

SAINT MICHAEL GARICOÏTS AND LIFE IN THE CHURCH

Theological and Spiritual Study

If Saint Michael Garicoïts wrote a great deal, he theorised very little. Rather, he took notes on the many texts he read. His notes, therefore, reveal the aspects which touched him deeply.

Because of this, he lived intensively. And his way of living, especially his living-in-relation with his brothers, men and women, lay and consecrated, hierarchy and finally, his life in the Church, is undoubtedly one of the most interesting aspects of his passage among us. Still today it remains a model for us. It is therefore worth stopping a minute to contemplate this life, to harvest those teachings which may also guide us, like “sign-posts of a great path”.

Jesus Christ was a sign of contradiction. The Church is as well, in her own manner: as composed of human beings and centred on the resurrected Lord, therefore woven with lights and shadows, powerful and weak, praised and despised. In the Church, or next to her, men live a conflictual relationship: attracted and rejected, seduced and disappointed at the same time.

St Michael certainly experienced this conflict in all phases of his life. He did this in a very personal way, without allowing anything that might discourage him touch the truth of his being. And this is what we will see in the following pages.

In order to simplify the presentation of our work, we will refer to St Michael’s existential relationship with the Church, starting from the sacraments of baptism (Michael, Christian baptised lay) and of ordination (Michael priest) and from his religious engagement (Michael, Religious of the Sacred Heart). The baptised lives his relationship to the Church in a so-called “common” state. The priest lives within a determined ministry at service of the community. The religious lives in a special state of life, called by tradition “state of perfection”. Such a distinction will enable us to sketch a more complete and nuanced picture of the relationship we intend to evoke.

Within the third sphere - Michael as Religious - we will place St Michael’s most long-lasting, piercing conflict of his adult life: the hesitation between the will of God, understood according to all the rules of the Church’s spiritual tradition, yet disputed by the desires of the same diocesan authority it meant to serve. This will not prevent Michael from living fully the charisma of religious life which is privileged relationship with God and with the neighbour in the Church, and a sign of the holiness of the Church. As a result, Michael’s ecclesial life unfolds in the marks of religious life: experiencing God - “sequela Christi” - consecration through vows - community life - apostolic dimension.

I. THE BAPTISED

The core of Christian vocation is belonging to the People of God, gathered around the same Christ, the same faith, inserted in the same historical-redeeming project of the Lord. It is by means of baptism that we become members of this Chosen People, called to the fullness of our vocation in Jesus Christ. This means that each faithful, within the Chosen People, is equally called upon to achieve Christian perfection.

It is not different for Michael Garicoïts. His vocation to holiness blossoms within and in the Church. It springs up in an environment of which it is, if not the fruit, at least the expression.

Dialectic on the relationship to the community

An important fact to remember is St Michael's first contact with the Church, marked by a gesture of violence: the torn-out page of the ritual. On one hand, the ecclesial consciousness of his parents is revealed: they waited six months to have him baptised by a non-ordained priest. On the other hand, those six months multiplied the strength of the baby, whose gesture reflects the tensions his Church is living. He who will be the great obedient one begins his Christian life with such an act of insurrection!

Therefore, Michael's Church life is carried forth, first of all, by a conscious lay community: his parents, above all, who rush to Spain to get married, who welcome the refractory priests making them baptise their children. In this way their fidelity to a universal Church is manifested, in opposition to a nationalistic Church imposed on them by the revolutionary government: "We separated ourselves from the Pope, we must return to the Pope" (Summ. 63).

Thus, resistance and obedience. A Church life, but based on an enlightened and free conscience. The life of a lay community, with an influential female presence and, moreover, with the animation due to the frequent encounter of clandestine priests. Here, a basis of profound rectitude is revealed, evidenced by revolutionary persecution, but still the empire of rigorous principles in the education of the younger ones.

Therefore, let us take our hats off to all the Christians who marked this decisive stage of Michael's life: his parents and grandparents, the determination of his mother Gratianna; his grandmother Catherine, confident and decisive influence on his vocational project; Mrs. Anghelu, the second motherly, firm presence in his life; Evariste Etchecopar "still young yet having already achieved such holiness, that a miracle of grace was necessary to prevent him from regressing" (Mieyaa, I, 108); and "this mason who, during my vacation, taught me more than any of my confessor" (DS, 148-149). And all the others. Amid them and with their help, the formation of the son of the Church, Michael, is realised. In his upright and generous soul, the effects and consequences will develop through all his life.

