried on Mount Sion. Two of the three girls became religious in the Beguine community; the other remained in the world to take care of the aging parents, but was consecrated to God by the Franciscan vow of chastity. The other two boys joined Camel.

One became Marius of St. Francis. While serving as prior of the most prestigious house of Malines, he wrote two spiritual books, one on spiritual exercises and the other on devotion for St. Joseph. And finally there was Michael, who added “of St. Augustine” to his name as a member of the Touraine Reform, probably in tribute to the Augustinian friars who had educated him in his youth.

The mother who was surely generous in giving all her children to the service of the Church, was not against Michael’s vocation, quite the contrary She frowned on his choice of Carmel because of decadence into which the Order had fallen in the Lowlands. The Thirty Years’ War, with William of Orange the most famous protagonist, had taken its toll. Politics had sharpened the animosity between the French-speaking Walloons and the Flemish contingent. Even the reformed friars were infected by partisan positions, so that there had to be a separate jurisdiction for the two sides. Intrigues were the order of the day. An eminent Walloon, Fr. Gabriel of the Annunciation, became the Assistant of the Fr. General in Rome. His misrepresentation of the Flemish side of the argument caused several flawed decisions to be made by Rome. Only with a visitation of Belgium by the Prior General Jerome Ari was the major superior able to see for himself that he had been misled by the advice he had been given.

The mother had reason to be concerned: to allow her son to enter such a perpetually charged ambiance militated against a vocation to religious life. Michael showed his maturity in not contradicting his mother’s anxieties, but in simply pointing out that perhaps the Lord was calling him to help restore the venerable family of Carmel to its pristine fervor. This type of reasoning was precisely what could lead her to change her mind. In fact, she subsequently dropped her objections to Michael’s Carmelite vocation. This decision produced one of the outstanding members of the Belgian province, a uniquely gifted Marian author, who was to serve in all the important appointments of the Belgian Province of Carmel, and the one who reserved the memory of the Ballaert family name for future generations.

Solid Catholic family background

April 15, 1621 was the day of Michael’s birth into an outstandingly Catholic family of John and Catherine Ballaert. As often happens, not much is known of his youthful years, but three episodes do anticipate his future direction. Like St. John of the Cross before him, as a youngster, Michael fell into a ditch filled with water and would have drowned had not a stranger jumped in to rescue him and deliver him safe and sound to his parents. This was taken as a sign that God had something in mind for him.

From an early age, Michael was used to spending any money that came his way not on personal hobbies or on favorite sweets, but rather he saved it to distribute to the poor. On one occasion the family visited some relatives on a feast of Our Lady. The occasion was marked by entertainment and feasting. Young Michael could not understand; he told one of his sisters that such Marian feasts should be given over to devotions and prayers.

What attracted Michael to Carmel we do not know, but it well may have been the Order's professed and fervent devotion to the Blessed Mother, as future events would indicate. A serious youngster such as Michael would also have been impressed by the reforming spirit of friars such as Martin Hooge and Livinius of the Bl. Trinity. Reform was desperately needed after the disasters of the religious wars of the 16th century during which personages such as William of Orange had rallied Protestant and Huguenot forces against the government of the Spain of Philip II. Religious houses were systematically destroyed; for instance, the cloistered nuns of Vilvoorde saw twelve nuns killed and the rest had to take refuge in Malines with their precious icon of Our Lady of Consolation. The year was 1578. Devastated also were the friars' houses in Valenciennes (1566), Antwerp (1578), Brussels (1580) and Ypres (1578). Several friars were put to death.

Reform of Carmel

To restore Carmel in Belgium was no easy task. Many attempts were made to introduce the Reform of Touraine, but first attempts at the beginning of the 1600's proved futile. According to custom, civil authorities often took sides. Valenciennes was the first foundation where the local Bishop supported the reformers as did the Governess of Belgium, the Spanish Infanta, Isabella. But even in this case the turbulent, divisive times were typified by the intervention of the local Count. The non-reformed friars in black habits captured his ear. When other expedients failed, the Count invaded the Carmelite house with his troops and attempted to abolish the brown habit, the sign of the reformed friars. Small wonder that Michael's mother was contrary to her son's vocation to Carmel.

However painstakingly, still reform did take hold in many religious houses. By Michael's time, there were three novitiates: one for Walloon (= French-speaking) novices, another in Louvain for reformed Flemish novices and a third novitiate for the non-reformed candidates. In October of 1639, Michael began his novitiate year, after having given evidence of his call to Carmel and also having explained his motivations and convictions. Solid foundations for Carmelite life were laid by the devout and experienced novice master, preparing the young candidate for his profession on October 14, 1640. Following the usual curriculum he studied philosophy in Ghent and then returned to Louvain to take up theology at the world-famous University. On the 10th of June, 1645, Michael was ready for priestly ordination.

