

LITURGY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST: The Vision of Virgil Michel

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If Father Virgil Michel was not the founder of the liturgical movement in America, he, was at least the bridge by which the liturgical movement came to this country. Michel was a bundle of energy, and he brought back from Europe a spark from the liturgical reform there and lit the fuse here. And when one returns to his writings, one finds a powerful connection between liturgy and social justice—a connection that, I think it fair to say, has not persisted down to our day. How did Michel come so naturally to connect liturgy and social justice while in our day we have come to neglect it? That is the question I seek to answer in this article. My proposed answer is that in his liturgical theology he saw the liturgy in the Temple intricately connected to the biblical understanding of a divine economy at work in the world.

Michel was well-read in G. K. Chesterton, and an admirer; and there is a passage in Chesterton's appreciations of Charles Dickens that seems applicable to describe Michel and simultaneously defines the task which faces us in this paper.

A man who deals in harmonies, who only matches stars with angels, or lambs with spring flowers, he indeed may be frivolous; for he is taking one mood at a time, and perhaps forgetting each mood as it passes. But a man who ventures to combine an angel and an octopus must have some serious view of the universe. ... The more widely different the types talked of, the more serious and universal must be the philosophy which talks of them. The mark of the light and thoughtless writer is the harmony of his subject matter; the mark of the thoughtful writer is its apparent diversity. The most flippant lyric poet might write a pretty poem about lambs; but it requires something bolder and graver than a poet, it requires an ecstatic prophet, to talk about the lion lying down with the lamb.¹

¹ Virgil Michel saw this clearly: "While *grace* thus binds the individual member intimately to his fellow members in Christ, it *never does anything to diminish the individual's dignity as a person or his own personal responsibility* in either his natural or his supernatural life." See *The Christian in the World* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1939), 57. The Mystical Body binds people without collectivism, and it dignifies people without individualism. This is, in fact, the entire economy of salvation recorded in the Bible. The Church is the world being reconciled to God, and in

I could take my starting point from the end of this quote. We also want to wind up talking about the Kingdom of God where, as Isaiah prophesied, "The wolf and the lamb shall graze alike, and the lion shall eat hay like the ox. None shall hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD." (Isa. 65:25). When Virgil Michel wrote, he was writing about the Kingdom of God.

But let me instead start from the front of this quote. A man who deals in harmonies may be frivolous, and need not be very thoughtful, for he is only matching stars with angels, lambs with spring flowers, liturgy with vestments, and sacraments with rubrics. What Chesterton calls frivolous, Aidan Kavanagh refers to as trivialized. He describes having seen an advertisement for a summer course called "Creative Worship" in which participants were to be taught how to "creatively use liturgy, liturgical robes, banners and stoles." Even if this course is no longer on the books, it reveals an attitude that can still be found easily enough, and Kavanagh's response remains fully applicable: "The relationship of embroidery to the driving of a diesel locomotive seems easier to demonstrate than the connection between stoles and proclaiming the Gospel. Something here seems to have been enthusiastically trivialized."²

But a person must have a serious view of the universe if he is going to harmonize liturgy with labor and capital, the sacramental body with the role of the state, distributing communion with distributive justice, the Mystical Body of Christ with the social order of mankind. Michel's book, *The Liturgy of the Church* (1937),³ outlines a beautiful liturgical theology by detailed analysis of the divine character of the liturgy, the hypostatic union, the liturgical year, sacrifice and oblation, the sacraments, and the divine office. His book, *The Christian in the World* (1939), begins with an anthropology of man as rational animal with a social nature, and leads to a defense of private property and the family unit, and explains the purpose of the state. *Our Life in Christ* (1939) treats sin and redemption, gives an ecclesiology,

this reconciliation there is concordance, not hostility, full individuality, not absorption. What God has planted in the world will soon be bigger than the world in which it has been planted. Therefore this reconstruction of society toward greater justice must derive from a renewed spirit, and this the Church carries to the world. Thus, the renewal of the society outside the Temple walls will begin by a renewal of the society inside the Temple walls. As Michel writes, "If the first purpose of the liturgical movement is to lead the faithful into more intimate participation in the liturgy of the Church, then the further objective must also be that of getting the liturgical spirit to radiate forth from the altar of Christ into every aspect of the daily life of the Christian." See *The Liturgical Apostolate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1927), 7. If we cannot now help breathing a ubiquitous pagan atmosphere on a daily basis, the liturgy nevertheless oxygenates the Mystical Body when we come to be *in-spired* (literally: "breathed into it") by the operation of the Holy Spirit upon the corporate relationship of Christians. Those ecclesial relationships in liturgy model our true human condition. G. K. Chesterton, *Chesterton on Dickens*, *Collected Works* 15 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 284.

2 Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984), 47.

