

“TO LEAD ME WHERE GOD WANTED ME TO BE”:  
AN ENQUIRY INTO THE SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT  
OF MARIA PETYT BY MICHAEL OF ST. AUGUSTINE

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The first contacts between Maria Petyt (1623-1677) and Michael of St. Augustine (1621-1684) date back to 1646. Maria was at that time 23 years old and a Carmelite tertiary for a few years. Michael was two years older and a lecturer in philosophy for the young friars in Ghent. Maria experienced their first meeting as a grace from above and wrote in her autobiography: “When I began to hear his teachings and to savour them, then I certainly felt that God had steered him to me, and that he must be my spiritual guide, to lead me where God wanted me to be.”<sup>1</sup> This God-given alliance between a spiritual director and his directee was a notable feature of the seventeenth century. Recent research has shown that such an intense accompaniment was a cultural construct that made a considerable contribution to the success of the Catholic reformation.<sup>2</sup>

This high esteem on the part of Maria would be reciprocated by Michael. During his accompaniment, Michael attached great value to Maria’s prayer for the *Observantia Strictior*.<sup>3</sup> This mutuality was a

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<sup>1</sup> MARIA PETYT, *Het leven vande weerdighe moeder Maria a S. ta Teresia, (alias) Petyt, vanden derden reghel vande Orden der Broederen van Onse L. Vrouwe des berghs Carmeli, tot Mechelen overleden den 1. November 1677*. 4 tt. in 2 voll. Ghent, bij de hoirs van Jan vanden Kerchove, 1683/1684. (Vilvoorde fotogr. reprinted [2002]) vol. 1, 53. I would like to thank professor sr. Helen Rolfson OSF for her translation of the quotes of Maria’s life story (vol. 1, 1-195). Also I thank fr. Míceál O’Neill O.Carm. for correcting my English.

<sup>2</sup> JODI BILINKOFF, *Related lives: confessors and their female penitents, 1450-1750*, Ithaca & NY, Cornell University Press 2005, 88f.

<sup>3</sup> A point of reference within this reform movement was the province of Tours. The stricter discipline introduced in this province was initially called *Observantia Strictior*, later the Reform of Touraine. Read more about this reform in the Belgian province in STEPHAN PANZER, *Observanz und Reform in der Belgischen Karmelitenprovinz 1623-1649: “pour parvenir à un parfait rétablissement de la discipline régulière”*, Roma, Edizioni Carmelitane, 2006.

known feature of the Tridentine reform as well, based on one of its fundamental tenets: the efficacy of intercessory prayer in the process of salvation.<sup>4</sup> Bilinkoff writes in her book, *Related lives*: "At a time in which Protestants challenged this entire system, clerical promoters insisted upon the holiness of women who voluntarily separated themselves from the world (...) so as to better pray for the souls of living and departed Christians."<sup>5</sup>

For the success of this important conjunction between priests and religious women the Church was indebted to the Spanish Carmelite saint, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582): "Teresa's contributions to spiritual direction were in many ways revolutionary. This is not due to any new methodology or to a redefinition of the relationship between director and directee, but rather because it was compatible to the revolutionary changes of the era."<sup>6</sup>, so Patricia Ranft writes in her history of women spiritual directors.

In the present article the spiritual fellowship between Michael and Maria is described in relation to the spiritual heritage of Teresa of Avila as it was valid in the seventeenth century. How did the Teresian model of sanctity take shape in their contact and are we able to discover the value of this accompaniment for the reform of the *Observantia Stricter* in the Flemish-Belgian province? This enquiry will be done on basis of the topoi underpinning this model of sanctity. Topoi are the parameters, the features of a model. We will treat the bond of priests and religious women, the esteem for intercessory prayer, spiritual warfare, reforming Carmel, combatting heretics and developing methods to distinguish true from false visions.

The article is structured as follows: first some preliminary comments on the Teresian model of sanctity, then a brief introduction to both life stories, Michael's instruction during Maria's novitiate, how the Teresian model of sanctity unfolded thereafter and the function of this model. In the end we will describe a few developments by which the functioning of the Teresian model weakened during the seventeen eighties.

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<sup>4</sup> J. BILINKOFF, *Related lives*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> PATRICIA RANFT, *A woman's way: the forgotten history of women spiritual directors*, New York, Palgrave, 2000, 133.

## TERESIAN HOLINESS

Maria Petyt spent her life of intercessory prayer in the silence of her hermitage in Mechelen. In the Catholic reform a hermit's life was seen as a quest for heavenly realms. "O Divine cell, from humans Thou does create angels."<sup>7</sup> the first prior of the hermitage of the Belgian *Observantia Strictior* in Liedekerke wrote in his genesis.<sup>8</sup> This desire for a heavenly life was an important characteristic of the Tridentine concept of holiness and one of the main features of Teresian sanctity. This perspective requires a brief explanation in advance.

Some decades ago the historian Peter Burke made his readers aware that holiness is contagious, which means that it is driven largely by processes of identification.<sup>9</sup> Since then it became even more obvious that a whole evolution of cultural models and religious practices is hidden behind the colourful spectrum of sanctity.<sup>10</sup> These models and practices have a significant cultural function. In times of reform models of sanctity – or rather the mimetic imitation of these models – are important indicators to gain insight into processes of adjustment to the frameworks that are propagated by clerical and secular authorities. Therefore a study of sanctity provides an important entry to the actual dynamics involved in processes of reformation.

Already a brief first meeting with both Michael and Maria allows hardly any misunderstanding about who was their shining example: Teresa of Avila. The image, or better: the model of sanctity, of this great Carmelite sister was not an unique phenomenon in the seventeenth century. As a model it had medieval roots, inspired by the work and *vitae* of mystical women like Catherine of Siena or Lidwina of Schiedam.<sup>11</sup> We also find the contours of the Teresian model of

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<sup>7</sup> BERTHOLDUS A SANCTO JOSEPHO, *Een kort verhael van den oorspronck, fyndatie ende ovderdom van het oudt eertijts vermaert clooster onser L. Vrovve ter Mvylen*, Gent, by Anthone Sersanders, 1653, 68.

<sup>8</sup> About Liedekerke, see JOACHIM SMET, *The Carmelites: a history of the brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, vol. 3a, Darien, Ill., Carmelite Spiritual Center, 1982, 435ff.

<sup>9</sup> PETER BURKE, *How to be a Counter-Reformation Saint*, in Kaspar v. Greyerz (ed.), *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*, London, German Historical Institute, 1984, 52.

<sup>10</sup> WILLEM FRIJHOFF, *Confessional sanctity. Concluding reflections and questions for the future*, in Jürgen Beyer et al. (eds.), *Confessional sanctity: (c. 1500 - c. 1800)*, Mainz, von Zabern, 2003, 380.

<sup>11</sup> MARC WINGENS, *A 'Holy Nun' in a protestant country: Maria Margaretha van Valckenisse (1605-1658)*, in *ibid.*, 298.

sanctity in the lives of other female saints of the Catholic reform. Within the Ancient Observance of Carmel, Maria Magdalena de' Pazzi (1566-1607), canonized in 1669, already showed traces of this model. Catherine dei Ricci (1522-90) did so within the Dominican tradition. In Teresa of Avila, however, the contours of this paradigm found a final synthesis.<sup>12</sup>

The strong reform movement initiated by this model of sanctity was primarily due to the early modern mysticism of Teresa. The emergence of printing and her literary qualities contributed to a striking mimesis of her creative holiness as well. Teresa's writings and her example inspired many religious women – also called her 'daughters'<sup>13</sup> – to confide to paper their own spiritual life, often coloured by an intense identification with their favourite saint. The literary circle that emerged out of this mimesis played a decisive role in defining and preserving feminine spirituality in the restrictive climate of the Catholic reform.<sup>14</sup>

Even more than transmitting female Catholic culture, the Teresian model of sanctity inspired religious women to a deeper exploration of the heavenly 'new world' that was discovered during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>15</sup> The Tridentine missionary desire to migrate had a mystical counterpart in the prayer of passionate women who went on a same journey in the enclosure of their lives discovering a new mystical world. Maria Petyt also made visionary trips. She wrote about the missionary zeal of her 'spirit of love': "Sometimes the spirit of love, like a bird, seems to fly all over the world, once with the Gentiles, Turks, infidels, heretics, then with sinners to convert them all to God, sometimes with the priors of the Holy Church, then with all pastors and confessors, while I join them and cooperate with them to bear the burden of their government with dignity and to accomplish that service according to the pleasure of God."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> ISABELLE POUTRIN, *Des «Livres extatiques» venus d'Espagne. Therese d'Avila et Jeanne de la Croix, modèles de sainteté féminine*, in *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> J. BILINKOFF, *Related lives*, 106f.

