

Michael of St. Augustine (1621–1684) and Maria Petyt (1623–1677)

As the reform of Touraine began to spread, it produced a number of important spiritual writers. Michael of St. Augustine was a member of the “stricter observance” in the Flemish Province. Born in Brussels into a fervently Catholic family, he entered the Carmelites in 1639 and spent most of his religious life in Mechelen, serving many years as prior of the community and several terms as provincial. He was a tireless writer on many themes, but is best remembered today for his treatise *The Mariform Life*, which presents the Christian goal of union with God and conformity to Christ from a thoroughly Marian perspective.

Two years his junior, Maria Petyt was born into a wealthy merchant family from Hazebrouck. She tried to join the Canonesses of St. Augustine but was refused for health reasons, after which she joined a group of beguines in Ghent. Here she came under the spiritual care of Michael of St. Augustine, who guided her into the paths of mystical prayer. Later she moved next to the Carmelite church in Mechelen, where she lived for many years as a lay anchorite and Carmelite “tertiary.” With the encouragement of her director, she began writing down her spiritual experiences, which Michael eventually published in a four-volume edition. Maria Petyt’s writing style is simple, direct, vivid, and even humorous at times. Most striking is her profound experience of the presence and role of Mary even in the highest states of mystical union.

Carmel has always associated itself with Mary, and Michael of St. Augustine and Maria Petyt are included here because they represent the culmination of a certain strand of Marian spirituality, one that foreshadows that of Louis Grignon de Montfort. The writings of Michael and Maria complement each other; he presents in theological terms what she describes from her own religious experience. Though some expressions used may sound extreme and not to everyone’s taste, as Michael acknowledges, these Carmelites are careful never to separate Mary from her divine Son.

They clearly recognize that, however exalted Mary's status and privileges may be, these are entirely the work of grace in her, a grace won by her Son's death and resurrection, and a work accomplished by the God who "lifts up the lowly." There is no fundamental competition between love of God and love of Mary, Michael argues, since both loves were united in the heart of Jesus, and the same spirit within us that cries "Abba, Father" also cries out "Ave, Mater" (Hail, Mother). For both Michael of St. Augustine and Maria Petyt, the Mother of Jesus continues the role she played at Cana: to bring us to Christ and say, "Do whatever he tells you."

From *Union with Our Lady: Marian Writings of the Venerable Mary Petyt of St. Teresa, T. O. Carm.*¹

5. How she honors and prays to the Blessed Virgin, in God

As for my love, my knowledge of divine things, the lights which I receive concerning revealed truths, my supernatural attractions—all this, it seems to me, is drawn from its source, which is the Unity of the Divine Being, although it sometimes flows superabundantly into my soul. Yet such a superabundant flood does not distract the soul from this Unity, for in all things the soul sees, recognizes, and tastes the one Divine Unity, in a mysterious and wonderful manner. The strength and the light of God alone aid the soul and raise it up to this level.

In like manner, it is in the Divine Being as in a mirror that I behold, honor, and love our all-lovable Mother, and that I pray to Her. I behold Her as making but one with this Divine Mirror, with this ineffable Being. And so when I kneel before one of Her statues and implore Her help for some intention towards which I feel an inner attraction—for the welfare of souls, the needs of my country, or something similar—soon Her image becomes present in this interior mirror, where She is contained together with all other creatures. At other times I seem able, in some manner, to penetrate beneath the exterior image, noticing nothing corporal, and I behold her totally contained in the hidden depth of my spirit.

6. A tender love impels her towards Jesus and Mary. . . .

It is an extremely tender love which I feel for Jesus and for His dear Mother, who is my Mother also. And this kind of love gives me great familiarity with Jesus, great ease in His company. With Him I am like a spouse, full of tenderness and affection. And the

feeling He evidences for me in return also appears to be full of affection. The same is true of my dear Mother. She seems to have adopted me as Her child; She instructs me in perfection and purity of spirit, so that I may become more pleasing to Jesus. She leads me to the love of Jesus and to loving commerce with Him. . . .

12. . . . *She is shown how to love Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and how to converse in spirit with them.*

. . . I contemplate Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and enjoy their presence in the depth of my soul, seeing them as united for all eternity to the Divine Being with whom they are totally permeated.

