Virgil Michel was a prophetic voice in the areas of education, liturgy, social justice, ecclesiology, and the role of the laity. In his brief lifetime he wrote numerous articles, book reviews, and pamphlets, translated texts, edited journals, and in collaboration with the Dominican Sisters developed a series of textbooks for catechetical use from the primary grades to the college level. Dom Virgil viewed the liturgy as the source of catechetical instruction for the faithful. For Michel, “every time the Church performs the liturgy [it] also instructs” (Marx 1957, 220). So intertwined was his thinking on liturgy, religious education, and social justice, it is difficult to isolate one area from another in his writings. One subject matter flows into the next with relative ease.

To understand Virgil Michel, one must envision the liturgy as the place where people not only worship God but also learn their faith. In addition, it is in the liturgy that one learns how “to be” in the world. Catholics are to take their sustenance from the liturgy and then go out into the world to make a difference. Thus, liturgy is both educational and inspirational for the faithful. It was to this end that Dom Virgil worked to instruct the laity in the Catholic faith. Before addressing his writings and work, this chapter examines the life of Virgil Michel. He was a man whose interests were broad in scope, yet fully grounded in his passion for the liturgy and its primacy for the instruction of the faithful.
George Michel (1890-1938) was the second of fifteen children born into the fairly affluent German-American household of Fred and Mary Michel of St. Paul, Minnesota. By all accounts, he grew up in a happy, religious, and comfortable home. George excelled as a student at St. John’s Preparatory School. An avid reader, he would read anything that came his way.

Entering the priesthood did not occur to Michel until his sophomore year at St. John’s College in Collegeville, Minnesota. Then on July 4, 1909, George Michel took the name, Virgil, when he entered the novitiate of the Benedictine monks. Four years later on September 26, 1913, he professed his solemn vows to Abbot Peter Engel and was ordained a priest on June 14, 1916 (Whalen 1996, 4).

Michel later earned a bachelor’s in Sacred Theology (STB) at Catholic University of America (CUA) and received excellent grades in his coursework: “Marks for class achievements at the University were given percentage-wise, and Michel’s were nearly all “99” and “100” (Roach 1988, 203). While at Catholic University, Dom Virgil became interested in the field of education. In 1918 he earned his doctorate in English. Later that year he enrolled at Columbia University for advanced study. One year after earning his doctorate, Michel had an article published in American Catholic Quarterly Review (1919). The topic was the subject of his dissertation, Orestes Brownson, a free spirit who thought that Roman Catholicism was the fulfillment of the ideals of America. Brownson remained a source of inspiration for Michel: “From Brownson, Father Michel received his enormous interest in contemporary thought and modern philosophy” (Marx 1957, 12).

In his dissertation, Michael Whalen identifies four experiences in the life of Michel that provide a “hermeneutical key” to understanding his catechetical writings (1996, 6). I will highlight five major influences on the life of Virgil Michel that bear serious mention: 1) the Benedictine Order; 2) the European Liturgical Movement; 3) the journal, Orate Fratres; 4) the philosophy of personalism; and 5) the Chippewa Missions. Additionally, Whalen includes in his list of influences Michel’s work with the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids Michigan, particularly Jane Marie Murray. This important collaboration is addressed in a later section of my chapter.
The Influence of the Benedictine Order

The influence of the Benedictine community on the life and work of Virgil Michel began when he was a young boy worshiping at his local parish, which was served by the Benedictine monks. At the time, the monastic community was in the midst of a liturgical renewal that lasted throughout the lifetime of Michel (Whalen 1996, 6). This early exposure to Benedictine liturgy inspired Dom Virgil to develop a deep appreciation for the role of worship in the religious formation of the faithful even as a youth.

His love for the liturgy developed further at St. John’s Preparatory School, a Benedictine secondary school in Collegeville, Minnesota. Later in college at St. John’s, Father Alcuin Deutsch, O.S.B., “won George’s confidence” (Marx 1957, 6). Thanks to his example, “Virgil Michel was attracted to St. John’s above all as a center of spirituality, learning and scholarship. Though he [later] joined an abbey in the Indianbush hidden in the woods, he did so in the faith that it possessed a power which could radiate and transform the society of his own time” (Franklin and Spaeth 1988, 49).

Michel spent some years teaching at St. John’s College before he went to Europe in 1924-25. Michel studied philosophy under Joseph Gredt at the International Benedictine College of St. Anselm in Rome. There he came in direct contact with the already emerging European liturgical revival. Michel later met Dom Lambert Beauduin, who “fired Father Michel’s interest in the liturgy and the doctrine of the Mystical Body” (Marx 1957, 27). Franklin and Spaeth write of Michel’s reaction to Beauduin’s activities:

The success of these endeavors dazzled Father Virgil. . . . He became convinced that a similar popular liturgical movement was the great need for the revival of the Roman Catholic Church in America. More and more Virgil Michel began to copy Beauduin’s personal style. (1988, 58)

The Benedictine spirituality and work ethic of Dom Lambert made a lasting impression on Father Michel. Tirelessly, Dom Lambert wrote books and developed media materials such as liturgical pamphlets, guides, and weekly and quarterly newspapers in order to promote and
defend the new liturgical movement. These were widely disseminated at Mont César in Belgium and surrounding areas.

As much as Virgil Michel was committed to the Benedictines, it would be in his later separation from the monastery that he would find his greatest peace.

**Michel and the European Liturgical Movement**

According to Whalen (1996, 64-65), the influence of the liturgical movement on Dom Virgil was threefold. First, it inspired Michel to establish and explain many themes of the European Liturgical movement to American audiences. Michel’s contribution therefore rested on his ability to tailor the themes of the European movement to appeal to the tempo and style of the American church. Chief among these areas of concern was the relationship between liturgy, catechesis, and social justice. These relationships were key factors in involving the laity in the liturgy and in the development of their personal and communal faith.

