

## **Orate Fratres: Liturgical Renewal and Brotherhood**

*Dr. David Pence*

Few people remember a liturgical and social justice reformer named Virgil Michel (1890-1938) of St John's Abbey in St. Cloud, Minnesota. He was talented and energetic monk who was considered the pioneer of the American liturgical and social justice movement. (In those days they were closely linked). Long before his abbey was betrayed by a homosexual predator abbot and became a resident house for multiple known abusers and a job center for feminists and homosexual activists, there was a manly monk named Michel who led the American liturgical reform movement. He had a radical notion of how the Eucharist would change relations among men. He saw how the life of prayer shaped the lives of his fellow monks and he knew what they experienced was meant for the church as a whole. He had experienced the living faith of men in a community of prayer, work and study. He saw this not as an exception but as a sacrament directing laymen into civic life as brothers in Christ, labor reformers, and community patriots. He had a dynamic sense that a deeper reform of American public life would come from the liturgical movement than from new labor legislation. He saw an emerging brotherhood from the Eucharist that would not accept the statist solutions of

communism or the individualist fallacy of *laisse faire* capitalism. He was a liturgist, a churchman, and a social justice radical in understanding the love and fraternity embodied in the Eucharist. He had a much deeper and more transformative notion of social justice than lobbying government for money for social programs. For this translator of European liturgical classics, active participation in the liturgy by laymen did not mean usurping priestly roles. It meant assenting fully in intellect and will to the paschal mystery of the liturgy and then going onto civic life as if men really were Christian brothers inviting other brothers to build a just civic life. He spoke to women as women and never equated justice with abolishing sex roles in either the church or the society.

“Go and baptize the nations” said Christ. “Go out to the towns and the cities.” This command not only to convert men as individuals but address them in their corporate social existence is as old as the gospel. In most parts of the world men live in some kind of territorial community. The feminists are right that the world map is a decidedly male construct. The Catholic brotherhood of the priesthood is a sacrament of the possibility of a public love grounded in justice. The church is a light to the nations (*lumen gentium*) not the extinguisher of such social forms. The diocesan character of the church is a sign that cities, towns and nations need not relinquish their local corporate characters. The church has been

thinking globally and acting locally for a long time. The church recognizes the memory and sacrificial duty of soldiers and patriots which shape national communities. She considers civic brotherhoods a positive development of human civilization.

Christianity unlike communism, unlike the amoral marketplace, and unlike Islam easily builds on the natural proclivity of men to form tribes, cities and nations. These relationships are forms of human love and need to be strengthened while they are purified.

The Christian understanding elevates but limits the authority of nations and political entities under the judgment of a Higher Being. All civic brotherhoods must allow men to congregate freely to worship God. It is man's duty to worship God and his highest purpose is to give thanks. This religious duty and his dignity as a being made in the image of God necessitates that political communities respect his freedom.

Almost all civilizations in the world are structured along patriarchal and fraternal notions of military duty and responsibility. Christianity is no stranger to such forms of organization. The Church indeed is the ultimate paradigm of patriarchal and fraternal *communio*. The stuttering feminist death yelps of the secular West must give way to the deeper voice of patriarchal authority and fraternity in the world movement of Christianity. Our liturgical life is a coming together of brothers to do the will of the Father.

We need not apologize for this form of love but purify and deepen it as we “baptize” the natural public communities of the world from patriarchal Confucian China to the tribal brotherhoods of nomadic herders to the new civic life of the mega cities.

Fatherhood and brotherhood need to be purified not denigrated. Let us pray the Christian prayer that Dom Michel first named the magazine of St Johns Liturgical Press—***Orate Fratres: Pray Brothers!***

*Dr David Pence is a Minnesota physician and member of the docsociety.*