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DECEMBER 2023 ISSUE

EMPTY TOMB PROJECT

THE MAGAZINE

*God is Tiny and
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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 (StartupCatholic) 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:

God is Tiny and We Need Rescue

By Thomas Griffin

Ever been in a situation where there was absolutely nothing you could do to make your circumstances better? Ever felt helpless and completely unable to bring about change in the life of a loved one or in your own life?

I would imagine that people who have been rescued from a burning building by a firefighter or rescued from a violent storm at sea by a lifeguard have felt that way. In their minds, it was all over. There was no way out and they were stuck. No matter how hard they tried or how hard they pressed forward their circumstances appeared unchangeable. They were helpless. They were lost.

Many Catholics today decry that the culture, and many aspects of our country, are crumbling. Morals and faith appear to be at all-time lows. Even if some people had their elected officials win political races and even if some laws changed there would still be so much broken in our times. There are no easy fixes to the brokenness of the human condition.

The reality of the times of the Jewish people who lived during Jesus' life were immensely worse than our current age. Forget about all of the modern comforts we have like running water, medicine and sanitation. Forget even that their land was occupied by a foreign and oppressive power (the Romans). The Jewish people of Jesus' time, and their ancestors, had faced seemingly insurmountable odds for thousands (not hundreds) of years.

We think that Americans have it bad because of a few years of strife - imagine if our families had experienced that and thousands of years of oppression on top of it? Imagine the sense of hopelessness and despair that so many would succumb to? They must have felt helpless. They must have believed they were trapped with no way out. Some might have convinced themselves that life is just something that we have to "get through" or endure.

Except for one important factor - a promise. A promise that arises over 300 times in their sacred book. That God would come and set things right. That an individual person (the Messiah) was going to be sent on a rescue mission for the heart of every single human being who has ever lived. With the birth of Jesus Christ, God enters time to make good on His promise to save us when we could not save ourselves. He came to give hope to the helpless.

For someone who has never experienced something that is out of their control, or anyone else's, to fix this might not make sense. However, for the majority of us we know what it is like to have zero power over a loved one's illness or paying your bills or troubling family dynamics. When we cannot save ourselves we must turn to Someone bigger than ourselves.

So, we need to be rescued. But what is even more important is how God chooses to rescue us. As one of my favorite songs of the season called *Winter Snow* by Chris Tomlin notes:

*You could've come like a mighty storm
With all the strength of a hurricane
You could've come like a forest fire
With the power of heaven in Your flame*

*But You came like a winter snow
Quiet and soft and slow
Falling from the sky in the night
To the Earth below*

*Oh, You could've swept in like a tidal wave
Or a big ocean to ravish our hearts
You could have come through like a roaring flood
To wipe away the things that we've scarred*

*But He came like a winter snow
So quiet, so soft, so slow
Falling from the sky in the night
To the Earth below.*

God becomes so close to us that we can miss Him. He becomes an infant who is completely dependent on his parents for life. In becoming so small, God gives us access to Him in an intimately powerful way. He could have come with an army of force and He could have easily crushed all opposition, but He comes as a baby.

Even in 2023, God still comes to be with us but He continues to do so in a very small and simple way. Every Sunday, Catholics all over the world gather in churches where they believe that a tiny piece of bread is Jesus Christ - His true and living Presence. Just like that first Christmas Jesus makes no worldwide public service announcement. However, we believe that the key to this life exists in that small and unimposing little Host. We believe that if you hand Him what is most troubling you that He will provide you with the answer. The answer is His unflinching and loving Presence.

This Christmas, become fascinated by the majesty of our God who comes to pull us out of the fires and storms of our lives, especially the ones that we cannot save ourselves from. But pay close attention to the small and seemingly insignificant ways that He chooses to do so. And, if you want to see the manger of Bethlehem continued - never miss Sunday Mass.

Thomas Griffin is the chairperson of the Religion Department at a Catholic High School on Long Island where he lives with his wife and two sons. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine.



