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FEBRUARY 2026 ISSUE

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THE MAGAZINE

## *Practical Prayer Habits*

*How to Pray More and Pray More Deeply*

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# ETP: The Magazine

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### What is The Empty Tomb Project?

*Empty Tomb Project:* The Magazine is a non-profit that exists to bring the reality and power of the empty tomb to as many people as possible. We are convinced that if men and women encounter Jesus as a real living person their lives will be radically changed.

We are an evangelization company that desires to bring relevant cultural and spiritual topics to our readers in an honest and fresh manner. We dive into topics that truly matter to people, themes that are brought up in people's homes as well as in church circles. We desire to bring uniformity in message and an increase in inspiration to Catholics across Long Island (and beyond).

Along with providing the most dynamic content we are committed to producing a product that is beautifully captivating to the eye. To do so we rely on the faithful designers at Startup Catholic so that the content can be amplified by the aesthetics of the magazine.

In order to reach as many people as possible with the critically important message of Christ we rely on donors in order to grow the mission and impact of our magazine. This will allow us to remain free and ensure that anyone who desires to meet Jesus today will have that opportunity. If you feel called to support us, please reach out via email: [EmptyTombProject@gmail.com](mailto:EmptyTombProject@gmail.com) and join us in the mission! You can also mail us a check using the envelope inside of the issue. All donations are tax deductible.

# Practical Habits for Prayer



By Thomas Griffin

If you are like me, winter can be a challenging time to pray. When the deep cold of winter sets the stage for Lent, the challenge is all the more real.

The winter months are cold and dark. They tend to be filled with inclinations to sleep in and remain under the covers rather than be moved to prayer. The darkness of the early mornings and early evenings tend to leave us more tired than normal as we stay inside for the majority of our day. It can too easily breed in me a desire to be lazy.

To combat these feelings in the early morning I have found that there are practical ways to make waking up for prayer a spiritual offering. First, I tell myself the night before that I will be waking up to give God a specific amount of time in prayer the next day. I try to do this every evening as I get into bed. This makes me more accountable to myself and allows me to make a promise to God about spending time with Him.

Second, I have found it very helpful to place my phone (alarm) in a place where I need to get up to shut it off. Too often I found myself turning my alarm off to snooze and I became easily distraught about how many days in a row I was not giving time to God in prayer. Moving my alarm made it that much easier to enter prayer because I was physically out of bed.

Finally, in my tiredness and in the darkness of my room I offer my desire to go back into bed and sleep for someone in my life who is sick or suffering in some way. This has been the most impactful practice. I began to see that the very act of getting up could be a sacrifice to aid someone else in need who was experiencing something much more challenging than being sleepy.

Even once the hurdle of entering prayer time is cleared, it can be especially difficult to feel like your prayer is “good enough” in the early mornings of the dark winter cold. To aid me in pushing through these moments I found solace in the words of the saints. St. Teresa of Avila once wrote, “When you find yourself dry in prayer, believe that God is working most in your soul, though you see nothing.”

The coldness of winter can also be experienced in the dryness (coldness) of prayer. St. Teresa reminds us that not feeling anything in prayer is normal but that it is also an invitation to lean into trusting that God is with us no matter what we are experiencing. Similar to training our bodies to wake up despite being tired, we can train our souls to be fervent in prayer even when it is challenging. This, in fact, can form the soil of a beautiful prayer life and devotion to spending time with the Lord no matter what.