<sup>14</sup> J. BILINKOFF, *Related lives*, 75.110. About the restrictive climate see in brief: ESTHER VAN DE VATE, *Maria Petyt – A Short Biography*, in Joseph Chalmers et al. (eds.), *Maria Petyt. A Carmelite Mystic in Wartime*, Leiden & Boston, Brill, 2015, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. BILINKOFF, *Touched by Teresa: Readers and Their Responses 1588-1750*, in CHRISTOPHER C. WILSON (ed.), *The heirs of St. Teresa of Ávila: defenders and disseminators of the founding Mother's legacy*, Washington, ICS Publications, 2006, 116f.

<sup>16</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 3, 32f.

Although Teresa might have lead her 'daughters' to the heavenly realms of their visions, the daily practice of their ministry was less adventurous and often marked by practicing the Exercise of the Presence of God, without which the spirituality of the seventeenth century cannot be described. Michael taught this exercise to Maria as follows: "Sometimes you have to practice inwardness to see God in all creatures, namely in this way: we know by faith that there is nothing, nor can there be <anything> without God, nor can creatures remain in existence unless God abides in them (...), so in a sense, all we see, hear, speak, touch, is God and all there is, it's all God."<sup>17</sup> This exercise gave access to a deep experience of God's unity and is an important key to understand the spirituality of both our main characters.

As we see in this Exercise, Michael as well as Maria went back to the spiritual sources of medieval Flemish and Rhenish mysticism that revived in the first half of the seventeenth century. Yet the Tridentine reformation was not only a period of resourcing but above all a time of profound changes in the Church, also in the lives of its mystics. Under pressure from the Protestant reformation, the discourse on contemplation went beyond the scope of the existing Thomistic theology. Contemplation was reserved for a select group of mystics.<sup>18</sup> Their vision of the heavenly goods had two sides. On the one hand, contemplation brought great authority to the mystic; on the other hand this charism demanded great humility and obedience to the ecclesiastical authority.<sup>19</sup> The risk that heavenly knowledge could take on a life of its own, was an important reason for the Church to intervene and to provide their accompaniment with a clear framework. We can already perceive this in the life stories of Michael and Maria.<sup>20</sup>

The next section describes Michael's childhood, his early years in Carmel and, briefly, his contribution to the *Observantia Strictior*. A brief life story of Maria Petyt follows, up to the moment she met Michael.

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<sup>17</sup> M. PETYT, *Veele Schoone ende seer geestelijcke leeringen bequaem om een Godtsoeckende ende minnende siele tot de opperste volmaecktheyt te stieren door Godts ingeven aangedient...* door haer selven aengeteeckent int jaer 1647, Dutch Carmelite Institute in Boxmeer, A.II 39, 55f.

<sup>18</sup> J. CHALMERS.

<sup>19</sup> I. POUTRIN, *Le voile et la plume: autobiographie et sainteté féminine dans l'Espagne moderne*, Madrid, Casa de Velázquez, 1995, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. E. VAN DE VATE, 'Oh, How Spiritual Directors are Obligated to Remain Silent!' *Michael's*.

*Redaction of the Writings of Maria Petyt: Some Initial Findings*, in J. CHALMERS et al. (eds.), *Maria Petyt*, 106.

## MICHAEL OF ST. AUGUSTINE

Michael of St. Augustine – Jan van Ballaert was his secular name – was born on April 15, 1621 in Brussels in a distinguished and devout family, as one of eleven children, all of whom chose the consecrated life. His biographer testifies his pious way of life: “From an early age, one saw that Virtue had a permanent seat in him because he was disgusted by children’s games and never went anywhere except with his mother to church. (...) As he grew up he was very devoted to prayer and he loved the unity in which God speaks to the heart.”<sup>21</sup> Jan received his school education at the prestigious convent school of the Augustinians. He studied “with such progress that he won a first award in all sections.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1639 Michael opted for the Ancient Observance of Carmel and followed his novitiate in Leuven. He professed his solemn vows on October 14, 1640, on the eve of the feast of St. Teresa. We are not informed about the time between his profession and ordination but probably Michael followed a year professorium<sup>23</sup> in Brussels, two years philosophy and two years theology before he was ordained priest on June 10, 1645.<sup>24</sup>

In those years the Belgian Carmel made a turbulent transition to the *Observantia Strictior*. Tensions around the ‘reformatio pura’ were running high.<sup>25</sup> Michael would be committed to this reform all his life. Jacobus a Passione Domini, Michael’s biographer in the *Stralen*, traced this zeal back to Teresa and wrote about her example: “Whose love arrows also seemed to have hit his heart. As a consequence he identified himself with her. He was always endeavouring to love God in the most perfect way. This love really overflowed his heart. Fr. Michael, like St. Teresa, was very inclined towards mental prayer. Teresa wanted to reform Carmel, and Fr. Michael wanted to promote the reformation of the [Fathers] Brothers of our Lady in the Netherlands and to maintain it in its first bloom.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> JACOBUS A PASSIONE DOMINI, *De stralen van de sonne van den H. vader en propheet Elias ... dese loopende eeuw verspreydt door de koningh-rycken van Spagnien*, Luyck, by Hendrick Hoyoux, 1684, 324.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Intern formation period for neo-professed friars.

<sup>24</sup> J. A PASSIONE DOMINI, *De stralen*, 325.

<sup>25</sup> S. PANZER, *Observanz*, 358.

<sup>26</sup> J. A PASSIONE DOMINI, *De stralen*, 325.

Michael would hold many offices in the Province during his lifetime.<sup>27</sup> Although praised and honoured by his biographers, one might wonder whether the straightforward way in which he developed his duties was appreciated by everyone. According to Hoppenbrouwers' information, letters have been preserved, in which he gave a warning to anyone who did not maintain the constitutions strictly, threatening them with punishment and even praying for God's curse on them if they did not change their lives.<sup>28</sup> In the eyes of Michael, moral decline could not remain without consequence. He looked upon his zeal as a life "in union with the most pure intent of the militant church" and wanted to avoid "what has happened in many regions, where at this moment the Catholic religion is banned for many years by the righteous judgment of God, possibly because of disrespectful and improper things in churches and during divine services."<sup>29</sup> In this respect Maria Petyt would stand behind her spiritual director firmly.

#### MARIA PETYT

Maria Petyt was born in 1623 in a middle-class family in Hazebrouck, a little town in the North West of France, which was then part of the Southern Netherlands. Maria's childhood stories are marked, like those of Michael, by a strong Catholic identity. She was a graceful girl who, although very sensitive, yet managed to follow her own way. At the age of ten she made "a perpetual vow of chastity to my Beloved, without anyone knowing it."<sup>30</sup> Not long after that, Maria was sent to a boarding school at a monastery in Saint-Omer to learn the language and to grow in piety and devotion.<sup>31</sup>

Beside her strong religious disposition, Maria's young life was marked by several breaking points as well: "This sincere, innocent, and pious disposition remained in me until the age of seven or eight years,

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<sup>27</sup> VALERIUS HOPPENBROUWERS, *Michael van de Heilige Augustinus*, in *Carmel* 2 (1949) 2, 163.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>29</sup> MICHAEL A. S. AUGUSTINO, *Het Enghelsch Leven. Dat is een gheestelyck tractaet van volmaecht leven onder de behoedenisse en bestieringhe vanden Heylighen Enghel Bewaerder, Yperen*, by Anthonius de Backer, 1681, 150f.

<sup>30</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 10.

<sup>31</sup> See for the Teresian background of Maria's prayer life: ELISABETH HENSE, *The Spirituality of Teresa of Avila and the Latin Manuscript about the Dutch War* (folios 30r-49v), in J. CHALMERS et al. (eds.), *Maria Petyt*, 252-265.

as then God let me catch the chicken pox (...) so that I became quite ugly and disfigured.”<sup>32</sup> Maria’s scars and the disappointment of her parents did not miss their effect. Her mind swung out: “For since that time, I interiorly lost many charms. I became somewhat more savage and wild, and liked to play like other children, inclined to play cards, to play for the whole day on ice, instead of going to school, disinclined to divine worship and devotion.”<sup>33</sup> In an outbreak of plague Maria, and her siblings, were housed with an uncle in Poperinge. There a slackening entered her life. Michael wrote about this period: “The vanities of the world and its pleasures crawled into her mind, and she began to desire them more.”<sup>34</sup> Although at home in Hazebrouck Maria resumed a superficial piety, she remained inclined to the ‘evil’, as she herself wrote.<sup>35</sup>

When, at the age of sixteen, Maria made a pilgrimage to a statue of the Blessed Mother near Lille, her prayer for a marriage partner was answered by Mother Mary in a different way from what she might have expected as a young woman: “making me pretty and pleasing to my Bridegroom Jesus, whom I had espoused six years earlier, without thinking any more about this espousal.”<sup>36</sup> After this pilgrimage the attraction between Maria and her Beloved evolved rapidly. Maria tasted some of the glory and pleasure of heaven, an experience that made her long for more devotion, and then subsequently for religious life. When Maria expressed the latter to her parents, they offered resistance and tested her motivation. In the end Maria was allowed to present herself to the Canonesses Regular of the Groenenbriel in Ghent, where she was accepted. However, her entrance would be delayed by the French raids at the border. It was probably in 1641 or 1642 when she finally moved to Ghent.