Second, Michel’s European experience of the European liturgical movement made him critical of American individualism, a type of mindset that he considered as counter to the way Jesus would want us to live. He thought that individualism fostered a “privatized” form of religion on the part of the faithful. To Michel, this attitude led to a vertical relationship with God without any regard to the horizontal or communal relationship with others. Third, religious individualism is quite contrary to the conception of Catholicism (23). To counter this attitude, Michel used and adapted the ideas of notable European liturgists, such as Lambert Beauduin and Emmanuele Caronti. Whalen gives an analysis and comparison of Beauduin’s *Liturgy the Life of the Church* and Caronti’s *The Spirit of the Liturgy* as they influenced Michel’s own *The Liturgy of the Church* (1996, 64-65). Beauduin wrote, “The Christian does not walk above on the path of his pilgrimage.” He added that

> Between the Church of heaven and the Church of earth there exists an intimate union which shall one day become perfect. This union manifests, nourishes and develops itself by a common participation in spiritual goods, by communication
of merits and individual goods, by a continual exchange of prayers offered to God for the welfare and spiritual progress of each member and for the increasing prosperity of the entire body. (22-23)

Similar themes are expressed in Caronti’s *The Spirit of the Liturgy*.

Finally, Michel learned from the European movement a multi-disciplinary approach to problems, understanding how all the parts could fit together. In other words, Dom Virgil learned that there was a connection among theology, life, education, and social justice. He saw how one could not be a fully participating member of the church if one did not understand their faith, liturgy, and justice. He also saw that an appreciation of the faith would lead to active participation in a faith community. Whalen explains that “Michel’s works must be read in an integral and mutually interpretive fashion” (65-66) in order to understand his multidisciplinary approach to all issues.

Dom Michel was certain about what would result if religious educators neglected teaching the liturgy as vital to living a full Christian life. He cautioned:

> The neglect of the liturgy and the absence of liturgical inspiration in our teaching of religion may account for many of the characteristics that we find extant today in our Catholic life in its relation to the world about us: the lack of inner vitality of the faith that is in us, the absence of apostolic ardor, the lamentable confusion that mistakes regimentation and external *conformism* for the flourishing of spiritual life, and the spiritual inferiority complex which makes many Catholics hide their light under a basket only too often unto its own extinction. (1937b, 269)

*Orate Fratres*

Michel explored many ways to promote his ideas on liturgy and its close connection with religious education. In order to help educate the faithful, Michel founded the journal *Orate Fratres* (*OF*), later renamed *Worship*. The first issue appeared during the Advent season of 1926 and was published by The Liturgical Press at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville,
Maryland. In publishing this journal, Dom Virgil promoted three of the traditional hallmarks of the Benedictine Order: reproducing texts, scholarship, and teaching. While Michel used this publication primarily to increase the appeal of the liturgy, he also saw the journal as a means to educate the faithful about the liturgy and social justice and their interconnection. To this end, he declared the mission of *Orate Fratres* to be: “The wider spread of the true understanding of and participation in the Church’s worship by the general laity in order to foster the corporate life of the natural social units of the Church—the parishes” (1926, 29).

The Liturgical Press has remained faithful to its stated mission in producing pamphlets through its Popular Liturgical Library. At the time, under the direction of Virgil Michel, “The Library” sold 700,000 pamphlets at a cost of ten to thirty-five cents. According to R.W. Franklin, two of the most popular titles were, *Offeramus* and *Our Mass* (1988, 198-99). Because of these books, an informed laity could become active participants in liturgy, one of the goals of Dom Virgil. Above all, Michel believed that theology should be the domain of theologians and lay people. He wrote of the laity: “Theirs is a native right to share in this theological knowledge and understanding, in place of the relegation of theology to an abstract science for experts, such as it has been until recently” (1936, 485).

Building on its earlier successes, The Liturgical Press began to publish a hymnal, *The Parish Kyrie*. This publication made it possible for the laity to sing the Gregorian chants at Mass. The publishing house always kept its lay readership in mind. Their audience was not primarily academics but the faithful in the pews.

*The Philosophy of Personalism*

Personalism played a significant role in the life and work of Dom Virgil. Michel was attracted to the views of the French personalist Emmanuel Mounier and began a correspondence with him in 1936. By 1938, with the assistance of a confrere, Gerald McMahon, he translated Mounier’s *Manifeste au service du personalism* as *A Personalist Manifesto*. Mounier’s personalist perspective had its roots in the Catholic realism and Thomism. According to Mounier’s personalism,
The human has an absolute value. In *A Personalist Manifesto*, Mounier writes, "A person is a spiritual being, constituted as such by its manner of existence and independence of being; it maintains this existence by its adhesion to a hierarchy of values that it has freely adopted, assimilated, and lived by its own responsible activity and by a constant interior development; thus it unifies all its activity in freedom and by means of creative acts develops this individuality of its vocation. (Beaudoin 1989, 236)

Mounier's personalism formed the basis of the *Novelle Théologie* which was emerging in France. It appeared in the work of numerous Roman Catholic scholars: M. D. Chenu, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Teilhard de Chardin (Hellman 1981). This philosophical trend appealed to Christians and non-Christians alike. Mounier's influence can also be found in the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Elias 1976).

Mounier's personalism, however, is not to be confused with individualism, a lifestyle and attitude that neither Michel nor Mounier would endorse. Rather, individuals within the personalist viewpoint live lives that affirm initiative and responsibility as well as maintain an active spiritual life. Moreover, this way of living is to be accomplished through community with others. To Mournier, living your life meant active participation with others, to be in relationship with others.

Accordingly, the paramount value of the person was sacrosanct in the context of criticizing institutions and competing spiritual and political ideologies that

sought to construct a coherent system which they try to impose upon human history by the sheer force of the ideas themselves. Whenever living history or the realities of human life resist their attempts, they consider themselves the more faithful to truth if they shrink back completely into their system, and the more pure and unadulterated if they insist blindly upon the geometric fixity of their utopias. (Mounier 1938, 4)

In the concrete, Mounier's personalism criticized both Communism and liberal capitalism for their potential to depersonalize individuals.
Michael reflected Mounier’s ideas in his thinking on “the imposed system of doctrinal formulas [as] expressed in his numerous articles concerning the theory and practice of religious education” (Beaudoin 1988, 238).

In personalist thought, persons are called to be critically reflective of their actions. They are to embark on a course of validation and renewal of themselves. Thus, life is to be looked upon as a journey towards betterment, enlightenment, and openness to new possibilities and learning. For Catholics this journey through life is to begin in childhood with proper upbringing and Catholic instruction. Moreover, this formation is to be built upon for the rest of one’s life through continual learning from the liturgy. Michel advocated this viewpoint as early as 1925 in an essay, “A Religious Need for the Day,” in which he linked his trinity of correct teaching, liturgy, and the living manifestation of living one’s faith. He contended that the truths of the faith “must be taught . . . in . . . their living appeal to the whole man” (454).