3 Virgil Michael, *The Liturgy of the Church, according to the Roman Rite* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).

then covers the sacraments and the life of prayer, while Michel's series on *The Social Question* (1936)⁴ has titles like "Labor and Industry," "Ideals of Reconstruction," and "The Nature of Capitalism." One could think he was schizophrenic unless one could find the integrating factor between these two lines of interest.

Our purpose here is to hunt for that integrating factor. Michel himself was aware that it is an elusive factor. He wrote an article entitled, "The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration." His opening sentence reads: "At the first mention of the subject of this address one might be inclined to ask: What has the liturgy to do with social reconstruction or the social question? Can the liturgy help to give jobs or raise wages? Can there be any connection between the liturgy and the social problem?"⁵

The Liturgical Movement and Catholic Action

Michel thought there was, and since he accomplished this integration in his own life, it will be useful to us to make a quick sketch of his life. Born in 1890, he professed vows at St. John's Benedictine Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota in 1913, and was ordained a priest three years later. He was sent to Catholic University of America in 1918 for a doctorate in English, and wrote his dissertation on "The Critical Principles of Orestes A. Brownson," the nineteenth-century social activist, novelist, and Catholic convert. When Michel returned to St. John's, he taught English literature for six years, and served as a jack of all trades—from directing the student orchestra to being dean of the prep school.

The defining moment in his life came when the Abbot of St. John's, Alcuin Deusch, O. S. B., sent him to Europe in 1924. He spent a semester at Sant'Anselmo, the Benedictine college in Rome. There he was overwhelmed by a course from Dom Lambert Beauduin, O. S. B., who is generally credited with having stimulated the liturgical renewal fifteen years earlier in his native Belgium. At the time of his encounter with Dom Beauduin, Michel was making connections between the liturgical principles and the renewal he had witnessed in visits to liturgical centers of Europe on his way to Rome.

Now, the person who deals in easy harmonies, to recall Chesterton's words, would expect Michel to settle in to work on the history of some sacramentary, but instead he transferred to the University of Louvain after a semester. His motives are explained by an entry in his diary: "I am attracted particularly by the courses in moral philosophy, social ethics, general metaphysics (under [Hans Urs von]

4 Virgil Michel, *The Social Question* (St. Paul, MN: Wanderer Printing, 1936).

5 Virgil Michel, "The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration," *Orate Fratres* 9 (1935): 536–545; reprinted in *The Social Question: Essays on Capitalism and Christianity* by Fr. Virgil Michel, O.S.B., ed. Robert Spaeth (Collegeville, MN: St. John's University, 1987), 1. The page numbers refer to this latter publication.

Balthasar) and study of texts of St. Thomas.”⁶ In a letter to Abbot Alcuin in 1925, he further reveals his mind:

I made a hurried sketch yesterday of a possible dissertation: Industrial Labor, a Chapter in Ethics. It proposes to examine the industrial factors in the light of the theory of cause—with labor as the efficient cause, of course; to examine labor as a principal title of ownership; to examine the question from the standpoint of rational psychology, man’s nature, intellect and will—rights, duties, responsibilities always in relation to labor; and the duty of society to regulate opportunities for work, to exact work, to demand social service from excessive riches, etc; ... I shall be saturated with my hero, St. Thomas, when the year is over.⁷

So it is not as if Virgil Michel switched careers in a mid-life crisis; his concerns about liturgy and social justice were birthed as twins in his preparatory study. What is their genetic connection? After Michel’s return to the United States his work is divided into two periods, separated by a sort of nervous breakdown from overwork. In the first period of activity, from 1926–1930, he initiated the liturgical apostolate by founding the journal, *Orate Fratres* (now published as *Worship*) and gathered together an advisory board and authors; he founded and directed the Liturgical Press, editing twenty of its publications; he wrote countless letters soliciting support for the liturgical apostolate; and he organized the liturgical summer school and the first National Liturgical Day.

There is evidence that although liturgy was occupying his time, it remained connected to numerous other subjects of study, perhaps the way the sun is connected to numerous other planets in its system. In 1926 he translated three books: Beauduin’s *Liturgy: The Life of the Church*, Abbot Caronti’s *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, and Martin Grabmann’s *Thomas Aquinas: His Personality And Thought*.⁸ He urged Abbot Alcuin relieve him by setting aside other monks for liturgical work by reminding him of their previous agreement: “I simply *must* put 85 percent of my time to philosophy. The spirit is urging stronger than ever.”⁹

6 Paul Marx, *Virgil Michel and the Liturgical Movement*, American Benedictine Academy Historical Studies: Biographies 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1957), 29; the quotation is from Michel’s diary.

7 Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 33–34; from a letter from Michel.

