

Resolving to pray more in 2022? Here are 5 tips for following through.



Fr James Martin SJ offers some advice on prayer

I have lost count of the number of times I have heard people say at the beginning of January, “This year I’m going to pray more!” The tone in their voice is often insistent, and the words “pray more” said with great force, as if they are reproaching themselves.

Although some people eschew making resolutions at the start of the new year, I think it is a noble goal. But there is a danger: If we make a resolution that is unattainable and then fail in our resolve, it can make us feel bad about ourselves. In the case of failed resolutions about our prayer life, we may also feel guilty *before God*—and even worse than we did before we made our resolution.

With that in mind, here are five tips for putting your prayerful resolution into practice.

1) Pray Less. I know that sounds counterintuitive, but it is a way of guarding against making a resolution you cannot keep. In my experience, people often end up setting lofty goals that are nearly impossible to fulfill with their busy schedules.

“I’m going to pray for an hour a day without fail!” says the young mother or father with children to care for. Then, the first time that they hear crying during their prayer, and they halt prayer to care for their child, they may give up on

prayer entirely. And, again, they feel needlessly guilty.

Even if you have the time for it, the prospect of 60 continuous minutes of prayer every day can seem overwhelming.

In that case, I often suggest beginning with more modest goals. Take it easy at first. (This is especially helpful for someone who has not been praying at all.) Start with 15 minutes a day. Or 30 minutes. This is not only more manageable but has the advantage of seeming so doable that the person relaxes and enjoys it more—and ends up praying longer than planned. So, to pray more, try to pray less. At least at first. Then pray more.

2) Mix it up. Often people get stuck in a rut, especially if they have been praying for a while. One of my spiritual directees (a person who comes to talk about how God is active in their daily life and private prayer) once told me, glumly, how monotonous prayer had become. Then he recounted his routine, which included the rosary, reading the Gospel for the day and then some Ignatian contemplation. You could hear the boredom in his voice.

In response, I suggested that he try some new ways of prayer. That goes for us all. If you are in a rut with centering prayer, try some Ignatian contemplation. If you feel tired of Ignatian contemplation, try some *lectio divina*. If you are

bored with *lectio*, try centering prayer. It helps from time to time to shake things up.

This should not be surprising. It is like any relationship. If you and your friend want to stay connected (a good goal) but you meet with your friend in the same way every single time, you might find things getting stale. If you see your friend every week for dinner on a Friday night for months on end, with the intention of staying in touch, it may start to feel “old hat.” In that case, you’d both say, “Hey, let’s do something different. Let’s go for a walk on the beach or in the park one day. Let’s see a movie.” Then you might find yourself relating to your friend in a new way.

Something similar can be at work in prayer. Shake it up a bit.

3) *Let go if it is not working.* Another common complaint is that prayer feels like a burden. This is sometimes the case with devout people who have set up a busy schedule of prayer for themselves. One woman a few years ago told me that the list of people for whom she was praying daily (a good goal) ended up being a 30-minute commitment. Between that, the rosary, the daily Gospel, her examination of conscience and some spiritual reading, she was starting to dread prayer. Prayer had become a burden, and she started to avoid it.

In these cases, I advise people to let something go. For this directee, I reminded her that while praying for other people is important, if it has led you to abandon prayer, then perhaps it is time to forgo the list of names for a while. She could still pray for all of them with one common intention.

Now, of course, simply because some parts of prayer might be difficult does not mean that we always need to “let go” of something. But in some cases, especially if it is making you dread, avoid or even fear prayer, it is time to review what is on your “prayer plate.”

4) *Get a spiritual director.* Few things are as encouraging to the life of prayer as a spiritual director, someone who helps you notice where God is active in your prayer and daily life. In the past, this ministry was often seen as something reserved for clergy or members of religious orders. But today hundreds of thousands (millions?) of lay people see spiritual directors, who are often lay people themselves.

That begs the question: Where do I find one, and how do I know what to look for? My book *Learning to Pray* covers this in more detail but, in short, start by seeking someone who has been professionally trained for the job. St. Teresa of Ávila famously said if she had to choose between a director who was wise and one who was holy, she would pick wise. In other words, trained in direction. That is essential. It would be like saying of a physician: Do you want someone who is healthy or smart?

To find one, inquire at a local retreat house, ask someone who already sees a spiritual director for a recommendation, or see what you can find at [Spiritual Directors International](#) or the [Office of Ignatian Spirituality](#).

5) *Trust in God.* Yes, that is a given, but often when we make resolutions about our spiritual life, we are tempted to think the results are up to us. (That kind of thinking has a special heresy all its own: Pelagianism.)

But it is God who invites us to pray, God who helps us to pray and God who gives us the fruits of prayer. It is not you just white knuckling it and gritting your teeth. God is on your side.

In fact, the very desire to pray more is coming from God. So, see this desire, and your resolution, as a call. And trust that God will be with you and will help you. As my own spiritual director likes to say, “The caller wants to help the called.”

(Fr Jim Martin, S.J., is author, most recently, of *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone*)