During these years the superiors, steeped in the Order's spirituality, presented the students with the Carmelite Rule of St. Albert, as well as what was considered the primitive Rule, "The Institution of the First Monks." Also studied were John Baconthorpe's writings on Carmel. Bl. John Soreth's commentary on the Rule, the works of John of St. Samson, the lay brother, soul of the Touraine Reform. Ven. Dominic of St. Albert had prepared more formal formation material. As numerous publications attest, Marian devotion took concrete form in the scapular devotion, and in the scapular confraternities which multiplied prodigiously. The other dimension of Carmel, which was being stressed was the apostolic

need for missions. The Prior General asked the Belgian Province to initiate something in England.

Regular observance

His was a spirituality based on the ordinary means, the regular observance as described in Carmel's Rule and Constitutions. Community prayer enjoyed a privileged role. In fact, rather than slacking off over the years, he became known as the friar inevitably the first in chapel and the last to leave. This included the midnight office, as celebrated in the Carmel of Malines. If, for some reason the lector, was not on time to rouse the community, it was Fr. Michael who, even as superior was on hand to supply for him.

Following contemporary usages, he followed the traditional forms of penance. The discipline was not a disputed question, but a frequently used means of bodily mortification. Like many saintly persons, his preference was the common food served to the community at large; one would never guess what was his favourite dish. When seriously sick, it was only in obedience that he agreed not to observe the laws of fast and abstinence. He spent the minimum time, four or five hours a night, in bed. He suffered much from the bitter, humid cold of the winter months, standing clear of the source of heat, and in choir attentive to the rubrics bare-handed and bare-headed, frozen but always faithful and fervent.

Although he was convinced that his Province was not more fervent and more deserving of God's graces because of his faults and failings, his confreres were of the opposite persuasion. He might consider himself a hypocrite who was not deserving of their regard, but his fellow Carmelites recognized his worth. For all of his life in Carmel, he was asked to take one position of responsibility after another.

As soon as he was ordained he was named professor of philosophy. He persevered in this task until 1649. While in Ghent where philosophy was taught, he became the spiritual director of a Carmelite tertiary Marie Petijt, a unique Marian mystic. Fr. Michael is remembered today mainly because of this chance meeting with a lay Carmelite, recognized as the contemplative who most effectively lived out and described the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary even in the highest realms of the mystical life. Fr. Michael, based on his solid academic background, was able to formulate her experiences in accessible language that has become classical on the subject. And this experience of the young Carmelite priest was not just a scholastic exercise; his own spirituality, as we shall see, was profoundly influenced by Marie Petijt's vision.

Novice master

Michael was a young, 28-year old friar when at the Provincial Chapter of Ghent on April 23, 1649, he was elected to the all-important post of novice master. His commitment to the novices lasted seven years, and continued long afterwards in a book which he published containing his instructions, *The Devout Life in Christ*, which he dedicated to the Prior General: "I offer you one of the clusters of grapes grown in the little vineyard of the novitiate, which I cared for seven years." Together with the volume *Introduction to the Land of Cannel*, this work reflects the contents of his instructions to the novices, which depended not so much on other authors as on his own religious experience. In fact, he stressed the main elements of the

Touraine Reform, which strove to recapture the atmosphere which made it possible to remain in divine intimacy not only on an habitual but also on an actual basis.

His instructions, then, issued more from prayer than from study. His spirituality was markedly incarnational, the spiritual was firmly rooted in, expressed by and stimulated by the immediate, the concrete, the physical. He made much of the use of images; later, as Provincial, his first act as such was to order a copy of the image of Our Lady *La Bruna* of the Naples Carmel to be exposed in every convent and he personally carried this image with himself everywhere. Guardian angels were very real to him. So was a saint such as Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, also a novice mistress who just recently had been canonized. He personally followed the progress of his novices. One of them, a promising prospect, was going through a vocational crisis and spoke of leaving Carmel. Fr. Michael believed in the young man's vocation. He appealed to St. Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi; he placed a holy picture card of her beneath a statue of Our Lady, and as St. Theresa had done with St. Joseph, he threatened not to rescue the image until the gift of perseverance was granted the doubting novice. This grace was eventually granted.