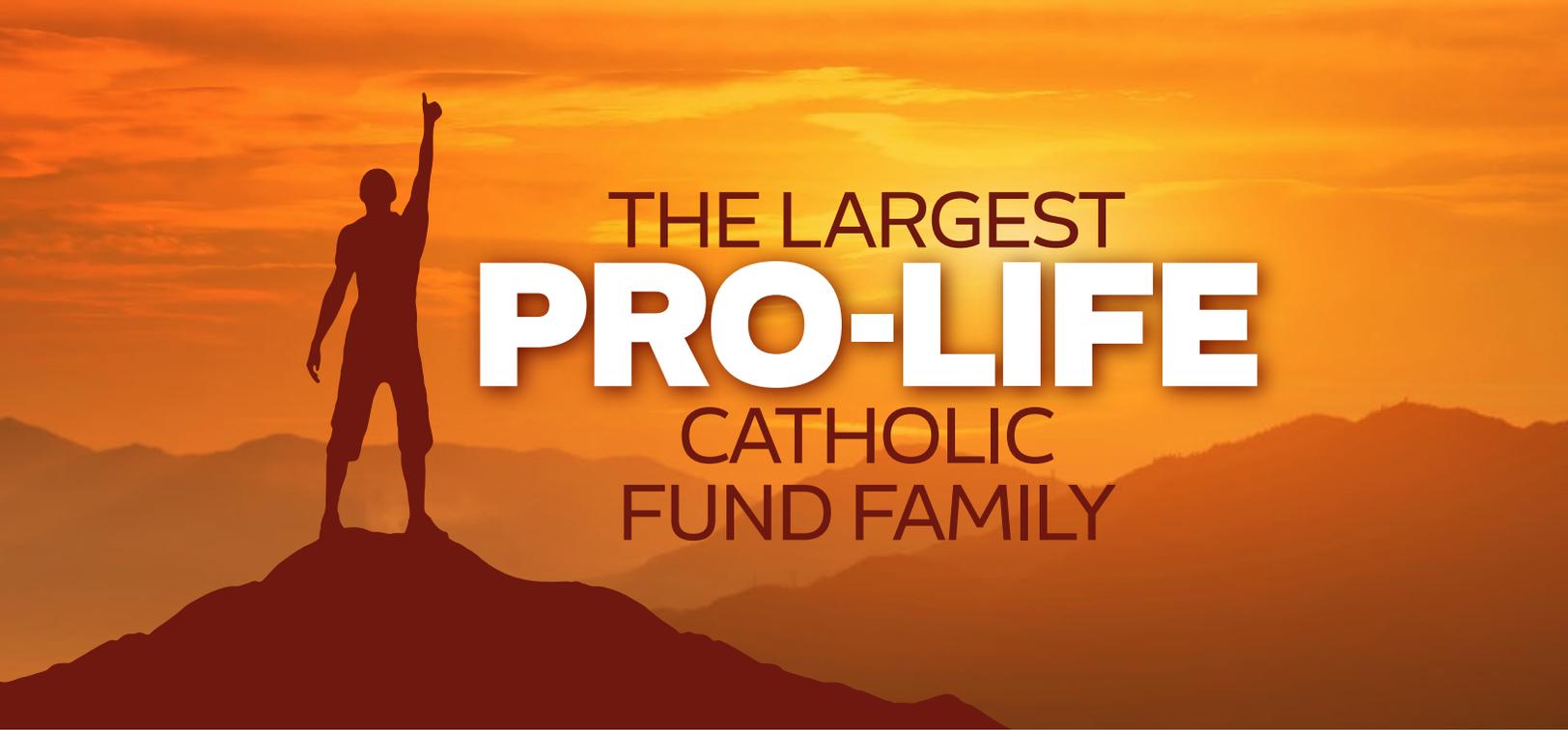
St. Paul of the Cross wrote about something similar, “When you are dry as dust in prayer, don’t quit, but keep going. Use little short prayers, especially acts of acceptance of the Most Holy Will of God” to guide you. His words here are encouragement for those who are tired and for those that meet hurdles in prayer to push through trusting that God’s providence is guiding us.

The focus on the will of God has been deeply profound for my own prayer because I have seen that dryness in prayer can too often result in my perception that my prayer needs to be different. Ultimately, in self-reflection, that is the result of my desire to control my prayer time rather than offer all of my heart and time to God, no matter the circumstances - even if those circumstances are not going as I desire them to.

To accomplish this surrender, a prayer of St. Thomas Aquinas can guide us to live out such an abandonment to the will of God. He wrote and prayed: “Grant me, O Lord my God, a mind to know you, a heart to seek you, wisdom to find you, conduct pleasing to you, faithful perseverance in waiting for you, and a hope of finally embracing you. Amen.” This prayer continues to direct me to focus most on God when I pray and it helps center me on the entire purpose of prayer in the first place: praise and worship of the real and true God of love.

