

James Martin SJ on Praying in the New Year (or trying to pray....)

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 three 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 centring prayer, try some Ignatian contemplation. If you feel tired of Ignatian contemplation, try some lectio divina. If you are bored with lectio, try centring 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.”