Let us hail also the persecuted priests, whose epic deeds have deeply impressed the imagination of young Michael. It is this resistance at the service of the Church, of her universality, that he will maintain through all his life. The other resistance, that of his violent and possessive temper, will be replaced by an immediate, almost meticulous obedience to the call of his conscience, or when the voice of legitimacy will be expressed by his mother's

voice. Later on, when his wish for the presbyterial ministry will have germinated, “All right, I am going; but do not forget: I want to be a priest” (Brunot, 19), he obeyed his father.

“I want to be a priest”: even if future ordination never appears clearly to him. Even if he has only the night hours left to study because during the day he works as a servant. Even if he has to give up his studies in Paris, because of the gratitude he feels for M. Honnert. Even if his course of theology is interrupted to make him a teacher in Larressore, without too many explanations. Even if real poverty still seems like a restraint to him, which will prevent him from understanding, for a while, the poverty of the Daughters of the Cross.

Sense of sin and sense of God

It is the pedagogy of his mother, Gratianne. It accompanies the catechesis of the time. All the events of his early childhood are taken as educational lessons: a small bird who has been set free from the noose of a neighbour, some needles lost by a peddler, some cloves of garlic left behind by a retailer, may lead a young boy to hell, a much more terrible fire than that heating us in the hearth, on Winter evenings! It comes as no surprise if Michael, faced with the cries of his brother whose apple he had stolen, feels already that his conscience condemns him to such an extent that he throws the fruit aside without biting into it!

Yet, formation had its positive side: “See how limpid and clear this water is? And yet it gushes from a hideous place”: it was the image of the Word of God (Summ. 91). With the sense of sin Michael will acquire the sense of God. His pastoral functions helped him in this sense. Little by little, God concretely becomes the core of his life, and sin, a reality to fight and to eliminate. Since then, Michael has the desire to belong totally to God.

A later event shows the complexity of this (of the whole) formation: that of the ecclesiastic pedophile who tries to abuse little Michael. The episode reflects the simplicity and the rectitude of the child and points out his mother’s attitude: frank conversation with her son, “lively reproach” to the fellow.

What will be Michael’s answer to his community of formation?

The grace of God, the seed of the community, Michael’s fertile soil, cannot but lead to one gift: the total gift to the persons he lives and works with, total gift to the Church-community. The community, then, can already reap the fruits in Michael’s Christian experience:

- the experience of a very profound and pure faith, which the Lord will confirm in the “consolation” (in the Ignatian sense) of Oneix;
- the sacramental experience of the Eucharist, result of an inner process of blockage and liberation;
- the experience of authentic human relationships, for which he will gain the deserved nickname of “Doctura” among his servant companions of Oneix.

These fruits are lasting. They make of Michael, at the seminary of Dax, “our Saint Louis Gonzaga”. Already, in Michael, there are no reservations in seeking the ways of the Lord and of service to the brothers. Therefore, Michael’s vocation is first of all vocation-reply to a God who is everything for him, and whom he has just discovered as love on the rural

roads of Oneix, and to a community that, by its examples and its formation, threw him into the arms of this God.

As a “way to perfection”, the only one Michael knows at that point of his life, is priesthood. He has no idea about religious life. Therefore, he will become a priest, to celebrate and to share with his brothers this Eucharist, the nourishment of which has been so long postponed.

II. THE PRIEST

Finally Michael the priest. Ignoring the tradition of the Church concerning religious consecration, he tries to flourish his race towards perfection through the paths of priestly ministry; to his understanding, this is the most radical way to follow in incarnation that “evangelical life” assumed by Jesus and by his “apostolic” community. This is also the most engaged way to serve the community, and he adopts it without reservations.

This time of his life includes his passage in Cambo and his positions as teacher and headmaster at the seminary of Betharram.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church dated 1992 declares the tight link to the sacramental nature of the ecclesial ministry, of its triple character of collective and personal service. These terms may be useful to make a brief synthesis of Michael’s Church life as minister of the Lord.

Character of service

Michael integrated thoroughly in the ecclesial mission of teaching (prophecy), of direction (royalty) and of holiness (priesthood), in a specific context and with extremely personal contributions.

He was excellent in his teaching function and he will prolong this service through all his life. Both in sermons and in catechesis, in counselling to the Sisters, in the conferences to his religious brothers, in classes of philosophy first and of theology later, in particular talks with the mayor fan of Voltaire or with the deaf-mute of Cambo. He was not an orator, it is said, but he was thoroughly at the service of the Word, and he put it at the service of everybody. “As teacher of philosophy, of theology and of the Holy Scriptures, his passion was the love for truth and for sound doctrine”, a witness reports (Summ. 128).