At first Maria’s convent life in Ghent prospered. Earlier than usual she received the habit. Yet, after six months, she was sent away for a problem she was beginning to have with her eyes. Maria found a place to live in one of the beguinages of Ghent and what followed was a desolate time. After a month, a Carmelite priest took her under his care. Maria wrote about his guidance: “He seemed to be looking for

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<sup>32</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 7f.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO, *Kort begryp van het leven van de weerdighe Moeder Sr. Maria a S. Teresia, (alias) Petyt*, Brussel, by Peeter vande Velde, 1681 (Brussel, photogr. reprint, 2002), 5.

<sup>35</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 14.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



some matter and occasion for mortification."<sup>37</sup> Despite some dubious excesses Maria did not suffer from the penances he imposed. She even wrote: "The Beloved gave me the grace to accomplish all of this with joy and cheerfulness of spirit; for the inward zeal and thirst were very great to draw me towards perfection."<sup>38</sup>

When Maria undertook a pilgrimage, along with another spiritual daughter that her spiritual director was guiding, the time appeared ripe for a subsequent step. Maria moved in with this spiritual daughter and her mother and led a regular life with them.<sup>39</sup> After a year, probably in 1643, she took her vows in the Carmelite Third Order, "promising obedience and perpetual chastity according to the (...) Rule, choosing the name of St. Teresa, in addition to our name, namely, Sister Maria of St. Teresa, on account of a particular affinity that I felt towards this Holy Mother."<sup>40</sup> After four years, the guidance by the first spiritual director came to an end because he moved away.

It must have been September 1646 when Maria and her fellow sister asked Michael to be their confessor.<sup>41</sup> Soon afterwards they began a second (half) novitiate. We can closely follow Maria's formation process because we have a copy of the notes she made.<sup>42</sup> I will describe Maria's spiritual development on the basis of the mystagogical way of the *Observantia Strictior* and two themes which are important for an understanding of the background of Flemish spirituality, namely, mortification and Christology.

#### THE MYSTAGOGICAL WAY OF CARMEL IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

At that time the formation of Carmelite novices, both of the Ancient Observance and of the Discalced Carmelites, was based on Thomistic thinking as current at the time of the Catholic reform.<sup>43</sup> In short this means that the way of perfection was followed by the analogical movement of the spirit, who listened to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. In this way the will was drawn to God. The will

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>42</sup> See note 17.

<sup>43</sup> JOACHIM SMET, *The Carmelites*, vol. 3a, 314.

followed its divine inclination based on its form, "like fire by its form is drawn to a higher place and to what brings forth anything similar to it."<sup>44</sup> This fire had to be fed. Later Michael would write: "I can compare piety with a fire that gradually kindles a devout soul more and more into the love of God, to feed this fire one can use many suitable resources, including the main one, that is mental prayer or meditation."<sup>45</sup>

On this road, however, virtues were to be practiced too.<sup>46</sup> We read in Maria's notes how Michael introduced the Exercise of the Theological virtues to both sisters: "You need to learn to get stuck in uncertainty, in faith, hope and love."<sup>47</sup> This lesson must have been difficult for our novices. A few classes later, Michael had to explain the Exercise again. He explained then as follows: "You will no longer practice active meditation but you will rest in God very quietly (...) if you would only consider these words very sweetly: faith, hope and love, faith, hope and love, withdrawing from all creatures and venturing yourself in God very sweetly."<sup>48</sup>

Some issues got the particular attention of Michael of St. Augustine, firstly, the need for mortification and renunciation, and secondly the encounter with Christ.

#### MORTIFICATION AND RENUNCIATION

For Michael mortification meant a deep renunciation of anything that distracts us from God. He taught Maria Petyt as follows: "If you do want to be united with God, then deny all creatures and unite your will with the will of God, that you may find delight in what is most pleasing to God to work with you and in you."<sup>49</sup> This emphasis on renunciation is fully in line with the *Observantia Strictior* and the Flemish spirituality of annihilation.

This medieval Flemish mystique was brought into line with the Catholic Reformation by the Capuchins in the first half of the seven-

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<sup>44</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, Ia q. 80, art. 1c.

<sup>45</sup> MICHAEL A. S. AUGUSTINO, *Het Godtvruchtigh Leven in Christo, voor de Beghinnende, Voort-gaende, ende Volmaeckte*, Brussel, by Jan Mommaert, 1661, 41.

<sup>46</sup> M. PETYT, *Veele Schoone*, 123.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 53f.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

teenth century.<sup>50</sup> The impetus for this renewed perception of the spirituality of annihilation was the *Règle de Perfection* of Benedict of Canfield, a book that Maria already read in her youth. Canfield perceived annihilation as making the human will conform to the divine will and he applied this to spiritual exercises. By this means he made annihilation to a kind of active perfecting technique and at the same time he made a strong connection with the Tridentine pursuit of perfection that spread across Europe in this century.<sup>51</sup>

In the lessons of Michael of St. Augustine, the annihilation of the human faculties got a different emphasis than in the *Règle* of Canfield. Michael's *Non* opens up the access to the *All* of God: "What rest can be found in the *Non* (...) he who abides in this valley will not be subjected to storms but he will let them all pass overhead. They can not touch him because he is so deeply absorbed in his *Non* and he lets God be everything."<sup>52</sup> Michael's rest in the *Non* reminds us of St. John of the Cross. By the *Non* one can recognize the disposition of a soul that possesses the *All*: "In this detachment the spiritual soul finds its quiet and repose; for, since it covets nothing, nothing wearies it when it is lifted up, and nothing oppresses it when it is cast down, because it is in the center of its humility."<sup>53</sup> Michael's teaching illustrates also how the spirituality of St. John of the Cross – which only in the seventeenth century arose in the Southern Netherlands – not only enhanced the renewal of the annihilation mysticism but gave it another accent as well.<sup>54</sup> Maria received from her spiritual director a more passive form of annihilation than she had learned from the *Règle*.

Another topic that got the attention of Michael is the place of Christ in the annihilation of the human faculties.

## CHRISTOLOGY

In his lessons Michael of St. Augustine established a strong Christological basis for the mortification to be practiced by both

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<sup>50</sup> KAREL PORTEMAN, *Nederlandse mystici uit de 17e eeuw of de mystici van 'den niet'*, in *Ons geestelijk erf: driemaandelijksch tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie der Nederlandsche vroomheid van af de bekeering tot circa 1750*, 47 (1973), 400.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>52</sup> M. PETYT, *Veele Schoone*, 33f.

<sup>53</sup> JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, E. Allison Peers (trans. & ed.), New York, Image books, 1962, 73.

<sup>54</sup> K. PORTEMAN, *Nederlandse mystici*, 405.

spiritual daughters. They fasted in order to convey Christ. Among Maria's novitiate notes we find the following lesson: "How to keep oneself in peace and to resign oneself in abandonment, to be a sacrifice for God and to become like Christ. It is a sign of progress and a special grace from God to stand without any support, without any feeling of God (...) Then you will be similar to Christ, whose resemblance you should seek continually."<sup>55</sup>

In the early seventeenth century the Flemish annihilation spirituality came into confrontation with the Christological orientation of the Teresian reform. The Capuchins had to endure much counterplay from of the Carmelites, in which Gracian, Teresa's counsellor, and confessor of the Spanish governor Infanta Isabella, played a leading role. In 1607 Gracian settled in Brussels and in 1609 he wrote his *Vida del Alma*, in which he aimed his arrows mainly on the widely read *Theologia Deutsch*. Gracian rejected the doctrine of the Capuchin 'perfectists'<sup>56</sup>, i.e. their one-sided focus on the inner self. Their main argument was, according to Gracian, "that the supreme perfection and the perfect life of the soul consists in the direct union with Christ, when it unites itself with all its capabilities with the Uncreated Truth (which is God) without the intervention of any creature and with complete destruction of all inner and outer actions."<sup>57</sup> So, rather than the union with Christ, Gracian's problem with the Capuchins was the immediate union that was to be pursued by the annihilation of all faculties and not by the grace of God.