Mounier’s personalism considered the education of the child of primary importance. To this end, Mournier proposed three fundamental “living ideas”: the purpose of education is not to fashion the child into rigid conformity with any social environment or with any doctrine of state; education ought to be concerned with the life of the whole person in a value-oriented context; education should influence one’s conception of life and one’s attitude toward life. The child must be educated as a person through the path of personal experience and the apprenticeship of free actions. The entire education of the child, like every influence in the life of the adult, should receive the guiding inspiration of some authority whose teaching is progressively interiorized by the subject who receives it (Beaudoin 1989, 236-37). These maxims had a deep impact on the educational philosophy of Dom Virgil Michel. Marx noted that Michel’s article “Are We Educating Moral Parasites?” written in 1927 was the application of the philosophy of personalism to the training and education of humans being in an enticing, secularized culture, from the necessary dependency of childhood, through the inevitable unsteadiness of adolescence, to the rich and responsible personality of adulthood. Sound education, he
wrote, is not indoctrination nor is it “a struggle for overlordship.” To educate is more than merely to instruct. (363)

The Chippewa Missions

Another significant influence upon Michel was his experiences living with the Chippewa, Native Americans of the Cass Lake area of northern Minnesota. Given to overwork, Michel’s superiors had often warned him to slow down. Marx summarizes the five years following Michel’s return from Europe in 1925:

He taught philosophy at the seminary, wrote on a variety of subjects, organized the liturgical movement, in collaboration with his community and others founded and edited *Orate Fratres*, established and directed the Liturgical Press, edited some twenty publications, translated Grabmann’s *Thomas von Aquin*, lectured and conducted about a dozen retreats, acted as Prefect of Clerics (1927-1929), carried on a large correspondence, organized the liturgical summer school and the first National Liturgical Day, directed and edited *With Mother Church*, and began an entirely new series of religion textbooks for the grades. (161)

In 1930, after years of arduous and productive work, Michel’s eyes gave out and he suffered a breakdown. He was admitted to the hospital where insomnia and severe headaches plagued him continuously (Marx 1957, 161). He was unable to say Mass or his divine office and so for two years his daily obligation was simply three rosaries (Marx 1957, 162). Upon his discharge from the hospital, Michel was sent to the Native American Indian missions near Cass Lake in the northern part of Minnesota. Marx writes that Michel was supposed to engage in light work among the Chippewa, but in typical fashion “he embraced with zeal the apostolate to the Indian” (162).

Though still suffering from headaches and depression, he never ceased working. After one year, Michel was recalled to Collegeville but he soon returned to the missions at White Earth after realizing he was still ill (Marx 1957, 163). During his three years among the Native Americans of northern Minnesota, he learned their language, hunted
with them and ate their foods. He lived simply and admonished the Chippewa to live Christian lives. He learned about poverty by experiencing it (Marx 1957, 163). In 1933 he was once again called to return to St. John’s in the capacity of dean. He was most reluctant to leave the peaceful home he had found. Evidence of how well loved he was by the Chippewa was the large delegation that later attended his funeral (Marx 1957, 164).

In the missions, Michel began to make connections between liturgy and culture (Whelan 1996, 70). This experience among the Native American people engendered in him an even deeper commitment to social justice. Although interested in social justice issues prior to 1930, after he left the reservation and returned to Collegeville Dom Virgil became even more convinced of the strong link between liturgy and society.

**Liturgy and Religious Education**

For some religious educators, the words “religious education” and “catechesis” are interchangeable. To others, they are distinct concepts, each with its own purpose. Although Michel began by using the term “Christian education,” he later utilized the terms, “religious education,” “religious instruction,” and catechesis almost interchangeably. Michel’s thought regarding religious education/catechesis “is one which evolved organically, that is, while Michel continued to refine and elaborate his initial insights, he at no point regulated them or recharted his course of thought” (Whalen 1996, 110).

Michel was familiar with the work of Thomas Shields of Catholic University, especially his innovative summer school. In 1929 Michel started his own liturgical summer school at St. John’s. He scheduled classes in liturgy, pedagogy in religious education, church music, and Christian art and symbolism. The school had an enrollment of seventy-five in its first summer. It was through this experience that Michel realized that there was a need for improved textbooks for schools based on the liturgy as the heart of the curriculum (Bryce 1978, S-49).

Michel was involved with the American catechetical movement, which began in the late 1920s. Prior to this time there was no organized and unified method of religious instruction throughout America:
“During the years of Michel’s’ life the theory and practice of religious education in Europe and in the United States was reflective of a popular theology which separated body and soul, intellect and emotion, sacred and secular” (Beaudoin 1989, 239).

At this time, the *Baltimore Catechism*, first published in 1895, was widely in use. This method of teaching religion depended on the memorization of answers to questions regarding the doctrines of the Catholic faith. These memorized doctrines were to be applied to one’s daily life by acts of the will with the grace of the Holy Spirit. For years some religious educators, including Frs. Edward Pace and Thomas Shields, viewed this method as rigid and narrow.

Virgil Michel suggested a different approach to religious instruction. Instead of memorization, he offered a liturgical approach to religious education. In his comments one can easily see the influence of personalism:

> The liturgy makes its appeal to the whole man, to understanding and to the senses, to the emotional and the esthetic life and to the will, and furnishes both the basis and the inspiration for constant spiritual growth of the integral man in all the elements of his nature. (Michel 1940, 532)

In this case, the continual growth of the individual, basic to personalist philosophy, was made manifest in Michel’s view of religious education.