He is probably more well-known as counsellor. And at this stage of his life it is important to verify how much he was helped, by helping. He directed many lay people in the world, very often under the banner of the Sacred Heart - and he perfected his intimacy with this mystery. He directed a large number of girls towards consecration to religious life - and it was then that he has began to discover the state of consecrated life. He directed in truth and transparency, before the Lord: he made the young people face their responsibilities, making them develop their personal vocation at the service of the community. He encouraged (already at that time!) frequent communion.

In fact, this direction touches upon the mission to sanctify. By requiring the best, Michael was putting on the path of the most radical gift. He therefore began by seeking more closely this form of gift, first in the sharing with the candidates to the convent, then with Sr. Jeanne Elisabeth, finally in the discernment with Father Le Blanc, who will lead him to assuming the engagement of consecrated life.

So, in carrying out the presbyterial ministry, Michael continued to live in the dialectic of his relationship with the Church: giving himself unreservedly, and by doing so, receiving the possibility to decisively plunge into the “state of perfection”.

Collective character

It is not clear why Michael at times gives the impression of being a great loner: because of his extraordinary temper and personality, or because a great number of holophotes were made on his person in view of his canonisation. Suddenly also the founding community is affected!

Now, Michael-priest fully felt and experienced his solidarity with the ecclesial body, as well as, even more, Michael-religious will.

Since the beginning, Michael is a docile instrument in the hands of the hierarchy. It is a well anchored personal conviction, rooted in a solid experience of Church: the teaching of his mother Gratianna, the sense of the struggle by the refractory priests he admires, his phase of life in intimacy with the bishop and his family. In brief, he lives his collectivity with veneration and absolute respect to the Roman, diocesan, or local authority.

In the same way he is united with his brother priests. Everyone admires the filial tenderness with which he deals with the elderly, providentially sent to his side: Father Hardoy at Cambo, Father Procope Lassalle at Betharram. Two particularly crucial problems, faced in a particularly filial way, evangelical let us say. It is supposed to be the same with the other companions in the ministry, although historians have not accurately investigated this aspect. During two years at Cambo, Michael has however lived fairly close to Father Jauretche, to draw up the manual of devotion to the Sacred Heart. And the team work at the seminary of Betharram was consolidated by the true friendship with Father Guimon and Father Lamaysounoube, vicar of Lestelle, with whom he warmly argues on the possibilities of founding a religious institute. If he always paid personally, if he never saved himself while accomplishing the tasks thrown his way, Michael always did it in harmony with his travelling companions.

Among them, we must mention the young seminarians met at Betharram, and most of them spiritually accompanied by Michael, led towards intellectual perfecting, personal asceticism and availability to the service of the Lord and of the brothers. That is to say, formed in the most ecclesial way possible. Their relationship with Michael is one of frank friendship, without prejudices of respect and discipline, but with all the freedom possible. Soon after, several of them will be brothers in religion. The first of them, and perhaps the most difficult, while deserving full trust, was Jean Chirou.

Personal character

At the same time as collective, the presbyterial ministry has also a personal character: the priest acts in the first person, “I absolve you...”.

To this personal character, Michael adds a very personal way of being a priest. He has “something more”, something he will later translate by “instantly, unreservedly, irrevocably, for love”. It is the practice of radicality, spontaneous at the beginning, a practise which could have become frightful for his contemporaries.

These personal traits already come from the frequency of the Eucharist, from meditation on the mysteries of the Word Incarnate, leading to the practice of the service to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

It is this coherence of an ever more increasingly intense gift that, with the help of the Sisters and of Father Le Blanc, with the joint aspirations of some seminarians and brothers, ended up by leading him to the option for consecrated life.

III. THE RELIGIOUS

We will preface this chapter with two quotations that describe us as the dream and the reality of religious life.

The first one is by Father Gaston Hialè, included in his collection of texts for St Michael's 150th anniversary at page 115: "According to the classic doctrine, charisma is a gift that aims directly at serving the community, more than at sanctifying the person who receives it. As far as Religious Life is concerned, however, one doesn't go without the other, because Religious Life is present in the Church and for the Church, in the world and for the world as a **SIGN** of the **HOLINESS** of the Church. 'The religious, because of their state, offer this exceptional and extraordinary witness that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes' (LG, 31).

One could say that Religious Life appears as:

- sign of the holiness of the Church and of the permanent action by the Holy Spirit within her;
- sign of the union between Christ and his bride;
- sign of the transcendence of the Kingdom of God;
- sign of the presence, from now on, of the eschatological goods;
- sign that it is by its nature an apostolic witness and appeal to all men."

