

## **The Liturgical Spirituality of Dom Virgil Michel**

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The purpose of this paper is to attempt to get to know the liturgical spirituality of Virgil Michel through some of the literature he left behind. It is important to note that it would be difficult to derive Virgil Michel's spirituality solely from the literature available at the library since the texts in general do not get heavily into background and context of his life. This is why secondary sources written about Virgil Michel also played a role in the research and were consulted.

Several major works of Michel were essential to the research, these include, an article titled the "Significance of the Liturgical Movement" and two books titled, *The Liturgy of the Church* and *Christian Social Reconstruction*. All of these sources provided important insights into Virgil's liturgical spirituality. The secondary sources provided contextual information that helped make sense of material regarding Virgil's life that was not directly accessible through his own literature. Some important components essential to understanding Virgil's spirituality that will be examined throughout the paper include that of a brief background/context, the significance of the liturgical movement, influences on his thought and his involvement with the Indian reserves. Moreover, it will be particularly meaningful, as a gateway into his liturgical spirituality, to take a look at his personal views on the relationship of theology and liturgy and that of social justice.

Virgil Michel was born in St. Paul in 1890 and died in Collegeville Minnesota in 1938.<sup>1</sup> Virgil Michel is typically regarded as the founder of the liturgical movement in the United States to which it is generally supposed to have commenced in 1926.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the awareness for a liturgical movement in the United States was something which was arising before 1926. This awareness was brought forth by other thinkers such as Father William Bausch calling for the need of a liturgical movement, two years prior to that of Virgil Michel.<sup>3</sup> Taking this into consideration, Sister Jeremy Hall finds it more appropriate to speak of Virgil Michel as the liturgical movement's "organizer or leader ... in the United States."<sup>4</sup> Virgil Michel wrote and spoke a great deal on the areas of "liturgical theory, social reform, educational theory, incorporation of laity into the life of the Church and ecumenism."<sup>5</sup> The greatest influence of Virgil's work was experienced in between the two world wars.<sup>6</sup> It's important to mention that the majority of material that Michel wrote was written for Catholics living in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> He focused on both the accomplishments and the corrupt living of members of society including that of Catholics (where the clergy were not exempt from criticism) and attempted to offer valuable insights into contemporary issues through a relevant interpretation of Christian revelation, that is to say scripture.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Roach. "The Prophetic Vision of Virgil Michel." in The Future of the Catholic Church in America: Major Papers of the Virgil Michel Symposium, ed. John R. Roach (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Sister Jeremy Hall, The Full Stature of Christ: The Ecclesiology of Virgil Michel OSB (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1976), xi.

<sup>3</sup> Hall, Stature of Christ, xi.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, Stature of Christ, xi.

<sup>5</sup> Roach, The Future, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Rose B. Calabretta, Baptism and Confirmation: the Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Writings of Virgil Michel (Roma: Unversita Gregoriana, 1998), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Calabretta, Baptism and Confirmation, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Calabretta, Baptism and Confirmation, 11.

Michel in his essay, “The Significance of the Liturgical Movement”, expresses his sentiments towards the liturgical movement, particularly the liturgical apostolate, that is to say the liturgical mission of the Church, by stating “Why, it is everything!”<sup>9</sup> This statement seems to embody much of Michel’s view on the primordial importance of the liturgical movement. He dedicated much of his life to see the movement being successfully carried forth. Virgil’s spirituality is highly geared around the Church’s liturgy. In order to fully grasp the significance placed on the Church’s liturgy let’s examine Virgil’s own words on the matter: “We all know that a minimum active contact with the Church’s liturgy (mainly sacrifice and Sacraments) is necessary for us to be good Catholics. We are better Catholics in our spiritual life, the better we make this contact, i.e., the more actively we participate with understanding and will in holy mysteries and worship.”<sup>10</sup> As seen by the aforementioned quote we can witness the centrality placed on the frequency of sacrifice and participation in receiving the sacraments. Virgil views regular participation in the receiving of the Church’s sacraments as one of the most essential components of Christian life.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he sees the bond of individual’s to Christ creating one living entity amongst believers in a profound unity. He sees the members of the Church as forming “a spiritual body ... [where] the mystical body of which Christ is the Head and we the members”. Yet, he sees every individual as forming a distinct part of the mystical body of Christ but each member is significant and all are working together.

