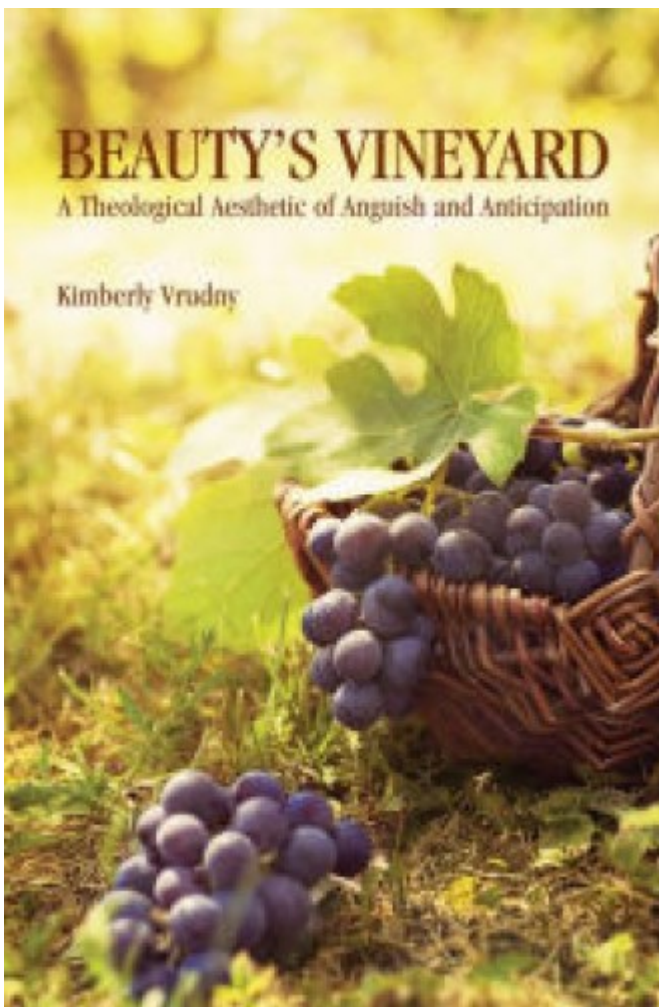


The mystery of the beautiful

How can God speak through what is soft and breakable? How can we?

by [Anne M. Carpenter](#) in the [October 25, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Beauty's Vineyard

By Kimberly Vrudny
Liturgical Press

Simultaneously a powerful lesson in the form of beauty and a personal memoir of faith, this book articulates a life of compassion, hardship, and hope. Kimberly Vrudny, who teaches theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, delves into the puzzle of the beautiful, attending particularly to the ethical and social dimensions of divine beauty and earthly beauty. She teaches us to view the world in a way that is sensitive to beauty, uniqueness, justice, and loss.

Vrudny carefully and clearly introduces what beauty is for theology. She names beauty as both a reference to who God is—the highest beauty, Beauty itself—and a reference to the created world. Vrudny's interest rests in the dialogue between these two forms of beauty, especially as she reflects on earthly beauty's nature as a fragile and breakable experience. On the one hand there is creation's imitation of God and God's gentle nurturing of creation's beauty, and on the other there is the delicate matter of human freedom, human limitation, human striving. Vrudny seeks to understand how God can speak through what is soft and breakable, even broken, and how human beings come to speak through it too.

Scholars will find in this book a rich interweaving of the history of ideas alongside key theological principles. Vrudny mixes biblical historical criticism with thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and Dorothy Day, continually allowing for more than one genre to intermingle. She generates creative interpretations of scripture alongside the classical interpretations from Judaism and Christianity. *Shalom* and *hesed*—God's peace and God's loving-kindness—are two of the book's key themes, both drawn from the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.

What uniquely marks Vrudny's writing is its accessibility. She performs complex and careful philosophical reflections and scriptural interpretations with such ease that an attentive reader can follow her without strain. The book's calm and clear tone keeps it focused and engrossing, whether the topic is philosophical, moral, or autobiographical. Her achievement is to walk in these wildly different fields with a sage eye for their unity, and in that sense Vrudny exemplifies how to be an educated person of faith. One every page she speaks with the open heart of faith and the sharp mind of a scholar.

The overarching theme of the vineyard serves as Vrudny's focusing lens. Fixing upon the vineyard image allows Vrudny to stress that beauty on earth takes work, needs cultivation, and requires keen attention. She avoids the trap of seeing beauty as a

static “thing” or an impossible ideal. Instead she articulates a vision of beauty as morally charged, possible to lose, and feasible to hope for. Recounting wonders and losses that she herself has experienced, both across the world and within the intimate space of family, Vrudny expresses the human need for beauty with warm realism and bracing specificity.

Loss and suffering are strong elements of the book, and Vrudny does not shy away from describing poverty, death, and injustice. But she does so with care and attention to detail, which prevents the book from descending into a grim eulogy for beauty. Vrudny, who is more interested in honest engagement than extravagant claims, stresses the importance of interreligious dialogue and social justice. Both of these topics require honesty and, for Vrudny, attention to the beautiful.

Through beauty readers encounter familiar themes in new contexts. For example, Vrudny interprets a work of art early in her book, a painting about violence in the Middle East. She responds with her own experience of the Middle East, as student and as teacher, and falls back upon the tradition of the Psalms for an interpretive voice.

Hope continually buoys this book—hope as a theological gift and task rather than as a dream. Hope, both the concreteness of it and the elusiveness of it, allows Vrudny (and her readers) to stare into the face of loss. Such hope is founded firmly in God, and equally in God’s call to us to work in the vineyard.