For to know, seek and find God is ultimately His doing and a gift of His life into our soul. When we persevere through the dark and cold of winter and sit in waiting for God despite the challenges - we become more aware that it is not us who wait for God, but He who is always waiting to encounter us, no matter the cold, the season or the situation.

*Thomas Griffin is the chairperson of the Religion Department at a Catholic High School on Long Island where he lives with his wife and three children. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine. He is the author of Let Us Begin: Saint Francis’s Way of Becoming Like Christ and Renewing the World.*



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# Lent for the Rest of Us

By Mary Molloy



*“He raises up the poor from the dust;  
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.  
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s,  
and on them he has set the world.  
He will guard the feet of his faithful ones;  
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
for not by might shall a man prevail.”  
(1 Samuel 2:8–9)*

Growing up, Lent was my least favorite time of year. I was always told to give up things I liked and then to be happy about it. As a child who struggled with chronic illness, I especially resented giving up the small comforts that made my days bearable. A favorite show, music, or a sweet treat often felt like a reward for surviving a difficult study session or yet another doctor’s visit—appointments spent trying to find the right combination of treatments so I wouldn’t feel like passing out during the day. Losing those things didn’t feel holy; it felt deeply frustrating.

Whenever I complained about Lenten penances, my parents and teachers would assure me that they were “good for me.” They didn’t always explain why—or if they did, I was too frustrated to listen. I understood the idea of penance in theory, but in practice it felt like real pain without meaning.

As I grew older, especially in high school and college, I met people who seemed to thrive during Lent. They took on intense penances: sleeping on hardwood floors, cold showers every day, eating only rice and vegetables, cutting out all television or other comforts. I was inspired by their love for God and at the same time was discouraged. Because of limitations outside my control, I couldn’t do even half of what they did. I began to wonder if that meant I loved God less.

That comparison deepened as I encountered the lives of the saints and met some really intense monks. When I read about hermits living in the desert without running water or electricity, I quietly concluded that perhaps I simply wasn’t capable of loving God as well as they did. Everything began to change when I started being more honest with the Lord in prayer. As I began to pray with the lives of saints like St. Thérèse of Lisieux and St. Gemma Galgani, I slowly realized something freeing: holiness built only on my own effort is impossible.

I am too weak to fast on bread and water for forty days. I have too many allergies to live in the desert. I have too many responsibilities to live in silence for more than a few days at a time. And none of that disqualifies me from holiness. Holiness is dependence on God, receiving what He gives in each moment of my life with trust. I had been defining what holiness should look like instead of receiving the suffering and grace God was actually offering me.



During quite an unforgettable Lent in 2020 a series of events led to my hospitalization with sepsis. Lent became filled with doctors, surgeries, and hospital stays. I could no longer perform holiness. Instead, Jesus came quietly and humbly through friends who sat with me, priests who brought Holy Communion, heard my confession, and anointed me, and coworkers and parishioners who helped shoulder the financial burden of that struggle.

Just recently, after a major snowstorm, my apartment door froze shut. My neighbor and I tried for over an hour to melt the ice, but nothing worked. I finally gave up and told my job that I wouldn't be able to come in. Providentially, a coworker who lived nearby happened to pass through my neighborhood. He had the right tool to break the ice and offered me a ride to work while my car sat trapped behind a mountain of plowed snow.

As I prayed that day, still irritated by how helpless I felt, I sensed a gentle reminder from God: holiness is not a contest. It is the willingness to receive God with open hands. To live with open hands means letting go of self-reliance. Lent is a season where false tools are stripped away so that dependence on God can grow. Sometimes that means giving up comforts we rely on instead of Him: a habitual treat, constant noise, distractions that keep us from prayer.

But just as importantly, Lent invites us to add practices that draw us closer to God: reaching out to someone who is lonely, keeping granola bars in the car for someone in need, choosing gratitude over complaint. Lent is not about "roughing it." Lent is about making space, space to listen, to receive, and to trust that whatever struggle God allows can lead us to holiness. That struggle might be heavy: grief, illness, uncertainty. Or it might be small: inconveniences, interruptions, unmet expectations.

