



Father Michael Mathis, C.S.C.

By Sr. Genevieve Glen, based on the original research of Rev. Robert Kennedy

Introduction

Father Michael Mathis, C.S.C., founded the liturgical studies program at the University of Notre Dame in 1947. Out of his summer programs in liturgical studies grew the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy (previously the Center for Pastoral Liturgy), established in 1970, and the annual pastoral liturgy conferences, sponsored by the Center since 1971.

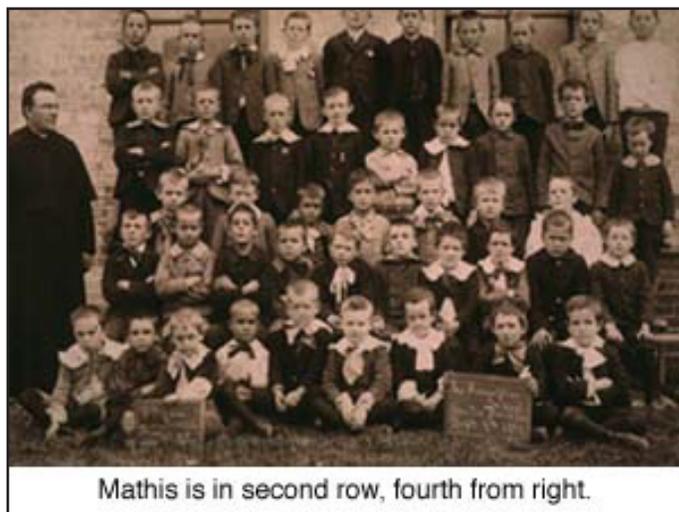


Marked with the Sign of Faith

Michael Ambrose Mathis was born October 6, 1885, in South Bend, Indiana, on the very doorstep of the University of Notre Dame. His parents, recent immigrants from Germany, lived in nearby St. Joseph Parish, staffed then, as now, by priests of Holy Cross. His early education was divided between Catholic school in South Bend, public school in Fitzgerald, Georgia, and St. Joseph's Orphanage in Lafayette, Indiana, where he was sent after his mother's untimely death.

With the encouragement of the orphanage chaplain, Michael entered the Holy Cross preparatory seminary at Notre Dame in 1901, at the age of 16. After making his final

profession of vows in the congregation of Holy Cross in 1907, and obtaining his bachelor's degree from Notre Dame in 1910, Mathis was offered an opportunity to study theology in Rome, but he confessed to his provincial superior that his heart lay elsewhere: he wanted to join the missions in Bengal. "Father," he said, "I've got the mission bug bad." And he would never get over it.





Mathis as a student at Notre Dame

Since he showed so little interest in Rome, he was sent to Holy Cross College in Washington, DC to study theology in preparation for his ordination to the priesthood in 1914. But even after ordination, the outbreak of World War I kept young Father Mathis from the missions after all. Still nourishing the hope that his chance would come, he agreed to stay in Washington, first studying architecture at The Catholic University of America, and then, when he confessed that he could not get excited about bricks and mortar, pursuing a doctorate in sacred scripture, which he completed in 1920 at Catholic University, Washington, DC.

Called as Missioner and Liturgist

But his studies never distracted him from what he would always call his "first love" -- the overseas missions. For twenty-five years, first as a doctoral student, then as a teacher of scripture at Holy Cross College, as mission procurator for the congregation of Holy Cross, and as founding superior of the community's Foreign Mission Seminary, Mathis devoted his abundant energies wholeheartedly to organizing every kind of support for the missions. In 1925, he also collaborated with Dr. Anna Dengel in founding the Catholic Medical Mission Society, better known as the Medical Mission Sisters, for whom he served as full-time chaplain from 1933-1938.

In 1936, while reading a copy of Pius Parsch's classic commentary *The Church's Year of Grace*, given to him by a respected colleague, Mathis underwent a conversion which surprised no one more than himself. Though he had always had a low opinion of liturgists, he found himself exclaiming: "This is the real stuff!" He later said of the experience: "I was converted to liturgy...and I do mean converted!" For the remaining 24 years of his life, especially after he was recalled from his beloved mission work in 1938, he re-directed his boundless energies to his second love: the promotion of the liturgy.



Mathis, as faculty member at Holy Cross College, Washington, DC.

Called as Teacher, Preacher, and Celebrant

He never forgot his long years of dedication to the missions, nor did he abandon his mission work without pain. From 1938-1941, he found himself torn between the two subjects he loved, missions and liturgy, but was assigned to teach neither in the religion department at Notre Dame. Those were dark years for Michael Mathis. He himself described their resolution: "I came to the conclusion that a man cannot give full time to two sidelines. Hence I chose what I thought was important on the missions as at home." The missions' loss was the liturgy's gain. Then in his 50s, Mathis was too old and too busy to become a true liturgical scholar, and too enamored of the liturgy of Pius X to become a true liturgical reformer, but he was tireless in serving both scholarship and reform out of an unshakable conviction that the church's liturgy forms the church's life.



Mathis, center, with Msgr. Martin Hellriegel of St. Louis, liturgical pioneer and longtime chaplain for the Sisters of the Precious Blood community, O'Fallon, MO. To the right of Mathis is a member of this religious community.