8 See Lambert Beauduin, *Liturgy the Life of the Church* (London: St. Michael’s Abbey, 1992); Emmanuele Caronti, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1932); and Martin Grabmann, *Thomas Aquinas: His Personality And Thought* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963).

9 Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 121; from Michel’s letter of 1925 to Abbot Deutsch. His wish was partially granted. Appearing in 1927 came the mimeographed text, *Notes on a Philosophy of Conduct* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1927) and in the foreword Michel writes, “These notes are not a

By 1930 his eyes gave out, and he was afflicted with headaches, and the Abbot mandated rest for him. He went to the Chippewa Indian reservation in northern Minnesota for three years. When recuperated, he returned to an equally feverish pace in the second period of his work, from 1933 until his death from pneumonia in 1938. During this time, he felt an apostolate in education in addition to the one in liturgy and the one in philosophy, and worked with the Dominican Sisters of Marywood, Michigan, to formulate a series of textbooks in religion from elementary school through college, called *The Christ Life Series in Religion*. And an even more increased focus on the practical questions of economics was stimulated by the economic depression of the 1930s, and many of his essays on capitalism and labor come from this period.

In one final move to contextualize Michel's thought, I pause to overlay on top of his forty-eight year life (1890–1938) some markers of what was occupying the Church's attention during these years. The first of the Church's great social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum* ("Of New Things") was written by Pope Leo XIII when Michel was one year old. Michel was thirteen when *Tra le Sollecitudini* ("Among the Concerns"), Pope Pius X's encyclical on sacred music, appeared in 1903. The great social encyclical of Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* ("Forty Years After"), was written while Michel was with the Chippewa tribe (1931), and he commented on it repeatedly during his seven remaining years of life. He missed Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical on the Church, *Mystici Corporis Christi* ("The Mystical Body of Christ"), by five years, and his encyclical on the sacred liturgy, *Mediator Dei* ("The Mediator Between God and Men") by nine years (1947). But I would say he was nevertheless familiar with their spirit and content. His entire active life largely coincided with the papacy of Pius XI, which began two years before Michel was sent to Europe, and ended the year after Michel died. Pius wrote encyclicals on Thomas Aquinas, on Catholic missions, on Christian Education, on Christian marriage, on Catholic Action in Italy, and on the Economic Crisis, to name a few.

Michel's work, *Our Life in Christ*, was published posthumously in 1939, and its late composition bears something of a retrospective and summary quality. In it he shares a sweeping view of the historical context in which he saw himself.

The Catholic Church had, so to say, to retire within herself and recuperate in the spirit of Christ. The direction for this was given in the Council of Trent which was the spearhead of the Catholic counter-Reformation. But for centuries the Catholic

textbook of ethics, but may some day be developed into one." Then in 1936 appeared *Philosophy of Human Conduct: A Study of Ethics on the Basis of Theism* (Minneapolis: Burgess, 1936) and in the foreword Michel writes, "The present volume is an expansion of a previous more condensed *Notes on the Philosophy of Conduct*. It was not possible to revise these Notes as completely as desired for book publication. Hence they are again appearing in mimeographed form. However, the present edition is intended as a step towards final publication in book form." This was two years before he died, but it had been in process for nine years.

Church was the despised and rejected enemy of the world, reviled or else ignored as the true Bride of Christ. Under such circumstances she could wield no Christianizing influence on the civilization surrounding her—a condition that greatly abetted the de-Christianization and growing paganism described in the foregoing pages.

*The twentieth century is witnessing the effects of the spiritual recuperation that has gone on in the Church in the past centuries. It is undoubtedly witnessing a true Catholic spiritual revival of greatest moment, the two chief expressions of which are the liturgical movement and the movement for Catholic Action. While the liturgical movement aims chiefly at the “reflourishing of the true Christian spirit,” in the words of Pius X, by leading Christians back to an “active participation in the primary and indispensable source of this same spirit, the public and solemn worship of the Church,” the movement towards Catholic Action is organizing and inspiring members of Christ to a full exercise of their office as apostles of Christ in the spread of Christ’s kingdom on earth.*¹⁰

Michel saw two expressions of a spiritual revival: the liturgical movement and Catholic Action. Paul Marx, his biographer, comments, “It was no mere coincidence, Father Michel often said, that the restoration of the liturgy by St. Pius X should be followed by 500 pages of pleas for Catholic Action written by Pius XI.”¹¹ And it was the latter, Pius XI, who remarked, “In the final analysis all permanent Catholic social reform begins in the sanctuary.”¹² A tribute by H. A. Reinhold also puts this connection effectively. “For Virgil Michel, the labor encyclicals of Leo XIII and the liturgical reforms of Pius X did not just by accident happen within one generation, but were responses to cries of the masses for Christ, who had power and gave the good tidings. They belonged together.”¹³ Michel himself commented on this thread running through the papacies of the twentieth century in his famous short-hand syllogism.