Either way, grace lifts us from the dust of pride and self-reliance and teaches us to rest in the joy of God's presence, even when the world around us feels like it is falling apart. Let this Lent not be about proving your strength, but about welcoming grace. Let it be a time to remove what blocks God's light and to receive, humbly and gratefully, whatever He offers to draw you closer to Himself.

*Mary Molloy teaches Religion at a Catholic high school on Long Island. She received her BA & MA in Catechetics and Theology from Franciscan University of Steubenville. She has spent the last 15 years in ministry both internationally and domestically. Her favorite thing is to serve the poor and spend quality time with her loved ones.*

# Strengthened by Heaven

By Aidan Weber

Each year I manage to convince myself that the Yankees can win the World Series. This time of the year is the pinnacle of false hope since the offseason provides new exciting player signings, speculative trades, and endless rumors, all of which fuel an irrational optimism. I spend too much time refreshing X (formerly Twitter) to see the latest rumors surrounding new players the Yankees might acquire.

Recently, I refreshed and saw a promising post that the Yankees had signed a player I deeply desired. My heart raced. I began to sweat and frantically searched for confirmation from trusted reporters. Hope surged as I typed the name of the most reliable analyst I could think of. But after digging through more credible sources, the truth emerged: the signing was fake. My brief moment of jubilation collapsed into disappointment. Everyone has an interest that can give them that source of jubilation. Maybe it's a singer releasing a long-awaited album or an actor starring in a highly anticipated movie. We hear the news, and it moves us to action.

Recently, I encountered a quote from St. Augustine that said “[In heaven] good will be so ordered in us that we shall have no other desire than to remain there eternally.” Naturally, after hearing heaven can fill all my desires and all the human heart longs for, one would expect that I'd drop everything, feel infinite jubilation, and spend the rest of my day reading about heaven. In reality, I brushed past it and continued with my day. Why does hearing all my hope being fulfilled not invite a larger response than hearing my hope for a team's championship might have slightly improved?

Two theories that plague us came to mind. First, it's not new news to us. The sense of awe may have passed by. Familiarity dulls wonder. We can fall into the same trap with the Eucharist. We should be in awe of receiving our actual Saviour but often it can become routine. This Lent, pretend you have just found out about heaven. Pretend you just found out that all your stresses will fade, your hopes will be fulfilled, and your only desire will be to stay.

Second, heaven feels distant. I fall into a trap of viewing heaven as a far-off place with no current effect on my life. Have you ever stopped to place yourself in heaven? We've all thought about heaven but have you ever placed yourself within heaven? Many

live with heaven as a far-off, fanciful concept, but it's a real place we all hope to go to. We will spend more time in heaven than on earth...by a lot. We are not made for earth but are made for heaven. Place yourself in heaven with your resurrected body. What do you feel? What do you see? What do you smell? Maybe you're wrong, but what you'll experience will be better. The point of the exercise isn't to be right but to acknowledge that heaven is a reality and a place we hope to spend more time in than we can imagine.

This Lent, be strengthened by the promise of heaven. During your Lenten observances be fueled by why you're doing them. As we look to Easter and prepare during Lent, remember that our whole life is a time of preparation for heaven and any sacrifice or trial is infinitely worth it because the reward is greater than what we can imagine. Heaven isn't just a reward for a good life, but a fulfillment of who we are. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states "Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness."

It's incomprehensible to worry more about any promotion, sports championship, or personal goal we set for ourselves than about the fulfillment of our ultimate end. As St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote, "How insignificant earth seems to me when I consider heaven." Whether we'll reach heaven should be on our minds more than anything else. All else starts to become less significant. Obviously, we must continue with our temporal striving but stress fades when we can be assured of a perfect future hope.

Finally, remain in awe of what heaven promises. Don't let routine statements we hear about heaven just pass by. It promises something greater than our intellect can comprehend. Stop and reflect every time you hear heaven is a fulfillment of our desires or will make us infinitely happy. When we're constantly gazing to heaven and remembering the promises of Jesus Christ's sacrifice and living a Christian life becomes far less taxing—and far more joyful.

