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SEPTEMBER 2023 ISSUE

EMPTY TOMB PROJECT

THE MAGAZINE

The Church is Dying on Long Island?

Where We Are & Where We Need to Go



A Mom Goes Back to School



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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 a Catholic media 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 will always rely on the best Catholic designers (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 and join us in the mission! All donations are tax deductible.

MAJOR HEADLINE:

The Church is Dying on Long Island?: *Where We Are & Where We Need to Go*

By Thomas Griffin

The landscape of Catholicism in America is shifting. Long Island is no exception.

In 2022 the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University released a comprehensive study regarding Catholic life in America. There are 195 Catholic dioceses in the United States which contain over 16,000 parishes. There are a total of roughly 34,000 priests (diocesan and religious) in America with about 22,000 serving in active ministry. Over 3,200 parishes do not have a pastor who lives on campus.

In another study from 2019, CARA reported that there are two states that have shutdown more parishes than any other. "Pennsylvania has reduced its number of parishes by 532 since 1971 and New York by 500 during the same period." This does not include parishes that have joined missions underneath one pastor.

In 2022 we had an occasion where it was not parishes that were merging but two entire dioceses. The Diocese of Steubenville and the Diocese of Columbus, Ohio plan to merge after ongoing conversations about the future of the Church in their regions. This is the second merger of its kind with the first coming in Alaska in 2020. While the Ohio merger still awaits Vatican approval there is reason to believe that such a ruling is likely.

The fact of the matter is that Catholic parishes have to be either closed or merged because there are not enough practicing Catholics, priests, nor the funds to keep them open full-time. Simply put, the Church is responding to the decreasing importance that Americans place on faith. The future faith experience of Catholics in America, and on Long Island, will be dramatically different from what we have known in recent decades.

The Census Bureau estimated that there are 57 million Catholics in America, and according to the Georgetown study about 17% attend Mass every Sunday. These numbers show that over nine million Americans attend Mass on a given Sunday. When applying these statistics to Long Island, which holds over one million Catholics, there are around 150,000 Catholics who will attend Mass this weekend in one of our 133 parishes. This is a number that helps provide a gauge for Catholic life in our area.

The Christian faith, following Jesus and being a disciple, has never counted on a 100% retention rate. There were people who hated Jesus and his mission. That is why they nailed him to a tree and tortured him to death. That is why his closest friends and followers were murdered as well. However, Jesus is very clear that he desires for all people to come to faith, be baptized and be united with him in the Church. That being said, there are many cases in the Gospels where people reject Jesus rather than follow him (the Jewish elite, the young rich man, Pilate, the soldiers, the unrepentant thief, etc.). Some will follow, but many will not.



As the downward trend of parish life continues there must be an acceptance that this is the truth of where we find ourselves at this time in American history. Pretending like parishes can operate as they did fifty, thirty, or even ten years ago will lead to ineffective ministry efforts as well as financial deficits. Parishes need to re-imagine how they employ their staff as well as what ministries are most critical to give their attention to. Since there are less people coming through our doors, less money available and less priests than ever before there must be a hyperfocus on the essentials.

Since the most recent numbers of Mass attendance in America are actually closer to 15%, we need to blitz this effort. Parish schools, religious education programs, outreach initiatives, and anything else that is fundamental to parish operation must be moved towards a Eucharistic foundation and bring people back to the church on Sundays. Parishes are not secular non-profits: they are meant to create and form disciples who love Jesus Christ and desire to form a relationship with him that is lasting.

The parishes that do so will be the ones that faithful Catholics support with their presence, time, and wallets. They will be the ones remaining after the mergers and closures. In our self-reflection we must consistently ask, do we love the idea of the Mass time we attend or the idea of our parish more than the idea that we are called to a radical life-altering relationship with Jesus Christ as risen from the dead?

Despite the scary statistics there are still so many parishes, schools, and individual Catholics who are on fire with the faith. This simple fact is why there is hope amidst the flames that surround the Church. As long as there is one priest, there will be access to the Sacraments. As long as there are a few disciples, they will spread the message and power of Christ to the ends of the island.

Jesus only started with a few followers and they changed the world. Even though the Church needs to be repaired and given a revival we should not lose hope. In fact, we should be excited because he is calling you to change it. God can do it without you, but He does not want to. He has enlisted your name to bring about renewal in the Church on Long Island. So, let's get to work.