Pius X tells us that the liturgy is the indispensable source of the true Christian spirit; Pius XI says that the true Christian

10 Virgil Michel, *The Christian in the World* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1939), 27. Michel used italics liberally; these are his, and they are also original to him in all of the quotations in this paper.

11 Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 194.

12 The encyclical, *Mit Brennender Sorge*, (“With Deep Anxiety”), quoted in Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 208.

13 Quoted in Marx, *Virgil Michel*, 42.

spirit is indispensable for social regeneration. Hence the conclusion: The liturgy is the indispensable basis of Christian social regeneration.¹⁴

Liturgy, Sociology, and Mystical Body Ecclesiology

What Virgil Michel found in Europe was a connection between liturgy and the ecclesiology of the Mystical Body. As the soul animates the human body, the liturgy animates the Mystical Body.

[In baptism] we become intimately united with Christ as members of the mystical Body of which he is the Head. Christ is, then, most truly and supernaturally our brother, we are all children of God in a very special and sublime manner; we are all brethren together who are intimately united in the one Christ. In this holy fellowship we find a harmonious combination of the two complementary factors of humankind, that is, organic fellowship coupled with full respect for human personality and individual responsibility.¹⁵

That is a tight-knit paragraph, which we will unpack in three stages: liturgy as source of the Mystical Body, the supernatural social character of the Mystical Body, and the Mystical Body as a model.

First, Michel repeatedly says liturgy is the life of the Mystical Body of Christ. Liturgy knits together individual members into one body. Liturgy is the operation of the supernatural *animus* ("soul") that makes the Mystical Body alive. The life in a little child makes him kick his legs energetically, and the life in the Mystical Body makes believers engage energetically in its liturgical forms. Chief among these is the Mass ("an extension of the sacrifice of Calvary"),¹⁶ but Michel also always mentioned the liturgical year, the sacraments and sacramentals, and the official series of prayers offered every day by the Church in her Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours. For Michel: "The liturgy can truly be called the life of the Church. Without the liturgy there would be no Church such as Christ has instituted. Without the liturgy there would be no Mystical Body of Christ, in which the divine mission of Christ continues. It is above all in the official liturgical acts of the Church that Christ himself lives and acts."¹⁷

14 Michel, "The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration," 8.

15 Michel, "The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration," 5.

16 Virgil Michel, *My Sacrifice and Yours* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1927), 40–41.

17 Virgil Michel, *Our Life in Christ* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1939), 50.

Liturgy, Christ, the Mystical Body, and the Christian are interwoven. Liturgy is the Mystical Body in action; the Mystical Body is Christ's body; to be in Christ's body is to be a Christian; to be a Christian is to participate in the liturgy.

This Mystical Body of Christ is none other than the Church, which Christ founded in order to spread his mission ever more among the sons of men, and in order to make all "men of good will" true supernatural sons of God.

The Church of Christ is defined in the Catechism as the congregation of all the faithful who believe the truths taught by Christ, receive the same sacraments and are governed by their lawful pastors, the successors of the apostle. ... *the Church is truly the continuation and the expansion of Christ on earth.*¹⁸

Second, the Mystical Body is a supernatural society. The main value of the language of the Mystical Body is to identify the connection that exists between individual Christians and Christ, and the resultant connection Christians have in their social identity. A vine and its branches is one metaphor; the body and its members is another; and both point toward the truth that this organism is more than a moral union, is more than a natural union—it is a supernatural union. As Michel put it: "St. Paul described this fellowship under the picture of the human body; and the early Christians, the Church Fathers, and many later theologians have followed him in this. As a result, the spiritual reality that is *the supernatural fellowship of souls in Christ has come to be called the Mystical Body of Christ*; and the supernatural truth of it, the doctrine of the Mystical Body."¹⁹

That the source of unity in the Mystical Body is supernatural does not diminish the social reality of the Church, but to the contrary, enhances it. The sacramental principle affirms that, "God has chosen to manifest himself to men's minds through external visible things, and to act in human souls by means of material things, words, and actions. ... *Christ perpetuated the sacramental principle as found in himself, when he instituted the Church as the continuation and expansion of his own divine self.* The Mystical Body of Christ is a sacramental continuation of Christ."²⁰

The Church is a visible society knit together more intimately than any natural society could be, according to Michel. "*Since the Church is the continuation and expansion of Christ*, it should contain all the elements of Christ, both divine and human; *it should contain the divine Christ-life in visible form*; the Church should also be a real *external organic society*. ... The birth of the Mystical Body of Christ on

18 Michel, *Our Life in Christ*, 47.

19 Michel, *Our Life in Christ*, 34–35.

20 Michel, *Our Life in Christ*, 78.

the first Pentecost Sunday was at once the birth of an invisible fellowship of souls in Christ and of the external embodiment thereof.”²¹