*Aidan Weber is a Long Island resident who is currently studying theology at the University of Notre Dame.*

# Mary, the Model Disciple

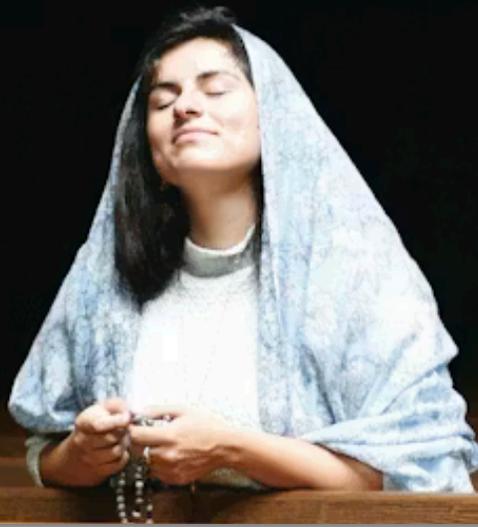
By Antonio Tufano

Growing up in the home of Italian and Latin immigrants, it wasn't uncommon for me to find at least one image of our Blessed Mother in almost every room. In my younger years, I never questioned her constant presence; to me, she was just always there. However, as I grew in the faith, I began to question why I always saw her. This isn't a unique experience; many people, both Catholics, Protestants, and non-Christians, may struggle with the preeminence Mary holds within Catholic spirituality.

The Catholic emphasis on Mary's role in Christianity can, in some ways, seem unbiblical to some. To start, she is only mentioned a handful of times throughout the four Gospels; without the proper context and understanding of these references, one can believe that she is solely significant because she gave birth to Christ. In many ways, however, not only are the various prayers and devotions towards Our Lady steeped in biblical allusions, but as we dive into the Scriptures, especially the Gospel of Luke, we see that everything we attribute to Mary is not only due to her, but it comes from the story of Christ's life itself.

In Luke's accounts of the "Annunciation" and "Jesus' True Relatives", we come to an understanding that Mary is not only a model of discipleship, but the preeminent model of discipleship through her reception and reactions to the messages she received. Luke intentionally positions her as a true disciple of Jesus—one who hears the word of God and keeps it (see Luke 11:28). In "The Annunciation", the angel Gabriel descended upon Mary and greeted her, referring to her as "favored one," ( Luke 1:28) a designation that conveys her unique relationship with God, and also highlights her readiness to receive His grace in a way that is unparalleled in the Scriptures.

Mary's discipleship comes into being when she gives "fiat", her wholehearted "yes", to God's words and plan. This act of surrender is not passive, but a profound expression of trust, courage, and spiritual receptivity, the core marks of a disciple of Christ. In Luke's account, she is graced precisely because of her willingness and readiness to accept God's will. Luke presents Mary as possessing the spiritual insight, given by God, to cooperate fully in His plan. In doing so, God elevates Mary as the model disciple, for she embodies all that we need to follow Christ.



Later in Luke's Gospel, we encounter Christ's teachings of his "true relatives." Christ's family is depicted as approaching the place where He is preaching. When it is announced that Jesus' family is calling for him, we see the adaptation that was made by Luke. In Mark, Jesus asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (Mark 3:33). To many who contest the role of Mary, this seems to be a blatant denunciation of Christ's biological family: Christ did not wish to show any kind of relation to his relatives (in fact, the Greek word used denotes the notion of cousin, not sibling). In Luke's account, however, this verse is redacted. Rather than have this denunciation, Luke moved forward to Christ's description of His true relatives.

Christ stated, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). This may seemingly be a denial of Mary; however, with Luke's addition of the Annunciation, we see that Mary has already heard the word of God and done it. She heard God's proclamation that she would bear the Son of God, and accepted it with her whole heart. She fits Christ's criterion exactly. Christ knows this and, therefore, cannot deny Mary as a relative in this episode. In this way, Luke preserves Mary's preeminence as the model and first disciple, as well as the integrity of Christ's teaching.