The second quotation is by Father Garicoïts himself (Ecrits, n. 1159): "The first thought (about the foundation) arose confused in the silence of our soul. To clarify and justify this thought, how many doubts, how much effort, what struggles!

At the first manifestations of his project, they were confused, and we had the right, with the dreams that a young imagination produces every day. We encountered inevitable resistance, legitimate defiance...

To conquer the right to serve the Church, we had to struggle against the Church. Finally, after so many such severe tests, the spiritual authority had to surrender, and at that point she covered us with her mantle; for she had recognised the signs of a divine consecration in us.

As a result, we enrolled in her militia, but without ever losing the characteristic of the free impulse that had created us. Our option to act is the spiritual authority; our life is God's and ours. Such is the fact."

We should note that, in founding an institute, there is always, on one hand:

- the free appeal of the Spirit, or charisma, which include the denunciation of certain excesses and the announcement of the Word of tenderness;
- the incorporation in the ecclesiastic institution, or “canonical state”, which is not necessarily restful.

On the other hand, while dealing with the progress of the institute, we will notice the main features of the witness in the Church and in society.

A. In dealing with the matter of charisma and of institution,

we are at the heart of St Michael’s relationship with the instituted Church, a relationship which is delicate, yet at the same time, transparent like spring water.

1. The reality

a) The Church in which Michael lives and works is an institution in full ferment, tormented by tensions and crises. To summarise this situation, we might refer to the famous reference of the “bishop’s tears”: in his concise and abrupt way, Michael resort to an extreme or isolated fact, perhaps, but which reveals a whole context of life in a good way. The revolution upset traditions and the social order and proposed a new ideal, alluring for many, of equality, liberty and fraternity; it left deep signs in the people, in the sense of a realisable utopia, and the clergy, who takes part in the best of aspirations, at least for the dynamism of the Gospel, at times indulges in the illusion of a liberalism that would be revealed, but not altogether deprived of excesses. Michael himself, student until a few years earlier, and at that time resident in the house of formation, will be sensitive to this spirit and slightly suspected of mennaisianism (De Lamennais).

b) On the other hand, because of his personal formation and conviction, Michael proclaims the absolute *primacy of God* in unequivocal terms that today may seem shocking to us: “God all; myself, nothing”, “Myself, nothingness, rot”, “Nothing enters Heaven but through the door of its nothingness”. This means that all the visible reality becomes shadow before the supreme reality - the only “real”: *God’s will*. Anywhere he sees God the man with personality can assume only one attitude: *obedience*. And for Michael, obedience is not merely a theoretically correct attitude: it is the generous and decisive practice of Arnaud and Gratianne, the same he had assumed since his childhood. Of course, this practice is based on a spirituality: the *devotion to the Sacred Heart*. Not in the sense of reparation, as it was for Marguerite-Marie Alacoque. But rather in the sense of Incarnation, following Psalm 39, 7-9 and Hebrews 10, 7: “Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God”. Because the Word has, we might say, the upright character of the Basques, and overcomes them infinitely: when it ‘says’, it is a done thing - incarnation, *abasement*, annihilation, we like to recall the Greek term = *kénosis*. The first act of the Son is total gift to the will of the Father, fulfilment of the *loving obedience*. And we, in turn, are called upon to give ourselves and to obey, to imitate the Son who says: “Here I am for incarnation”, to enter the redeeming project of the Father, whose Son becomes one of us in order to make us divine. Therefore, we need to develop the *theological dimensions* of obedience: to obey through *love*, because obedience is availability to the project of the Lord and virtue of common good; to obey in *faith*, whatever the authority, even unworthy; to obey in *hope*, because hope has no other reason than God himself, and because with God “nothing is ever lost”.

When we deal with the theme of Michael's relationships with the Church and the matter of the official recognition of the congregation, we must not omit, from the beginning, either Michael's spiritual conviction or his practice of obedience.

2. The appeal by the Spirit, or charisma.

Any position taken is a denunciation of the abuses it means to fight. Therefore, we may say that every founder wants to denounce what offends the primacy of God. In Michael's case, it is first of all one of false liberalism; he strongly fights against it, but without the narrow-minded attitude which will lead, in the 20th century, to certain forms of morbid anti-communism. Michael will rather make it the object of a survey on his liberal ideas: there lies his honour: we can discern in him his absolute recognition of the primacy of God, that keeps up with a great capability of openness and listening to the voices of the century, in view of dialogue.

