

The legacy of Virgil Michel: a new understanding of liturgy and life

By Lee Hanley

"The liturgy is the best evidence of the church's understanding of human nature." Those were Father Virgil Michel's words 60 years ago. He was convinced that the liturgy — celebration of the Mass and other sacraments — speaks to the deepest human needs.

Father Michel was a Benedictine monk and philosopher at St. John's Abbey in central Minnesota. He played a large role in laying foundations in the United States for renewal of the church's liturgy.

Interestingly, he saw a real connection between worship and action to build up a just world.

Father Michel journeyed to Europe in 1922 to study philosophy. He was in his early 30s then. In Europe, he became excited by what he observed in some centers that were encouraging fuller involvement by the people in liturgy.

He would go on to stress the reality of the Mystical Body, viewing Christians as branches of the one vine of Christ. Father Michel felt this image could lead to understanding of the responsibility of all Christians as Christ's members.

For Father Michel, liturgy could even be a model for such social action as the founding of credit unions.

In light of his experiences in Europe, Father Michel began sending recommendations about the liturgy to the abbot of St. John's. He proposed the launching of a liturgical library and a new magazine on the liturgy. He warned his abbot that the work proposed would mean "what every big thing means — work and manpower." But as his excitement built, Father Michel received neither encouragement nor discouragement.

When Abbot Alcuin Deutsch finally gave his approval, Father Michel wrote that it "kept me awake for the greater part of two nights," and caused him to oversleep the third — Good Friday.

Returning home in the autumn of 1925, Father Michel went about his work with rare energy. He founded the magazine *Orationes Fratres*, now called *Worship*. He assembled a corps of collaborators from within and beyond the abbey, founded the Liturgical Press, taught philosophy, lectured and gave retreats, wrote extensively and edited many publications.

Above all, he thought it impor-

tant to pursue liturgical renewal from within the church. His expectations were tempered by realism. Father Michel expected change to be slow — even slight — and cautioned his collaborators that the fruits of their efforts would likely await reaping by another generation.

His accomplishments in just five years were overwhelming, but overwhelming for him physically as well. By 1930 he was exhausted. He suffered terrible headaches; his eyesight failed so he could neither celebrate Mass nor read his breviary.