Thomas Griffin is the founder and editor-in-chief of Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine.



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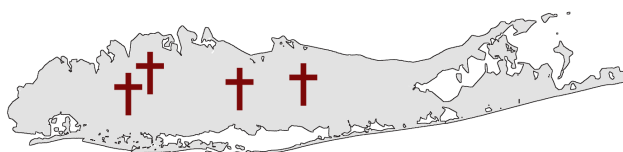
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Pray for Vocations

By Fr. John Crozier

It began with an invitation.

In the Fall of 2009, I was a junior at Kellenberg Memorial High School. I was also quietly discerning a vocation to the priesthood, although I hadn't told anyone. I spent a great deal of time involved with apostolic activities at Kellenberg – teaching in the parish religious education program, serving as a member of the retreat staff, and working in the campus ministry office (known as The ARK at Kellenberg).

While I never shared my discernment with anyone up to this point, I happened to find myself with an invitation from Bro. Michael Gillen, SM to attend a Holy Hour for Vocations on a Friday night at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington. While the prospect of going to a place that I had never been to before was intriguing, the fact that a bunch of my friends were also invited made the invitation appealing, and upon learning that a dodgeball tournament would follow the Holy Hour, we were sold.

Fr. Brian Barr, then Diocesan Vocations Director, had grown the Holy Hour for Vocations from a small monthly gathering to a large-scale Diocesan event, provided dynamic preaching, while musicians provided moving praise and worship music, all within the setting of the impressive and historic seminary chapel.

While many details have faded from my memory, what stood out to me the most was that I wasn't alone. There were hundreds of other high school and college students from across Long Island who filled the chapel. That October evening would be the first of many Friday evenings spent at the seminary, and over the course of a year and a half, I built up the courage to introduce myself to Fr. Brian and share that I was discerning a vocation to the priesthood.

Fourteen years later, I now serve as the Associate Vocations Director for the Diocese and have the privilege of overseeing the event that played such a crucial role as my discernment. While the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception is no longer the house of formation for our seminarians, it remains a vibrant retreat center and a building as rich with beauty and history. Just as Bro. Michael extended an invitation to me fourteen years ago, I want to invite you to join us as we pray for vocations – especially to the priesthood and religious life on Long Island, and maybe even stay for a game of dodgeball, too!

The Holy Hour for Vocations will take place on the third Friday of each month. Doors open at 7pm.

2023-24 Holy Hours for Vocations Dates: September 15, October 20, November 17, December 15, January 19, February 23, March 15, April 19.

Battle? Why Battle?

By David G. Bonagura Jr.

It is the most aggressive, most intrepid, most thunderous prayer in the Catholic tradition, and it takes no prisoners from its very first line: “St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle!”

What battle is this? Isn't Jesus supposed to be the Prince of Peace? And isn't Catholicism about love, not fighting?

Jesus is indeed the Prince of Peace, who will rule triumphantly over His creation when it is brought to fulfillment before the Blessed Trinity at the end of time. Then the Lord “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

But we are not there yet.

On Good Friday, Christ definitively won the war over sin and evil. As we pray in the Easter season, “By dying He destroyed our death. By rising He restored our life.” But, as if the news of Central Command's collapse has not yet reached the minions of Satan, pockets of resistance to the King of Kings hold out everywhere—first, in human hearts inclined toward sin, and, second, in our world that refuses to surrender peacefully to the King. This internal resistance—called concupiscence by the Church—manifests itself in multiple ways, according to St. Paul: “immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like” (Gal 5:19-21).

To fight these battles in our souls and in our world before Christ the King's return, we need martial reinforcements. Enter St. Michael the Archangel, whose feast day we celebrate, along with his fellow archangels Gabriel and Raphael, on September 29.

St. Michael appears twice in the Scriptures; both times, he is leading armies against evil. In the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel receives a vision of how the final battle between warring kingdoms on earth will be resolved: “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book” (Dan 12:1-2).

In the Book of Revelation, Michael again appears as the decisive leader in the cosmic battle between Heaven and the forces of evil: “Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him” (Rev 12:7-9).



An inescapable component of the Christian life is our struggles against sin within us and against evil looming in the world. In these travails we are never alone: St. Michael fights with valor alongside us. He reminds us that the Lord is close at hand, even if we do not see Him or sense Him. And with him we know that Satan does not have a prayer in this contest.