Michael denounces, above all, disobedience that aims at hindering the work of God: "We want neither to obey God, nor to *reign* in him by obeying him. And then, inevitably, we become the most childish slaves, with the most ridiculous passions" (DS 113). Michael, the well named, to the "Non serviam" of the fallen angel, opposes the "Quis ut Deus?" of his baptism.

Moreover, Michael warns against the Judaic, Protestant, Pelagian and Jansenist spirits, which are, according to him, ways of opposing the will of God.

We have seen in the previous paragraph what he announces: a God who is all, but who is founded in charity; who sends us his Son, whose Heart reveals the Heart of the Father; a Son at his disposal (Here I am), annihilated and obedient unto death on the Cross; the magnet, the model and the means, for us, of attaining the love of the Father. Moreover, Michael also announces an inner Master who urges us to promptly obey, in the same way, the will of the Father, through love, in faith and hope.

With Michael and following him, we introduce to the world and to the Church one of the aspects or one of the faces of the mystery of God and of his tenderness.

As long as it is a matter of charisma, there are no difficulties for the diocesan authority: d'Astros encourages; d'Arbou is slightly reluctant, then liberates the first companions; Lacroix at such an availability to obedience. Problems arise when the devoted group is to become an Institution.

3. The inclusion into the ecclesial institution.

The first two bishops quoted did not have the time to pronounce themselves. Between Lacroix and Garicoits, a very special sort of measuring one's strengths, as we would call it today, began. Michael had no intention of "going over the bishop's head"! Authority placed him in Betharram, took his seminarists from him: he made his discernment according to the rules of St Ignatius and convinced himself of the need to found an institute of priests. Authority itself sent him the first companions (they will be 10 in 1840). And it is with the bishop's guarantee that he opened the school in Betharram.

Now, Mgr. Lacroix comes with different ideas. He doesn't want a "congregation" in the strict sense of the word, nor vows. Therefore, new discernment for Michael by the Jesuits, and confirmation. Periodically Mgr. Lacroix proposes constitutions without vows. The companions - and Michael - implore every time and obtain the vows, and the application of the Jesuits' rules. The bishop always went back to his ideas and always accepted to back out. Michael? He did as once with the cook of Bayonne when he took revenge by joyfully washing the pans: he obeyed. There is something impressive in this challenge between the two giants: the bishop, seduced by the transparency of the founder and his group; the founder, obedient to

his bishop like a child. This is what earned us this extract from a funereal homily given by Mgr. Lacroix: “Obedience! He had it every day on his lips, as well as in his heart of apostle; he always spoke of it, it was his word, his unique virtue on which he made all other virtues depend (...). He followed it and he required it of everybody”. (Bourdenne, 399).

Garicoïts had given his Institute the characteristics of obedience, of annihilation/incarnation and of availability to the mission. It seems that for this same reason, he has been led, in the Plan of the Father, to a limit-experience in this field: available to the mission to such an extent as to volunteer for America, he was condemned to a “tertiary” work of formation of female religious and missionaries (moreover, not all of them willing!); obedient, he has always welcomed as the Word of God the slightest words or gestures of his bishop, beyond any personal discernment; annihilated/incarnate like the Word, he is for this reason condemned to experience a situation of being-without-being and of seeing the possibility of his whole structure being destroyed in the future; and he dies, the morning of Ascension Day in 1863, without the slightest perspective of a solution for his utopia, without having done anything to influence the bishop’s decision: a “human” perspective, at that time, would be closer to catastrophe than to success.

And it is at this point, after his death, that the road of his community begins, under the Lord’s protecting hand: the insistence of the bishop to transform it into a group of diocesan missionaries; the appointment by the bishop, as Superior General, of the leader of the opposition to the vows - appointment confirmed in the most pure Garicoïts spirit, through election by the assembly; the unlikely conversion of Jean Chirou to the religious ideas of Father Michael, and the votes repeated by the assemblies in favour of an authentic religious life; the umpteenth drawing up of the constitutions, providentially accepted by the bishop, by Auguste Etchecopar, and the umpteenth shelving of the text; the presence of these constitutions in the drawer and the election of Father Etchecopar to Superior General. This is when a miraculous intervention occurs by an unexpected pair of persons, Sister Mary of Christ Crucified and Miss Berthe Dartigaux, as well as the not less prodigious approval of the tribunal in Rome, not without the total elimination of all the reticence of the venerable bishop. But this occurs when Father Garicoïts has already entered the glory of Heaven 12 years before.

