We suffer the loss of Father Michael Thomas Morris of the Order of Preachers, not simply because he was an exceptional son and brother...Dominican friar, priest, and teacher...author, artist, and friend, but because he was onto something that we cannot live without.

I.

It’s the subject of Pope Saint John Paul II’s 1999 Letter to Artists, which must have been the cause of some euphoria for Father Michael when it was published, since that letter expresses the very substance of his superlative heart.

Saint John Paul wrote: “This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair.”

Back in the 5th century B.C., the philosopher Plato said that it is beauty that draws our heart out of accommodation with daily routine, and that keeps it from decaying into nothingness.

Beauty possesses the power to overcome our crippling resistance.

Monsignor Luigi Giussani, Servant of God, once remarked: “The motivation for saying ‘yes’ to something that comes into our life, defeating all preconceptions, is beauty.”

II.

Even more—there is a direct link between the beauty of art and the human longing for God.

In that Letter to Artists, Saint John Paul tells us:

Art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. Insofar as it seeks the beautiful,...art is...a kind of appeal to the mystery.... True beauty...open[s] the human soul to the sense of the eternal.... Beauty...stirs that hidden

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1 #11
2 1998 Fraternity Exercises, p. 16
nostalgia for God.³

John Paul’s successor, Pope Benedict XVI, was to echo this:

Art is capable of making visible our need to go beyond what we see, and it reveals our thirst for infinite beauty, for God.⁴

And the current Holy Father, Pope Francis, himself adopts the theme:

Every expression of true beauty can...be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus.⁵

Why such unshakeable conviction about the religious potential of art and beauty?

The French playwright Jean Anouilh said it best: Because “beauty is one of the rare things that do not lead to doubt of God.”

III.

But the question is: Where can you find a person who takes the evangelical power of beauty seriously?

That is why God raised up Dominican Father Michael Thomas Morris.

Father Michael was tuned in to a truth well expressed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger:

The Church is to transform, improve, “humanize” the world—but how can she do that if at the same time she turns her back on beauty, which is so closely allied to love? For together, beauty and love form the true consolation in the world, bringing it as near as possible to the world of the Resurrection.⁶

With ominous foreboding, the great 20th century theologian Father Hans Urs von Balthasar warned that “whoever sneers at [beauty’s] name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past...can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love.”⁷

Ratzinger goes one step farther in a statement some may find shocking: “A theologian who does not love art, poetry, music, and nature can be dangerous.”⁸

That is the reason why, for us, Father Michael Morris—true son of Saint Dominic and true

³ #10, 16
⁴ General Audience 2011
⁵ Evangelii Gaudium 167
⁶ The Feast of Faith, pp. 124-125
⁷ The Glory of the Lord—Volume 1, pp. 18-19
⁸ The Ratzinger Report, p. 130
brother of Blessed Fra Angelico—twin brother!—was so irresistible.

More than a PhD in Art History and Professor of Religion & the Arts, Father Michael was a kind of prophet, in this sense: a prophet is someone who announces the significance of the world and the value of life.\(^9\)

For example: When Father Michael’s cancer doctor delivered his devastating diagnosis of Stage Four colon cancer, Father Michael listened to the news and responded with complete peacefulness—nonplussed, composed, resigned.

The doctor was taken aback by this. Really? No agitation; no anger; not even a slight sign of surprise. Alarmed, the doctor spoke up again, repeating more clearly the terrible news. And, again, Father Michael stayed totally serene—nonchalant even.

This only unnerved the doctor, who feared Father Michael wasn’t really grasping what he was trying to communicate to him, or that he was in denial. So the doctor said to him directly and rather bluntly, “You’re going to die, you know.” And Father Michael, the picture of tranquility, replied, “Yes, I know. I understand.”

Well, the doctor was utterly undone by this. He told Father Michael that he had never met a patient who ever received such a dire diagnosis so calmly and acceptingly.

He then confessed to Father Michael that he himself was an atheist. And he went on to ask Father Michael this question: “Do you think the reason why you have no fear of death is because you are a Catholic priest?” Father Michael thought about it, and said in answer, “I suppose so.”

In one of his beautiful art commentaries, Father Michael speaks a truth that he himself exemplified, and that very likely he learned from his special patron, Saint Mary Magdalene, whose feast day is today, and in whose parish he was so honored and delighted to live and serve:

> The cradle of contemplation begins at the foot of the cross, in close proximity to the source of all grace. For it is there that one can penetrate the mysteries of salvation and gain true understanding.\(^{10}\)

IV.

Father Michael showed his prophetic grace in the wondrous way he looked at art and enabled us all to see.

The art-historical eye sees all!

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\(^9\) An insight of Monsignor Luigi Giussani, Servant of God

\(^{10}\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0nnCP6PT_w
He held a deep conviction regarding artists: they are not just architects, sculptors, musicians, poets, and painters, but veritable preachers.

*When we can see what they say, we receive what we need.*

Which is the reason for the Gospel reading chosen for this, Father Michael’s funeral Mass.

Father Michael had a large, ancient, painted wooden statue of Saint John the Baptist ensconced on a pillar in the corner of his bedroom—an object of his devotion.