Central to Michel’s thinking was the idea of community. He said: “To this must be added the collective nature of the liturgy, which makes legitimate use of the best possibility of what is today often known as mob or crowd psychology (1940, 531). Moreover, Michel believed that a person also learns by doing, thus he advocated a religious education grounded in the traditional pedagogical device of active participation. Michel was not against the acquisition of abstract knowledge. However, he believed the method of the *Baltimore Catechism*, with its emphasis on memorization of doctrinal issues, begged for better educational methods to be employed. Michel wrote:

> This . . . is not to disparage the acquisition of abstract knowledge; but it does stress the evident fact that abstract knowledge, especially about natural and supernatural living, cannot be
inculcated unto good fruits of life by mere abstract instruction. (Michel 1940, 530-31)

Before examining what Virgil Michel thought religious education ought to be, it might be helpful to understand what he thought it should not be. In his articles “Religious Education” (1937a), “Rediscovering the Obvious: Liturgy and the Psychology of Education” (1940) and “Liturgical Religious Education” (1937b), Michel outlined what he saw as some of the failures in religious education. He lamented the “almost universally accepted atmosphere of individualism, naturalism and materialism that pervades the culture of today” (1937a, 218). To counter these, Michel advocated the absolute value of the human person as delineated in personalism, with spiritual values at the very heart and center of human reality. As a result, the human person exhibits a capacity for freedom, responsibility, knowledge, consciousness, and love. While the individual is held in high esteem, individualism is not to be prized. For Michel, personalism is diametrically opposed to any system of doctrine, formula, and control. Therefore Michel was adamant that catechetics, first and foremost, respect the person. To this point, Michel wrote about “Our one-sided stressing of intellectual grasp of doctrine, which has only too frequently turned into mere memorizing without too much understanding (1936, 218). Michel believed in the practical application of religious truths, pointing out that too often class activity was separated from the celebration of the liturgy. Furthermore, Michel insisted that the moral teaching of the Church should be presented not as a mere intellectual exercise but rather as lived experience.

Another criticism Michel offered was that Catholic religious education in his day had become too Protestant: “Much of our teaching of Catholic religious education has confined itself to the Protestant conception and delimitation of Christianity. This is true even of many sermons preached from Catholic pulpits” (1937a, 219). Dom Virgil saw in the adoption of the Baltimore Catechism the specter of Protestant influence:

We have followed the method popularized by Luther in his catechism of short questions and answers. We have aped Lutheranism! Not so much that we copied his short question
and answer method—which might be unimportant, though some say it is not; but we have followed Protestantism in separating dogma from the living liturgy of the Church. For the Protestant reformer, who repudiated all visible priesthood and liturgical mystery, this is intelligible, for the Catholic, it is not! (1937b, 268)

The antidote to this, according to Virgil Michel was to teach the faith while “doing” faith. He decried, “We thereby separated both our teaching efforts and the learning efforts of the children as far as possible from the sources of divine grace in the liturgy” (1937b, 269). Unfortunately, in this article as in others, Michel does not provide a practical application of how one is to go about doing this. However, as a theorist, he could be quite vocal. It is only in his catechetical books that he gives expression as to how these ideas were to be implemented.

Michel argued that the liturgy was not only the vehicle for receiving God’s grace but also provided sound pedagogical principles for religious education. It was through the liturgy that catechesis was made real and concrete with the ultimate goal of appropriate action in the world by members of the church:

Now what does it mean to say that the liturgy must be made basic in our religious education? It means just this (and perhaps much more): that we must teach the truths of our religion in their practical relation to that living religion, to the actual living out of these truths in the church both by the church as a whole and by each member as an active participant. It means that the truths in their interrelation of dogma and worship must also be taught in their mutual relation to the everyday life of the Christian, which must ever be but an extension of the sacrificial dedication of himself to God at the altar. It means that the truths must be taught with all the interrelations they have in the living itself, psychological, emotional, intellectual, volitional, natural and supernatural. (1937b, 267)

Moreover, Michel asserted that unless and until we teach from this fundamental worldview we would teach an abstract form of
Christianity. In short, religious educators would not be teaching the truths that Jesus taught. Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life was fundamental to understanding the worldview of Virgil Michel. He, in turn, maintained that this was the path that all Catholics should follow. The guiding principle of his religious educational views was this:

Just as Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, or King, Teacher and Priest so all religious education consists of morals, truths and worship; to teach Catholic truths without relating these truths, both theoretically and practically, to actual worship, which is a living of these truths in real union with Christ, is a terrible neglect of the duty of religious education. (1935, 495-96)

In his article, “Rediscovering the Obvious,” Michel explained his views on religious education:

Similarly, the science of education about which there has been such a to do in the past decade, has in many respects been no more than “discovering” and formulating in technical terminology principles which were taken for granted by our forefathers. This is especially true of psychology of education. Applying these principles to religious instruction, we find that they have been part and parcel of the Church’s traditional method of teaching through the liturgy—but we have lost sight of the fact with our loss of liturgical spirit. (1940, 529)

Michel described the “rediscovered” pedagogical principles that ought to be applied to religious education. Although he predates the “experiential learning” generation, he did however comment on what the probable results could (and have, to a degree) become:

The consequence has been that while we taught something of the Mass, for instance, we did not teach it in relation to proper attendance at Mass. And when we taught and drilled attendance at Mass (by means of the rosary, of litanies, of popular hymns or else silence), this “praying” of the Mass had at least the possible principle of “learning by doing,” but in
regard to the focal center of all Catholic life we had the children learn without doing on the one hand, and on the other do without learning. Is there any wonder that the truths learned had no vital meaning for them and did not stick, and that the mechanical doing only too often ceased when there was no longer any pressure of external circumstance to bear on the grown-up children? (1937b, 268)

It is clear that Michel was working to formulate some type of middle ground between theory and experience in his approach to catechetics. What is striking is that the statement was written in 1937. Religious education professionals are still tying to find that middle ground. To this end, Michel delineates the following “rediscovered” pedagogical principles that ought to be applied to religious education (1940, 529-32):

1. **Method and materials should be adapted to the learner.** Michel maintained that the connection between education and liturgy is integral to the Christian tradition. He asserted that this principle has been applied at all times within the liturgy of the Church. More important, this has been made manifest in the Incarnation. Further, Jesus instituted the Church and provided it with the sacraments and the liturgy. By this, Jesus gave the liturgy as a means of worship that is innately pedagogical and serves needs of human nature to praise its Creator.

2. **Religious education should proceed from the concrete to the abstract.** This principle is true because learning is best achieved by moving from the concrete to the abstract. In Virgil’s view, people understand more clearly the “what” they were doing if they understood the “why” as well. Toward this goal, Michel thought the materials used at Mass and other sacramental celebrations were the concrete outward signs of inner grace:

   The materials used in sacraments and sacramentals, water, wine, oil, bread, ashes, salt, palms, various colors, the audible words, the visible gestures, all of these are so many concrete signs that convey their message to the soul in accordance with the natural aptitudes of man. (1940, 530)

3. **One learns by doing.** Since he viewed learning as an interactive process, Michel urged active and intelligent participation by
individuals in order to realize the full value of educational processes. Michel lamented the “state of apathy and indifference” (1940b, 530) that was prevalent during his time and urged the faithful to take an active role in the liturgy. As an example, Michel urged that during the celebration of the Mass the faithful recite prayers, genuflect, and sing: “The simple sign of the cross, in word and action, is a striking example that is not only intelligible but also appealing to the lowly and the great alike” (1940, 531).