What are the weapons that St. Michael supplies as reinforcements? Again St. Paul supplies the list: “[L]ove, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

In one of the faith’s great ironies, Christians fight wars with the weapons of the Prince of Peace, the same ones He wielded in His sorrowful passion. Virtue defeats vice, holiness conquers evil, love overcomes selfishness.

As we pray for St. Michael’s intercession, let us remember that though the war is won, the battle for holiness rages as fiercely as ever—and other souls depend on our docility to the Holy Spirit to help them win their battles. Let us pray, therefore, in the beautiful words composed by Pope Leo XIII in 1886:

“St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle, be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him we humbly pray; and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls.”

*David G. Bonagura, Jr. teaches at St. Joseph’s Seminary, New York. He is the author of *Steadfast in Faith and Staying with the Catholic Church*.*



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Our Vernacular: In Transition

By Theresa Marino


The prefix “trans” means change.

Never before in my 12+ years of classroom teaching and youth group leadership have I been so acutely aware of how very many Catholic terms begin with the prefix “trans.” Transubstantiation, Transcendentals, Transitional Diaconate, Transfiguration, Transcendancy. My whole professional life has been one of teaching these core concepts as they relate to the events of Christ’s life, the nature of God, the Sacraments and divine intimacy through prayer. Since my task is to relay these highly complex ideas to middle and high schoolers, the standard approach has always been to break things down into more digestible pieces.

“Trans” means change, and “figuration” means shape or form... I’ve explained in simple terms to many groups of students concerning the fourth Luminous Mystery of the Rosary. But as years go by, this otherwise benign statement has garnered more and more giggles from the student peanut gallery. (For those in the reading audience who don’t frequent the company of adolescents, the sound of giggling is the bane of every teacher’s existence and signals an inner question something along the lines of: “What do they know that I don’t?”). What exactly do they imagine happened to Jesus in the presence of His apostles that day on Mount Tabor when He was transfigured?

As a teacher in the year 2023, I’ve had to develop a hyper-conscientious ear for how the minds who receive my lessons may interpret them in light of the “education” they receive outside my classroom. I’ve adapted my dissemination of terminology to provide needed context (through the full reading of a Gospel story, for example) - rather than just giving a list of vocabulary words - in order to paint an accurate picture in my students’ imaginations. If I were not to make this adjustment as an educator in response to the changing discourse of modernity, what God-forsaken ideas might my well-intentioned students leave my classroom with as a result?

As the old adage goes, “whoever defines the terms wins the argument.” At the moment, it seems the anti-Christian culture is winning the language argument on many fronts by appropriating Christian language for its own purposes. Terms like love, marriage, mercy, dignity and freedom to choose come immediately to mind as they - while inherently religious in nature and origin - are presently conflated with practices which thwart God’s design for human flourishing. Mercy (killing), (Death with) Dignity, the right to choose (to end life in the womb), love (is love). Who’d have ever thought that there would be a generation of minds to whom the words male and female would be given to any form of controversy? Our students, being vernacularized and habituated to a certain culture of godlessness often come into the religion classroom with preconceived notions of specific words which makes conversations which were once taken for granted as easy or uninteresting, difficult and increasingly provocative. Thus, the weight of responsibility upon our shoulders as educators of well-formed conscience and a certain age seems to increase the more that this discourse (d)evolves. For charity’s sake, I find myself prefacing discussions of such topics with clarifying statements such as “The world has one definition of the term we’re learning, and God has another. In my class, we will be discussing the latter.”

A person is shown in profile from the back, wearing glasses and a denim jacket. They are looking out at a bright, hazy sunset or sunrise. The background is a soft, warm glow of light, with some blurred greenery visible on the right side.

I'm not sure we can claim the struggle of refurbishing vernacular for Christ as unique to our times. However, it is certainly unique insofar as the souls who sit in each of our classrooms are unique. The souls to whom the task of formation has been entrusted to us at this exact circumstance in the history of the world are necessarily and by definition - unique to our times. Therefore, we teachers must be called upon to be very precise about the words we use in order to avoid unnecessary ambiguities. It is our duty as educators (and as adults generally speaking) to be the means by which young people don't get more circled up, but to be the means by which they learn to draw the unadulterated meaning of words.