Prior Provincial

On May 12, 1656, he was elected Prior Provincial for the first time. The situation was tense especially between the Walloons and the Flemish contingent. The latter made up two-thirds of the friars, which made the other third, French-speaking friars complain about under-representation. A common complaint was that the first fervour of the Touraine Reform was slowly being extinguished, and this especially after the death of the leading reformer, Fr. Martin Hooge in 1640. The Walloons obtained a commissary of their own in the person of one Fr. Matthias de Corona, who was under the influence of Fr. Gabriel of the Annunciation, a reformed friar but with a flawed personality that knew no bounds in defending the "rights" of his French-speaking confreres.

When put in charge of the reform in Germany and Bohemia, he became a well known figure on the Carmelite scene and as a result was elected Assistant General for the German and Slavic portions of the Order. He was definitely partisan in defending the minority, French-speaking cause. In Rome he convinced the Prior General to appoint Walloon superiors who were not acceptable to the Flemish contingent. Things boiled over until the General, Jerome Ari, realized that he had to make a personal visitation of Belgium. For three weeks the General listened to the aggrieved friars, and in the end he realized that he had made decisions based on the one-sided reporting of Fr. Gabriel. The General was noble enough to acknowledge the injustice of some decisions, which he consequently rescinded.

Not only did the Fr. General approve some of the expenses that he saw to be legitimate or even necessary and that had been covered by local "municipal laws" which the Constitutions allowed in order to take into due account local conditions. The General was even more radical; he saw that the only viable solution to the tense situation was to divide the province in two - into a smaller Walloon province of 140 religious and the larger Flemish province with 450 men. His Flemish confreres supported Fr. Michael whole-heartedly and elected him provincial two other times, so that he served them in this capacity for a total of ten years.

Formation was the strong dimension of Fr. Michael's provincial service. In 1663 he was appointed Prior of the novitiate house in Malines. The Constitutions of the time specified

that the prior would have much to do with the formation of the candidates. Given he was prior for eight years, and even when subsequently he served as assistant provincial he would have had input in the formation program, in total he was involved in the future membership of the province for 25 years.

The moderation which the Fr. General urged on the Flemish friars was abetted by the conciliatory nature of Fr. Michael, who was constantly in some leadership role. Two outstanding religious whom he guided were Fra. Arnold of St. Charles and Fr. Timothy of the Presentation. The former died as a cleric and has been immortalized as the Carmelite St. Aloysius Gonzaga or Stanislaus Kostka. Fr. Michael wrote an authoritative biography of the admired novice. Fr. Timothy, on the other hand, took up his pen and was the first to write a biography of Fr. Michael.

Popular superior

Why was Fr. Michael appreciated for his leadership qualities? Above all because of his native ability to harmonize an uncompromising commitment to the observances of the Reform but at the same time, in personal relationships to be constantly genteel and kindly. In less sophisticated times he was nicknamed “the mother of the province” since he seemed to understand each member. The reformed Constitutions ordered the superior to visit each of his confreres once a month to inquire about their temporal and spiritual welfare. Fr. Michael was successful as superior because he took this injunction not as a formality, but in the context of spiritual growth and fraternity. When the saintly cleric Fra. Arnold was dying, Fr. Michael was at his side constantly; the genuine affection between the superior and the cleric became apparent on every page of the biography of Fra. Arnold which Fr. Michael wrote.

Fr. Michael was not shy with the instructions he provided for the young religious. His many writings were actually the teachings he shared with his confreres. But book knowledge was not his only means. Even as provincial he knew how to correct. He noticed one younger religious not genuflect in front of the Bl. Sacrament in the proper way. He called the cleric aside, instructed him in what he was doing wrong and then gave him a practical demonstration as to how one should genuflect in front of the Bl. Sacrament.

Other religious depended on him for an authentic interpretation of the Rule and Constitutions. The two devotions he recommended above others were two Carmelite staples: the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Perhaps remembering his mother’s reservations, he never ceased stressing the Carmelite ideal and charism. But this in no abstract, theoretical sense; his was an incarnational approach with episodes redolent of the desert fathers as well as of previous Carmelite “greats.” Once, to test his obedience, he ordered Fra. Arnold of St. Charles to wash a clean white cloak. When another religious upbraided Fr. Michael for this, his reaction was typical: “Brother, carissimo, out of obedience I would be ready to wash even a brand new cloak.”