4. Learning is best done through group processes and dialogue. Liturgy, for Virgil, should be a collective action on the part of the faithful, who should not be present merely as passive observers: “Once rightly instructed, the faithful member of Christ cannot but enter into its action with mind and heart and thus absorb its lessons ever more intimately” (1940, 531). To Dom Virgil, the Mass is the primary symbol of individuals being in community. Liturgy, conducted according to sound liturgical rubrics, should also foster the development of each person within a communal context. Thus Michel brings to bear the basic principle of personalism to an understanding of members of the Christian community and their participation in the liturgical actions of the Church.

5. Repetition enhances learning. Although Virgil argued against the over reliance on memorization of the *Baltimore Catechism*, he did favor repetition when it came to liturgical participation. He saw value in the weekly or even daily repetition of the prayers and the rituals of the Church. In Michel’s view, the memorization of doctrinal statements, often poorly understood or even misunderstood, is not to be compared to the repetition of prayer and actions in which one has proper understanding and plays an active part.

6. Learning involves progressive development and growth. From Baptism and continuing throughout one’s life, Michel maintained that the individual under the influence of the love of God advanced further along on the path to perfection day by day. He made clear the importance of the liturgical year:

> Such progressive advance on the path of Christ is seen in the development of the Advent liturgy to Christmas, and again in the development of Lent through Passiontide to Easter. It is also evident in recurrent daily and yearly cycles of prayer,
whose repetition calls, not for mechanical sameness, but a constant spiritual advance towards the greater realization of the Christ-life. (1940, 532)

This idea later became foundational to the catechetical books developed by Michel and his colleagues.

**Catechetical Textbooks**

In addition to publishing articles for the adult laity, Michel developed a series of catechetical manuals for schools of all levels, elementary through college. He was involved with the creation of five liturgical and catechetical publications, four of which will be reviewed here: *A High School Course in Religion* (for secondary schools); *With Mother Church Series* (for primary and secondary schools); *The Christ-Life Series* (for elementary school) and *The Christian Religion Series* (for high school and college). In each endeavor, Michel was the creator, author, or collaborator of a particular series of texts. Whether his involvement was direct or indirect, Michel’s thought was the guiding light of each project (Whalen 1996, 166-214). In these works his idea of liturgical catechesis receives concrete application.

*High School Course in Religion* (1924)

This course was introduced in the College Preparatory School of St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota, during the school term year of 1923-24. This curriculum was designed for two class periods of religion per week. In his introduction, Dom Virgil described the basic outline for this course as the concentration on religion as a reality for the whole person, both interior and exterior. Michel saw religion as interior but he did not see it as a privatized form of practicing one’s faith. Nor did he want the faithful to confuse external forms of faith expression as representative of what true religion was all about. Michel explained:

> Religion with many persons takes on some external forms of action and remains at them. Such religion is but a faint shadow of true religious virtue. It is but a cloak that hides the
true poverty existing in heart and mind—a blind that covers up before the eyes of others the true nakedness of the soul. If this fact is lost sight of, religious education and religious training easily assumes the form of an inculcation of external forms to the neglect of the vital core. (1924, 408)

When Michel speaks of “religion as interior,” he is referring to the truth that religion must permeate every fiber of a person. Virtue must become a part of thinking, acting, and a way of life to the extent that the person is no longer thinking about what he or she is “doing.” Instead, virtuous living ought to become instinctive. Michel wrote:

Only where positive religious virtue has previously been acquired and cultivated until it has become second nature, until it has entered the very life of individuals, will such external exhortations reap much fruit, and then they will become unnecessary. (1924, 409)

By claiming that “religion is of the whole man,” Michel is suggesting that religion is not a solitary aspect of a person’s life but is to permeate every aspect life. It must be possessed by the whole person and “therefore be rooted in and find a response in everything that makes up human nature” (411). For him, faith is more than “a mere affair of momentary sentiment” (410).

Each year of the high school curriculum concentrated on four distinct areas: 1) memorization of prayers with the addition of mental prayer in later years; 2) doctrine—commandments, government of the church, religious books, gospels, sacraments, the Creed, the Epistles; 3) history—the life of Christ, history of the Church, history of the Church in the United States; and 4) practice/reading—mental prayer, the lives of the saints, and selected pamphlets on religious topics.

In his article, “A High School Course in Religion” (1924), Dom Virgil explained his methodology and choice of subject matter. He stated that one of the prime purposes of the coursework arrangement was to teach the students not to rely on textbooks as the source of all knowledge. Above all, he wanted students to understand religion as “a spontaneous and personal possession” (484). It was with this goal in mind that Michel devised the curriculum for each study area:
memorization of prayers and texts from the Bible must be accompanied by understanding and doctrinal study should include the usual teachings of the Church as well as a study of the gospels and epistles. In an interesting development he placed other New Testament texts in the area of memorization. He mapped out his rationale:

The multitude does not long merely for academic dissertations or verbal dissections of divine truths in all their telling simplicity. No better form of such doctrinal exposition can be had than that coming from the lips of Christ himself. (476)

The coursework involving history did not stress the memorization of dates, places and names. In fact, Michel advocated that teachers dispense with a textbook for this area of coursework. He felt the course material ought to be presented to the students orally and the students were to take notes as they saw fit (478). What Michel hoped to achieve in teaching was this:

It is essentially an unfolding of the divine plan in the life of human society. It is not secular study; it presents Christ in the Church not figuratively but literally, as he is the life of that body, personally dwelling therein. The development of history should be the varied manifestations of Christ. His work of the redemption; it contains the same struggle with evil that Christ exemplified during His visible sojourn on earth. (478)

For the area of readings/practice, Michel exhorted teachers to make students aware of a variety of Catholic periodicals. Since he believed that Catholic families had little knowledge of Catholic literature, he felt it was the duty of an “educated Catholic to foster Catholic literature and by word and example to help spread its influence” (484).