In order to further engage with Virgil Michel’s liturgical spirituality it is important to situate his context and mode of thinking. It will be essential to examine some major influences on his thought. These influences comprise that of three distinct mediums, including that of

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<sup>9</sup> Virgil Michel. “The Significance of the Liturgical Movement” in The Liturgical Movement (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1930), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Michel, Liturgical Movement, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Michel, Liturgical Movement, 16.

persons, writings and experience. Although these three distinctions as delineated by Rose Calabretta provide useful insights and information into the mode of thinking of Virgil Michel, they tend to create a trichotomy which is not completely evident. This is true because all three elements overlap with one another and are intimately intertwined with one another. While taking this into consideration let's examine some of the available data with respect to each of these aspects of Michel's influences.

In terms of influential persons in his life, those included Father Athanasius Meyer, his abbot Alcuin Deutsch and his professor of ecclesiology Lambert Beauduin.<sup>12</sup> Beauduin has been attributed with being responsible for triggering an interest within Michel of the liturgy and the doctrine of the mystical body.<sup>13</sup> In terms of his writings, Virgil was deeply influenced by both Thomas Aquinas and Orestes A. Brownson. It is worth mentioning that Virgil upheld various theological insights of Brown which influenced his stance on Catholic thought, these include: “(a) the call for a return to the Scriptures and Patristics in theological discourse; (b) the defense of the vitality and mystery of the Church; (c) the promotion of the lay apostolate; (d) social reform; (e) the need for Christian unity.”<sup>14</sup> With respect to experience, there were two majorly influential periods of his life, the first occurring from February 1924 to August 1925 and the other from April 1930 to September 1933.<sup>15</sup> In 1924, Virgil arrived in Rome and became heavily entrenched within philosophy, particularly, that of Thomism. He grew disappointed with much of Scholastic philosophy because of its complacency. Similar to the work of Bernard Lonergan, he sought to make the thought of Thomas Aquinas applicable to modern problems instead of

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Marx, Virgil Michel and the Liturgical Movement (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1957), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, Virgil Michel, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Calabretta, Baptism and Confirmation, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Calabretta, Baptism and Confirmation, 42.

becoming that of an “intellectual slave” whereby no new relevant insights revolving around the work of Aquinas were being brought forth.<sup>16</sup>

Michel often times recorded some of his experiences within his daily diary entries.<sup>17</sup> Some of which involved the period in which he lived in France and Spain, when living there he noticed a great division between the clergy and the people. He sensed the indifference of the clergy, who were identified with the monarchy, towards the common people. The clergy was apathetic towards poverty and supported the wealthy.<sup>18</sup> Michel was troubled by the spirituality of the people. It is quite evident that a transformation within Michel can be witnessed. Rose Calabretta elucidates this notion, she states:

“Here he realized how distant the life of the Church could become from the real everyday lives of the people. Indeed, what he saw was so distant from his ideal of the Church, that his resolve to remain close to the laity and cooperate with them in every way, must have taken shape at this time. He deplored the absence of social responsibility on the part of the Spanish clergy and nobility.”<sup>19</sup>

More will be mentioned on Michel’s views of social justice further into the paper.

Another aspect that worked as a profound transformative experience which in turn helped shape his liturgical spirituality is that of his involvement with the Indian reservations of Northern Minnesota. It should be noted that throughout his period in the Indian reserves and assisting with missions he lost his sight, suffered from severe headaches, was plagued with physical pain and mental depression.<sup>20</sup> Despite his illnesses, Dom Virgil Michel, seemed to be dedicated to help the Indians prosper and aided them with their spiritual, social and economic needs.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Marx, Virgil Michel, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, Virgil Michel, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, Virgil Michel, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Calabretta, Baptism and Confirmation, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, Virgil Michel, 163.

<sup>21</sup> Calabretta, Baptism and Confirmation, 49.