Finally the “canonical state”, recognition by the Church of what was right in Father Garicoïts’ intuition. Some years later, recognition of Michael’s personal holiness will come, his canonisation. His relationship with the Church is therefore perfect, exemplary, and is proposed to us as model. For Michael it was a “marvellous spectacle” to see the consequences of the Love that led the Word to incarnation and unto death on the cross. More modestly, we admire the marvellous spectacle of Michael’s extraordinary experience: on one hand, obedient to the extent of avoiding any suggestion to his bishop, and to silently do whatever he is requested to, including to pack his things and leave Betharram; on the other hand, by not allowing his Spirit to fade, the flame of the ideal of radical and definitive consecration, and by achieving absolute transparency, without the slightest provocation to the authority, he succeeds in making a community of some 200 people share in the experience of this ideal. It is difficult for us to understand, but there is certainly something in all this for us to learn today...

B. Religious life is a sign of the transcendence of the Kingdom of God.

The religious centres his life on faith and interprets the world and history starting from God, who is therefore the ultimate sense of all realities. Compulsorily, this experience of God in Christian life will always be a Trinitarian experience. Garicoïts based his Christian and

community life on a deep Trinitarian experience, which appears in all his writings, and that we will briefly develop, at this point, starting from his preface to the constitutions of 1838:

God the **FATHER**. 1) It has *pleased* God to make Himself loved, to the extent of including in his project the sending of his only Son. The triple objective of this sending: to make the Son the magnet, the model and the means for us to attain love. 2) He is the Father, who Jesus, the new Man, recognises and assumes the *plans*, by putting himself completely at his disposal as victim, like Isaac, like Jefte's daughter. 3) God is the only orienting pole of our existence: facing him, Man assumes the condition of victim to its extreme limit, that of accomplishing all his *orders*, including obedience unto death on the cross.

God the **SON**. 1) Sent by the Father, the Son of God *becomes flesh* in order to become the magnet, the model and the means by which we attain divine love. 2) The Son is available to the Father's plan, by taking the place of all *victims*; he comes to do the Father's will. 3) The Son positively and unceasingly assumes his mission, always remaining in the state of victim, doing nothing by himself, abandoning himself to the orders of God unto his *death on the cross*.

God the **INNER MASTER**. 1) He is not explicitly quoted in the first paragraph, but he is the one who, through the Incarnation, *vitalises* the design of drawing us to divine love, of showing us the laws of love, of making us attain love. 2) The Spirit of the Father finds place in the Son incarnate to *animate* him to take the place of all victims and to deliver himself to the plans of the Father on him: "Here I am, o God, I come to do your will!". 3) Finally, it is the Spirit, assumed by the Son until the end, who *leads* him to total deliverance unto death on the cross.

At the sight of this marvellous spectacle, **WE** 1) recognise that we are cold in front of the loving project of the Father, the exemplary availability of the Son, the animation of the Spirit. 2) As missionaries, let us open ourselves to the impulses of the Spirit to follow the obedient Christ and to incite our neighbour to the way. 3) Let us turn our eyes toward the first disciple, Mary of the Annunciation, of the Ecce Ancilla.

C. Religious life is a sign of the union of Christ with his bride,

impassioned love of the person of Jesus. To be a religious means to be called (vocation) to live with Jesus in a specific way, in union with other disciples (communion), living the way he did (consecration) to make him visible amid the men of today (mission). This means to live a dynamic process, enlivened by the action of the Spirit, an evangelical project under way, of which the Church is the first drawing.

Michael follows Jesus available to the will of the Father: he and his companions "felt drawn to dedicate themselves to imitating Jesus, annihilated and obedient". Jesus is total listening, absolute openness, and in this sense we must imitate him. And we must follow him when the Ecce Venio becomes the concrete act, "like an athlete eager to run a race" (Psalm 18,6). Because Christ, the way, the truth and the life, says to us: "You know the way that leads to the place where I am going". In the simplicity of his childhood, Michael wanted to follow him from mountain top to mountain top; but soon, he discovered the inner ways during the spiritual enlightenment at Oneix, which caused even a physical frontal collision against an obstacle. Since then, Michael has followed the Good Shepherd at full gallop on his horse in Cambo; on the Galilean paths of the daily service between Betharram and Igon; on the ways of obedience, wherever he was and at the first signs; on the Ignatian paths of discernment, or in the direction, as indicated by the Daughters of the Cross, of real impoverishment. In brief, he experiments all the ways which may lead him to follow more closely Christ, each time

better understood through experience. Like Jesus, he becomes tender, “man-suetus”: he lets himself be tamed by the firm hand of the Lord. And he himself becomes orientater for his brothers and sisters, director of paths, for the bettering of all in the faith. “Three days of gathering with the much loved Garicoïts gave us more than eight days of pastoral retreat”, recognises a venerable priest (Bourdenne, 276). But Michael did not cease “to implore the Holy Spirit, by saying to him: ‘You yourself educate the persons I am talking to; teach us to wish and to achieve all that you ask of us’.” (DS, 344).