The With Mother Church Series (1929)

The With Mother Church series had unique origins. This series was originally conceived by Sisters of Saint Dominic, Estelle Hackett and Jane Marie Murray of Grand Rapids. According to Whalen, Michel worked as a collaborator on this project. He provided the lessons on the liturgy and the church calendar year (1996, 171-72). However, it was
the sisters who actually wrote the texts. From the beginning the series was not designed to be a formal textbook or textbook series. Nor was it designed to be an all-inclusive form of religious education. Instead, it was written to address a specific issue: to initiate children to the liturgical feasts within a catechetical environment. This series explained the feasts within the liturgical year and how their celebration helps to illustrate God’s plans within the life of the church.

There were several reasons why the authors felt this type of series was needed (Whalen, 171-72). The liturgical movement, which was beginning to grow in popularity, emphasized the “Mystical Body” and its view of grace as life in Christ. Second, the collaborators sensed that the Baltimore Catechism did not sufficiently address the areas of feasts and seasons in their texts. To make up for this neglect, the authors began to design this series of five manuals. These texts were not meant to supplant an existing curriculum, but they were designed to be a set of experiential laboratory manuals and not a complete religion curriculum. The authors recommended that the series be used in conjunction with other materials.

Whalen (1996) assessed both the positive features and drawbacks of this series. He noted that

On the one hand, these manuals constituted an integrated catechetical process in that they are designed ideally to be used sequentially and in whole. On the other hand, they could readily be used in isolation from one another. (175)

The series’ inability to be integrated with the existing catechetical series used in schools was its Achilles heel. Ultimately, the clash of objectives and approaches was to be, at once, the manuals’ success story and their major drawback. Although the series revealed deficiencies in liturgical foundation in the catechetical manuals then in use, the manuals were not enough to overcome the fundamental lack of liturgical catechetical instruction in the classroom.

*The Christ–Life Series* (1934)

Michel collaborated with Basil Stegmann, OSB, and the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, Michigan, most especially with Sister Jane Marie Murray, to produce *The Christ-Life Series in Religion*. By 1934 all
eight volumes for primary school were completed. In an article in *Origins*, Monsignor Roach remarks on what was paramount to Michel:

Liturgy equals life. That equation of Fr. Virgil’s is apparent from the titles alone of his major works: *The Christ Life Series; Our Life in Christ; The Christian in the World; Liturgy and Catholic Life*. He understood we are embodied spirits, and we don’t just attend worship, but we are a part of worship. (Roach, 20)

Michel set the tone of the series in the opening paragraph of the *Teacher’s Manual: The Christ-Life Religion Series*: “Michel speaks of the Church as the Mystical Body and refers to the vine and branches imagery found in John 15 when speaking of the abundant fruit that every Christian is called to bear” (Beaudoin 1989, 237). Thus, the focus of this series is upon understanding the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ where each person as a result of his or her baptism into the faith is graced to carry out God’s will. Marx noted:

This was Michel’s profound conviction: if every student could be taught the liturgical life of the Mystical Body of Christ and his active share in it with all its implications for daily living, then he would have in the liturgy a lifelong teacher accompanying him as a kind of adult educator; in various life situations-truth, inspiration, and grace would be imparted as needed. (1957, 22)

Moreover, as Michel imagined it, the true instructor was the Holy Spirit, Christ’s spirit, instructing through the liturgy.

This series incorporated doctrine, Scripture, art, liturgy, and music into a text that was meant to present the faith not as formulas to be memorized, but rather as a lived reality. According to Marx (1957), “If other texts had embodied parts of the liturgy as auxiliary aids, the *Christ–Life Series* was an avowed attempt to build a primary school religion curriculum based on, and inspired by, the liturgy, but without neglecting doctrine” (234-35). The series had eight volumes, one for each of the grade levels in primary school.

This catechesis is grounded in the study of the Mass, sacraments, and the liturgical year. Each topic area progressively leads one deeper
and deeper into the liturgy. Furthermore, according to Whalen (219) the same themes, albeit in an expanded format, can be found in the texts Michel helped develop for the high school and college levels.

The Christian Religion Series (1938-52)

In this series Dom Virgil collaborated with Sister Jane Marie Murray. From the outset, this series was to be a continuation of The Christ–Life Series. The authors initially intended this series to consist of six volumes: four high school texts and two college-level volumes. Because of the death of Virgil Michel in 1938, only four volumes were actually published: two for high school and two for college.

In the preface to the first high school text, Sister Jane provided details on the shape the series was to take: Grade 9 The Life of Our Lord; Grade 10 Living in Christ; Grade 11 Christ in His Church; Grade 12 Restoration in Christ. The two college-level texts written by Michel were Our Life in Christ and The Christian in the World (Whalen 202).

As to the direction of the series, Murray wrote, “The series is written in the spirit of the Catholic revival of the day and specifically of the liturgical movement” (Whalen 202-03). Additionally, she pointed out that

the books of the series consequently stress the vital truths of the Christian tradition in their relation both to the worship of the church and to the daily life of the Christian-and always in reference to the special characteristics of our present civilization. (Whalen, 202-03)

The Christian Religion Series was a companion set to The Christ-Life Series. In theory these two separate series could be used independently of each other. The Christian Religion Series coupled the liturgical and sacramental foundations in The Christ-Life Series. This dual basis is important for understanding the content or purpose of The Christian Religion Series and the philosophical approach to catechetics by Virgil Michel and his collaborators.

In this regard, Whalen makes an interesting observation: the locus of The Christ-Life Series and The Christian Religion Series is founded on the idea of “experience,” since both series took for granted that students
were engaged in a conscious and full participation in the liturgical experience (206-07). The co-authors’ pedagogy was simple: they were training young minds to grow to adulthood and to be prepared to take their place in society. Consequently, the high school texts were geared toward the social teachings of the Church, while giving the liturgy and sacraments a prominent place in teaching. In his summary, Whalen synthesizes Michel’s methodology in five foundational points: 1) The Foundation of the series, its philosophy and psychology of education, is Dom Virgil’s philosophy of personalism, which places great importance on the absolute value of the human; 2) the Content of the catechesis in the series is the entire liturgical life of the Church as lived in its sacraments, the Mass and the liturgical year; 3) the Context in which catechesis took place is the liturgy as celebrated within the family and the church, which were viewed by Michel as the primary foci for the celebrations of feasts, sacraments the liturgy; 4) the Experience of liturgical catechesis is participation in the Mass. Also important for Michel was conveying an understanding of the colors, rubrics, music, and vestments; and 5) the Integrating Principle of the catechesis is the community (209-12). Whalen notes, “As such his approach to liturgical catechesis correlated liturgy and life, sacrament and society, worship and world, Eucharist and community” (213). It was Michel’s hope that catechetical study would lead to a commitment to social justice, since the liturgically instructed would be enabled to maintain horizontal and vertical relationships with God and with community.