Fr. Michael eventually gathered his writings into a 4-volume work *Institutionum mysticarum*, adapting it to a more general readership. To this collection he added what has become his most famous work *A Mary-form and Marian Life in Mary and for Mary*, which he wrote out of his own deep Marian devotion, but also based on the mystical experiences of Marie Petijt. His style is simple and direct; he avoids the subtleties on which many other authors dwell. In the process he gives a solid, catholic view of the spiritual life as a lessening of a dependence on creatures and an ever greater dependence on God. In his Marian

writings, he shows that in some instances, Mary is actively present in the highest spheres of the mystical life.

Carmelite and Rhenish Schools of Spirituality

Fr. Albert Deblaere, SJ, an expert on the matter (*Dictionnaire de la Spiritualité* X, 1980, col. 1187-1191) is of the opinion that Fr. Michael has a unique contribution in spirituality insofar as he linked a pure Carmelite spiritual tradition with the rich Flemish spiritual tradition. For instance, in dealing with the vow of poverty, Fr. Michael echoes the interior emptying of self that northern mysticism made much of. To live poverty at the heights means “renouncement of every creature so that a person reposes in God, without willing, without knowing, without understanding, without feeling anything of created realities, or even of divine charisms... not to desire anything, not to possess anything with attachment... neither graces nor virtues, neither things of heaven nor of earth, neither things natural nor supernatural.” This totalitarian detachment from all that is not God Himself – in order to re-find everything in Him, is common to the Carmelite and to the Flemish schools of mysticism.

While in his compendium on the spiritual life he cannot avoid dealing with the extraordinary phenomena that sometimes accompany a serious commitment to growth in the Spirit, he enters into detail in the description of gifts such as ecstasy, enlightenments, levitation. He enters into their symptoms, their implications, their meaning, their fruits. Mirroring the mentality of his time, Fr. Michael writes as if these were the ordinary *humus* of Carmel. And yet even on these pages he retains his basic leitmotif of detachment/renunciation and a simple (he calls it “essential”) union with God without any additions on our part.

These two strands are found at the beginning of spiritual striving, or the ascetical part as it was then labelled, but they are even more evident in the higher stages of the life in its mystical stages. On all levels, Fr. Michael speaks of a deiform life. By this he means life directed towards God one’s final, definitive destiny. A deiform life implies that the instincts, satisfactions of personal fulfilment are not the main focus. It means living as if there were no reward for us in eternity. Our goal is not some gift of God, but rather God Himself. Christ’s task was, and is, to be our “way,” showing us the life of virtue and of the spirit in the concreteness of his manhood. This process Fr. Michael described well in his *The Devout Life in Christ*. This imitation of Christ was etched against a background of an ever increasing interiority, that is, of God becoming an ever more present and dynamic and actual factor in one’s life. All his life, for instance, Fr. Michael made ample use of sacramentals such as holy pictures, statues, but with the scope of building up one’s interior strength and awareness as God simply becomes more and more central during a person’s waking moments. The spiritual person becomes a servant/slave of Jesus who truly dominates one’s convictions and resolutions.

Though he does not say so explicitly, Fr. Michael writes as if he believed that contemplation was a component of Carmelite life. The traditional means, which he inculcates in its pursuit should be embraced by all Carmelites:

Silence, solitude, mortification. Intimacy/communion with God Himself without any other material or spiritual creature, is the goal of an authentic spiritual life, epitomized in an ever more perfect conformity of the human will with the divine. To become deiform, then,

means a sustained effort to recognize, acknowledge and incarnate the Spirit's inspirations. This process includes both active and passive contemplation.

Meditation, for Fr. Michael, is not an end in itself; it should lead to contemplative prayer and the sooner one reaches the transition the better. Renouncement is an integral part of the process. The passive (and infused) type of contemplation is a sheer gift of God which the soul on its own cannot acquire. Yet perfection – and this has magisterially been taught by the II Vatican Council - is the goal of everyone. All, on the other hand, can acquire active contemplation. The person who has divested self of all that is not God and has a simple, unencumbered intimacy with God, has reached an uncomplicated intuition of God, which traditionally has been called contemplation.

This active contemplation, in Fr. Michel's teaching, ordinarily occurs in spiritual dryness, which marks a transitional period and not the definitive perfection of the soul. Even in instances when active contemplation is not concomitant with dryness, still it is not a final resting place, but is often completed by infused contemplation, its fulfilment and crown. While active contemplation is for everyone, infused contemplation is given to those to whom God wishes to grant it as an earthly reward for all the previous striving to live in a God-like way.