To summarize our first two points: Liturgy is the life of the Mystical Body, and the existence of the Mystical Body is a social accomplishment. Therefore Michel quotes with approval the historian, Christopher Dawson: “The Mystical Body is the link between the liturgy and sociology; and in proportion as men are brought to realize, through the liturgy, their position as members of that Body, will their actions in the social sphere be affected thereby. ... A visible manifestation of incorporation into Christ, a visible unified action on the part of the members, cannot fail to revive and foster in them a determination to carry their Christ-life into the social and economic sphere.”²²

Rocks of Shipwreck: Individualism and Collectivism

The third stage in understanding the role the Mystical Body plays in integrating liturgy and social justice is to see the Mystical Body as a model for human societies. Michel lived through a time period when two contrary social anthropologies were dominant, termed by Pius XI “twin rocks of shipwreck” that must be carefully avoided.

For, as one is wrecked upon, or comes close to, what is known as “individualism” by denying or minimizing the social and public character of the right of property, so by rejecting or minimizing the private and individual character of this same right, one inevitably runs into “collectivism” or at least closely approaches its tenets.²³

Individualism and collectivism are the two extremes regrettably explored with thoroughness in the modern period. Since the latter is a reaction to the former, Michel seems to see the more fundamental problem lying with individualism, and in his writings he spends the most time on it. Of course, there is a positive sense of individualism. “Christianity has always upheld the supreme value of each individual soul, and so has always been the champion of a moderate form of individualism. It could do no less since the whole Christian view of life, both natural and supernatural, is dependent on the existence of individual human responsibility for one’s action and conduct. Christianity has always stood for a proper apprecia-

²¹ Michel, *Our Life in Christ*, 63–64.

²² Quoted in Michel, “The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration,” but Michel does not cite the source for Dawson.

²³ Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimus Anno* (“Forty Years After”), Encyclical Letter on the Reconstruction of the Social Order (May 15, 1931), 26.

tion of human personality and has always opposed the treatment of men as if they were animals or mechanical robots."²⁴

There is no problem, for Michael, in thinking of individual persons with individual human responsibilities. But as he analyzes the situation, a fallacious brand of individualism made its appearance four centuries ago when the individual conscience was made the supreme judge in all matters of religion, and from there became the sole judge in the entire field of social life two centuries later. "All authority superior to man was denied, and human traditions were laughed out of court. There was then no longer any master superior to man. Man was his own supreme authority, his own sole lawgiver, not only in religion but in all the fields of human conduct, especially also in economic life. Man no longer had any real duties towards his fellowmen."²⁵

When Michel looks at the injustices abounding, he cannot but agree with Pius XI's characterization of modernity as a renewed paganism. In the Pius' words: "The present state of affairs ... clearly indicates the way in which we ought to proceed. For we are now confronted, as more than once before in the history of the Church, with a world that in large part has almost fallen back into paganism."²⁶ Therefore, in Michel's opinion:

With the gradual rise of the new paganism of our day, it is not surprising to hear that men also arose who denied the social nature of mankind. ... Organized society was then explained by the individualistic philosophers as being entirely the result of a free social contract by men. Men themselves created society by freely entering into a contract. They did this for their own advantage—the doctrine of selfishness connected with individualism—and they could freely break the contract if it so suited them. Society was man made, and it could be unmade by man at will.²⁷

Naturally, the person most likely to unmake the rules of society, in order to remake them in his favor, is the person with the most power. Modern man defied natural law, abandoned divine law, and, in an act of exaggerated individualism, held "that each man is sufficient unto himself, and that each man must look out for himself without bothering about others. ... There is no higher law for man, no moral law superior to this principle of individualism."²⁸ For Michel, this attitude was to the

²⁴ Michel, "The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration," 2.

²⁵ Michel, "The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration," 2.

²⁶ Pius XI, *Quadragesimus Anno*, 141.

²⁷ Michel, *The Christian in the World*, 63.

²⁸ Michel, *Ideals of Reconstruction* (St. Paul, MN: Wanderer, 1936), 9.

detriment of the common good, social justice, distributive justice, and the role of the State; it made difficult any communal life that does not absorb the individual, as well as any individual life that does not eschew community.

What is the Christian called to do? He must remain in this world, but he cannot be of a world like this. The Christian must be a witness of a social way of being that avoids individualism's autonomous morality and disregard for others, on the one hand, and collectivism's willingness to destroy or absorb the individual, on the other.