**Expectations for Religious Educators**

In such an ambitious course of instruction, Michel obviously had great expectations for religious educators about how they were to go about their duties. According to Marx,

not only must the teacher know his subject matter thoroughly, use the best pedagogical methods and skill, be acquainted with human psychology and needs at the various ages, and understand the prevalent environment and culture, but above all, he must live (emphasis in the original) what he teaches. (1957, 238)
Furthermore,

Death to self, a profound and joyous living of the Christ-life—that is the essential lesson that must be caught from, if not taught by, one who must be seen by the student as a co-victim with Christ as a happy messenger of good Tidings from God. The teacher of religion, unless he lives thoroughly what he professes to teach, implicitly denies what he would have his students carry over into their lives. (Marx 1957, 238)

In two essays published in the *Journal of Religious Instruction*, Michel explored what he considered to be minimal knowledge necessary for a religious educator to teach religion, especially the Mass. This editor of textbooks decried that teachers lacked the basic knowledge that is foundational to teaching religion. In his response Michel concentrated on upper grades and high-school level teachers. He held that a teacher ought to have a well-rounded, liberal arts college education. In this regard, he was critical of the offerings of Catholic higher education and expressed his hopes for better college courses, saying

I do not mean the motley secularized mosaic of a course that even some Catholic colleges offer, but really a Catholic college education, one that has mastered knowledge and views of life in terms of a living Catholic philosophy. (1938b, 765)

Michel believed the Mass was not a separate activity in a person's life but “should be intimately related to everything a Catholic says and does and thinks.” He continued:

Furthermore, any teacher who ignores, or is ignorant of this essential truth, while it is possible they would be imparting correct knowledge about the Mass the possibility exists they could miss the whole purpose of the Mass. (Michel 1938b, 765)

For Michel this would produce students well-versed in the rubrics of the Mass, yet ignorant of its meaning. In Michel's judgment, not to understand the Mass would be to fail to understand Christianity and what it means to be a Catholic. He explained that
What happens in concentrated form in the Mass when it is intelligently and wholeheartedly participated in must unfold itself in detail through all the moments of our life between Mass and Mass, regardless of whether we can attend the Sacrifice daily or only on Sundays. The Mass is at once cult, creed, and code-worship, dogma, and life—and no teaching of it that does not embrace it in its totality is in any sense adequate. (Michel 1938a, 596)

What else would Michel ask from a religious instructor? He desired that the Mass be taught as embodying all the mysteries of Christ, as praying the doctrinal truths of revelation. He wanted every participant in the Mass to be joined with Christ (the vertical relationship] as well as with other Mass attendees (horizontal relationship) in knowingly giving themselves to God in the offering and receiving of Christ in the Eucharist.

Michel believed the Mass enacted all the mysteries of Christ, and was “the central-prayer action” of the Mystical body of Christ. Further, the Mass should be taught as the praying of the doctrinal truths of revelation. Ideally this means that at Mass each person joined in the collective offering of the entire community to Christ and, in return, received Christ in Holy Communion. Ultimately the Eucharist was taught and therefore understood in true Catholic fashion. That is, the emphasis was placed on the Real Presence, sacrifice, and sacrament of Communion.

For Michel, therefore, the Catholic instructor must be well versed in the Old and the New Testament. This knowledge is fundamental if the teacher is to teach the real meaning of grace. Grace is not to be understood, or taught, as a free pass to heaven. Rather, it is to be seen as truly living with Christ. If this were understood properly and lived out in the person’s life, then heaven could be thought of as being present in the here and now.

Logically, the teacher must effectively connect the Mass with the doctrinal teachings of the Church. Michel continued:

To assure the application of this doctrine by students to present and future life, the instructor must teach always in terms of immediate participation in the Mass; otherwise the
students will be learning without doing and doing without learning—and in the end, perhaps, neither learning nor doing. In other words, if the truths and the spirit of the Mass are to suffuse daily living, the Mass must first be meaningfully lived and experienced at the altar in church. If, then, the learner intelligently shares in the Sacrifice according to this capacity, carry over will be assured, especially if the teacher has related the “inspiration projection” of the Sacrifice of Christ to daily student living, while obviously living the Mass himself. (Marx 1957, 233)

In “Knowledge Requirement for Teaching the Mass,” Dom Virgil wrote:

[These] requirements are not even what the teacher of the Mass should know by reason of his specialization in the Mass. They are what every intelligent layman should know as a matter of course; and they are also, I hope, what every graduate of a Catholic high school and college will know ipso facto in the next generation. (Michel 1938b, 767)

Writings on Religious Education

The best way to understand Michel is through his articles on education. Because of his enormous output, this section will concentrate on his views regarding the education of youth.

In an article with the interesting title “Are We Educating Moral Parasites?” Michel treated moral education of youth at home and in school. In a theme that resounds even today as many young people seem to abandon their faith after receiving the sacrament of Confirmation, Michel voiced similar concerns:

Much has been said in our day of the leakage in Catholic ranks in our country, of the way in which our youth succumb to the allurements of a life of pleasure, or the inspirations of non-Catholic thought, of how the training once received withers at almost the first instant of contact with the heat of the excited life today. (1927a, 147-55)
Michel opined that once youth are away from school or home their Catholic moral values are in danger of being abandoned or at least compromised as they enter society: “They live or die morally with the surrounding conditions. In other words, they are in the moral life what most parasites are biologically—they give all indications of being moral parasites” (1927a, 149). Michel posits two reasons for this. First, young people’s hearts and minds are overly protected by their parents from the realities of the world. Young children are shielded from the temptations of their surrounding environment: “In the home the child lives in a moral environment that is not to be found later in the world at large. The young mind and heart are carefully shielded against the words and actions of an older world“ (150).