CATHOLIC CEMETERIES OF LONG ISLAND

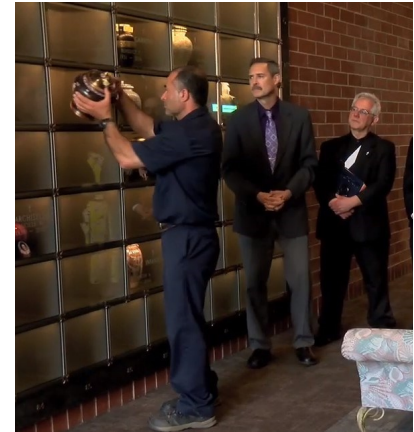
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CREMATION AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Cremation is becoming increasingly popular among the broad population, Catholics included. Many people do not realize that cremation is permitted for Catholics as long as it is not chosen in denial of Christian teaching on the Resurrection and the sacredness of the human body. When cremation is chosen, the full course of the Order of Christian Funerals should still be celebrated, including the Vigil Service (wake), the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal. The preservation of this order allows for the greater expression of our beliefs and values, especially, the sacredness of human life, the dignity of the individual person and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Church teaching insists that cremated remains must be given the same respect as the body, including the manner in which they are carried, and the attention given to their appropriate transport and placement. The cremated remains of a body are to be buried or entombed, preferably in a Catholic cemetery, and using the rites provided by the Order of Christian Funerals. The following are not considered to be reverent dispositions that the Church requires: scattering cremated remains, dividing cremated remains and keeping cremated remains in the home.

Over time, families do not always immediately select a final resting place or schedule a committal service for cremated remains. If you are among those who may still have your loved one's cremated remains at home, now is the time to complete the process and ensure a safe, respectful final resting place. With Catholic Cemeteries of Long Island, your loved one will be in a place that reflects their Catholic beliefs and values, a place that reminds us that death is a step to a new and eternal life with the risen Lord.



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Notice Him

By Isabel Hogben

The human brain is in a constant state of noticing. If we focus, we can see the slightest change of expression, hear the tiniest shift in tone, taste the most minuscule of alterations (a pinch of salt!), and feel the smallest adjustments of temperature and pressure.

But we choose what we perceive. The Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, also known as the frequency illusion, explains this. When we focus on something, we begin to see it everywhere. The most popular example is with red cars. Start thinking about red cars; every parking lot and major highway will suddenly be chock full of them.

The applications are endless: focus on the good, and it will soon surround you, focus on opportunities, and they will abound. So, what do you notice?

This Christmas season, it might make all the difference.

Look at your Christmas tree. Newly installed and not yet decorated. What do you notice? Your to-do list or maybe it is the dragging down of boxes of ornaments from the basement, hours of decoration, time that you don't have, potential shattered glass, scattered pine needles in need of sweeping? Or do you see a physical sign of Advent, an expectation of the birth of our God? You hear Silent Night on the radio: does it spark prayerful recognition of the birth of our Savior – or does it coronate thoughts of “this is Aunt Deb’s favorite song, I have to prep the guest room for her today, the linens, the towels, etc.”

These earthly considerations are not wrong, but they distract us from Who should have our focus. Simone Weil wrote that “attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer.” Noticing God is a form of worship, and what we notice can tell us what we worship. If we're truthful about where we place our attention, our true loyalties and authentic gods are revealed.

During the hustle and bustle of a distinctly Christian season, God calls us to notice Him. He plays a daily Marco-Polo with our busy souls, egging us on to call and respond. Nowhere better are God's calls and our response demonstrated than through the story of the Magi.

Matthew's Gospel's nativity focuses intently on these three wisemen. Not only are these men learned, they are master-observers. They were the first to notice the star of Christ; the star that prophesied His birth.



Christ's star appears to us, too, in our daily lives. It extends beyond Bethlehem and Year Zero. This same bright globe floats, luminous and calling, in the night sky of our lives, but only the trained eye, the eye looking for light and for God amid an expanse of darkness, will see its shine.

The Magi notice Christ's star "at its rising" and immediately respond to God's call, which still echoes throughout the ages. They pay him homage (Matthew 2:2) with gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and also, with attention. They choose to notice him.

But how can we notice God more often? Or even without ceasing?

Fr. Joseph Muntadas in his writings on St. Josemaria Escriva's idea of "plan de vida" (plan of life) provides an example. Living in the awareness of Christ, he writes, is like being a mother who lives in awareness of her child. She "walks around the house with eyes and ears attentive to the cradle." As a mother lives distinctly in the presence of her child, we must live distinctly in the presence of God: noticing Him in his invisibility, quieter than a cry and in his star, subtler than a shriek.

To notice God more, let us follow the lead of the Magi. When called, we must spiritually journey (Matthew 2:2), behold Christ (Matthew 2:11), rejoice (Matthew 2:10), pay him homage through the gift of our attention, and depart from our encounter transformed, forging a new and different path, like the Magi did on their return to Jerusalem (Matthew 2:12).

Isabel Hogben is a high school junior and Catholic writer. She's won multiple writing awards and has been published in Portsmouth Abbey School's The Beacon, The Rye Record, The Free Press, and quoted in The New York Times. She lives in Rhode Island.