During his life, the “sequela Christi” becomes, day by day, more evident: from the Pyrenean-following of his childhood to the obedience unto death.

D. Religious life is a sign of the presence, as from now, of the eschatological goods.

“Consecration represents an intimate relationship and a personal alliance with the “Beloved” (Bro. Henrique, *Vida religiosa: um projeto em construção*, p. 34). The religious, according to St. Augustine, is “homo Dei nomine consecratus et Deo votus” (De Civ. Dei 6 - PL 41, 283), a man consecrated by the name of God and dedicated to God.

Alliance without return, definitive consecration, is all Michael and his companions wanted to live, and why they insisted so much on the vows. Mgr. Lacroix “wanted a society of Priests, in the Sulpicians style, and whose members wouldn’t be bound by vows. Father Garicoïts, on the contrary, thought that the sacred bond of vows was necessary to enchain human freedom and make the religious spirit live into the members of the Society. The Bishop allowed them to follow the rules of the Society of Jesus on the spiritual conduct of the members; but he absolutely refused the taking of vows. Father Guimon had to fall on his knees before His Excellency to obtain this favour from him. The Bishop consented, but only on condition that the vows, even if perpetual, were binding only until one belonged to the Society. (...) This form did not match Fr. Garicoïts’ ideas; yet, always full of deference for the authority, he submitted to the will of the Bishop. (...) He used to talk of the vows and their advantages, in the sense Rome gave them to us later on. (...) He used to explain them in all their value” (P.G. Higuères. *Summarium*, 180-181).

The objective of vows, therefore, is “to enchain human freedom and to make the religious spirit live”. Here, we can re-read the words of the Fathers of Betharram, in the preface to the Constitutions of 1838: “to dedicate themselves to imitating Jesus, humble and obedient, and to working whole-heartedly to bring the same happiness to others”. The final remark by Fr. Higuères, “He used to explain them in all their breadth”, allows us to understand this total gift and availability at the service of the Lord and the neighbour.

It may be interesting to make a link between the words “vows” and “victim”. Is there a common etymology? Originally, the sacrificial victims were “vowed” to God. Yet, God prefers mercy in the heart of man, to sacrifice, which sometimes is something external to the person. Then comes the Word Incarnate who unites the “heart” and the victim “by replacing all victims”. Thus, the vow establishes a very tight link with the Lord, and engages to the depths of one’s heart. This consecration and this alliance are signs of the presence of the Kingdom amid us.

E. Religious life is a sign of the holiness of the Church and of the permanent action by the Holy Spirit in her.

This is the sign Michael chose as evangelical need and that he realised in a radical and simple way in his community life.

“ ‘In October of this year, 1835, Fr. Fondeville writes, the personnel of Betharram, composed by Mr. Garicoïts, Guimon, Perguilhem, Chirou and Larrouy and Fondeville, wanted to draw up a rule in order to sanctify themselves with greater edification. The rule of the house of the missionaries of Hasparren was adopted; and, without further preamble of noviciate but their good will to glorify God, to save their souls and to sanctify people, the members unanimously elected Mr. Garicoïts as superior, promised him obedience, poverty, renewed their vow of chastity, and emptied their small purses in his hands’. Doesn’t it sound like the verses by which Luke reports on the formation of the first Christian community?” (Bourdenne, 83-84).

The unifying element of the community is charity. “The bond of charity is stronger than any obstacle and than death itself. The superiors will be the first to engage themselves with great zeal to unify all hearts. May they be one!” (DS, 360).

Community life is a sign of the holiness of the Church and of the permanent action by the Holy Spirit in her. This is why she must be very careful. In this sense, Michael really insists on the responsibility of the superior. For example: “Your sisters are people of goodwill..., members of a body..., the beloved children of God...God has his special designs for them... The Lord has destined them to work in his service, not as slaves, but freely from love. Begin then by winning their hearts and their trust... Love them without limits... St. Vincent de Paul said that he never used hard words to reprove others on more than three occasions and even those few he always regretted, because what he achieved in an unpleasant way he could have achieved with gentleness... Act then always with gentleness... If you do the opposite you will slam the door on everybody. Do not spare anything to obtain your Sisters’ wholehearted trust: kind words, loving attentions, even such tokens of affection as they would receive from their families, far from weakening the Rule will contribute in a wonderful way to ensure its perfect observance, out of love!” (DS, 363-365, passim.).