After Gracian's death in 1614, Thomas à Jesus (1564-1627) continued the fight against the 'perfectists'.<sup>58</sup> Thomas showed greater openness than Gracian and combined the voluntarism of Hugo di Balma with the Rhenish and Flemish spirituality of introversion.<sup>59</sup> Prayer is performed by turning inwards. Aspirations are not addressed to God in heaven but as He is present in the ground of the soul.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> M. PETYT, *Veele Schoone*, 11f.

<sup>56</sup> P. HILDEBRAND, *Dwalingen bij de Nederlandsche Perfectisten*, in *Ons geestelijk erf*, VI (1932), 60-72.183-193.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>58</sup> A biographical and theological profile is found in PIET HOORNAERT, *Gij staat mij altijd bij. Een gebedspraktijk van de Karmel: de contemplatieve aspiratie*, Gent, Carmelitana, 1996, 303-330.

<sup>59</sup> JEAN ORCIBAL, *La rencontre du Carmel thérésien avec les mystiques du Nord*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1959, 48.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

Michael's stance in this controversy with the 'perfectists' was clear. He joined his brother Carmelites.<sup>61</sup> However Maria had to overcome many obstacles, not only during her novitiate but afterwards as well. One of her early letters, written five years after her novitiate, discusses her resistance to meditate by focusing on the humanity of Christ.<sup>62</sup> It is likely Maria felt still attracted to a more abstract form of meditation. She experienced Michael's instructions as too coarse for her mind: "When I began to practice this, I felt a pain in my head and tension in my brain because I tried to press the image of the Sacred Humanity too active and too coarse in my mind."<sup>63</sup> In the course of time Maria overcame her resistance and completely adopted the practice of living and praying with Christ, the God-man. Finally Michael's instruction even formed the basis of how she would bear the working spirit of Christ in her life: "Sometimes union with or taking on the form of Christ, the God-man, still continues in me. This union is brought about by the power of unifying love, and by a simple approach and adherence to Christ, who seems to pray in the prayer itself (...) for the active spirit of Christ then owns the soul and does with it whatever it desires."<sup>64</sup> In the last sentence of this quote we especially become aware of the influence of the Catholic reform. Maria's union with Christ serves the apostolate of the Church and contributes to the salvation of others. This shift towards an apostolic prayer was also peculiar to the *Observantia Strictior*. Jean de Saint-Samson wrote about the God-man: "A God who is working, acting and suffering for mankind, to save them: a God-man, suffering to the infinite and dying to liberate us from an eternal death."<sup>65</sup>

As we consider Maria's novitiate and the life stories of our main characters in our research on the Teresian model of sanctity, we do not only notice the strong empowerment of the Teresian sanctity but we also identify an important development which is supported by historiography.<sup>66</sup> We signal the exporting of the model from the Iberian peninsula into North-West Europe and we perceive how the model is confronted with the revival of the old Flemish mysticism of annihilation at the time of the Tridentine reform.

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<sup>61</sup> M. PETYT, *Veele Schoone*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 2, 105f.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>65</sup> JEAN DE SAINT-SAMSON, *Les contemplations et les divins soliloques dv vnerable F. Jean de S. Samson*, Paris, chez Denys Thierry, 1654, 272.

<sup>66</sup> I. POUTRIN, *Des «Livres extatiques»*, 49.

In the following sections we describe how the Teresian model of sanctity evolves in the contact between Michael and Maria. The first sections are described from Michael's viewpoint and relate the topoi, the features, of his guidance. The next sections are written more with an eye on Maria and investigate the function of the Teresian model of sanctity for the *Observantia Strictior*.

#### MICHAEL'S GUIDANCE OF MARIA'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY. MICHAEL AS HEAVENLY MEDIATION

Not long after Maria Petyts second profession, Michael of St. Augustine left Ghent.<sup>67</sup> On this occasion Maria and her sister asked whether the spiritual direction could continue. After some doubt, Michael "consented to us writing once every four months and giving an account of what had inwardly taken place in us during that time."<sup>68</sup>

Despite his physical absence Michael continued to stay present in the life of Maria. Once he had moved to Antwerp she saw him next to God for seven years: "Thus our Lord provided a very sensible and fitting means of supporting me and to lead me forth on the way of the spirit, namely, that he, my Spiritual Father, always seemed to be present close to God and seemed to behold me wherever I was."<sup>69</sup>

This heavenly presence of Michael aroused so much fear that Maria submitted herself wholly to him. Her oldest surviving letter fragment narrates her request to be obedient to him: "like being without my own discretion, without my own will, and with that pure love of my Beloved."<sup>70</sup> this intensification of the bond between priests and religious women was the main topos of the Teresian model of sanctity. Both in Spain and in the Southern Netherlands the tradition to present one's spiritual life to a director was a weighty matter, which became even weightier in the course of time. Maria's strict obedience should teach later readers how treacherous it is to deal lightly with one's spiritual life and how important it is to present all experiences to a spiritual director.

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<sup>67</sup> On January 24, 1648 he was appointed as a professor of philosophy and prefect of the students in Antwerp.

<sup>68</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 66.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, 30.

Unfortunately we have too few guidance letters from Michael to Maria to examine this obedience comprehensively. However, further reading of Maria's autobiography makes clear that Michael did not go along with everything. When Maria wanted to strengthen her mortification by abandoning meat and fish, he initially refused her request, "until the Beloved would assure her more <in this matter>." <sup>71</sup>

This renunciation of meat and fish brings us to another feature of the Teresian model of sanctity: Michael's protection of Maria's form of life.

#### THE REALIZATION OF THE CLUYSE. MICHAEL'S PROTECTION OF MARIA'S PRAYER LIFE

Maria's vegetarian diet turned out to be a preparation for her life as a hermit. "After I had continued for a year or two in this abstinence (...) my soul became all the more ignited and desirous to live even more strictly (...) in the manner of life of a hermit or recluse." <sup>72</sup>

Praying in solitude was one of Maria's earliest desires. The image of the 'eremital' Teresa of Avila already shows up in one of the first chapters of her autobiographical story. <sup>73</sup> The inspiration for this mimesis, we also read in Maria's *Life*: "I always found great savour and satisfaction in reading or hearing the *Lives* of St. Religious, especially those who had lived as hermits or hermitesses. Their way of life pleased me so well that Our Lord from then on gave some signs that He had chosen me to live the life of a hermit, just as we now do. My affection was ever drawn to that end, as I shall elaborate later, for by nature, I had an inclination towards solitude and withdrawal from people." <sup>74</sup>

The theological and spiritual background of hermit life in the *Observantia Strictior* is found in the writings of Jean de Saint Samson. He saw the life of solitaries as a compensation for the love of Christ. <sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO, *Kort begryp*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 96f. She makes her plans together with Catherine of Oorsaghe.

<sup>73</sup> Already mentioned in E. VAN DE VATE, *Maria Petyt against the Background of the Political and Religious Situation in Flanders in the Seventeenth Century*, in J. CHALMERS et al. (eds.), *Maria Petyt*, 37.

<sup>74</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 11.

<sup>75</sup> DONATIEN DE S. NICOLAS, *La Vie, Les Maximes et partie des oeuvres dv tres-excellent contemplatif, le venerables Fr. Ian de S. Samson*, Paris, chez Denys Thierry, 1651, 140.

They find their merits in their intercessory prayer for the world: "They thus practice uninterruptedly their charity through their intercession to His Majesty, for the good of the world."<sup>76</sup> This was, as we already have seen, an important principle of the Catholic reform.