Make the New Year Count

By Theresa Marino

You are going to die. Not the most traditional of mantras for this cheerful time of year. We may be more at ease saying things like “Treat yourself, it’s the holidays!” or “May your days be merry and bright!” But when we speak of making a new year count, there is nothing that motivates like calling to mind the 100% mortality rate of human beings. Despite how fragile we know life to be in principle, we all tend to act day to day like we’ll have endless chances to forgive, to get in shape, to travel, to work less, to smile more, to get right with God. This New Year’s resolution didn’t stick? Well, there is always next year!

According to the records of Database Earth and the PRB (Population Reference Bureau), there was no next year for 2,912,402 Americans who made New Year’s resolutions last January 1st, 2023. An estimated 10-15% of those deaths were sudden or unexpected. Transportation accidents, falls, fires, drownings, heart attacks, blood clots and unexpected late-stage medical diagnosis are among the most common sudden death incidences. We all know a colleague, a cousin, a friend or an acquaintance who has received this type of news in the last calendar year which has rocked their world. We have all heard the tragic stories of suicides and overdoses in our neighborhoods, churches and school communities. We’ve all sung along to the country songs which remind us that the best way to live is to “live like you were dying” (Tim McGraw). Death instantly puts our priorities in perfect perspective. We know this, and yet when it happens around us, we are never quite prepared. Would you be surprised if this New Year was your last?

As Catholics, we shouldn’t be. In the Mass readings leading up to the season of Advent, we hear the Lord remind us again and again to “watch,” “stay awake” and “be ready” because death will come like a thief in the night. When we pray the Hail Mary, we invoke the intercession of Our Lady “now and at the hour of our death.” From ancient times, all the greatest saints made some daily spiritual practice of calling to mind the possibility of their own death. In Latin, this is called Memento Mori and it means; remember your death. This reminder made them more alive, not less.

It is a good thing Christmas comes just before New Years! Jesus is born into the darkest of places precisely that he may shine light into them. He is born into the most dire of circumstances precisely so that he might encourage us that there is no depth we cannot conquer with his help. What if our most important resolution this year was to live in a deeper relationship with God?

Let January 1st, 2024 be the day you take your first step in that direction. Let every day after be another step towards that ultimate goal of a “happy death.” Doing so will allow us to live our best and happiest life. That is, after all, why God came to live among us...to show us how to live life to the full.

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.

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Slow Down in 2024

By Thomas Griffin

Everyone you talk to appears to be rushing around attempting to accomplish the insurmountable each week. Calendars are filled with countless activities and events that need to be attended and planned ahead for.

This is especially true for families who have younger children. The pressure put on parents for their kids to join multiple sports teams, play instruments, and go to parties has become a phenomenon that is crushing family life. Parents have the desire to provide their children with great experiences that will form them into great young people and adults one day. As a dad of a three year old and a one year old most of these busy calendar events are in my near future. Even though life already seems very chaotic.

One recent and honest question for my wife and I is: what is the cost of living such a busy life?

Time is not unlimited. We have to make choices with how we will spend it. If time is spent doing something that means there is something else that must be sacrificed for it. It seems to me that the first to go is dinner as a family and one-on-one time with our kids. As we begin a new year I know I need to reflect on that.

Pope St. John Paul II once said, "as the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live." Every single person is born into a family because God knows that we are not meant to live alone. The manger scenes at Christmas convey this deep truth. The communion that a family shares makes us like God, who is literally an eternal family of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

According to several studies nearly 90% of parents state that they believe that eating dinner together as a family is critical for the health of their children and their family dynamic. There is a reason why Jesus spent so much time sharing meals with people. However, in today's world under 50% of dinners are eaten together as a family in America. That means there are about 180 days a year that families do not eat together.

Instead families are running around to a variety of events for their kids or parents are simply working later and later. Dinner time is so pivotal because it is the place where families are able to share their company and their day in an uninterrupted and (hopefully) screen-less way. Looking at each other in the face and making personal connections about the joys and struggles of our day binds families together.

In 2024, slow down - eat with your family.



The immensity of events on the calendar also means that children spend less overall time with their parents and siblings. Now it is healthy and necessary for kids to be with others their own age, but is it possible that kids are less formed in their character today because the importance of faith and parental formation is diminished? Parents are not the friends of their children. They love them but they are called to parent them not befriend them. Implementing time for dads to be alone with one of their children and moms to be alone with one of their children breeds a relationship of uniqueness but it also brings about a more motherly and fatherly relationship.

Children desire to be led and they strongly desire alone time with their parents. So, in 2024 let's slow down and spend time with them because, sooner than later, they will be out of our homes and our relationships with them will be radically different.