To make the Betharramite community life become witness of the Trinitarian union and of the Church among mankind, Michael insisted also on the observance of the Rule with extreme sensitivity; now, the Rule continues to be primordial for our community life, having acquired in our times a practical and perfectible expression we call: community project.

F. Religious life is a sign that is by its nature apostolic witness and appeal to all men.

“Oh! If only we could gather together a society of priests having for their programme the very programme of the Heart of Jesus, eternal priest, servant of the heavenly Father: absolute generosity and obedience, perfect simplicity, unchanging gentleness! these priests would be a real mobile camp of picked soldiers, ready to hasten, even and above all to the most difficult ministries, unwanted by others!” (Bourdenne 65).

Apostolic engagement comes from the example of Christ, humble and obedient, and constitutes the *raison d’être* of the institute.

This is the apostolic aspect which appeared the most in Michael Garicoïts’ ecclesial life: at the beginning, an ardent and spectacular engagement; then, soon, a very precise engagement concerning the choice of tasks and linked to community discernment.

1. Michael was led, little by little, by personal discernment and by a bishop’s and community decisions, to the service of religious life, to the formation of people, men and

women, consecrated to the mission. In Igon alone, 1200 female religious were guided by him. In Betharram, he begins by discovering and founding male religious life - in one of its possible forms - as a reply to the today of the history of his time; he then sets to the task of formation for this life: initial formation for the young people and, above all, permanent formation of the missionaries. This leads us today to the need for re-creating the religious life of our time: "the today" has changed, other points of witness must be emphasised. Are we seriously engaged, not only to restore a religious family or to fish for vocations, but to re-found our consecrated and community life?

2. Michael perceived and lived the service of the promotion of the young as a scholastic option. He was a pioneer in the field of education, in times when this supplementary function was required. Today, we ask ourselves: what are the young people lacking? is it a matter of education? of professional opportunities? of social insertion? of sense of life and of the world? And how can we meet these new challenges?

3. As for the domestic mission or "ad gentes" one is concerned, Michael did not avoid his responsibilities, particularly amid the most needy. Always attentive to the pressing needs, he did not exclude either individual or collective dedication. At the Elicabide's trial, he answers as witness, and he tells the truth, but he takes time to talk with the accused, to try to convince him of the beauty of his situation. To every question by missionaries, he responds; to the more complex American mission, he replies positively in line with the assembly of the religious. He makes no distinction between spiritual and bodily needs, and to Father Guimon who consults him on the convenience of giving to the poor, during the cholera epidemic, the money received for the ministry, he answers: "Oh! My dear friend, what are you asking me? When you sacrifice yourself for the souls, give everything you have; help all these unlucky persons; do everything you can to comfort them" (Miéyaà, III, 1125).

Also in our days, the mission submerges us, the needs are many, and we must discover how to inculturate the Good News, how to "opt for the poor" and to live solidarity...

CONCLUSION

This is how Michael Garicoïts lived his belonging to the Church, “holy and sinful people” (5th Eucharistic prayer of the Brazilian liturgy). He suffered from the limitations inherent to the human character of the Church, of which he always considered himself a full-fledged member and which, in his turn, he always tried to honour and to grow by his contribution.

As a youth, the Jansenist mark of his circle barred his way to a faster and long-desired access to the Eucharist. He did not make it an incurable trauma: he barely maintained, due to this, the wish and the commitment to free others of this plague.

About his spiritual orientation, which led to an, at that time, extraordinary frequency of this sacrament, someone wanted to deduce that he was teaching liberal ideas and denounced him to the proper authority. He sincerely explained his position to the bishop’s delegate and the delegate, far from carrying out the matter, appeared enchanted by his common sense.

At this point, having escaped both excesses, Michael would seem destined to a harmonious and peaceful life of Church. It was so externally, for those who were only looking superficially. The trial of his whole life came from our human limitations: the frank opposition between the two main channels of God’s will - a personal and community discernment, confirmed by all Ignatian methods, versus the opposite firm decision of his bishop and superior. This trial, of a type probably destined in different ways to all of us, made him grow in stature of holiness, and finally, we have no better witness to his sense of Church, than the one given by the same bishop, Mgr. Lacroix, on Michael’s funeral day:

“The Lord destined him to create a great realisation within the Church and He led him by the hand. (...)

How much I should thank the Lord, for having kindled such a saintly priest and for having placed him at the head of the apostles of this diocese! Oh! how much I do appreciate it! Oh, how much I love it, my dear congregation of the diocesan missionaries, who will carry and shake the flame of the Gospel!” (Bourdenne, 395, 398).

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