The hermit spirituality of Maria Petyt is closely linked to this background. In a vision, in which Joseph appeared to her, she formulated what hermit's life meant to her: "He, Joseph, made me understand what was the life of true hermits and that they must be dead to the world and to creatures, that the outward works of love towards the neighbour are not, and may not, be exercised by them, except through special order from God."<sup>77</sup> Hermits – although a prey to the misunderstanding of people – are the pillars of Christianity: "They make atonement to God for people's sins; through prayer, they prevent much of the destruction and punishment that God threatens to send over the world; through their prayer they convert many souls to a better life; they obtain more graces for others so that these people might be more pleasing to God. (...) They are genuine mothers and fathers, who would gladly bear all people to Christ, for their salvation and they, indeed, give birth to a multitude, through their burning love and loving petitions to their most-Beloved who is so familiar with them and so close."<sup>78</sup>

Although Michael hardly ever wrote about solitary life, he played an important role in the realization of Maria's desire. First, as a provincial, he helped her to find a proper place to live. That brought a sudden momentum to Maria's planning. In her biography he wrote: "And right there was a vacant place in Mechelen, ideal for her intention (...) The place suited our Worthy Mother very much and she lost no time (...) to that way of accepting life (...) she took possession of these *Cluyse* <i.e. hermit's cell>, in the month of October 1657."<sup>79</sup> A Beguine – called Catherine of Oorsaghe – joined Maria Petyt after a year.<sup>80</sup> With her arrival the sisters of the *Cluyse* grew towards a recognized community. Michael wrote the ordinances for this little convent and submitted them to Venturini, the Prior General.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>76</sup> J. DE SAINT - SAMSON, *Oeuvres complètes 3: Méditations et Soliloques 2* (Hanneke Hooft ed.) Roma, Edizioni Carmelitane, 2000, 256.

<sup>77</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 89f.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>79</sup> MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO, *Kort begryp*, 24.

<sup>80</sup> The aforementioned spiritual daughter and her mother, who had travelled together with Maria to Mechelen, left the *Cluyse* after a year and a half.

<sup>81</sup> *Ordonnantien voor de heremitagie der susteren vande AlderHeijlighste Maget Maria des Berghs Carmeli*, see MICHEL VAN MEERBEECK, *Daily Life at the Hermitage in*



In the formation of the Marian life of these hermits Michael played an important role. This form of life grew in the first years of Maria's stay in the *Cluyse*. After a 'visit' from Mary, the Blessed Mother, Maria Petyt entrusted the place to her patronage and dedicated the prayer of the sisters to her as well: "I feel encouraged to appoint her as an absolute mother over this house, and to entrust all the children that will be recommended to me, or will come here, to her womb and breasts for them to suck and be filled with a humble, solitary, mortified, pure and unmixed divine spirit, with which she is filled; similarly to dedicate this place, or the principle of our form of life, to her and to name it after her. Therefore it seems to me that this pleases her, and that she accepts with pleasure the office of a genuine Mother and Governess of this great family."<sup>82</sup>

For the Carmelite tradition, the Maria-form life would become a term in its own right. Both Michael of St. Augustine and Maria Petyt have become well-known for the treatise *Marie-vormigh ende Marielijck leven in Maria om Maria*.<sup>83</sup> This treatise, written by Michael, has some passages which correspond literally to Maria's letters. Briefly described, the spirituality of the Maria-form life is about Marian life that transforms the soul to the divine life, a life in God. Where the soul mirrors itself in the Blessed Mother, the soul is fertilized with new life and gives birth to a new life in God.<sup>84</sup> In this transformation the Marian life is coloured by the motherly and compassionate qualities which are developed in the soul.<sup>85</sup> This supernatural life nourished by Mary, our Blessed Mother, finds its roots in the rich Marian devotion of the Carmelite tradition. It can be traced back to Baconthorpe (ca. 1290-1346), and later to the Flemish Arnoldus Bostius (1445-1499). From Bostius Maria Petyt probably derived her thoughts about patronage for the *Cluyse* as well.<sup>86</sup>

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*Mechelen at the Time of Maria Petyt (1657-1677)* in J. CHALMERS et al. (eds.), *Maria Petyt*, 53-66. See also: MICHEL VAN MEERBEECK, 'Als in een wel ghereguleerde kluyse. De ordonnantiën voor Maria Petyt (1660)', in *Ons Geestelijk Erf, driemaandelijksch tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie der Nederlandsche wroomheid van af de bekeering tot circa 1750*, 6 (2015) 4, 282-335. In this article the (Dutch) text of the ordinances is given.

<sup>82</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 2, 314f.

<sup>83</sup> MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO, *Onderwysinghe tot een grondighe verloogheninghe syns selfs, ende van alle creaturen, ende tot een Godt-vormigh Goddelyck Leven in Godt om Godt. Met een By-voeghsel naer het tweede Tractaet van een Marie-vormigh Marielyck Leven in Maria om Maria door den selven aucteur*, Mechelen, by Gysbrecht Lints, 1669.

<sup>84</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 2, 343.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 21.

<sup>86</sup> ARNOLDUS BOSTIUS, *De Patronatu et Patrocinio B.ma Virg. Maria*. Although this writing was publicized in the *Speculum Carmelitanum* of 1680, Daniel of the Virgin Mary already mentioned it in 1662, see note 122.

Altogether, in Michael's protection we find a feature of the Teresian model of sanctity that was very helpful to Carmelite female spirituality in that time. Patricia Ranft writes about this topos: "Finally, and perhaps most important, with the advent of the confessor-director women gained something still very much needed in this world of religious turmoil: protection from and access to male power structures."<sup>87</sup>

With the foundation of the community, the role of Michael became divided in two tasks: mentor of the convent and personal director of Maria.

#### MICHAEL AS A MENTOR OF THE CONVENT. SPIRITUAL WARFARE

In its first years the young community came into disrepute among the town-dwellers of Mechelen. Michael left us some detailed information about that. One piece of gossip was: "that the *Cluyse* was like a brothel for the religious", but Michael holds that: "The parish priest often came very early, or sometimes far into the evening, to visit them to see if he could find any thing of what was being said but he saw nothing but virtue (...) In all these storms 'Mary Petyt' and her 'sisters' remained in full tranquillity and steadfastness in God. She didn't oppose it, she just commended their protection to sweet Jesus."<sup>88</sup>

This disrepute left deep scars in the community. The sisters got into conflict. The tensions increased so much that Maria felt unable to exercise her office as Mother. On her own request, Michael temporarily took over her position as superior.<sup>89</sup> In that time he managed to lessen the sting of the conflict: "His Reverence recognized in this the subtle tricks of the Evil One (...) knowing well that such and similar things have happened in some communities, bringing subjects and Superiors into great torments of spirit (...) our Reverend Father judged that these misunderstandings etc. among us had happened, that is, that it was the Evil One who had taken on our form, and so acting unreasonably had caused the misunderstandings."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> P. RANFT, *A woman's way*, 120.

<sup>88</sup> MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO, *Kort begryp*, 18. Although not written, these stresses can be derived from the Jansenist conflict. The said parish priest, Christiaan de Cort, was known as an ardent Jansenist. On the other hand Michael and Maria were fierce anti-Jansenists.

<sup>89</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 142.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 145f.

Such deceptions of the Evil One may surprise our 21st-century frame of reference. However, in the *Observantia Strictior* such situations were approached differently. In the *Maximes spirituelles* of Jean de Saint Samson, first published in 1651, we read: "It is not at all infamous to be possessed or tormented by devils because that is wonderfully ordained by the eternal providence of God, for his great glory and for the welfare of the creatures. The world is surprised by seeing this spectacle but we who enter the realms of God in one way or another, we can only render Him our infinite gratitude."<sup>91</sup> We will have to keep in mind the Teresian theme of spiritual warfare against evil spirits, as we continue to deepen our understanding of the role of Michael as the personal spiritual director of Maria Petyt. There is no doubt that he presented her a militant Teresa: "While she, Teresa, relying on spiritual weapons, overcame all infernal spirits as weaker than flies. She drove them away with a cross or with holy water because she was no more afraid of them than of a fly."<sup>92</sup>

#### MICHAEL AS A PERSONAL DIRECTOR OF MARIA. A CIRCLE OF INSTABILITY

Although Maria initially felt well in the narrow enclosure of the *Cluyse*, not long after her arrival in Mechelen a period of darkness set in, a night of inner struggle: "I have suffered this in myself, being placed in this state by God. I knew not what to think of myself (...) The more I tried to find a way out of the sensitivities of my nature (...) the deeper I fell and seemed to be entangled in them."<sup>93</sup> This dark night lasted for four or five years and the darkness would not cease after this first night. Also later on Maria would go through long periods of breakdown, times in which she suffered much physical and mental pain.<sup>94</sup>

Placing this disruption in the perspective of the Teresian model of sanctity, it remains not surprising that many female mystics after Teresa of Avila got into a circle of instability.<sup>95</sup> While it is important to

<sup>91</sup> DONATIEN DE S. NICOLAS, *La Vie*, 356.

<sup>92</sup> MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO, *Het Godtvruchtigh Leven*, 562.