In the Gospel we heard, John the Baptist, seeing Jesus walk by, is so struck, so overcome by the beauty of Jesus Christ that he can’t help himself. Intuiting something that Pope John Paul II would explicitly teach—“The Church needs art [in order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ]”¹¹—John the Baptist is moved to point out Jesus to the world by way of a symbol…in an artistic image: the Lamb of God.

And he instructs us: *Behold!*

Which means a lot more than just “Look at him.” Father Michael’s genius was in the way he understood, practiced, and taught us “beholding.”

Because the ability to behold is a gift. “Beholding beauty is…a [method] of…transformation [by which we are able] to respond to God’s beauty in grace and so be gradually deified, [made God-like], becoming more able to see beauty as [we] become more beautiful.”¹²

This is why we pray those words, *Behold the Lamb of God*, at Mass as a most proper way of preparing ourselves just before we receive Holy Communion.

In all he taught us, in all he preached to us, in all he shared with us, Father Michael so well communicated an insight of Saint John Paul II:

> Beauty makes one feel the beginning of…fulfillment, and seems to whisper to us: *You will not be unhappy; the desire of your heart will be fulfilled—what is more, it is already being fulfilled.*¹³

V.

Father Michael could not have foreseen the radical evangelical initiative that Pope Francis

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¹¹ *Letter to Artists*, #12
¹³ *Message to Rimini*, August 20, 2002
would launch in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium—The Joy of the Gospel.*

The pope there calls for “a renewed esteem for beauty [that serves] as a means of touching the human heart.” He says that “each particular Church should encourage the use of the arts in evangelization,” and that “we must be bold enough to discover new signs and new symbols...[that] prove particularly attractive for others.” Because “the Church grows by attraction.”

Pope Francis calls this new initiative the *via pulchritudinis*—the “way of beauty,” and he declares that “a formation in the *via pulchritudinis* ought to be part of our effort to pass on the Faith.”

No brag, just fact—who could name a more outstanding patron, formator, and priestly proponent of the *via pulchritudinis* than Father Michael Morris?

It is not a coincidence that, during these eighteen years of the publication of *MAGNIFICAT*, one remark that is invariably made to me again and again, when I have the chance to travel and meet subscribers to the magazine, is, “When my *MAGNIFICAT* arrives in the mail, the first thing I read each month is Fr. Michael Morris’ art essay.” The *via pulchritudinis* in action!

**VI.**

But, of course, as Pope Benedict reminded us, “the truest beauty is the love of God.”

And to be true to this truest beauty, Father Michael was the truest and most generous of friends, who lavished the love of God on others in gracious and extravagant ways.

Just one story:

In addition to all his many other astonishing talents, Father Michael was a marvelous cook. He loved food. He loved to *talk* about food. He referred to delicious food “ambrosia.”

Keep this in mind now as we travel back to one week ago—to last Friday, the day Father Michael died. He was returning from a treatment at the hospital. I was accompanying him. As we walked in the corridor of the rectory that leads to his bedroom, Father Michael became short of breath.

He slumped against the wall. I rushed right behind him. And then I held him as he collapsed to the floor, fighting hard to breathe.

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14 #167
15 All from #167
16 #14
17 *Sacramentum Caritatis*, #35
I called 911. I gave Father Michael absolution. Very quickly, the EMTs came. As they were performing CPR, I saw Father Michael’s dear friend of decades, Dominican Father Michael Carey, arrive, across the way from me. I called to him to come around to the other side of the hallway where I was, and to bring the holy oils so that we could anoint Father Michael, administering the Sacrament of the Sick.

Father Carey had just moved to Saint Mary Magdalen and did not yet have the chance to unpack his holy oil stocks. So I asked him to go down to the kitchen, and bring up some cooking oil.

Which he did. Fr. Carey blessed the oil, crawled on the floor close to his beloved friend of so many years, and then anointed him, giving Father Michael the Last Rites of the Church.

Now I have to tell you this: No one besides Father Michael Morris would have been so delighted by the fact that his ultimate, sacramental entrance into the long-awaited eternity of God’s Paradise was expedited by means of Kirkland Signature Greek Olive Oil.

Extra virgin.

**Conclusion**

The official, recorded time of Father Michael’s death was 4:15 pm—“Around four in the afternoon.” Saint John the Evangelist wanted to be sure that the approximate time of their encounter with Jesus was specified in his Gospel so that at four pm every day they would remember what had happened to them and relive the wonder of meeting the Man who changed everything in their lives. May we do the same.

On the day of Father Michael’s death, Friday, July 15th, Pope Francis sent a telegram to all the Dominican Provincials of the world assembled these days in a General Chapter in Bologna, Italy. In that telegram, the Holy Father declares: “Dominicans should be signs of the nearness and tenderness of God.”

Father Michael, we thank you for being an obedient Dominican—for being such a loving, compelling sign of the nearness and tenderness of God.

We beg you, Blessed Virgin Mary, Most Holy Mother of God: *Behold your son, Michael, and love him who so loved you.*

O Lord, grant eternal rest to Father Michael, and let perpetual Beauty shine upon him.

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