A warning sounded by Fr. Michael – and repeated in our day by men such as Fr. Bartholomew M. Xiberta – was against an avidity to know the actual, exact status of one's soul. A person should spend as little time as possible discerning one's interior dispositions, whether it be aridity or consolation, light or darkness. What is important is to remain in the loving presence of our Beloved, whose love always goes first and is not based on merit or worthiness, but in God's sheer and multiform goodness. In other words, there should be a minimum of self-analysis, and a maximum of authentic openness to Him who because of his infinite goodness, can alone fulfill all of our desires and aspirations. The practice of the presence of God in the Carmelite tradition, has been an essential type of prayer. To allow oneself to be loved by God in whatever form He decides – be it basking in his presence or lack of the same, be it with intuition into spiritual matters or emptiness of Spirit – is supreme wisdom. If God prescribes or allows spiritual aridity, the person should humbly and even gratefully acquiesce, realizing that in this way one's dependence on God becomes all-embracing.

Mixed life

But Fr. Michael knows that Carmel is both contemplative and dedicated to activity in Christ's Church. As he points out, the mixed life of Carmel is to be accepted with all its ramifications and one should not be constantly looking over one's shoulder to see what others are doing. Carmelites are not required to make a choice between Martha and Mary, but the Church expects them to harmonize the two elements, while accepting the fact that Mary had chosen the better part. In this sense, the authentic Carmelite should have an accurate set of priorities with the contemplative elements of one's life in first place, but without excluding or looking down on or neglecting the other elements.

However, this demanding spiritual vision should not be undertaken with an iron-clad determination and clenched fists, determined to succeed. Fr. Michael points out nothing should be forced in the spiritual life. If a person comes to experience the love of God, all else on the path is seen to be a consequence of this unmerited love. The person who experiences

the love of another understands that the return of love is not a categorical imperative, but a normal human response to this wondrous gift of love. The more one comes to know who God is, the more one recognizes his good fortune and as every lover, he/she will even look for sacrifices to make in order to prove that this love is appreciated. The deeper the love experienced, the greater the sacrifice one is willing to undertake for the sake of the Beloved.

Marian devotion

Michael of St. Augustine is best remembered for his Marian devotion and his ability to describe it in uniquely effective theological terms. For this gift he owes much to the tertiary Marie Petijt whom he began to guide when he was just a young priest. However, this service of direction and of theological expression was not alien to his own devotion and faith. His was a tender, child-like approach to the Blessed Mother. When he could not pray it was to the Mother of mercy that he ran and asked her to pray in his stead. How often he did this with the psalms even of the Divine Office; his reasoning was that Mary herself had used these psalms as her expression of prayer. She knew better than anyone how to pray them with meaning and fervour.

How often he held the image of Our Lady before his eyes or on his breast as he begged his heavenly Mother to take pity on him and make up for his unworthiness. He had this image of Our Lady, *La Bruna* of Naples, printed and made available to every religious house, but also in all the public places of worship so that the faithful too might benefit from the living presence of Mary in Church, and also from her beneficent intervention for all those who call upon her in need.

As major superior, he ordered that whenever a Carmelite began to write, the first word he should write at the top of the page should be “Maria.” The name of Mary should also be inscribed on the doors of the friars’ cells and other common rooms of the friary. This healthy incarnational Marian spirituality was not a mere formality. One historian (Ismael Martinez, *Los Carmelitas VI Figuras del Carmelo*, BAC, 1996, p. 246) is of the opinion that Fr. Michael’s Marian teaching is “the most exquisite, mature and final fruit of Carmel’s Mariology.” Zealous propagator of the Touraine Reform, he inherited Arnold Bostius’ vision of Mary. The latter taught that everything Carmelite belonged to Mary as her property or domain. The other solidly entrenched conviction was that of John Hildesheim, namely, that the mission of Carmel in the Church was to continue the love that Jesus had for his Mother. The vision espoused by Fr. Michael not only can be considered the highpoint of Carmelite devotion, but it has often been compared to the total consecration to Our Lady as formulated by St. Louis Maria Grignon Montfort, however without the latter’s stress on “slavery” to Our Lady, but rather on the ties of filial affection.

A life lived in and for Mary should not be seen as a life parallel to a life in Christ. It is merely a new way of living that same Christ-centred life. Far from being an obstacle to a God-centred life, a Marian life is a help and stimulus to live in God more authentically, since Mary was the first and best disciple of her Son. The various names for this Marian life reflect different dimensions of Mary’s presence in Christ. *Mary-form life* means a life conformed to the will of Mary by which a person is ready and happy to do whatever is pleasing to God and to Mary. *Life in Mary* stresses a life of dialogue with an ever loveable and loving Mother, a dialogue which at times is a being present to one another. *Life for Mary* is a commitment of all of one’s energies to see Mary honoured in all things in this way fostering the spread of the

Kingdom of her Son Jesus. All this demands that a person be permeated by the spirit of Mary which is a spirit best expressed by Mary's *Magnificat*.