In order to accomplish either of these tasks we must commit to slowing down. There is no other way. In order to slow down I know that I need to evaluate what we do as a family and what we might need to step away from in order to become a healthier and stronger unit. Everything that we choose to walk away from will be a sacrifice but the rewards and benefits will be beyond our estimation.

So, is your life too busy? Are you ever able to slow down and simply spend time with your loved ones? What are the activities or work engagements that you can step away from?

Answering those questions will allow us to become more present to the ones that we know are most important to us. Who knows, if enough families do so we might even change the world - families have the capacity to do so.

Thomas Griffin is the chairperson of the Religion Department at a Catholic High School on Long Island where he lives with his wife and two sons. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of Empty Tomb Project: The Magazine.

NEW YEAR Resolutions

A Grinch Lesson

By William Conboy

What is the meaning of Christmas? Everyone has heard that question asked at least once before. However, it is one that needs answering now more than ever. Christmas to the world has become nothing more than a winter celebration, but it is so much more than that.

The classic Grinch movie chose to tell its audience what Christmas isn't so they could better understand what it is. The Grinch with his small hardened heart hated the toys, decorations, and joyful singing of Christmas. He was so envious of the happiness people found in it that he wanted to shut the whole celebration down. He closed his heart off to the joy it could offer and hoped he could stop Christmas by stripping it of its new material nature.

However, in his quest to ruin Christmas the Grinch made a critical error. He looked at it in the eyes of the world. He stole every decoration and toy because he thought those were the source of the people's joy. All he saw was the physical. And yet when Christmas morning came the town still sang joyfully, even without all their things. If all the gifts and decorations were stolen from my house on Christmas Eve I don't think I'd be very happy, but if they were taken it wouldn't diminish the beauty of Christmas. That is the lesson being taught here.

The Grinch realizes, "maybe Christmas...doesn't come from a store." Maybe it comes from one of the greatest moments in history instead. It comes from the moment that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

As wonderful as gifts might be, physical things can never fulfill us. The true cause of our joy is not the presents but Emmanuel, God with us. God alone is capable of giving us joy everlasting and the beginning of this joy is found in Christ's birth. The critical importance of Christ's Incarnation cannot be emphasized enough.

As St. Gregory of Nazianzus, a Church father, said, "What has not been assumed has not been healed." Christ assumed our humanity in all things but sin so that God could rescue us. That redemption began with His Incarnation. The fact that God "emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men," was and is revolutionary (Phillipians 2:7). The Creator of the universe in order to redeem us and to empathize with us took flesh and lived a life like ours. This fact is what should animate our great joy during this holy season.

I am the first to admit, it's easy to convince yourself that material things are all that matter when it comes to how Christmas is treated these days. To the stores it is a commercial holiday and I like receiving the gifts that come from them. Today we are all tempted to look to lesser things for our happiness whether it be prestige, money, or food and drink. However, these mere objects can never satisfy the longing of the human person.

Pope Francis once said, “whenever material things, money, worldliness, become the center of our lives, they take hold of us, they possess us; we lose our very identity as human beings.” Relying solely on the material for our happiness is to rely on something that will never be enough. In fact it is to rely on something below our humanity.

St. Augustine gave the famous quote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” The human heart longs for God above all else and that is our gift at Christmas: God is coming for us.

So we understand why we should be joyful as witnesses to this mystery, but what about those who do not understand? The Grinch hated seeing the Christmas festivities but when everything was stripped away and he saw that Christmas was still celebrated his heart grew. While that may just seem like a warm and fuzzy plot resolution, there is a truth there.

Joy, happiness and hope can change hearts. Many people today look at Christmas in a way that is completely divorced from Christ. I see that as people put up Christmas trees and lights at my secular college. They want to celebrate something but what they celebrate is merely “the holidays” with the true meaning obscured. However, this type of celebration will never come close to the peace a Christian finds in truly celebrating Christmas. The beauty of a reverent midnight Mass, of a nativity scene and old fashioned Christmas carols calls people to the deeper reality.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, the famous Russian novelist, once said that beauty will save the world. I would add that joy also will save the world and that the perfect fusion of beauty and joy is found in the Christian celebration of the Incarnation. When people come across that joy they can’t help but at least mimic it. Deep down everyone has a desire for the true meaning of this holiday. By celebrating it in goodness and truth we can evangelize those who may not yet understand, but want to.

Who knows? Maybe we could even grow the hearts of the Grinch’s around us and inside of us.

William Conboy is a Long Island native and lifelong Catholic. He worked as a catechist during high school and is currently in undergraduate studies for a degree in journalism.

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