Mary not only hears the word of God and keeps it, but she ponders His works as well. There are two times within his Gospel that Luke describes Mary as "pondering them (those events surrounding her son) in her heart (Luke 2). Through this, Mary is not only an example of doing those things that God tells us, but also of pondering them (deeply considering and turning over in one's mind and heart all that God has done for us). We are to follow His will, but also think about it and come to a certain understanding of His work. We are to recognize that all that happens in our lives is God's work and that we are to see Him through it.

But why does Luke do this? Why does Mary matter? This literary and theological shift likely reflects the developing reflections of the early Christian community at the time of Luke's writing. The Christians of that time had moved further from the earthly ministry of Jesus and began to contemplate not only his life but the lives of those who followed him. Mary is the first among the disciples to hear the word of God and keep it, as stated before.

Not only is she the first, but the only disciple of Christ to keep God's will without fault. She gives her entire soul to God without doubt, giving Him perfect faith. The next time you see an image of our Blessed Mother (especially during the Lenten season), remember that she is not only there to watch over the owners of the image, but to serve as a reminder of how to be a true disciple of Christ with devout faith and trust. For this is the purpose of our entire Lenten preparation.

*Antonio Tufano is currently a junior at The Catholic University of America. At CUA, Antonio is studying Theology and History, as well as pursuing a Certificate in Pastoral Ministry. He hails from Mineola, New York. Antonio also pitches for CUA's varsity baseball team. After college, Antonio plans to teach high school theology and history, as well as pursue a Master's Degree in Theology.*

# Beauty and God

By Mike Sxhramm

Lent is a time to focus on Christ. It is the season of growth in spiritual life. A chance to make our faith more beautiful. It may strike some as unconventional to use the word beautiful to describe the Person of Christ. We tend to think beauty befits a landscape or a piece of art. Cultural conventions aside, humanity has an innate sense of the beautiful without always articulating its substance clearly. One gift of Medieval philosophy and theology was its focus on the essences of substances, including abstract and seemingly subjective ones like Beauty.

While the objectivity, and in consequence transcendence, of Beauty has been lost by many of the modern mind, the work of the Medievals, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, can help us recover this sense. Because Jesus Christ, whose divine nature carries within it the Cause and standard of Beauty itself, one can find within him the objective elements of as understood in the perennial philosophy and Christian theology.

## What is Beauty?

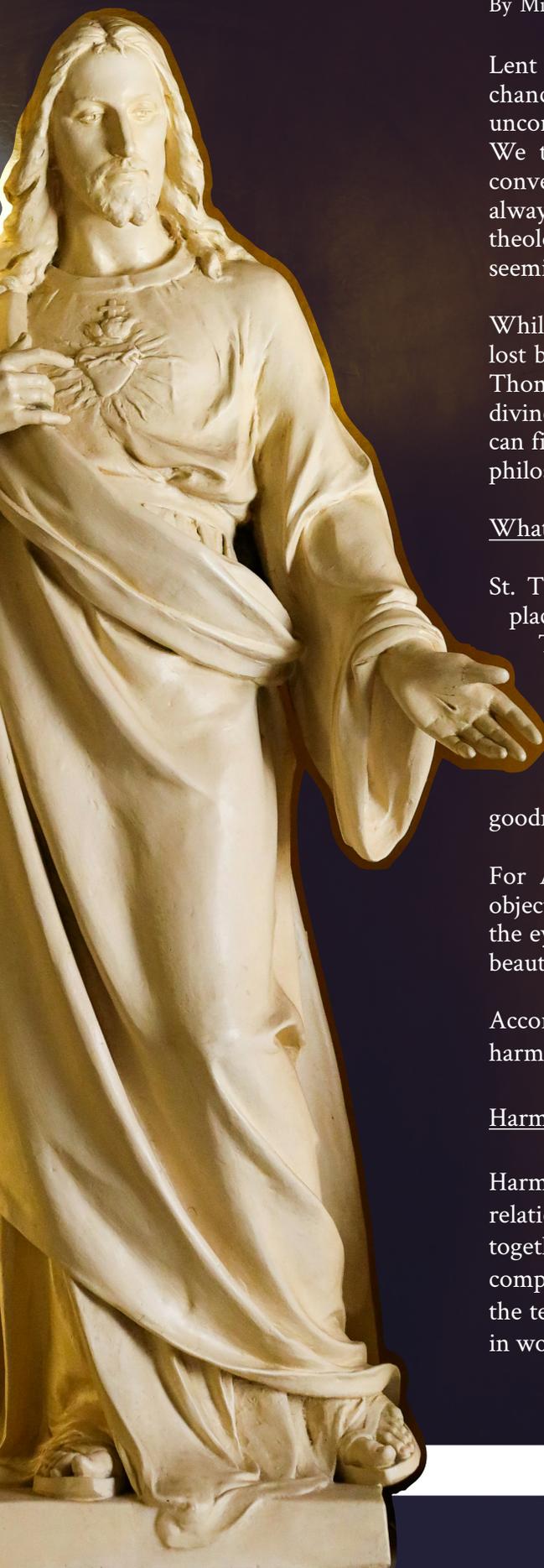
St. Thomas understood beauty as flowing directly from God's nature. He placed it among the "transcendentals," alongside goodness (*Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 5), oneness (I.11), and truth (I.16). These transcendentals are convertible with existence as such (ST I, Q. 16, A. 3). This clarifies that God is neither one object among others in creation nor identical with creation. Rather, God is the source and ground in which all things participate in being. This participation includes the material universe and invisible realities such as truth, goodness, and beauty.