<sup>93</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 111f.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>95</sup> A. DEBLAERE, *De mystieke schrijfster Maria Petyt (1623-1677)*, Gent, Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde, 1962, 146.

see the differences – Maria’s pains were not the same as Teresa’s – her aches and instability can be considered within the Teresian paradigm, that highlights the way she dealt with her illness and pain. The story about Teresa’s illnesses made her ‘daughters’ – and Maria was one of them – no longer shy away from emotionally poignant descriptions of what happened to them. The similarities with Teresa’s life presented their illnesses as a combat against the devil and his cohorts and as an opportunity for spiritual gain. It is therefore in line with the same spiritual gain that Maria articulates her vocation for suffering with words of her great saint: “I would have exclaimed with Saint Teresa, either suffering or dying.”<sup>96</sup>

#### TENSIONS BETWEEN MICHAEL AND MARIA

When Maria in 1667/1668, as a sad culmination of a decade of rising tension in and around the *Cluyse*, was blackened by “a person who sometimes treated me unsparingly”<sup>97</sup>, the relationship with Michael suffered grievously. Michael believed the stories of this person and rebuked Maria. Maria experienced this confrontation as a turning point in her natural attachment to Michael. According to her, it even meant the severing of the last bond between them. She wrote: “His scolding’s and gruff way of acting, entirely different from his usual ways, etc. affected me very deeply. They oppressed and straitened me not a little, seeing that my only friend now seemed to fall away, too, and was against me.”<sup>98</sup>

The tensions in the contact between Maria and her spiritual director would last a long time. In periods of greater aversion Maria even purposed to break off the contact with Michael: “I sometimes felt such an aversion and disdain towards him that I hated to listen to him, to see him, or to think of him; I once was so overcome by this conflict that I openly dismissed his Reverence, thanking him for the place and the habit that I had worn, and for the trouble that His Reverence had had for so many years with me, being firmly resolved to leave the place, the habit, and him. But his Reverence, noting well that I had reached my limit and was overpowered by a exceptionally great

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<sup>96</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 3, 81.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 81.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

conflict, did all he could to set me at peace, and make me believe that it was a conflict and torment from the Evil One to bring me somehow into a trap and to the loss of my soul."<sup>99</sup>

This tension within spiritual guidance completely fits with the Teresian renewal. It may be even another feature of the model. Despite all such problems, the Tridentine reform of spiritual direction brought many benefits to religious women. Patricia Ranft writes about their freedom to choose a spiritual director: "The development of the confessor-director figure had a particular impact on women. The emphasis on compatibility between confessor-director and directee gave women a good deal of leverage in a penitential system where they previously had none. Instead of submitting to the demands of one's parish priest or to those of an appointed cleric, as mandated by the Fourth Lateran Council, confesseees were now in a position to exercise control over the confessor by choosing the confessor."<sup>100</sup>

The next three titles do not describe the nature of spiritual direction but rather the function of the Teresian model of sanctity within the *Observantia Strictior*.

#### THE FUNCTION OF THE TERESIAN MODEL OF SANCTITY WITHIN THE OBSERVANTIA STRICTIOR

According to her hagiography three spiritual motives were given for the holiness of Saint Teresa of Avila: reforming Carmel, combatting heretics through prayer and developing methods to distinguish true from false visions.<sup>101</sup> These three patterns are reflected in the life of Maria Petyt as well, although their features changed in course of time.

#### REFORMING CARMEL

In Teresa's life, prayer and reform went hand in hand. As Michael wrote in his *Inleydinge tot het landt Carmelus*: "Saint Teresa, despite having to care so much for the new foundations and the promotion

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>100</sup> P. RANFT, *A woman's way*, 108.

<sup>101</sup> I. POUTRIN, *Des «Livres extatiques»*, 53.

of the reformation, nevertheless was not prevented from experiencing her ecstasies, her unifying love for God and her prayer of silence.”<sup>102</sup> This dual feature of Teresa also characterized the spirituality both of Michael and Maria.

Less than two years after moving to the *Cluyse*, Maria lit up in prayer for the *pristinus splendor* of Carmel: “On the feast day of our Holy Father Elijah in 1659, I was driven to ask him that he might acquire from the Beloved and from the amiable Mother that his first spirit, what he first instituted, might be renewed and aroused in his Order. (...) It seemed to me that I was being asked in the inner depths of my heart whether I was willing that this would begin and happen by my help.”<sup>103</sup>

At first Maria’s ‘yes’ to this question sounded a bit idealistic. After several years, however, her spirit became clear and concrete in praying for the Belgian province ‘in a soberly state’.<sup>104</sup> This prayer occurred in the same dynamism as Maria’s other penances. She suffered severe pains. In a letter written on September 26, 1669 Maria narrated how this was affecting her penance: “Two days after your Reverence left, the Beloved threw me on the bed again, and I suffered huge pains in various parts of my body (...) Today, the purpose why the Beloved was sending me those pains, was to be shown to me, namely the improvement of the slack, and the evil KK in our Holy Order.”<sup>105</sup>

Maria willingly endured these penances; in the course of time a motherly love for the province grew: “The Beloved seemed to hand over the <province> to me and to make me like a mother over it (...) so it seems to me that I have to take care of it, and I have to speak to the Beloved, as a good-hearted, emotional, jealous and loving mother.”<sup>106</sup>

When it came to implementing the reform, the intercession of Maria Petyt was very precious to Michael, for example when the language struggle in the province got out of hand. Maria wrote to Michael, then assistant provincial: “Thereafter I received the assurance that all your work and resistance is very pleasing to the Beloved and the amiable Mother; <I> got a promise that it would go well, the

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<sup>102</sup> MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO, *Inleydinghe tot het landt van Carmelus*, Brussel, by Francois Vivien, 1659, 444f.

<sup>103</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 3, 147.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 171.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, 149f. The abbreviation KK is unknown, probably Maria means ‘krachten’ (forces).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, 156f.

Beloved and the amiable Mother will work with the dear father and father provincial."<sup>107</sup>

Michael will continue to rely on Maria's intercession until after her death in 1677. In his letters to his friend Seraphinus of Jesus and Mary he would write how he entrusted the General Chapter of 1681 to the prayer of Maria Petyt.<sup>108</sup>

With a view to the reformation of Carmel, we see how Maria's commitment to the reformation of Carmel connects more with the theme of sickness and suffering than with the actual building of a reform. Where Teresa proceeded vigorously in founding new monasteries, Maria's contribution was largely limited 'to be thrown on the bed'. A similar shift towards greater passivity we see in the spiritualization of her motherhood. Although Maria received a motherly heart for the province, her motherhood consisted to a great extent in addressing her Beloved.

Regarding Teresian sanctity, we may conclude that even though, Maria's intercessory prayer is still very powerful, that prayer is more withdrawn from society than in times of Teresa. This conclusion is supported by the wider historiography about the position of women after the Council of Trent.<sup>109</sup>

#### PRAYER FOR THE HERETICS

A second function that was attributed to the Teresian model of sanctity, the spiritual battle against heretics, is found extensively in the life of Maria Petyt. Her zeal focused primarily on the heretics in the Dutch Republic. Michael referred to "the fervor of prayer, which she was pouring out for the conversion of the heretics in Holland."<sup>110</sup>

This militant prayer is very reminiscent to the Discalced Carmelite nuns in the Southern Netherlands. Their convents along the border with the heretical Dutch Republic were intended to protect the faithful against the danger of the Protestant reformation and were thus characterized by a frontline mentality.<sup>111</sup> In this same spirit Maria Petyt prayed for the Spanish king and against the heretics in the North, but even more than that, she was gifted with a supernatural prayer for

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, 149. About these problems, see V. HOPPENBROUWERS, *Michael*, 165f.

<sup>108</sup> E. VAN DE VATE, 'Oh, How Spiritual Directors ...', 93f.

<sup>109</sup> See E. VAN DE VATE, *Maria Petyt*, 30.

<sup>110</sup> MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO, *Kort begryp*, 70.

<sup>111</sup> MARC WINGENS, A 'Holy Nun', 299.

Louis XIV and the French armies.<sup>112</sup> During the Dutch War (1672-1678) Maria received in her visions the mind of a commanding queen and she was given – at least in those visions – a heavenly authority that she exercised in favour of the French armies.<sup>113</sup> In addition, Maria substituted for Louis XIV as he failed to repent for his sins.<sup>114</sup>

At Maria's own request this prayer was kept secret. It must have been too hard to take for her compatriots who were seriously affected by the atrocities of the French army. Moreover her prayer was a sensitive issue in her spiritual fellowship with Michael. Maria's letters show how she did not conform always to her spiritual director, who probably leaned more towards political correctness. Maria wrote to him about the Spanish governor and the Habsburg emperor: "Your Reverence assures me that our Leader conducts himself well, and that the Emperor is a devout man. But it seems to me they do not do pious works, as would befit zealous and catholic leaders, who should use their weapons to ... of the Holy Church, to achieve the eradication of the heretics etc."<sup>115</sup> How Michael of St. Augustine related to these political issues is not entirely clear. While editing Maria's writings – after her death – he wrote to his friend Seraphinus that he could not agree with the antagonistic tone of Maria's letters.<sup>116</sup> However, he would continue to support the content of her visions.