Michel was deeply entrenched within the Indian style of living. He shared their simplicity and poverty.<sup>22</sup> He worked with them and earned authentic friendships from them. This can no doubt have deeply influenced his sense of spirituality in a way that would not have come about if he was dedicated to a purely intellectual life or if he was involved with the corruption of the clergy as was witnessed in Spain and France. This put him in solidarity with humanity and the universality of the Christian message of compassion and salvation.

Virgil Michel in his work titled, *The Liturgy of the Church*, deals with the question of theology and liturgy. In this work he reveals a deep dissatisfaction for modernity's denial or partial blindness of the evidential basis of liturgical prayers being a profound expression of the early Christians' beliefs. Michel states: "The liturgy is one of the chief theological sources, as they are called, one of the chief sources for the evidence of theological truths consciously held by traditional Christianity. That this had been denied in our day, or at least lost sight of to some extent will surprise non who is aware of the great loss of liturgical sense that Catholics as a whole have been suffering from."<sup>23</sup> Michel believes that theological doctrines/beliefs should be based upon primarily the Scriptures but that the liturgy must follow after that of Scripture as an exposition of theological truths. This suggests that Virgil Michel's liturgical spirituality is not only ultimately rooted in that of Scriptures but also consequently in that of tradition, namely that of a liturgy grounded within Scripture. Michel shares similar sentiments with that of Pope Pius X when Pius X iterates that there a deep loss in the sense of the "true Christian spirit" through modern times.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, not only is this sense of the spirit lacking but that it must be made to

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<sup>22</sup> Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> Virgil Michel, *The Liturgy of the Church: According to the Roman Rite* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1942), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Michel, *The Liturgy of the Church*, 18.

thrive again is something that Michel is deeply in agreement with that of Pope Pius X.<sup>25</sup>

Michel's spirituality also seems to suggest one of revolution and change where the modern sense of liturgical practice of the Church has come to lose vital elements that are primordial to traditional Christianity. There seems to be a sense of renewal, rejuvenation and new birth. The liturgical revival would incite not only a renewal but an increase of faith, piety and the deepening of an interior spiritual life of Christians. Moreover, this renewal could be a lived reality of baptism, the death and the resurrection of Christ manifested through an awakening and transformation of Christians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Virgil Michel was deeply interested in social justice. In his work, *Christian Social Reconstruction*, he dedicates a chapter to the notion of social justice. Although it is more of a technical treatise he iterates some useful points that tend to demonstrate his reverence for fairness, equality and betterment of society as a whole. He reveals a distaste and critical outlook on the notion of individualism. Michel's spirituality can be teased out from his insight on social justice and can be regarded as one which takes into account the Christian vocation to helping others through equality, fairness and compassion. The following quotation illustrates Michel's understanding of the essence of social justice:

“the basis of social justice, or of the obligation in justice of each member of society to help toward the maintenance of the common well-being of society, lies in the inescapable social nature of man. Even in the height of our individualism no one could really deny that man's life from beginning to end is that of a member of a social group, and that a man's individual efforts are by themselves entirely insufficient for the proper development of the possibilities and abilities latent in his personality.”<sup>26</sup>

Michel was very astute in his ability recognize the perniciousness of the notion behind individualism that pervaded western culture in his time period and which unfortunately still

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<sup>25</sup> Michel, *The Liturgy of the Church*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Virgil Michel, *Christian Social Reconstruction*, (New York: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1937), 6-7.

persists into our present day. He is able to rely on human experience to criticize this notion of individualism since it goes contrary to our experience as humans who must be in constant interaction with one another. There is little doubt that relationality and community played a large role in Michel's spirituality which was reflected upon deeply in that of his actions, writings and liturgical views.

Despite having died at a relatively young age, he was able to leave an inspirational legacy that perhaps, should be emulated, by liturgicists and church leaders today. Virgil Michel lived out, an exemplary life with high moral standards, that propelled him to be involved in social issues in order to potentially make a difference. His experiences did not permit him to be idle. On the contrary, they brought him face to face with social problems that glared the Church and humanity in the eye. His spirituality was evident through his work and involvement with the less fortunate. The essence of his liturgical spirituality is somewhat captured through his writings but cannot be encapsulated by them since it goes much deeper than can be solely expressed in words.

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