Mary's greatness does not depend on some factor in herself. She is extolled because He who is mighty has done great things in her, so great that no greater dignity could be granted to a creature. Mary is God's Masterpiece insofar as He has shared an abundance of his life and love with her. Fr. Michael refers to the traditional title of Mary "Neck of the Church," connecting the Head with the other members, and acting as a channel of graces for all others. In line with the Marian spirituality of Carmel, Fr. Michael called on Mary as Mother of grace and of mercy many times a day, especially in the "Hail, holy Queen," Carmelites invoked Mary in her mercy. The life of grace requires mercy when it is lost or tarnished or threatened. Mary is God's prime instrument in both cases. Fr. Michael during all of his life thought of himself as supremely unworthy of God's love. Each time he celebrated the Eucharist and the sacrament of penance, he called on the Bl. Mother to obtain for him the attitudes she had in receiving Jesus within her and the correct dispositions to confess his faults effectively in order to be forgiven and healed.

The Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, view creatures as so filled with traces of God their Creator that persons who do not recognize the greatness and power of God mirrored in his creatures, are outside the realm of truth. The Church teaches as a dogma that creatures should lead us to the knowledge of the existence of God – even without grace and revelation (I Vatican Council). If all creatures reflect something of their Maker, how much more Mary who in Fr. Michael's appreciation, shares in more divinity than all other angels and saints put together. For this reason we venerate her with special hyperdulia. In the theological context of his day, marked by Jansenism and Quietism, which suspected even the humanity of Christ in the highest reaches of mysticism, it was hazardous to affirm the role of Mary in such unequivocal and maximalist terms.

A Positive, Maximalist Approach

In contrast to the minimalist quietists and jansenists who deemed creatures obstacles vis-à-vis union with God, Fr. Michael proposed that Mary was so pervaded by the divine that "she seems to be by grace what God is by nature" (*De vita mariaeformi*, ix), but, again, simply because God deigned to flood her with his most exquisite and unique graces and privileges, as he gave to no other person. Mary's cooperation was such that she continued to pronounce her "fiat" with joy and gratitude in all that happened to her, even the enigmatic and hidden. But this abundance of graces is not a treasure to be honoured so much as to be shared. Fr. Michael is a serious and strenuous supporter of Mary Mediatrix of all graces. Good theologian as always, he derives all grace from Christ Jesus, the Head of his Body, but since Mary is the Neck of the Body, these Christ-derived graces reach us via Mary.

The basis of all this is Mary's motherhood – the human existence of Jesus derives completely from Mary. We, who belong to Christ by our baptism, are given a share in his life by filial grace, so at least part of our life of grace derives from Mary. The title "Mother of mankind" is not a euphemism but a statement of fact. But an authentic mother does not merely generate a child and bring him to the light of day, but also nurtures and cares for him especially in childhood. Likewise Mary continues to exercise her motherhood over those faithful to her Son. Fr. Michael, from the depth of Carmel's experience, characterizes Mary as mother with the adjective *amabilis*, "loveable." But this does not suffice to express the depth

and intensity of his love for Mary He, a northern European becomes rather Mediterranean with adjectives to describe Mary, most of them in the superlative. She is the most loveable of mothers, a non-pareil source of life and love. He stretches even the Latin in an untranslatable double superlative *superamabilissima*. Other times he simply calls her “the Love of Carmel.” The best way a Carmelite has of showing his/her gratitude for the presence and benefits from so wonderful a Mother is imitation. He links this need with the title of Carmel “Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary:” brothers, and so imitators of her virtues and her way of life.