The Latin root of the prefix "trans" means to go across. As summer concludes, those of us in educational fields are experiencing a difficult transition of our own; that of going across from a place of peaceful rest to intense expectation. We have expectations laid upon us by the state, by the diocese (in the case of Catholic schools), by the parents of our students, by our colleagues, by the culture we live in, by the bills we must pay at the end of each month. But also, by the Gospel of Jesus Christ which is "the same yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Saint Paul speaks firmly to the consciences of adults in positions of instruction, saying: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1).

Let's pray this September for those in teaching capacities, those in administrative capacities, those in ministerial capacities, those in roles which determine the regulations placed upon all of the above. So that for their own good, and for the glory of God, they may have the courage to conduct their classrooms and themselves in a way which befits the dignity of their profession and those who stand to benefit from it. May their efforts - both seen and unseen by the eyes of students - be conducted ever towards their ultimate end of Heaven and union with Christ, the Teacher whose words are always precise, always true, always living and affective.

Theresa Marino is a New York native who has served the Catholic Church throughout her twenties in various ministry capacities. Currently a middle school Religion Teacher, she has also worked in high school campus ministry, music ministry, mission work and parish settings.



A Mom Goes “Back to Catholic School”

By Emily Santos

Prior to becoming a wife and mother, I taught for seven years in public elementary schools. I loved working with my students, and although I couldn't pray *with* them, I often prayed *for* them on my way to school or on my drive home. I asked God to work through me so the students could encounter Him through me. However, I always felt as though there was a limit; I could live out my faith through my actions, but could not share Jesus by name with my students.

After my husband and I welcomed our first child, we made the decision for me to stay home and raise our son, and we had our second son eighteen months later. Being a stay-at-home mom was both harder and more fulfilling than I expected it would be. It was challenging to be in the thick of parenting 24/7. However, I wouldn't trade the experience for anything else in the world. What a privilege it was (and is) to be the primary teacher – alongside my husband – of the children that God entrusted to us.

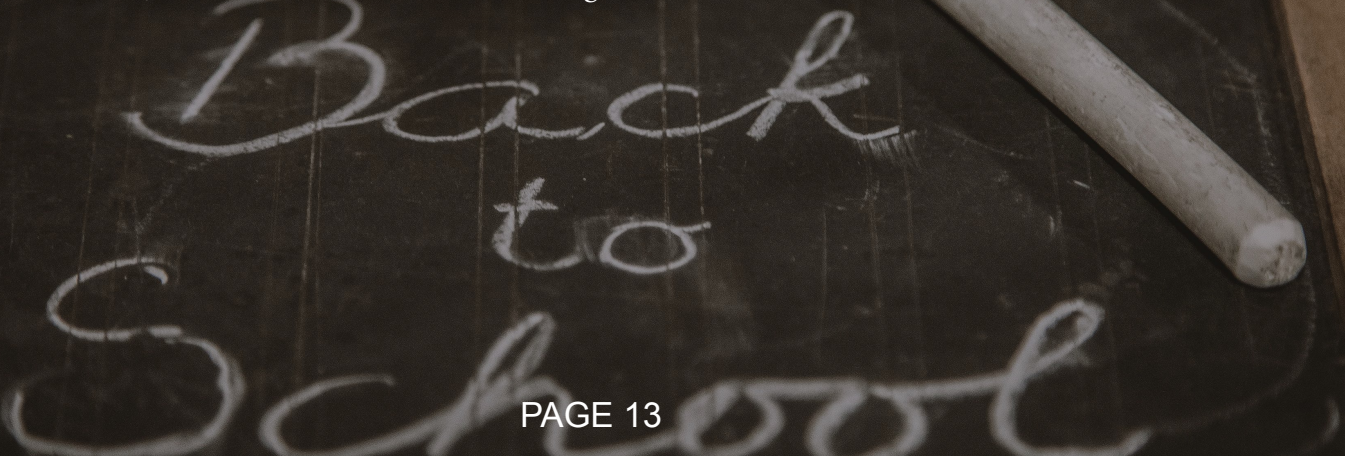
As our first son approached school age, my husband and I were faced with a weighty decision: how do we want our boys to be educated? In a world where we find ourselves constantly swimming against the current, how might we best ensure that our boys are exposed to truth, goodness, and beauty? How might they learn not only strong academics, but also the truth that God created them and has a purpose for their lives?

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

These were the last words spoken by Jesus to his disciples before he ascended into heaven, often referred to as the Great Commission. They are the marching orders for the Church, encompassing our mission: to form disciples. We, as the Church, are called to fulfill this mission every day. Beginning this September, I will face the task of carrying out the Great Commission in a way I have never done before: as a Catholic school teacher.