Now what is the Christian principle over against these two pagan extremes? It is such a mutual balancing and limitation of the two as brings them into harmony. Pius XI refers to this principle at various times. ... It is this double character, the harmonious fusion of the two elements of human nature, the individual and the social, that we must not only keep in mind, but that must again become dominant in all human life. How can that be done? Pius XI answers by referring to a "new diffusion throughout the world of the Gospel spirit, which is a spirit of Christian moderation and of universal charity." ... This renewal of human society which must needs bring about a harmonious relation between men, one of cooperation and mutual aid and not one of mutual strife and cut-throat competition, must have its origin and inspiration in religion.²⁹

Renewing the Christian Spirit

Michel agrees completely with Pius XI's assessment that "social reconstruction must be preceded by a renewal of the Christian spirit, from which so many persons far and wide, devoted entirely to business, have unfortunately departed. Else all endeavors will be vain and the edifice will be built not upon a rock but upon shifting sand."³⁰

Reading their encyclicals as if they were liturgical documents, Michel stitches with thread from all the popes of the twentieth century: Pope Leo XIII said the foundation of social laws are laid in religion; therefore, Pius XI said the renewal of human society must be preceded by a profound renewal of the Christian spirit; and Pius X pointed out the great need of deriving this spirit from its source, which is active participation in the sacred mysteries. With this, Michel announces, we have come to the liturgy, but we must not stop here. Liturgy is a source for the necessary renewal of the Christian spirit; yes, it does do that. But if liturgy is left at

29 Michel, "The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration," 4.

30 Quoting Pope Pius XI, in Virgil Michel, *Christian Social Reconstruction: Some Fundamentals of the Quadragesimo Anno* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1938), 111.

the state of private religion, then Christianity risks contracting all the symptoms of the individualism that Michel thinks Christian liturgy is intended to heal. So his conclusion is that if we forget the role of the Mystical Body we will simply have a religious version of the private neo-paganism that is the whole problem to begin with.

“What is the basic idea of this liturgy?” Michel asks. And his answer is:

It is that of the Mystical Body of Christ—a concept that was not only well known to early Christians but also a primary inspiration for all their conduct and life. It was constantly preached by the Church Fathers and taught by the Church down to our own day, but it has often, among the faithful of all ranks, been left in the background, even quite forgotten, especially since the growing dominance of an un-Christian individualism.³¹

Dawson’s words take on new clarity: the Mystical Body is indeed the link between liturgy and sociology. Liturgy is a power (Greek: *dynamis*) that creates the Mystical Body to which the individual belongs, and has an impact upon the society in which it abides. The City of God has an impact upon the City of Man. Michel believed that we are witnessing the twin expressions of a spiritual recuperation in the Church. The first expression, the liturgical movement, beckons Christians at liturgy to see themselves as branches of a vine, as members of a body, as citizens of this City of God. The second expression, Catholic Action, springs from the awareness that Christ, head of this body, is doing the work of overcoming alienation between man and God, and between man and neighbor, and expects his body to share in this work. “Since *the Mystical Body of Christ is the supernatural society instituted by Christ among men for their greater good, and since it was so constituted by Christ as to be best adapted to human nature, it may well serve as the model of social life and social relations for mankind.*”³² The Mystical Body is the fulfillment of the person-in-relationship and therefore exhibits the good for which God has created every other society. The Mystical Body properly balances, limits, and harmonizes individualism and collectivism.

Throughout does the liturgy, the life of the Mystical Body of Christ, aim above all at the development of the highest personality in its members. This is God’s own way of stooping down to the ways of man and adapting his own divine dispensation to the best needs and abilities of human nature. It is for that reason the Mystical Body of Christ and its life are the God-given model

31 Michel, “The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration,” 5.

32 Michel, *The Christian in the World*, 142.

for all the relations here on earth between human persons and the different societies of which they are members.³³

How the Mystical Body serves as model must be worked out differently for different societies. This task occupies Michel in various essays and chapters, but we will not distract ourselves to consider them in detail. He is generally thinking of four societies, basing himself on Thomas: the family, economic society, the state, and the Church.³⁴ In each case, he asserts the salutary witness that the Mystical Body gives by placing the individual within a community, but not losing the individual to the community. The hierarchy of values is correct.

Although our supernatural life is always lived in a fellowship, although we are always *members of the Mystical Body*, yet the individual is *never swallowed up by the fellowship*. . . . The Mystical Body of Christ, then, as the divine model of human fellowship, teaches us the lesson that *the supremely valuable thing in human society itself is the individual human person*. But it does also more than that, and this brings us to our final point. Since the social group as such is not something apart from the single members, the good of the whole must also depend on the action of the individual persons constituting it.³⁵

It is crucial to understand that the reason the Mystical Body can be this model for every other society is due to the fact that grace perfects nature. The supernatural society is not irrelevant to the structure of natural societies, because grace is not irrelevant to nature. Grace does not discard nature, ignore nature, antagonize nature; rather grace perfects nature.

