Virgil Michel, OSB
(1890–1938)

“Everything in the life of man depends on the ultimate outlook upon life, on the ultimate meaning and value set upon life. The liturgy . . . sets supreme value on human life by properly aligning it with the source of all life. And it is at once the embodiment of the teaching of Christ and the continued realization of his mission.”
(Liturgy and Catholic Life, 1936)

Of the numerous pioneers of the Liturgical Movement that began in the mid-1920s in the United States, Dom Virgil Michel, OSB, is most frequently referred to as its founder. The Benedictine monk was gifted with a keen sense that the liturgy contains the “Christ-life,” the very source of maturation for the Christian body that unites spiritual life to the social realm.

Like other great liturgical reformers, liturgy was not Michel’s specialty; his primary schooling was in English and philosophy. After his ordination on June 14, 1916, Michel studied at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and completed a doctoral dissertation on the thought of American philosopher Orestes Brownson as it pertained to literature and art. From there, he concentrated on philosophy at Louvain for six years before returning to St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, in 1925.

While in Europe, Michel was particularly inspired by Belgian monk Dom Lambert Beauduin, whose innovative perspective was that the liturgy is the life of the Church. Thus, Michel began forming plans for a U.S. version of the popular European Liturgical Movement. He began by sending liturgical books back to St. John’s for translation and publication. It was Michel’s hope that Collegeville could become a center for what he dubbed a “Popular Liturgical Library.” Furthermore, Michel advocated the development of a pastoral journal, comparable to the French periodical La Maison-Dieu, which would provide Church leaders with sound liturgical theology. This goal was realized on November 28, 1926, with the inaugural issue of Orate Fratres (now published as Worship), which formally established the Liturgical Movement on U.S. soil.

Clearly, Michel returned to the United States in the fall of 1925 with dreams to reinvigorate the liturgical apostolate of the Church. As editor of Orate Fratres, he worked to establish and widen the connections among those most associated with spreading reform. Dom Virgil contacted seminary professors and bishops trying to win their support for making the liturgy once again the heart of the Church. Although his chief assignment was to teach philosophy at St. John’s, most of his energy was spent trying to reshape attitudes in the United States toward the Church’s life of corporate prayer.

However, Michel’s health could not keep up with his zeal. By 1930, his eyes were worn out and his nerves taxed. To recover, Michel was sent to northern Minnesota, where he spent three successful years ministering to the Chippewa Indians. In September of 1933, Michel hesitantly returned to Collegeville to be the dean of the college. There, he formulated a program of regeneration for the task of Christian education. Simultaneously, he published his most sophisticated works on social philosophy and economic theories in relationship to Christian life.

Exhausted, Dom Virgil succumbed to pleural pneumonia and died on November 26, 1938. Throughout his life, Michel produced a prolific array of writings on the nature of liturgy and its connection to justice. He could not be swayed from his conviction that living the liturgy would bring a transformation of culture. It is the syllogism so frequently quoted that best sums up his view: “Pius X tells us that the liturgy is the indispensable source of the true Christian spirit; Pius XI says that the true Christian spirit is indispensable for social regeneration. Hence, the conclusion: the liturgy is the indispensable basis of Christian social regeneration” (“The Basis of Social Regeneration,” 1935). As Godfrey Diekman, OSB, once suggested, perhaps Michel’s greatest contribution to the U.S. Liturgical Movement was keeping it from becoming a “sacristy affair.”