For Aquinas, beauty proceeds from God's essence, and since God is an objective reality, beauty must also be objective. It is therefore not merely "in the eye of the beholder," dependent on personal preference or taste. Instead, beauty can be recognized through identifiable, objective features.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, these objective properties of beauty are harmony, clarity, and integrity (ST I, Q. 39, A. 8):

## Harmony

Harmony (Latin: *consonantia*) refers to the proper proportion of parts in relation to one another. It describes how the elements of something fit together as a coherent whole. We experience this when certain colors complement each other or when musical notes blend well together— hence the term "harmonizing." Visually, harmony is evident in symmetry, whether in works of art or even in the human face.





One finds harmony in the Person of Christ from his Beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” as peace is the result of the harmonious relationship of parts. In the case of human societies, we are the “parts” that must cohere around a common principle, namely justice. This is why many recognize that peace is a natural result of justice.

### Clarity

Clarity (Latin: *claritas*) refers to the radiance or intelligibility present in an object. It can be seen in the vividness of a pure color or the brightness of a clean, well-ordered space. Perhaps the most striking example is the contrast between the face of a living person and that of someone who has died. Clarity is how beauty communicates itself to observers. It is what allows art to convey its meaning and intention.

The most profound movement of clarity when considering the Gospels is seen at the Transfiguration. After Jesus brings Peter, James and John up Mount Tabor, “his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light” (Matthew 17:2). Here we see radiance emanating directly from the Source of light and life, both essential aspects of clarity.