First of all, it cannot be mentioned too often that *the supernatural life of grace and the natural life of this earth*, divine faith and natural knowledge, grace and nature, *are not antagonistic* to each other. On the contrary, God built up the supernatural structure of our lives as members of Christ upon our very human

33 Michel, *The Christian in the World*, 78.

34 Virgil Michel, *St. Thomas and Today: Comments on the Economic Views of Aquinas* (St. Paul, MN: Wanderer, 1936), 42: "Aquinas mentioned a fourfold social relationship between men: (1) That of *family*—"There is a natural intercourse between men, according as they share a common natural origin; and in this is based the friendship between father and son, and other realties by blood." (2) *Economic society*—"Another type of intercourse is economic, according to which men communicate in domestic (economic, household) services." (3) The *state*—"Another is political, according to which men communicate with their fellowmen living about." (4) The *Church*—"A fourth is divine according to which men share in the one ecclesiastical body, either actually or potentially, and this is the friendship of love, which is exercised towards all, even enemies."

35 Michel, *The Christian in the World*, 77.

nature. ... That means, for us, that the supernatural structure of the Mystical Body of Christ, far from being contrary to the best human nature, is in fullest harmony with the latter; and the Mystical Body must therefore serve for us as the model towards which man should strive in all his natural relations and life. When we ask ourselves what should the right structure of any human society be, or how should the individual be related to any society of men, we can always point to the Mystical Body and say: There is the model that we should try to follow in all our human relations; for God constructed it on the basis of what is best in and for our natures.³⁶

I want to highlight one sentence in that quote because I suggest that it is the key to the connection Michel sees between liturgy with social justice: "The Mystical Body must therefore serve for us as the model towards which man should strive in *all his natural relations and life*," not just the model for the institutional Church. The supernatural society is a model for all natural societies. This is the integrating factor for which we have been looking. What liturgy has to do with social justice is what the supernatural has to do with the natural, what the sacred has to do with the profane, what grace has to do with nature.

The Sacred, the Profane and the Story of the Bible

The social order of the Church is relevant to other social orders because all social orders are written into our nature by the same Divine Author. When we want to know how to act on earth, we can look at heaven on earth, which is the liturgy. When we want to know how to act naturally, we can look to the supernatural. When we want to model our human relations, we can look to the saints. Why? Why is this the case? There is an ecclesiology at work here, but it is only intelligible within a vision of biblical proportions. The Scriptures remind us that when we are face-to-face with liturgy, we are not talking about the rules of some "Jesus Club," we are talking about something cosmic in scope and eschatological in ambition and already planted within history.

Let me use an image from C. S. Lewis in order to get at this. In the final book of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Last Battle*, Prince Tirian is thrown into a stable where a monster wants to kill him. But to the prince's surprise he finds himself standing under a sunny sky, on green grass, before the High King Peter and Queen Lucy. Beside them is the door he came through, but standing "as if it had grown there like a tree." He can walk around it, yet when he looks *through* it he sees the inside of the stable where he had been thrown to die.

36 Michel, *The Christian in the World*, 76.

"It seems, then," said Tirian, smiling too, "that the stable seen from within and the stable seen from without are two different places."

"Yes," said the High King Peter. "Its inside is bigger than its outside."

"Yes," said Queen Lucy, "In our world too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."³⁷

In the biblical economy, the inside is bigger than the outside which holds it. A garden built for two contains the whole human race in germ; the earth's Sabbath holds heaven's leisure; a tabernacle with prescribed Levitical dimensions holds a throne for the *Shekinah* ("Spirit") of the Holy One; a stable contains the throne of God, who contains in her womb the one who holds the cosmos in his hand; the first day of the week holds the Eighth Day, and history contains eternity. The Creator seems to like tight squeezes. He continually kenotically fits himself into his creation. "Do you realize," St. Gregory of Nyssa once asked, "how much your Creator has honored you above all creatures? ... All the heavens fit into the palm of God's hand. And though he is so great that he can grasp all creation in his palm, you can wholly embrace him; he dwells within you, nor is he cramped as he pervades your entire being."³⁸

The biblical economy arcs from a protological alpha to an eschatological omega, and this economy is the story of creation being raised to its final end. In a sense, it is the story of an inversion. We think the profane contains the sacred, and that our job is to dot the landscape with temples and mark holy hours on our day planner. But when God has finally had his way, the whole world and every moment will be sanctified, and the sacred will have given the profane its eternal destiny. The city of Jerusalem contained the Temple; but in the heavenly Jerusalem, the city will be the temple. The *fanum* ("temple") is the destiny of the *pro-fanum* (what stands outside the temple, destined for the temple, waiting to get in).