The spiritual authority of Maria's visions was based on her spiritual motherhood – already noted in our previous section – which had evolved years before. As a bride of Christ Maria Petyt re-gave birth in Christ: "The day after the feast of the Holy Trinity, I thought I mentally conceived many souls which would be converted to the Catholic faith. I seemed to have them all enclosed in my heart, in that sense that I had received them as spiritual fruits from my divine lover, as if He wanted to make me their spiritual mother, as He is their father. Once again the affirmation seemed to be renewed that I was his companion."<sup>117</sup> This feminine form of apostolate could come to life in the Maria-form area of the *Cluyse* and had its Carmelite roots in the work of Arnoldus Bostius, who wrote in his *De Patronatu*: "Through the gospel Mother 'Mary' brought forth children to Christ, again and

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<sup>112</sup> VERONIE MEEUWSEN (ed.), *The Latin Manuscript about the Dutch War and Its Translation in English*, in J. CHALMERS et al. (eds.), *Maria Petyt*, 119-239.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 161 ... points to a place in the manuscript that is not readable.

<sup>116</sup> E. VAN DE VATE, *'Oh, How Spiritual Directors ...'*, 96.

<sup>117</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 3, 82.



again she has given birth, until Christ was formed in them inseparably, until He was united with them in heaven."<sup>118</sup>

The revival of this motif was not purely spiritual but had a nationalist connotation in the Netherlands also. We find the term re-bearing in a Flemish hagiography of St. Begga († 698), who because of the similarity of her name was seen as patroness of the beguines. About her and her husband Ansegisus, the Discalced Carmelite Elias of St. Teresa wrote: "the entire Dutch church is allied to them rightfully as nursing fathers of the Catholic religion."<sup>119</sup> In a previous description of Begga's spiritual motherhood he went back to "Gregorius, from whom we can clearly see that if when someone converts a fellow human to God, he becomes equal to the spiritual mother of our saviour Jesus Christ, a fortiori <the spiritual mother> of all humans, because of bringing souls to be born to eternal salvation, something much more perfect and happier than when <they> were first bodily brought into the world by their parents."<sup>120</sup> Although this cannot be verified, the model of sanctity of Begga undoubtedly will have strengthened the bearing-motif in the writings of Maria Petyt.

Remarkable, and important for our research, is that in the course of time, also the spiritual fellowship between Maria and Michael was deeply marked by this bearing-motif. We read in a letter written on June 24 1675 how, in line with Michael's desire, the Beloved joined Maria as companion to her spiritual director: "Reverend Father, at your wish the Beloved seems to have joined me, unworthy as I am, to you as a consort of your Reverence, helping your Reverence according to the spirit and in the spirit, to labour, to generate, et cetera. (...) as that maternal mind towards the Order was conceived, discovered, and made alive in me."<sup>121</sup> Michael and Maria probably derived this spiritual metaphor from the writings of Daniel of the Virgin Mary, who already in his *Vinea* of 1662 cited a passage from *De Patronatu* of Arnoldus Bostius, that speaks about a spiritual marriage between Elijah and Mary.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>118</sup> EAMON CAROLL, *The Marian theology*, 24.

<sup>119</sup> ELIAS VAN SINTE TERESA, *Het leven van sinte Begga hertoghinne van Brabant* ..., Antwerpen, by Hieronymus Verdussen, 1631, 326.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 320f.

<sup>121</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 3, 150f. See also: CHRISTOPHER O'DONNELL, *Loving presence: Mary and Carmel - A Study of the Marian Heritage of the Order*, 2000: <http://ocarm.org/books/content/loving-presence-mary-and-carmel-study-marian-heritage-order>, (July 2016) 3.4.

<sup>122</sup> DANIEL A VIRGINE MARIA, *Vinea Carmeli seu Historia Eliani ordinis B. mae V. Mariae de Monte Carmelo*, Antwerpen, by Jacobum Meursium, 1662, 121, nr. 233.

## A POLITICAL PRAYER OF MARIA?

When it comes to Maria's Teresian prayer against heresy, in the seventeenth century there was not much occasion for change. The ongoing war situation in the Southern Netherlands probably caused the militant traits of the Teresian model to remain in this territory while in other countries those militant traits were transformed increasingly into a spiritual battle.

Maria's political involvement seems more interesting than exceptional. After all, political prayer belonged to the 'daughters' of Teresa. However, the paradoxical perspective in her heavenly mediation is interesting. On the one hand in her visions Maria held the dominance of a queen and her 'spirit of love' flew to remote areas in order to convert pagans. On the other hand she asked to keep her visions secret and saw herself as an isolated soul praying in her own corner.<sup>123</sup> This humility certainly has to do with Maria's meekness but even more with the mental changes in the seventeenth century. Less and less the ecclesiastical authority considered the political prayer of women to be God-form, and thus this prayer was marginalized in its community involvement.

In this paradox the essence of Maria's prayer for the heretics is not yet clear. Despite all the violence of war, Maria developed a very receptive prayer. Illustrative in this respect is a summary of one of her letters, made by Michael: "The Beloved places N.R.G. <Nostrum Regem Galliae: Louis XIV> in her heart, about whom she believes that he is born a Christian in Christ; but N.R.H. <Nostrum Regem Hispaniae: King Charles II> was removed from there as it were. Afterwards he was nevertheless internally placed on the throne in her heart, where the spirit of love unites them and makes them her sons."<sup>124</sup> Maria's 'sons', the King of France and the King of Spain, were united in Maria's heart in a spirit of love. In this atonement we touch the depth of Maria's intercession. This sense of reconciliation and unity is given her after a long period of penance and practicing the Exercise of the Presence of God.

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<sup>123</sup> V. MEEUWSEN (ed.), *The Latin Manuscript*, 203.

<sup>124</sup> Rome S. Alberto, Arch. Post. III, 70: *Vita Venerabilis Matris Mariae a Sta. Teresia Tertiariae ordinis Bmae Virginis Mariae de Monte Carmelo*, fol. 15r; cap. 257.

## MARIA'S VISIONS

Teresa's autobiography could obtain a great reputation inside and outside Spain because it appeared to be a successful attempt to defend her mental prayer and feminine visions against the accusations of the Illuminism of the Alumbrados.<sup>125</sup> In the middle of the seventeenth century in the Southern Netherlands the Catholic reform was changed on this point. However, one thing remained the same, the mistrust against visions was still there, even in the soul of Maria Petyt.

Maria's first, still cautious, visions can be dated back to 1658. Michael wrote: "Jesus often showed himself in her inner self in the form of an amiable groom, wounded by love for her."<sup>126</sup> The figurative flowering of Maria's making love with her amiable groom occurred in the higher faculties of her mind, i.e. her will and her reason. It is striking how Michael saw that these images did not acquire a life of their own. In his biography of Maria he emphasized the spiritual character of these visions: "Neither should anyone think that these kisses, which she got from her Beloved are happening physically. No, because they happen in the spirit (...) and they cannot be understood or articulated by reason: neither can anyone enjoy these unless in the most pure unity of spirit."<sup>127</sup>

Maria's visions not only accompanied her life stages as beloved, bride and mother, these appearances also evolved with the course of the liturgical year, moving from a vision of the Infant Jesus<sup>128</sup> up to the contemplation of the heavenly goods.<sup>129</sup> During these years her visions also became more intense.

The more intense the visions, the more Maria doubted whether she should tell Michael. She estimated that he would be impressed too much: "What will I do with myself? If I say everything that has happened to me to the Reverend Father, he will approve the visions and encourage me to turn myself peacefully to them, when they will be granted to me; particularly since he seems to love these visions very much."<sup>130</sup> However, Michael conscientiously and responsibly accompanied this visionary development of Maria. Unlike what Maria

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<sup>125</sup> ALISON WEBER, *Teresa of Avila and the rhetoric of femininity*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1990, 33-35.

<sup>126</sup> MICHAEL A. S. AUGUSTINO, *Kort begryp*, 50.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 58f.