The second reason is that children are often threatened into behaving well. Michel had little patience with the “big stick and the stern command” (Michel 1927a) method of instilling moral virtue and good behavior. He thought that

In both cases the growing child learns to be good by reason, chiefly, if not solely of its environment. In so far as neither of these conditions can last throughout life and in so far as the world and the flesh will under all circumstances be with us at all times, this type of education is a grave injustice to the youth. (150)

Then how was one supposed to teach children moral values? Michel responds: “Education is to assist young people in their period of transition from a state of helplessness and direction by others to one where they are in control and are able to make their own decisions” (150). This necessary transition becomes clear especially when Michel asserts that “The two points ever to be kept in mind under pain of dire failure are simply what a youth is, and what he or she is to be. He is to be a full-fledged man, but at present is only trying to become one” (151; emphasis in the original).

Thus, Michel suggests that parents are to rear children within an atmosphere of acceptance and care that respects them as individuals. There was no room for a prescribed set of rules and formulas for every child growing into adulthood. He recognized and respected the uniqueness of young people and had an appreciation for their tender,
impressionable, and confusing stage of life. Michel recommends that youth be treated

with the kind, sympathetic understanding that was Christ’s, an unselfish sympathy that is willing to make sacrifices of personal comfort and time, miseducation is the natural result and the fault of it lies rather with the adult than with the youth. (152)

Throughout his work and writings, Michel’s personalist philosophy is evident. While he insists that “definitive objective, universal standards of conduct must be insisted on at all times” (152), Michel wants parents and educators to respect the value and dignity of the person. In such an atmosphere, education for self-direction, self control, and freedom are no longer seen as valueless concepts. Instead, they are valued resources nourishing the individuality of the person. Michel argued that children have the right to an education that assists them to gradually develop into adulthood as morally self-controlled and self-dependent individuals. Moreover, since children are individual persons, the education process should endeavor to respect their uniqueness. Thus, the aim of religious education is not to form “a creature that has become set in its ways of acting and its habits of thoughts and ideals, but a creature that is guided by reason and free will in its best actions” (152). Seemingly, Michel anticipated later educational reformers in his concern for education for freedom, self-direction, and self-control. He differs from them in asserting that this education for freedom should not be value neutral or subjective, but committed to objective moral values. Beaudoin analyzes Michel’s thought noting that

His concern as a personalist is the most appropriate way to educate persons for a free assimilation of the universal and objective values while respecting the absolute value of the person. He proposes a dialectical process which is truly a developmental enterprise. (1988, 245)

Michel proposed education as “an interpersonal dialogue involving both teachers and parents” (Beaudoin 1988, 240). Hence a primary goal of education was to raise children
to a position of social partnership, in which there is something of the relation of give and take, since there are always on both sides, or in both parties, duties or obligations as well as rights. There are no relations between men on this earth, in which all the rights are on one side and all the duties on the other. Any education that neglects this fundamental truth is a menace to human society. It results in a product we wrongly called individualism. (Michel 1927a, 155)

Michel’s rejection of indoctrination in teaching is a concrete example of the influence of personalism on his educational philosophy. While other religious educators of his generation did not hesitate to advocate indoctrinating students in the truths of faith, Michel warned teachers not to impose the truth on students nor force them to engage in mindless religious rituals. He counseled that

If this fact is lost sight of, religious education and religious training easily assumes the form of an inculcation of external forms to the neglect of the vital core. Young souls may be marched regularly to the reception of the sacraments, to frequent devotion, and still not get beyond the acquisition of external habits which is upheld by the dint of the pressure of eternal circumstances. (1924, 419)

Michel’s Legacy

No doubt the liturgical movement left a significant impact on the Church in this country. Pecklers notes the movement was not without ecumenical and ethnic influences (1998, 283). Virgil Michel’s stress on the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ gives meaning today to the multicultural elements and changing global demographics in the Catholic Church. Pecklers concludes his study by commenting,

The multicultural liturgical communities of the 1990s are quite different from anything the American liturgical pioneers might have imagined, but the principles and goals advocated by those pioneers remain as valid and relevant today as they did in 1926: to find in our liturgical prayer the impetus for
social action in the face of rising inflation, unemployment, and a growing problem of homelessness; to see the Eucharist as modeling a pattern of more just, more dignified human relationships. (1998, 286)

Bringing people closer to the liturgy brings them closer to the universality of the Church. Michel knew that a deeper understanding of liturgy led believers to its practice in daily life. Still today the goals of liturgical catechesis, a vibrant faith and a hunger for worship, are fostered by a sound understanding of the proclamations, rites, symbols, and rhythms of the Mass. Michel knew well that the interplay of liturgy, catechesis, scripture, and witness through actions for justice are essential to handing on the faith. This interplay becomes of even more importance in today’s growing secular culture. Catholic religious education would greatly benefit from a return to Michel’s deeply spiritual and psychological understanding of this kind of liturgical catechesis.

Yet as a result of the reforms of Vatican II and subsequent changes in methods of catechesis, much of what Virgil Michel advocated has lost its visionary glow. However, the age in which he wrote must be kept in mind. To say he was a man ahead of his time seems trite. However, Dom Virgil gave voice to ideas that are still very much with us today. He advanced a philosophy that places great emphasis on the dignity of the person. Michel challenged a doctrinaire method of education in favor of one where the laity also learned the reasons why they held certain beliefs and performed certain rituals. To this end, he endeavored to synthesize different areas of study (liturgy and social justice) into an educational model that would teach the laity—young and adult—what it means to be a Catholic in the world and what they are called to do.

Virgil Michel stressed that teachers should endeavor to convey the message that revelation is God speaking in the present and that from this insight discernment of an earthly vocation is possible. This doctrine of a present revelation began to be more commonly held following the Second Vatican Council.

Dom Virgil sincerely wanted Catholics to understand and practice their faith. He was also convinced that they needed some type of education to grow into the fullness of adult faith. It is impressive that sixty years before Vatican II, a Benedictine monk would make it his
life’s work to teach the faithful what the Church had not previously taught clearly about the role of the laity. He was a pioneer who wanted the laity “to possess” their own church. While Michel did not provide an entire syllabus to flesh out his theories, he did leave behind a wealth of ideas and ideals.

As a result, the Church is blessed today with Michel’s vision of the absolute value of the human person, the right of the laity to be full participants in the Church and its liturgical life, their right to understandable religious texts, and their responsibility to live their faith in the practice of social justice.