Beatitude results when the *profane* reaches the end to which it is targeted. This means that the sacred is not irrelevant to the profane. The sacred does not discard the profane, ignore the profane, antagonize the profane; rather, instead, the sacred perfects the profane. The Mystical Body is a model for the world because what God has done in the Mystical Body is what God desires to do for every person in the world. As Aidan Kavanagh would repeatedly say in his lectures, "Liturgy is doing the world the way the world was meant to be done." In biblical ecclesiology, therefore, the liturgy of the Temple is a sign and model of the movement of God

37 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Harper Row, 2001), 744.

38 Text in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, ed. Jean Daniélou (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1979), 162.

in the history of the world. In the biblical economy, the liturgy is not the story of the “Jesus Club,” it is the story of humankind. The liturgy of the *fanum* shows the destiny of the *pro-fanum* after what is inside that profane world has grown to its proper eschatological proportions. In the sacred, we see the profane’s end through a glass less darkly.

The natural societies of the profane order cannot be rightly understood without the supernatural society of the Mystical Body, because the residents of those profane, natural societies are destined for deification. How could we understand the way in which people are to relate on earth if we have forgotten that they are specially made for a place in the mystic rose, as Dante describes heaven? How can we understand how people are to relate on earth if we have forgotten they are made for a corporate existence in the heavenly choir, the heavenly army, the heavenly city? Heaven is always described as a populous place. If liturgy is only concerned with Temple protocol, then what goes on in the Mystical Body would be irrelevant to what goes on in any other social form. But in biblical ecclesiology, what goes on in the Mystical Body is an iconic precursor of our eternal home. Even more: it is an efficacious sign of our eternal home, as the scholastics defined “sacrament.” The liturgy accomplishes in us—individually and socially—what it signifies.

Unfortunately, as Michel knew, under the twin weight of finitude and its corruption by sin these beautiful truths are difficult to remember.

That this ubiquitous pagan atmosphere, which the Catholic can not help breathing today, has had some effect on his Christian outlook need hardly be mentioned. *Many a member of Christ today is hardly aware of the social relations and inspirations contained in the very idea of a common membership in Christ.* The average Catholic of today is individualistic to quite a considerable degree without knowing it at all. ... Again many a Catholic unwittingly guides his conduct, apart from set periods of prayer, almost wholly in accordance with the pagan view that the whole purpose of life is to have as good a time as possible here on earth.³⁹

The biblical story is prophetic, and it lifts the hem of the stage curtain so we can see the last act coming. Every liturgy within the Temple is an iconic modeling of what awaits the whole earth. Liturgy is a sacrament of the heavenly *sobornost* (“spiritual fellowship”).

Michel argues that “all men have the strict right by natural law to as much of [the goods of this earth] as they need for attaining the purpose of their creation

39 Michel, *The Christian in the World*, 28.

by God.”⁴⁰ What is the purpose of a human being’s creation by God? The question might sound natural enough, but it requires a supernatural answer. Over the answer Christianity parts company with neo-paganism. “One of the chief characteristics of the new paganism is its complete this-worldliness,”⁴¹ while the whole biblical economy asserts that our true home is eternity.

Christianity would then agree with socialism that all men should have a sufficiency of economic goods and that men should cooperate in the acquisition of these. But there the agreement stops. For historical socialism this is the supreme purpose of human life and of society and all else is subordinate to its maximum attainment. For Christianity this is but a means to the genuine end of man, which is the maximum development of moral personality here on earth and the supernatural union of man with God both here and hereafter. Far from seeing an ultimate goal in the acquisition of material goods and comforts, Christianity holds that these are but the means to the higher things of life.⁴²

This is not to be interpreted as saying Christians can be so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. It does not counsel the starving person that we can neglect his body because we have saved his soul. Rather, this liturgical vision of material goods sees with penetrating clarity the proper value of those material goods, and so loosens our clenched grip upon them. They are means, not ends. A person will only stand in right relationship to the earth below him, and his neighbor beside him, if he stands in right relationship to his Creator over him. Worship comes from an old Anglo-Saxon root, “worth-ship.” To worship something is to ascribe it worth. Only true worship of the proper God could shatter our idolatrous worship of wealth, and so activate alms-giving and our commitment to the common good.

If we knew what a tool was for, then we could use it correctly. We would not break the butter knife on a screw head, or tear the bread with a phillips screwdriver. Economists want to know how to use the tools of labor and capital, but they must first learn what man is made for, and that is revealed in the liturgy: he is made for fellowship. We are created in the image of a triune God, whose very being is communion, so our fulfillment involves a corporate quality. That is not just true for

40 Michel, *Christian Social Reconstruction*, 20.

41 Michel, *The Christian in the World*, 22–23.

42 Michel, *Christian Social Reconstruction*, 72.

people who happen to like going to Church; that is the ontology and the orientation of man.