Jesus taught us to pray taught that God’s Kingdom is realized in his followers especially by seeking and practicing the Will of God. Within this Kingdom of God is contained the reign of Mary too, and it is legitimate to want to act, to live and to die for Mary insofar as Mary holds a unique position in the reign of her Son Jesus. The first duty of a disciple is to love the Blessed Virgin. In the their tradition, Carmelites are charged in the Church to continue the love that Jesus had for his Mother. This implies a love of her God-given beauty. Secondly, the Carmelite is called on to imitate Mary, and Fr. Michael insists that this imitation is above all in the matter of chastity, poverty and obedience, a basic connection reflected in the current (1995) Constitutions. Although Fr. Michael knew about the movement, sponsored by the Augustinians with whom he had studied as a boy, to consider self as a slave of Mary he never uses the term. Since Carmel is intent on the title “bying/loveable Mother,” rather than slaves, Carmelites are sons or brothers of Our Lady

Since in his day (and until post Vatican II times), Carmelites pronounced their vows to God and to the Blessed Virgin Mary explicitly, they spontaneously considered themselves consecrated to God and to her. While the word “consecration” is not used, the contents are clear and run through Fr. Michael’s writings. All of oneself should be left in Mary’s hands. Fr. Michael is explicit: strictly speaking our consecration is to God who is Lord over all; consecration to Our Lady is real but subordinate. In this sense, Fr. Michael adopted what many Catholics practiced: the offering of all of one’s activities in the name of Mary Not relying on their proper merits, which Christians realize are all too meagre, they offer their mite of mutual love to God in the name of Mary, whose love was as intense as theirs is dull and unstable. Fr. Michael intuits that our most love-able Mother, Mary will gladly come to our aid and be our intercessor and allow us to present ourselves to God under her name. She is, after all, Carmel’s foremost patroness.

Mary in the mystic life

Fr. Michel’s specific contribution to the role of Mary in Carmel has to do with the mystical stages of the spiritual life in which the person is overwhelmed by the action of the Holy Spirit. A person is expected to cooperate in removing any and all obstacles to the Spirit’s activity and a person must sharpen his/her awareness of this beneficent action of the Spirit. Contrary to Jansenistic teaching, Fr. Michael is resolute in his conviction that Mary should never be considered an obstacle. On the contrary she can be present in the activity of the Holy Spirit, which makes us recognize our divine sonship, which concretely was effected with the input of the Blessed Mother.

In the prayer of quiet, when a person is absorbed by an immersion in God without any specific form, but rather the person seems lost like a drop in the ocean of the divine essence, Mary can be part of this prayer insofar as she is profoundly immersed in God, and allows

Him to have his way with her. She appears as the human being most immersed in God and included in our appreciation of the Godhead.

Another point inculcated by Fr. Michael was the full compatibility of vocal and aspirative prayer in this state of quiet. Largely under the action of the Holy Spirit, the person experiencing the prayer of quiet will spontaneously and simply – without studied formulation, but rather allowing self to be led by the Spirit – exclaim in admiration, in gratitude, in praise, in supplication... “My God and my all... Good Jesus, draw me to yourself... Mary how precious your name, sweeter than honey.” A prayer that originates with the Holy Spirit will find expression under the Spirit’s inspiration. This prayer makes us contemporaries with God’s world: as human beings we are led by the Spirit to express our involvement.

Mariologists remember Fr. Michael for his teaching on the Mary-form and Marian life. His writing on the subject is the result of a re-elaboration of notes taken by his directee, Marie Petijt, which she consigned to Fr. Michael. He himself out of his deeply Marian mystical experience was able to discern the theological principles which made conformity to the life of Mary a valid spiritual path. If we are meant to lead a life conformed to God’s Will, then it is given to some seekers of perfection to take the human person most conformed to that Will, Mary, and keep her before one’s eyes and heart in order to follow on her way, which is the best exemplification of the way of the Spirit of Jesus. Fr. Michael is precise: life in conformity with God’s Will is necessary for our salvation, while a Mary-form life is an added grace, a help offered to us from on high.

Mary beloved of God

Fr. Michael’s merit lies in his efforts to explain what life in conformity with Mary means. In focusing one’s gaze on the Person of Jesus, one realizes that the Father was able to accomplish all that He desired in Jesus; there was a convergence of action between the Father and Jesus in a spontaneous, loving and reverential manner. Applied to Our Lady, this same process obtains: there is a spontaneous and loving convergence by which Mary remains in perfect availability of will with God’s Will, without being distracted by any of the trials and tribulations of life. Often Fr. Michael recalls the Marian experiences of St. Peter Thomas and St. Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi. It is a question not of the ordinary grace that the Spirit gives us in order to love Mary but an extraordinary grace by which we love Mary in God and God in Mary. We admire her as totally ‘permeated by the divine and so we appreciate God “better” from our human standpoint. Flooded by God’s life and love, Mary mirrors God in a unique way, and her projection of the divine in her human person enables us to appreciate God all the more.