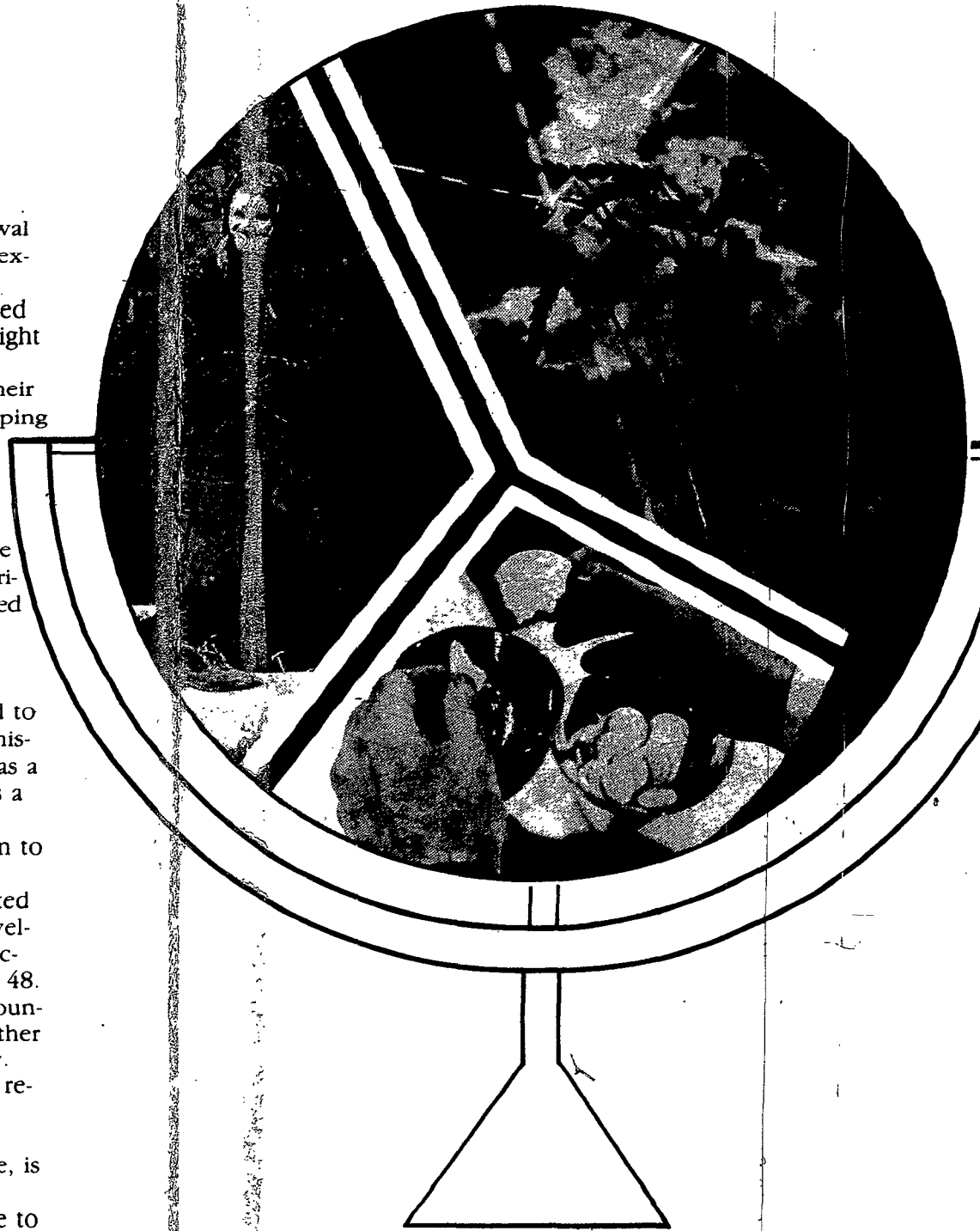
After a year of enforced recuperation, he was assigned to work in one of the abbey's missions where he showed skill as a pastor — and, incidentally, as a deer hunter.

In 1933 he returned as dean of St. John's University. But by 1938 he once again had worked himself to exhaustion. He developed pneumonia, further infection set in and he died at age 48.

The decisions of Vatican Council II 20 years ago realized Father Michel's dream for the liturgy. Had he lived, he would have rejoiced. But it's not likely he would have ceased work.

The liturgy, he would argue, is dynamic. And he would have seen more that could be done to encourage the people's participation in worship and to develop understanding of its potential for all of life and for the world.

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Eucharist Vision for the world

Table manners in Corinth: etiquette wasn't the real

By Father John Castelot

There is a fascinating scripture story about St. Paul and the people in the Greek city of Corinth. It illustrates how important it was for early Christians to recognize that the bonds among them as a people made a real difference.

The Mass expresses our unity as God's people and makes us a community. But it is not magic in this sense. This is where the problem St. Paul had to face comes in.

As was the custom in those days, the Eucharist was celebrated in a home in the context of a meal. All the people were supposed to contribute to the meal. All were to share in it too.

But, it seems, the wealthier community members would arrive early, not having had to

work. They brought gourmet foods and vintage wines. These people would proceed to glut themselves and get drunk.

When the poorer people finally arrived with their day-old bread and common wine, they were embarrassed and hurt to find their brothers and sisters already well-fed and all too well-drunk. The meal which was to express their unity became an occasion for ill-will and division.

Paul takes them to task. The reason, simply, is that they are doing all this "without recognizing the body" (1 Corinthians 11:29). The body he refers to is the community.

During the Mass today, the priest says, "Pray my brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God the

almighty Father."

This terminology reflects an understanding found in Scripture.

The liturgy is the highest form of worship. But it is not merely the worship of individuals who happen to be in the same place at the same time. It is the worship of a community.

That is why Luke summarized the life of the first disciples in these words: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... They went to the temple area together every day, while in their homes they broke bread" (Acts 2:42, 46).

The scripture accounts of the Eucharist's origins suggest the importance of the community.

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