<sup>128</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 1, 170f.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 306.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 248.

might have expected, he did not fall into zealotry but continued to place her visions in the context of the Exercise of the Presence of God.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, under his guidance Maria developed a certain dexterity in averting “imaginary false visions or impressions.”<sup>132</sup>

Maria’s resistance implies a very cautious handling of her visions. In her letters she engaged in a careful deliberation of these heavenly intercessions, endlessly relativizing her discernment. The coordinates of the celestial mediations she received are described in a Teresian frame of reference.<sup>133</sup>

When prophetic visions came, Maria opposed them vehemently. In a letter, probably to be dated early November 1671, we read: “I was very hard and rebellious to give in to them and to surrender myself to be drawn on such a way of visions.”<sup>134</sup> Maria reacted in accordance with Teresa’s posthumous warnings, published after her death: “Souls should not trust nor insure themselves with special visions and revelations, and neither should they pursue them as a way of acquiring perfection.”<sup>135</sup> After Maria’s death, Michael decided not to include her prophetic visions in the Dutch edition of Maria’s *Life*. He remarked only that it was expedient to wait until a more convenient time.<sup>136</sup>

Incidentally, the same happened with Michael’s own visions. His biographer reported: “He has foreseen some matters and predicted etc., which will be made known at their time and which we will conceal in particular in order not to contravene the decrees of the popes in this matter.”<sup>137</sup> Which visions Michael saw, is unknown till now.

Taking a broad view of the function of Maria’s visions we see not so much a shift in the Teresian model of sanctity but rather an intensification and refinement of this feature. In Maria’s writings we notice an ongoing development and differentiation of the mystagogical frame of reference. However, this constant refinement and extension of the mystagogical framework didn’t bring the Catholic reform the clearness and consistency, which was needed. A critical reader may

<sup>131</sup> MICHAEL A S. AUGUSTINO, *Kort begryp*, 56.

<sup>132</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 2, 290f.

<sup>133</sup> See for instance *ibid.*, vol. 1, 286.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>135</sup> TERESA DE JESÚS, *Raden ende gheestelijcke onderwysinghen vande H. ende serapijcke moeder Teresa à Iesu*, Gendt, by Franchoyes d’Ercle, 1673, warning V, 13.

<sup>136</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 4, 303. Michael may have had hasitations because of the conditions in Caelestis Hierusalem cives. Paolo Parigi, *The rationalization of miracles*, Cambridge & New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 147.

<sup>137</sup> J. A PASSIONE DOMINI, *De stralen*, 327. See n. 136.

rightly observe that the discussion against the visionary Alumbrados had acquired a life of its own in the seventeenth century. Not only because of Maria's life in the *Cluyse* but also because of a changing mentality, she was forced into a greater dependence and passivity in experiencing her celestial mediations. However, with the Teresian model of sanctity there was an instrument that helped women to preserve unity with the Church. This, of course, was an important objective within the Catholic reformation.

#### THE DECLINE OF THE TERESIAN MODEL OF SANCTITY

The Teresian model of sanctity, as reflected in the spiritual fellowship between Michael and Maria, took on its own shape against the Flemish background of annihilation and renunciation. Although cultural shifts do not follow a causal logic, this model got unmistakably more passive traits. The more specific shifts in the model show how Teresa's example was waning in other ways as well. Increasingly, heavenly mediation was confined to a closed environment and the authority of religious women was restricted more and more.<sup>138</sup> Both developments had their effect. The Teresian paradigm was undermined in its transformative power and went astray in its own heavenly adventure.

#### THE VALUE OF MICHAEL'S AND MARIA'S SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP FOR THE OBSERVANTIA STRICTIOR

Besides the features of the Teresian concept of holiness described above, which undoubtedly have been very fruitful for the *Observantia Strictior* in the Flemish province, attention may also be drawn to the more intrinsic values of the spiritual fellowship of Michael and Maria.

First, their conversations and letters offered room to articulate a new spiritual framework. Patricia Ranft writes: "Encouraging the placement of the spiritual director within the penitential system but not relegating the director exclusively to the system, provided society with a place where males and females could redefine their

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<sup>138</sup> A. WEBER, *Spiritual administration: Gender and discernment in the Carmelite reform*, in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 31 (2000), 145.

relationship to society and to each other in the changed world of post-Reformation Europe.”<sup>139</sup> The empowering force of this room was innovative, also for the *Observantia Strictior* in Carmel. Michael’s and Maria’s shaping of the Maria-form life and their shared spiritual ‘parenthood’ brought creative and formative elements to the reform of the Flemish province.

When we want to understand the value of their spiritual fellowship on a spiritual level, we have to go back to the dynamics of the Catholic reform as we briefly described them in the biography of Michael. In his dissertation on the *Observantia Strictior* in the Belgian province Panzer describes this dynamic with the following quote of Schilling about the early modern discipline: “Functionally it was a kind of pincer movement which was controlled, from above, by the state, the church or other institutions, as it was from below, by the society and therefore significantly influenced by family, neighbourhood, fraternities or other corporations. To some extent mechanisms of self-control and self-regulation were set in place, so that the objects of the discipline were also the subjects.”<sup>140</sup> This socio-historical description of Schilling touches reality, especially when we remember Michael’s visitation letters, yet it remains formulated in terms of discipline and constraint, and is therefore of limited value to a research which considers spiritual resources as well. Research into sanctity goes beyond such description in mere socio-historical terms. Due to its spiritual perspective, research of patterns of sanctity will focus more to the creative power of a reform.

In its pursuit of heavenly perfection the Teresian concept of holiness exceeded the disciplining dynamics of many other reform efforts.<sup>141</sup> Its transforming power was borne from a supernatural perspective, or as Maria Petyt put it: “What a miracle it is that we are inclined to good and virtue, when the Beloved undoes the evil inclinations of corrupt nature and reshapes nature through his grace, pouring into it a new form?”<sup>142</sup> To fight against vice – both internally and externally – a new, heavenly, form had to be received. This applied also to the Ancient Observance of Carmel. In the spiritual fellowship between Maria and Michael the longing for this ‘new form’ underlied the Maria-form life in the *Cluyse*. The intercessory prayer of Maria Petyt

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<sup>139</sup> P. RANFT, *A woman’s way*, 122.

<sup>140</sup> S. PANZER, *Observanz*, 321.

<sup>141</sup> P. RANFT, *A woman’s way*, 137.

<sup>142</sup> M. PETYT, *Het leven*, vol. 2, 56.

and her sisters – and the faith of Michael therein – revitalized the old image of Mary's patronage of Carmel. The spiritual motherhood of Maria, as again highlighted within the 'family bond' of Carmel, lifted the *Observantia Strictior* above a Tridentine inspired disciplinary action and brought a revitalizing force to the reformation of the Flemish province.

#### BREAKPOINTS IN THE MODEL

The early seventeen eighties were a difficult time for the Flemish Carmel. Not only did the never-ending conflict around Jansenism threaten the province, but also the Bollandists started a struggle against the Carmelite tradition.<sup>143</sup> Theirs was a militant church, but in a far different way to the one to which Michael was committed.

For the *Cluyse* it became heavy weather as well. The archbishop of Mechelen (or his vicar) protested against the entry of three young women. His argument was that the foundation of a new congregation was not allowed. We read about this issue in a letter of Michael to Seraphinus of Jesus and Maria, in which he formulated the counterargument that there was no formal congregation in the *Cluyse* at all<sup>144</sup>. Certainly this counterargument of Michael refuted the protest of the archbishop but undermined of course the support and continuity for the life of the tertiaries in the *Cluyse* as well.

These two developments were signs of how the Teresian empowerment – the strong pact between spiritual directors and religious women – was waning in the Catholic reformation. From this study we can only confirm what Jodi Bilinkoff wrote about the decline of intensive spiritual relationships in this period: "After nearly 150 years of extraordinary vitality in renewing their church and opposing Protestantism, by the second half of the seventeenth century Catholics no longer seemed capable of maintaining a united front. Troubling internal conflicts erupted, the most serious of which was the theological dispute sparked by the posthumous publication of a treatise by the Flemish bishop Cornelius Jansen in 1640."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> L. CEYSSENS, *De Carmelitarum Belgicorum actione antijansenistica iuxta chartas p. Seraphini a Jesu Maria in Analecta Ordinis Carmelitarum* 17 (1952), 102.

<sup>144</sup> Rome, Sant'Alberto, Arch. Gen. Ord. Carmelitarum, II Flandro-Belgica commune 3, Bruxelles, February 24, 1680.

<sup>145</sup> J. BILINKOFF, *Relates lives*, 113.

Although Michael and Maria lived in the twilight of the Teresian reform, both have been able to give a strong and spiritual response to their time due to their strong fellowship. They experienced the harsh reality of war and violence and saw this very reality, sometimes in spite of themselves, with different eyes, in the unity of God's creative love which they discovered as the center of their Carmelite family.