

THE LITURGICAL SPIRITUALITY OF DOM VIRGIL MICHEL

Dr. Scott Ventureyra

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine 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 his own works, since the texts in general do not delve deeply into the background and context of his life. This is why secondary sources written about Virgil Michel were also consulted and played a role in the research. Several of his major works were essential to the research, these include: an article entitled the "Significance of the Liturgical Movement" and two books entitled, *The Liturgy of the Church* and *Christian Social Reconstruction*. All of these sources provided important insights into Virgil's liturgical spirituality, while the secondary sources helped make sense of material regarding Virgil's life that were not directly accessible through his own literature.

Key words: Catholic social justice; Dom Virgil Michel; liturgy; liturgical spirituality; spirituality

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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, liturgy and social justice. It is important to note that Virgil Michel was a man of action, faith and truth, unlike many who stand for faux social justice causes these days. Unfortunately, in recent years, social justice has become heavily tied with postmodern ideology and its obsession with power, while compromising truth and propagating myths about the patriarchy and oppressed groups. This has regrettably involved the stifling of free speech at our educational institutions and in public domains involving individual and collective genuflection at the altar of political correctness.

Virgil Michel was born in St. Paul in 1890 and died in Collegeville Minnesota in 1938.¹ He is typically regarded as the founder of the liturgical movement in the United States which is generally believed to have commenced in 1926.²

It is important to note that a liturgical consciousness was arising in the United States prior to 1926. This awareness was brought forth by other thinkers such as Father William Bausch, who saw the need for a liturgical movement, two years prior to Virgil Michel.³ Taking this into consideration, Sister Jeremy Hall finds it more appropriate to speak of Virgil Michel as the “organizer or leader ... in the United States,”⁴ of the liturgical movement.

According to John R. Roach, 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.”⁵ The

¹ 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.

² Sister Jeremy Hall, *The Full Stature of Christ: The Ecclesiology of Virgil Michel OSB* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1976), xi.

³ Hall, *Full Stature of Christ*, xi.

⁴ Hall, *Full Stature of Christ*, xi.

⁵ Roach, “Vision of Virgil Michel,” 6.

greatest influence of Virgil's work was experienced in between the two world wars.⁶

It is important to mention that the majority of material written by Michel was written for Catholics living in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷ He focused on both the accomplishments and the corrupt living of members of society including many 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.⁸

In his essay, "The Significance of the Liturgical Movement", Michel expresses his sentiments towards the liturgical movement, particularly the liturgical apostolate, i.e., the liturgical mission of the Church, by stating "Why, it is everything!"⁹ This statement seems to embody much of Michel's view on the fundamental 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.¹⁰

Through this quote, we can witness the centrality placed on the frequency of sacrifice and participation in receiving the sacraments. Michel views

⁶ Rose B. Calabretta, *Baptism and Confirmation: the Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Writings of Virgil Michel* (Roma: Universita Gregoriana, 1998), 19.

⁷ Calabretta, *Baptism and Confirmation*, 11.

⁸ Calabretta, *Baptism and Confirmation*, 11.

⁹ Virgil Michel, "The Significance of the Liturgical Movement" in *The Liturgical Movement* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1930), 12.

¹⁰ Michel, "The Significance of the Liturgical Movement," 13.

regular participation in receiving the Church's sacraments as one of the most essential components of Christian life. Moreover, he sees the bond between the individual and 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."¹¹ 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 mode of thinking in a broader historical context. It will be essential to examine some major influences on his thought. These influences comprise three distinct mediums, including persons, writings and experience. Although these three distinctions as delineated by Rose Calabretta provide useful insights and information about the 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 us examine some of the available data with respect to each of these aspects of Michel's influences.

In terms of the influential persons in his life, Father Athanasius Meyer, his abbot Alcuin Deutsch and his professor of ecclesiology Lambert Beauduin are included.¹² Beauduin has been credited with responsibility for triggering interest within Michel in the liturgy and the doctrine of the mystical body.¹³

In terms of his writings, Michel was deeply influenced by both Thomas Aquinas and Orestes A. Brownson. It is worth mentioning that Michel upheld various theological insights found in Brownson's writing, which influenced his stance on Catholic thought. According to Calabretta, these included: "(a) the call for a return to the Scriptures and Patristics in theological discourse; (b) the defense of the vitality and mystery of the

¹¹ Michel, "The Significance of the Liturgical Movement," 16.

¹² Paul Marx, *Virgil Michel and the Liturgical Movement* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1957), 18.

¹³ Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 28.