His guiding concern was catechetical: he was ardent in his commitment to the formation of the Christian consciousness and the Christian life of God's people through an authentic understanding of the liturgy. The Benedictine Godfrey Diekmann has characterized this relationship between liturgy and catechetics as one of the unique contributions of the American liturgical movement.

Mathis pursued that concern with characteristic enthusiasm, working from small, inauspicious beginnings through a multitude of important liturgical projects,

which would have exhausted many a person younger than he. When he was sent as chaplain to St. Joseph's Hospital, South Bend, in 1941, Mathis delighted in devoting all his spare hours, most of them late at night, to an earnest study of the liturgy and of its biblical and patristic sources. However, he soon came to the insight which was to animate all his later work: the liturgy must be not only well-studied but also well-celebrated to be fully understood.

Creating a Liturgy Program at Notre Dame

Mathis put this insight into practice in 1942 with his Vigil service, an adaptation of the Office of Matins celebrated in English in preparation for the Sunday Eucharist. He held the vigil with small groups wherever he could: in the hospital chapel, over the Aquinas bookstore, in the tiny firehouse chapel on the campus, until it gained respectability through the Notre Dame Summer School of Liturgy.

That, too, was Mathis' brainchild, and one of his most enduring contributions. In 1947, he badgered university authorities into allowing him to hold a summer session in liturgy. It was for

undergraduates only, and consisted of three courses: History of the Sacred Liturgy in the Latin Rite, Theory and Practice of Gregorian Chant, and a miscellany entitled Important Features of the Liturgy. By 1948, after working all one night to devise a curriculum to replace one rejected as "not academic enough," Mathis was given permission to launch a graduate school of liturgy, with these instructions from Notre Dame president, Fr. John Cavanaugh, C.S.C.: "Now, Mike, this must not be a one-horse affair. Go out and get the best professors and then get the money to pay for them."

Mathis obeyed Cavanaugh's instructions to the letter. Armed with funds provided by a former student of his, Michael P. Grace, he scoured Europe and the United States for the very best of the liturgical scholars. The summer faculty rosters he assembled read like a "Who's Who" of the liturgical movement. Pictured here are the 1955 faculty members: (l. to r.) Cornelius Bouman of Nijmegen, Holland; Fr. Mathis; Msgr. Martin Hellriegel; Gerald Ellard, SJ (teacher and author); Ermin Vitry; and Johannes Hofinger, professor of liturgy, evangelization and the missions. Boniface Luykx, the Belgian Norbertine priest, with his controversial views on confirmation, was a frequent visitor.



It is unfortunate that, in the 1940s and 50s, no one thought liturgists or the liturgy program important enough to merit a file of photos in the University archives, though the list is long and impressive: Joseph Jungmann, Louis Bouyer, Jean Danielou, Balthasar Fischer, and Godfrey Diekmann are only a few of the scholars who taught here.

Integrating Theory into Practice

Mathis insisted on academic excellence; however, even academics took second place to the celebration of the liturgy. The daily celebration of eucharist and the liturgy of the hours took pride of place in the Notre Dame program. Mathis was convinced that theory must be integrated into practice. He kept the program alive from year to year through his own dogged perseverance, despite the fact that few of his colleagues or confreres appreciated his work at first. They were not alone, in those days, in thinking liturgy an eccentric pastime for so capable a person. Until his health broke in the late 1950s, Mathis oversaw every detail of the summer school, from planning the program and hiring the faculty, to finding places to celebrate the liturgy.

As if that were not enough, he took on a number of other projects as offshoots of the liturgy program: Seminars for artists and architects, seminars for priests and seminarians, including



1953 photo of Mathis

a unique workshop held in 1956 to instruct them in the newly revised rites for Holy Week, and an important series of books. At the urging of Cavanaugh's successor as president of Notre Dame, Father Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., Mathis saw to it that the faculty's lecture notes for nine of the summer courses were either translated from their original languages, or transcribed and edited for publication. The University of Notre Dame Press published them under the general title of the Liturgical Studies. Among them were Jungmann's *The Early Liturgy*, Bouyer's *Liturgical Piety*, and Danielou's *The Bible and the Liturgy*, to name only three still in use as study sources today.

It is difficult to believe that the indefatigable Mathis found time for still other projects in the late 1940s and 50s, but he was always pursuing some new idea. Reversing his own earlier opposition to the use of the vernacular, he came to see the value of an English liturgy and played an important part in the translation and publication of the official American ritual approved by Rome in 1954 for limited use in the United States.



Mathis, blessing bicycles.

Leading the Way to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

Mathis also worked long and diligently from 1948-1956. It was at the National Liturgical Week sponsored by the Conference at Notre Dame in 1959 that Mathis made his last major public appearance. Still recuperating from a major heart attack, Mathis was brought to the conference in a wheelchair and could manage only a momentary appearance on stage. There, this small, now frail man standing with Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro, who had literally worn himself out for the love of the liturgy without any recognition for so many years, was greeted at last with the standing ovation he so richly deserved.



Six months later, exhausted by what a confrere called "his many years of overtime in the service of the Lord," Michael Ambrose Mathis died on March 10, 1960, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council where a number of the very scholars he had brought to Notre Dame over the years would author the Constitution on the Second Liturgy, promulgated in December 1963, three years after Michael Mathis' death.

Acknowledgements

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