This past June, I learned that a position had opened up at the Catholic elementary school I'd attended as a child. Not only was there an opening, but it was for a position I had always wanted: academic intervention. I interviewed for the job and instantly felt at home in my childhood school. After discussing with my husband and praying for guidance as to the right decision for this school year, I was met with overwhelming peace that this was where our sons and I would thrive this year. In this role, I will be working with small groups of students to offer targeted support in reading and math.

While attending my new teacher orientation with my bishop I was reminded that I am not *just* a reading or math teacher in a Catholic school. Working at a Catholic school means that I am a religion teacher. What a joy it will be to speak freely of Jesus, our Blessed Mother, and the saints. I will be given the chance to pray with my students, to go to Mass with them, to remind them of God's unending love.

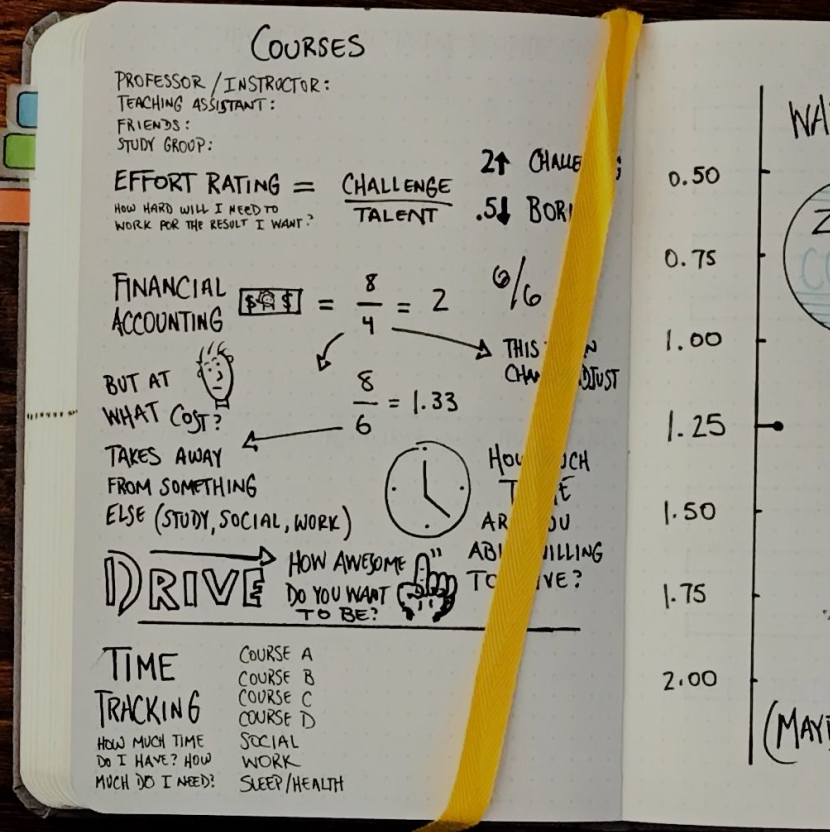




I have also been reflecting upon another way this teaching experience will be different. It is the first time I'll be teaching as a mom. Previously, I could only try to imagine the preciousness of each of my students in their parents' eyes. Now, I have experienced the depth of a parent's love for their child and it has given me perhaps a bit more of an idea of God's love for them as well. I also understand that parents truly are their children's primary teachers, and that as a school teacher, I am simply a partner with parents in their children's education. I am excited to work alongside parents to help the children reach their fullest potential.

I want my students to excel in academics. But moreso, I want them to know the love of Jesus and to become His disciples. By teaching the truth, helping students to grow in virtue, and introducing them to the person of Jesus Christ, I pray that I can help them draw ever nearer to the ultimate destination for their lives: heaven.

Emily Santos lives with her husband and two young sons in Rochester, NY. After seven years as a public elementary school teacher and five years as a stay-at-home mom, Emily is thrilled to step into a new role as the academic intervention specialist at a Catholic elementary school.



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TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ISSUE:

1. SAVE THE CHURCH, FOLLOW HIM.
2. ST. MICHAEL AIDS US IN REAL BATTLES.
3. GOING BACK TO SCHOOL MEANS WE PREACH CHRIST.
4. PRAY FOR VOCATIONS.
5. TRANSITION WELL.

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