

Some unknown author spoke for many of us when she wrote:

'Twas the week after Christmas and all through the house/ Nothing would fit me, not even a blouse./ The cookies I'd nibbled, the eggnog I'd taste/ At the holiday parties had gone to my waist./ When I got on the scales there arose such a number!/ When I walked to the store (less a walk than a lumber),/ I'd remember the marvelous meals I'd prepared:/ The gravies and sauces and beef nicely rared,/ The bread and the cheese/ And the way I'd never said, 'No, thank you, please.'/ As I dressed myself in my husband's old shirt/ And prepared once again to do battle with dirt/ I said to myself as only I can: "You can't spend a winter disguised as a man!" /So away with the last of the sour cream dip,/ Get rid of the fruit cake, every cracker and chip,/ Every last bit of food that I like must be vanished./ I won't have a cookie – not even a lick./ I'll only chew on a long celery stick./ I won't have hot biscuits or corn bread or pie./ I'll munch on a carrot and quietly cry./ I'm hungry, I'm lonesome and life is a bore. But isn't that what January is for?/ Unable to giggle, no longer a riot. Happy New Year to all and to all a good diet! (DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2008, p. 91) Someone said that "a new year's resolution is something that goes in one year and out the other." But I have a suggestion.....

Let's go back to the time in the gospel when Jesus' disciples asked Him, "Teach us how to pray." What brought this on is the subject of our reflection.

They had been with Jesus a while and began to see that it was through the medium of prayer that He drew His strength from beyond Himself. They noticed He prayed a lot. Jesus prayed when He was joyful and when He was in agony. He prayed with others around Him and when He was alone at night. He prayed high on a mountain and on a level plain.

And this was not lost on His disciples. They saw that He was linked to some deep place, to something beyond -- to the One He called 'Father,' and they wanted that for themselves. That's what they meant when they asked Jesus, "teach us how to pray." They didn't necessarily want words – although He gave them some – they wanted the depth that reaching beyond gave.

They didn't ask for power to do miracles, the quick intelligence to silence opponents. They wanted the graciousness of soul, the largeness of spirit, the wholeness that Jesus displayed. They wanted His power to love when hated, to forgive when wronged, to be big hearted with small-minded people, to reach beyond His tribe, and to live beyond slogans. They wanted Jesus' ability to see 'larger,' if you will, and that, obviously, came from beyond.

A story makes the same point: A holy monk was once given a most precious Bible by a wealthy man grateful to be freed of his sins and addictions. Though the ancient book was worth a fortune, the monk placed it openly in his small hut as a focus for meditation and prayer.

One day a destitute and sick man wandered by. He was wounded and seemed half alive. The holy monk took him in and for many months cared for him, eventually nurturing him back to health. As he got better, the man, a felon and thief as it turned out, became more and more interested in the Bible that he could see was worth much money. Soon the temptation of greed became too strong. One day while the monk was out ministering to the poor, he snatched the Bible and fled.

As it turned out, he was eventually caught in connection with another crime and put in prison. The police returned the Bible to the monk. Upon receiving it and hearing what had happened to the man, the monk traveled to the village where the man was held. He forgave him, handed him back the book and left. The thief was delighted. It would fetch much money when he was freed. After a year, the thief was released, but during his imprisonment he'd had time to think. It wasn't long before he appeared at the hut of the old monk and handed him back the Bible. "Oh," said the monk, "You can keep it. It will bring you much money." The thief cried out, "I don't want the book, I don't want the money! I want – I want whatever it is that made you give it back. I want what's inside of you that makes you able to do this."

That's what the disciples meant when they asked Jesus, "Teach us how to pray. Give us the gift that will help us look beyond, look deeper. What they wanted was Jesus' depth of connection to the Father so that they would not live shallow lives, always determined by peer pressure, the fickle crowds, the latest fad or today's advertising.

We should want the same thing but today, as we all know, it's almost impossible to 'go beyond,' to escape the attractive greed, the incessant distractions, the powerful drive for surface image and acceptance and notice. It's almost impossible to escape the speed of life, the constant activity, the pressure to consume and collect and buy, to escape the world of sound bites and slogans, to escape the constant call to the 'always busy' and 'never enough time' syndrome, which is a badge of success in our society. But all of this is sucking the life right out of us.

So this is New Year's, the traditional time for resolutions. We know in our hearts that we need to pull back from the noise, the omnipresent mass media that panders to what's worst in us – our greed, confirms our prejudices and wipes out our morals, a media that will not allow us the time to look beyond.

It would be an interesting exercise to take some paper and write down an account of the past week of our lives and see how much time was spent reading secular magazines, looking online, Facebooking, tweeting, smart phoning, or TV watching – and what we were taking in all this time, day after day. Make a list of the daily diet of WHAT we read or watched. Now multiply all that input by months and years.

What we often mostly get is shallowness of soul. What we get is insensitivity and lack of inner peace. What we get from this poor intellectual and moral diet is bad spiritual health that lives by responding to media stimuli and the culture's definition of success and its exultation of speed, being active, always on the move -- all of which prevent depth so that we can get to the place beyond, the place Jesus tapped in His prayer.

But for the New Year, I suggest that we make just one simple resolution. I suggest that we imitate Jesus and go apart now and then from the culture. That we imitate Mary of today's gospel of whom it was said, "And Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." We need to go apart, reflect, take a break from the TV, from our devices, from the official secularism of our culture. Like Jesus, we need to tap into the Source. We need to tap something beyond, to tap that spiritual equilibrium that makes us free.

So here's the resolution – Just ONE! – Every day set aside at least 15 minutes to do some spiritual reading, whether the gospels or another book. You could use the AT HOME WITH THE WORD books we gave you at the beginning of Advent, or the REDISCOVER CATHOLICISM that we gave you at Christmas. Engage an alternate voice, a different drummer, a deeper vision of life. Tap into the source of life and love.

Socrates famously said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Saints, mystics, and the gospels say he is right. Daily spiritual reading will make not only for a happy New Year but a holy one. Amen. (adapted from Bausch, FROM NO TO YES, p. 27-30)

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