Mary is so precious to us because she was so marvellously attuned to that grace which allowed God free rein in her whole being. As Marian life is the life of God as lived concretely by Mary – and not something parallel to God’s ordinary way. As Mother of Jesus, Mary was adorned with wondrous divine gifts which give the impression that God and Mary form a single whole. Fr. Michael quotes Scripture to avoid the accusation of exaggeration. He cites the psalm:

“All of you are gods” (Ps 81: 6). Mary’s rapport with God is unique insofar as her divine motherhood is a never-to-be-repeated event.

Mary was not mother only in the conception and birth of Jesus her Son. She continued her loving concern for him throughout her days, manifesting her love in the hundreds of ways every mother does. Hers was not a life of ecstatic rapture, but of conforming her motherly will to all that the heavenly Father asked of her. By her love Mary was an associate of Jesus in his saving work throughout his life, and on to Calvary Mary was an integral, albeit secondary part of God's plan for our redemption. Even in the highest realms of contemplation, it is legitimate to concentrate on her as God chose her for her unique role. Fr. Michael repeats that Mary forms one object of contemplation with God – but not in some independent way, but because she is more dependent on Him and his grace than anyone else. Often Mary will lead us to a keener appreciation of the marvels of God's loving-kindness towards us and of the ocean of God's powerful love. Fr. Michael warns not to allow this communion with Mary to depend on our sensitive nature, based on feelings and consolations. It is the mind, the will, the memory that are the faculties preferred.

The role of the Holy Spirit

Fr. Michael recognizes that the action of the Holy Spirit is needed for this Mary-form type of life. Just as the Holy Spirit is responsible for the outpouring of God's love into Christians, and it is He who makes them aware of the intensity and power of this love, so He rouses in us deep-felt sentiments of love for Mary our loveable Mother. Just as He makes it possible for us to cry out "Abba, Father," so he puts in our hearts and on our lips the invocation "Salve, Mater." The Holy Spirit produced this affection for the Father and for Mary in the heart of Jesus. Now that same Spirit produces the same sentiments in the followers of Jesus.

Mary becomes an exemplar for all because she submitted so humbly and so thoroughly to the action of the Holy Spirit who overshadowed her not just at the annunciation, but throughout her life. Thus, those who belong to Mary, as Carmelites do from their very beginnings, are given a share in the spirit of Mary. She teaches them how to be as docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as she was. Gazing at her, Carmelites learn what it means to let God and the Spirit of God have their way with us. Fr. Michael risks misunderstanding but he is convinced that this new life is a superior way of the Spirit. In no way does he doubt that God is the Supreme Being as no one else is. But it is common doctrine, writes Fr. Michael, that in heaven there will be supplementary graces given to souls according to their capacities and requirements and specific graces by which individuals had special appreciation of various aspects of the faith such as the manhood of Christ, his five most precious wounds, the cross – and precisely, the Blessed Virgin Mary. The perfections of God are filtered to us in an understandable way by the Blessed Mother, who is not a goddess, but could deceive someone without the correct faith, simply because there is so much of God's life in her.

The appreciation of Mary's role in the upper realms of contemplation is not something that the person decides to pursue. It is a sheer gift of God, which can and should be prepared for, but which is given as God sees fit. Concretely a person should be grateful for the type of Marian life and devotion which God grants to him/her, without hankering after something else. Fr. Michael does urge his hearers and readers to aspire to a mystical Marian life; he considers it his duty to help others understand what this implies, given his own experience and that of Marie Petijt.

God, then, takes the initiative in granting a deeper appreciation of the role of Mary in mysticism. There must be no violent effort to reach this Marian experience. When someone is not taken up into this superior realm, one should be content to gaze at our loveable Mother and love her in a mature and conscious way. He constantly refers back to the example of Christ. "The Spirit of Jesus effected in Him a filial love for the eternal Father, and formed in his heart also sentiments of filial affection... towards his beloved mother... Note how this could happen in Christ absolutely without preventing the highest perfection and you can easily see that the same thing can happen in some devotees of Mary without any prejudice to the contemplative life" (*De vita mariaeformi* c. xiii).

To prepare for this eventual gift it is enough to be humble, without pretensions, generous, with a desire to be completely abandoned to what God wants. Fr. Michael remained true to this vision until the end. His death occurred during a bitterly cold February 2nd 1684, in those days fittingly celebrated as a Marian feast. The brother assisting him, attempting to fend off the cold, closed the curtains around his bedstead. This charitable gesture, however, prevented Fr. Michael from gazing at his beloved image of Our Lady. His last wish was "My good Brother, open those curtains, so that I can rivet my eyes on that loveable Mother of mine." And gazing at her, he died.