At present, these Three show themselves to me all together, without there being introduced the least intermediary in my contemplation of the Divine Being. For he, as it were, overshadows them and fills them. They seem, in some way, to be absorbed in him, and it is thus they present themselves. So true is this, that it is impossible for me to lose the presence of God, even for an instant, when I consider them or raise up my love to them. In them, I see and love nothing except God alone and that which is divine. The remembrance of them in no way prevents me from remaining in God. It in no way detracts from my simplicity of spirit.

Thus I have come to understand how the blessed in heaven can see and love each other in God without impeding their beatific vision, their joy and their love. I have learned by experience that it is the same here.

18. . . . *She sees Mary present in choir during the chanting of the Salve Regina. She asks Her blessing and rejoices in the fact that she belongs to the Order.*

. . . On the eleventh of August, 1668, while the [Carmelite] religious were chanting the Hail, Holy Queen and the Litany, I experienced a particular joy and contentment of heart because I seemed to see our most tender Mother there among Her dear Brothers. She was greatly pleased, and the praise, gratitude, and respectful devotion paid to Her seemed to delight Her immensely. . . .

Full of gratitude, I rejoiced that this lovable Mother had called me to be a part of such an Order. [She was living as a “third order” Carmelite in a small house attached to the Carmelite church in Maline, Belgium. —Ed.] I saw well with what a special love She cherished this Order, because it is so dedicated to Her veneration and Her love, because it celebrates Her feasts with such devotion

and respectful familiarity, such as befit Her true children and Brothers. For this reason did I feel so happy at being able, like the others, to take refuge under Her maternal protection; at being a member, no matter how insignificant, of the Order; at being a small shoot of this Vine of Carmel, in which I should love to bring forth fruits in superabundance for the pleasure of my Beloved and His lovable Mother.

22. The Blessed Virgin commands her to explain in what the "Marian Life" consists. . . .

I believe that my dearest Mother is commanding me to explain at some greater length what it has often been freely given me to experience of this life in Mary, or "Marian Life." . . .

Without a doubt it is true that, according to the usual manner of expressing it, God is our sole and final end. In obtaining this end, in contemplating and enjoying this Supreme Good, there is contained the soul's complete happiness, whether in this life or in the next. In this sense, the soul can neither aspire nor attain to anything higher.

But in another sense the soul can aspire to something more, can tend to something higher, and this in a manner which bears some analogy to the condition of the blessed in heaven. The Saints possess, each of them, one glory, one happiness, one satisfaction which comes to them from the contemplation, love, and fruition of the Divine Face and the Divine Being. . . . Yet certain Saints and Blessed, it is commonly known, receive a glory and happiness over and above that described already, a glory and happiness that is to a certain extent supplementary, each one according to his merits or according to the providence of God.

A similar situation comes to pass in this life, when certain souls are favored with supplementary gifts, graces, and favors, through which, if I may so speak, they become like the Saints and arrive at a more lofty manner of life in union with God. In this sense, such a situation constitutes a higher degree of spiritual life than the degree of simple mystical union, and hence one may truly speak of a more eminent degree. That which I experience of this life in Mary, or Marian life, seems to be a twofold life . . .

From Michael of St. Augustine, *Life with Mary: A Treatise on the Marian Life*²

Chapter One: Just as we can live a deiform and divine life, so we can live a mariform and marian life, that is, a life in conformity with Mary's good pleasure and in her spirit.

. . . We have said elsewhere that we must live deiformly, that is, conformably to God's good pleasure and according to the demands of the divine will. In like manner, it is fitting for us to live mariformly, that is, conformably to the good pleasure of Mary, the Mother of God. This is the reason why those who profess to be Mary's most dear children use one and the same eye of discretion to judge whether all that they do and omit be according to the good pleasure of God and their lovable Mother. . . .

Chapter Five: Life and death for Mary must be directed, further, to God, just as in the veneration of other saints.

Here it must be noted that life for Mary must be directed and ordered also to God. (This is true, in the same way, of love and veneration of other saints.) Mary herself is totally devoted to God's good pleasure, and she lives for God eternally, according to his will, his love, and his glory. Hence all life for Mary must be further directed to God, so that we do not live and die for Mary as for our ultimate end, with inordinate self-seeking and attachment to [anything] which is not God. This should be our aim: through life and death in and for Mary to live and die more perfectly in and for God, for the love of God and according to his good pleasure and to establish the kingdom of Mary within us, together with the reign of Jesus. For the kingdom of Mary is not opposed to the kingdom of Jesus; it is, rather, completely directed to the kingdom of Jesus.