### Integrity

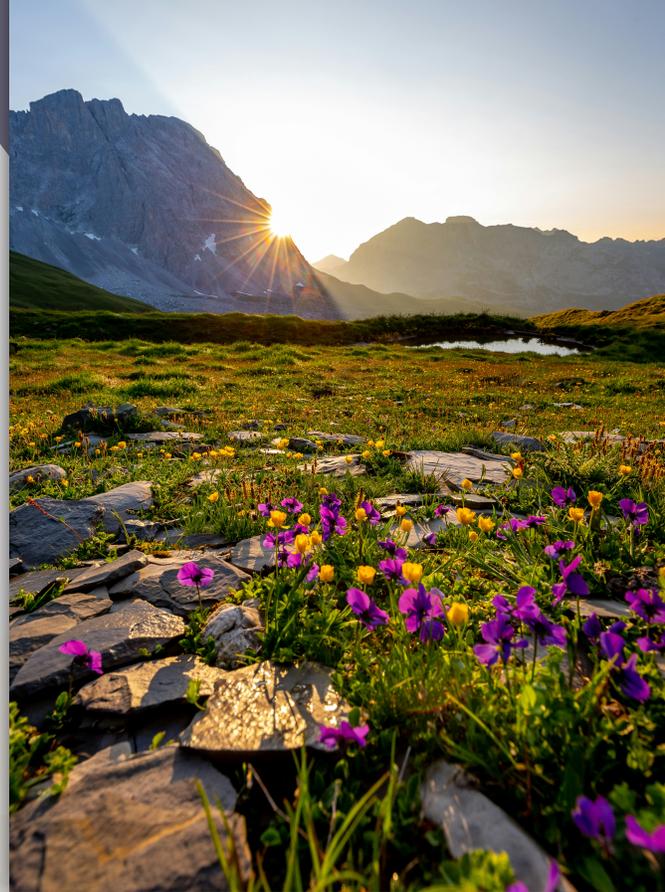
Integrity (Latin: *integritas*) refers to the completeness or wholeness of a thing. The parts essential to its nature are properly ordered. These parts function together and they also serve the essence of the whole. This depends on the object’s purpose, or *telos*, which determines whether anything necessary is missing. This goes beyond harmony, the first feature, because the parts must go beyond working together. They must also be drawn toward their common unifying principle, which is its *telos*. While we typically think of integrity in terms of morality, which is not untrue. Its moral component flows from a deeper metaphysical reality. Integrity describes how the disparate parts of a substance conform to its core, just as one’s words coincide with one’s actions.

That person is described as having integrity.

One can find integrity in the preaching of Jesus when he instructs us to “seek first the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33). When everything external to oneself is ordered around this core principle, “seek first,” then everything will be held together by that principle. Jesus shows this integrity in himself in John 6:38, when he declares that he has come to do “the will of the one who sent me.” Everything about Jesus’s ministry revolves around this integral point.

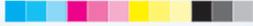
St. Thomas Aquinas recognized that God is the Source of beauty because God is the Efficient Cause of everything (ST I. Q 2. A 3). By understanding beauty St. Thomas would also understand a different aspect of God’s nature. By understanding beauty, St. Thomas could also recognize the beauty that is found more readily in the Person of Christ. When we understand beauty, its harmony, clarity, and integrity, we can recognize beauty more readily in Jesus Christ and in everyone else, including ourselves. As Lent begins, there is no better perspective to have.

*Mike Schramm is a theology and philosophy teacher living in southeastern Minnesota with his wife and seven children. He also is the managing editor of The Journal of Absolute Truth. You can also find his writing at Busted Halo, Deep Down Things, Catholic Insight, Catholic Exchange, and the Voyage Comics Blog.*



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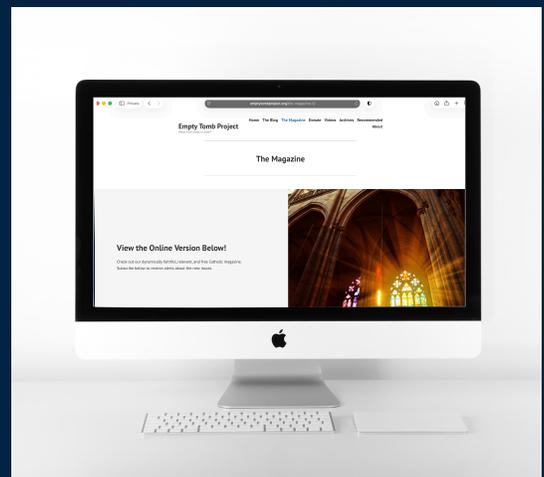
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St. Aidan's (Williston Park)  
St. Martin of Tours (Amityville)  
Our Lady of Lourdes (Massapequa)  
Our Holy Redeemer (Freeport)  
Our Lady of Hope (Carle Place)  
Our Lady of Grace (West Babylon)  
St. Martin's (Bethpage)  
Church of St. Joseph (Ronkonkoma)  
Our Lady of Lourdes (Malverne)  
St. Frances de Chantal (Wantagh)  
Blessed Sacrament (Valley Stream)  
Our Lady of Mt. Carmel (Patchogue)  
St. Francis de Sales (Patchogue)  
St. Joseph's (Garden City)  
St. Mary's (Manhasset)

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