Best known for his creation of the liturgical studies program at the University of Notre Dame, Michael Ambrose Mathis was born on October 6, 1885, in South Bend, Indiana. When his mother died suddenly in 1896, Mathis lived in an orphanage. There, a chaplain led Mathis to the Holy Cross preparatory seminary at Notre Dame. He professed his vows in the Congregation of Holy Cross in 1907 and was ordained a priest four years later on June 26, 1914.

After earning a doctorate of sacred theology in 1920 at The Catholic University of America, Mathis taught Scripture at Holy Cross College, the major seminary of the Holy Cross Fathers.

This teaching position, however, did not distract Mathis from his zeal for the missions, as manifested in several accomplishments. First, in 1915 he was appointed procurator for the Holy Cross missions and successfully found financial support for the missions. Second, Mathis was responsible for constructing the Holy Cross Foreign Mission Seminary in 1924, serving as its superior until 1931. Finally, in 1925, he, along with Dr. Anna Dengel, founded the Medical Mission Sisters.

Just when it seemed that mission work would continue to be his life apostolate, Mathis was reassigned to teach at Notre Dame. This was a providential move, as he had recently experienced a “conversion” to the liturgy. However, he continued to wrestle with the “mission bug” for the next several years, trying to devise better liturgical formation for missionaries. Nevertheless, Mathis began his study of the liturgy when he was named chaplain of Saint Joseph’s Hospital in South Bend in 1941; this post provided long nights for reading.

In 1946, Mathis proposed a liturgy program at Notre Dame. Always the maverick, he insisted on orchestrating each detail of this program. The program attracted the best names in liturgy for teaching positions and published the nine-volume Liturgical Studies series that included such classic works as Louis Bouyer’s Liturgical Piety, Josef Jungmann’s The Early Liturgy, and Jean Daniélou’s The Bible and the Liturgy.

“Liturgy isn’t just a science. Of course, it could be treated as such a subject in some universities . . . . But very few institutions have treated the subject not only as a science, but also as an art . . . . In other words, it would be like having chemical study or a study on chemistry without a few explosions. It would be like studying architecture without ever making a plan.”

(Quoted in Robert Kennedy, Michael Mathis: American Liturgical Pioneer, 14–15)

Mathis was more a pastoral workhorse than a trained scholar. His publications focused on several volumes of vigil services intended for preparation for Sunday Mass. Mathis believed that quality, prayerful preparation was needed for a restoration of the liturgy. In his words: “In these studies my chief concern will be to find out the special lessons the Church wishes to teach us in any particular Mass and the dispositions she desires to arouse in our hearts by the Proper, and then to suggest some practical ways by which these lessons and dispositions can be translated into action both at the Mass and throughout the day” (quoted in George Schidel, “‘Never Too Much’; In Memoriam: Rev. Michael Ambrose Mathis, C.S.C.”, 16).

Outside the confines of Notre Dame and his duties as a hospital chaplain, Mathis contributed to the work of the national Liturgy Conference and its annual Liturgical Weeks. In addition, he was charged, in 1953, to prepare and publish the new vernacular American Ritual, the sacramental handbook for priests. “His concern for solid scholarship,” writes Robert Kennedy, “for the restoration of the rightful place of Scripture, chant, and homily in the liturgy, for the accurate interpretation of the liturgical texts . . . sought to form the faithful in the true Christian spirit so that the liturgy could be an expression of their hearts and lives” (22).

After a series of heart attacks, Mathis succumbed to exhaustion and died March 10, 1960.