

New Year's Day - 2024

Sister Wendy Beckett, the amateur yet acclaimed [art critic](#) declared that it was her favorite of the Vatican's many treasures, one she would not trade for all the rest. Michelangelo's Pietà is one of the world's most well-known and beloved masterpieces. Part of its magic is the depth of its mystery.

1. Renaissance sculptors were masters of making marble look so soft as to fold like fabric. Michelangelo was among the best. The piece is a solid and massive unit. Yet movement courses over all its surfaces.

2. The masterpiece comes with a major flaw, which Michelangelo, perhaps wryly, insisted was a manifestation of grace. Jesus looks his age. He appears to be a dead man in his mid-30s. But you needn't look all that closely at the Madonna to see a teenage mother. When his critics drew attention to this age discrepancy, Michelangelo quipped, "Chastity enjoys eternal youth."

3. There is another significant flaw. If the dead figure of Jesus were to stand erect, he would be about six feet tall. If his Mother Mary, who holds him in her lap, stood up, she would be more than twice that height. Most viewers never notice this. Michelangelo knew that the figure of a fully grown man in the lap of a woman would look ungainly, disproportionate. And what he wanted above all in this piece was to display proportion, harmony and completion between the man and the woman.

So his Mary is massive, and unlike so many depictions of women, she exudes strength. Without apparent effort, she holds her dead son in her arms. Her shoulders are not bent; they do not seem to strain. Even her face is still, silent and solid. If, so often, the sad fate of women is to bear what men have wrought, she does this like no other.

4. The fullness of her grace, of which the Archangel Gabriel spoke, is manifested in the strength of her suffering.

5. The tortured body of Jesus is in sharp contrast. It is much more fluid. Sister Beckett likened it to a flowing river. It is a stream of grace, coming down from the mountain that is the woman.

Sister Beckett also thought the Pietà to be an utterly unique image of the unity of man and woman. So much seems reversed, the very opposite of our sexual stereotypes, but together, the sorrowful mother and—yet at this moment—stillborn Son are one.

6. Michelangelo's mother died very young. Here, mother and son are given back to each other, never more to be parted. The mother, who cradled in her arms the living child at Bethlehem, now holds in those same arms the dead Son who has given his life for her and for the world.

Here Calvary echoes Christmas, just as Christmas prefigures Calvary, if we read the full account of the infancy narratives and not just those parts that charm us on Christmas Eve. Mary bore a son who came among us to love us, to teach us, to heal us, to suffer and to die for us. Like a rock she holds him now at the end of his life. She is riven like the rock Moses struck in the desert. The heart of this rock has been broken and from it cascades a flood of grace and mercy. (The Rev. Terrance W. Klein is a priest of the Diocese of Dodge City and author of *Vanity Faith*.)

It Is Jesus!

The great philanthropist Stanley S. Kresge was often in the company of college presidents or other fund-raisers asking for endowment or financial aid. During the course of discussion, Mr. Kresge would always ask one question, "Do you think the world is better today than it was 2,000 years ago?" I'd like to ask you that question today. Is the world any better after 2,000 years since Christ came?

I say to you on this closing Sabbath of the second millennium, that it is Jesus Christ and his teachings that lie behind all the efforts at social reform. It was he who put an end to slavery. It was Jesus who abolished the gladiatorial shows of ancient Rome. It was Jesus who elevated the status of women. It was Jesus who sanctified childhood. It was Jesus, who by his emphasis upon the worth of human personality conferred on us our liberty. It is Jesus who has given us a new way of life, a new standard of conduct, a new power for living. Christ can save our world when Jesus is born again in the hearts of men and women. [by William K. Quick from *Seeing and Believing* (Luke 2:22-40), on *The Protestant Hour*]