Therefore, the soul which loves God and which professes to be a true child of this lovable Mother should watch carefully, so that in all its works it allow its love of God (which is poured forth in its heart by the Holy Ghost who is given to it) to extend to Mary. Such a soul must lovingly have recourse to her, keep itself reverently turned towards her by the constant filial remembrance of her presence. Yet the soul must see to it that this extension of the divine love to Mary return again to God, to terminate ultimately in him. For the love of Mary is not permitted, nor is it to be exercised, for any reason other than God's sake.

When the soul is led and directed in its marian life by the Spirit of God, inwardly and almost spontaneously, then there is no

problem in this regard. For then the soul learns by experience that this life for Mary is in no way a hindrance to life for God, but rather a help and a stimulus. It finds that its love reaches God with and through Mary, that it rests simultaneously in Mary and in God, though ultimately, of course, in God as in its final end.

Chapter Six: The marian life is, in a certain sense, more perfect than a life of simple union. We find an illustration of this in the life of the blessed in heaven.

. . . The blessed in heaven all enjoy perfect glory and joy in the face-to-face contemplation of God. They are filled with the light of glory and their souls are flooded with beatific love, and in this consist their supreme joy and happiness. Yet, as everyone admits, the blessed possess, besides this essential beatitude and glory, other accidental joys, each one according to the measure of his merits and according to the disposition of God, the Rewarder. Such accidental joys are found, for example, in the contemplation of the most sacred humanity of Christ, of his holy wounds, of the holy cross as the instrumental cause of the soul's beatitude; in the delights of intimacy with the most glorious Mother of God, with the blessed Joseph, or other of the saints; in an especially clear and profound knowledge of some of God's mysteries. There are many like joys, in which one of the blessed shares more, another less. Thus is one saint more sublime in glory than another, because the beatific love in one is more intense and also extends to more delightful objects than in another. . . .

It is in this sense that the marian life joined to the divine life is more perfect, is one grade higher than the ordinary contemplative and unitive life, since the marian life is twofold: divine-marian, life in God and in Mary, through the simple contemplation, love and enjoyment of God in Mary and of Mary in God. . . .

Chapter Eight: The marian life in no way hinders the simple contemplative life. . . .

. . . True, some souls are found, even among those who tend towards the summit of perfection, to whom this marian life is foreign and seems senseless. To such souls this life seems not a little opposed to detachment from all creatures, and hence alien to true perfection. But they must beware of despising this life or of judging it proper to imperfect spirits, beginners, or proficients. Let them know that, as we have earlier explained, the marian life can easily

accompany the divine life without in any way hindering it; in fact, it can serve as a help and a stimulus to the divine life, especially when it is caused in the soul by the direct action of God.

Yet our interior attraction must be followed. Thus, aside from the actual influence of the Holy Spirit, it is unwise to force the spirit or to urge it to act in the manner outlined above. It suffices to regard one's dear Mother with deep affection, to love her in what might be called a more mature manner, until she deigns to infuse this spirit of marian life into the soul. . . .

Chapter Thirteen: The Spirit of Jesus produces in the soul love for God the Father; it also produces love for Mary, the Mother of God, as it did in Jesus himself. . . .

"Because you are the sons of God, God hath sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying: Abba, Father," writes St. Paul [see Gal 4:6]. From this we learn that the Spirit of Jesus abides in the children of God, producing in them, according to their capacity, a tender love for God the Father. But just as this Spirit produced in Jesus a filial love for his Eternal Father, so it also produced in him a filial affection for his most dear Mother, and this it will continue to do for all eternity. Is it any wonder, therefore, if the Spirit of Jesus which, in the hearts of the children of God cries Abba, Father (that is, produces love for the Father of Jesus), also cries from those same hearts Ave, Mater [Hail, Mother] (that is, produces filial and reverential love and affection for Mary) even as happened in Jesus himself during his lifetime and happens now in heaven?

. . . For it is one and the same Spirit of Jesus which produces all in these souls; namely, both divine and marian love, without hindering either. Only think how this took place in Christ without prejudice to the highest perfection, and you will realize how it can take place in certain of Mary's chosen children without prejudice to the contemplative life of perfection.

. . . One and the same Spirit of Jesus, as we have said, accomplishes all this in the faithful soul, according to the capacity of each one and the desire of the Spirit. Hence, there should be, in the future, no cause for wonderment, since this union of marian and divine life is thus justified theoretically and, practically, is established as being realized in certain souls.