Church; (c) the promotion of the lay apostolate; (d) social reform; (e) the need for Christian unity.”¹⁴

With respect to experience, there were two profoundly influential periods in his life. The first occurred between February 1924 and August 1925 and the other from April 1930 and September 1933.¹⁵ In 1924, Virgil arrived in Rome and became deeply immersed in Thomistic philosophy. He grew disappointed with much of Scholastic philosophy because of its complacency. In a manner similar to the work of Bernard Lonergan, he sought to make the thought of Thomas Aquinas applicable to modern problems instead of becoming an “intellectual slave” whereby no new relevant insights revolving around the work of Aquinas were being brought forth.¹⁶

Michel often recorded his experiences in his daily diary entries.¹⁷ Among these, a number were from the period during which he lived in France and Spain (1930-1933), where he noticed stark polarity between the clergy and the people. He recognized the indifference of the clergy who shared the same attitude as the monarchy toward the people. The clergy were apathetic with respect to poverty and supported the wealthy elite.¹⁸ Michel was troubled by the spirituality of the people. It is quite evident that a transformation within Michel can be witnessed during this time. 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.¹⁹

¹⁴ Calabretta, *Baptism and Confirmation*, 36.

¹⁵ Calabretta, *Baptism and Confirmation*, 42.

¹⁶ Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 26.

¹⁷ Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 29.

¹⁸ Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 31.

¹⁹ Calabretta, *Baptism and Confirmation*, 47.

Another profoundly transformative experience which helped shape his liturgical spirituality was his involvement with the Indian reservations of Northern Minnesota. It should be noted that during this period in the Indian reserves, while assisting with missions, he lost his sight, suffered from severe headaches, and was plagued with physical pain and mental depression.²⁰ Despite these setbacks, Michel remained dedicated to the Indians, helping them to prosper and aiding them with their spiritual, social and economic needs.²¹

Michel immersed himself in the lifestyle of the Indians; he shared in their simplicity and poverty.²² He worked with them and developed an authentic relationship with them. This can no doubt have deeply influenced his sense of spirituality in a way that could not have come about had it been dedicated to a purely intellectual life nor if he had involved himself in the corruption of the clergy that he witnessed in Spain and France. This placed him in solidarity with humanity and the universality of the Christian message of compassion and salvation.

In the work entitled, *The Liturgy of the Church*, Michel deals with the question of theology and liturgy. Here he reveals a deep dissatisfaction with the denial or partial blindness of modernity to the evident basis of liturgical prayers as profound expressions of early Christian belief, 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 no one who is aware of the great loss of liturgical sense that Catholics as a whole have been suffering from.²³

Michel believed that theological doctrines/beliefs should be based primarily on the Scriptures, but that liturgy must follow Scripture as an

²⁰ Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 163.

²¹ Calabretta, *Baptism and Confirmation*, 49.

²² Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 163.

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

exposition of theological truths. This suggests that Virgil Michel's liturgical spirituality is not only rooted in Scripture but also in tradition, i.e., liturgy grounded in Scripture. Michel shares similar sentiments with Pope Pius X, when the Pope writes that there is a deep loss of the "true Christian spirit" throughout modernity.²⁴ For Michel, this sense of the spirit is not only lacking, but must be made to thrive again. Here Michel is in complete alignment with Pope Pius X.²⁵ Michel's spirituality also seems to suggest the need for revolution and change where modern liturgical practice within the Church have lost vital elements essential to traditional Christianity. There seems to be a sense of renewal, rejuvenation and new birth in his expressions. Liturgical revival would incite not only renewal, but an increase of faith, piety and deepening the interior spiritual life of Christians. Moreover, this renewal would be an outlived recognition of baptism, the death and the resurrection of Christ, manifested through an awakening and transformation of Christians in the twentieth 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 presents useful points which demonstrate his reverence for fairness, equality and betterment of society as a whole. He reveals a distinct distaste for, and critical outlook on, the notion of individualism. His spirituality can be teased out from his insights on social justice, and can be regarded as taking into account the Christian vocation of helping others through equality, fairness and compassion. The following quotation illustrates Michel's understanding on the essence of social justice:

[T]he 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

²⁴ Michel, *The Liturgy of the Church*, 18.

²⁵ Michel, *The Liturgy of the Church*, 18.

proper development of the possibilities and abilities latent in his personality.²⁶

Michel's astute recognition of the perniciousness behind the individualism that pervaded Western culture in his time points to a problem which unfortunately persists into the present day. He is able to rely on human experience to criticize this notion of individualism, since it runs contrary to our human experience which proves we cannot avoid constant interaction with one another. There is little doubt that relationality and community played a large role in Michel's spirituality, which was deeply reflected in 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 liturgists and church leaders today. Virgil Michel lived an exemplary life with high moral standards, which motivated his involvement in the social issues of his day with the hope of making a lasting difference. His experiences did not permit him to be idle. On the contrary, they brought him face to face with glaring social problems. He made an honest examination of the injustices associated with Church and society of his day. His spirituality sprung forth from his writings and his consistent involvement with the less fortunate. However, the essence of his liturgical spirituality is captured only to some degree through his writings. Indeed, it cannot be adequately captured by them, since it delves much deeper than words can express. It delves into the realm of action driven by faith, as James 2:14-26, states:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

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

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