

# BEHOLD, I MAKE ALL THINGS NEW

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In past Januarys I've written about new things from science, medicine or technology to amalgamate into our daily lives. This year I thought we might explore a few ways to bring some newness into our hearts, into our lives with God, into everyday life. How many broken resolutions revolve around the usual weight loss or exercise concerns? I'm by no means a personal trainer nor a dietician, but I can offer a few ideas for spiritual growth.

Let's begin with **daily Scripture reading**. Catholics sometimes come in last place when it comes to reading and praying with Bible texts. In fact, I once heard a priest say from the pulpit that "lay people shouldn't read the Bible because they don't understand it." How does one come to know Jesus without knowing the Story? Anyway, one suggestion I offer is to read and ponder the scriptures for weekdays and feast days to see what they bring us. A benefit from this practice is to see centuries of wisdom in our Catholic Church as the daily readings expose to us the depth and profundity of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). Prophets are very clear most of the time; historical books and war chronicles are difficult, yes. But these offer an insight into the breadth of salvation history, how God was revealed to people for centuries until the ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ.

New Testament literature so often reveals the miracle of how our faith grew from a mustard seed of a small community to 1.5 billion Roman Catholics today. The letters of Paul, for example, give great insight into the beginnings of Christianity and our theology of Christ, the Church, the Trinity, the suffering and torment of the first believers. It's amazing when you consider that after thousands of years, we profess every Sunday exactly what Paul formulated with and for the first believers. It's not only astounding, but also a miracle of divine inspiration.



St. Matthew, Lindisfarne  
Gospels, English 700 AD

The four gospels! People will ask: 'how can you preach every day when you hear the same readings all the time? How do you think of new things to say? I learned years ago a maxim to live by: if I know myself as renewed by God each day, the scriptures will take on fresh, new meanings. I never find preaching to be boring; if it is, it's probably because I'm not aware of what God has done for me lately. It doesn't take a lot of time to read the passages assigned to Mass on each day, during seasons and on feasts. May I suggest a great resource for you? Go to: [onlineministries.creighton.edu](http://onlineministries.creighton.edu) and you'll find a wonderful calendar that will link you to [bible.usccb.org](http://bible.usccb.org) which is the web site of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Each day on the Creighton University site has the readings' link plus a commentary on them. Both these sites offer a treasury of resources for prayer, retreats, reflections. On the usccb.org site you find the entire New American Bible used in U.S. Catholic liturgies at your fingertips. It's wonderful! Explore! I encourage some of the people I walk with in spiritual direction who commute to the Loop for work to spend train

time in prayer. The daily Scriptures are wonderful as you prepare for a workday. Others pray a rosary, favorite devotions or do some spiritual reading. If you drive to work think of a particular style of music that calms you down so you can face the boss with equanimity. There are untold books you can easily download and listen to (unless that distracts you from driving safely). Just a few words of dedicating your day to the Lord can crank down the anxiety level in your head; talk to the Lord as if he's in the passenger seat. If you're alone, talk out loud...no one can see or hear you. (When you hear people outside on cell phones telling their stuff to the world, why worry at all about talking out loud in your car?) Even a couple of sentences to God will set up your day in a positive way: thank God for the beauty of winter, a particularly splendid sunrise with the skyline before you, the laughter of your kids at breakfast, a plea for the gift of patience...there's always a reason to give God thanks, no matter your work, station in life or the state of your union with God. Always!

**Meditation vs. Contemplation.** There are libraries about these two forms of prayer; they are often used interchangeably but there is a difference. **Meditation** is a human mode of prayer whereas **contemplation** is divinely infused prayer. Meditation uses images, concepts and reasoning, those means which are of the created order to commune with God; it includes nevertheless all forms of prayer in which human effort is quite active. It can offer only a remote knowledge of God. Meditation leads to a prayer beyond all methods, contemplation. We enter wordless prayer of quiet calmness, into an awareness of (as Teresa of Avila wrote) the ‘Divine Guest.’ The popular devotional prayer forms of the Rosary, litanies, devotions to a particular saint or Mary are all good and great springboards to deeper experiences of prayer. People choose these forms because they’re find one or the other very fruitful.



But notice that **meditation** leads to **contemplation**. For example, it’s one thing to pray the Rosary daily. However, the fundamental purpose of the Rosary is to bring about a contemplative experience by considering the sufferings of Jesus, the joys of the Blessed Virgin, a love for the Eucharist in the Luminous mysteries, and so on. Depending on many variables, people reach a contemplative state in a short while or after letting God take over after the words are finished. For example, our friar community prays the Office together every day in our chapel. There comes a time after reciting three psalms that we listen to a short selection from Scripture. Then we pause for a long period of quiet...we meditate on the Word we just heard, then allow God to come into our hearts. The Spirit prompts us, as it were. And these sacred moments and an intense

awareness of God can come anytime, even while we’re doing other things.

I was about six or seven years old and remember sitting on the basement stairs watching my Mom do laundry. I noticed her lips were moving but I heard nothing from her. So I watched a bit longer, then asked her what she was doing. “Oh, I’m just praying a rosary while I work.” St. Benedict coined the phrase “ora et labora” for the monks’ daily life – “prayer and work”. Monks pray while cleaning out barns or making fudge or baking fresh breads to sell. Same with our own Franciscan Poor Clares – an entire day devoted to prayer whether together with the Liturgy of the Hours or while cooking alone for the community. However, contemplative prayer is not exclusive to cenobites (monks) or religious (like us friars). Jesus taught all of his followers to seek holiness, to seek the face of God. All of us have the capacity to go beyond those favorite words and just simply BE in God’s presence. And that does take time and practice.

We live in a rat race every day, whether urban or rural people. Yet people come to the confessional all the time concerned about their prayer life. Sociologically we battle a consumerist attitude without even realizing it at times. I call it the ‘drive-thru mentality’ ~ I want it here and I want it now! So when people ask about their prayer life, I respond with a form of this: how much time are you willing to give God? We can spend hours surfing the Net or Netflix but God? Honestly...when was the last time you sat with tea or coffee and allowed yourself 10 or 15 minutes (start slowly) to contemplate divine realities? Try it.

I have found another source of touching God more deeply at my age: **learning how to live with limits!** This is difficult, I know. I know too well. Whether a new chronic illness or another joint that just cannot do what it did 25 years ago, there are constant challenges in every moment of life. Some of these challenges involve our bodies. Francis of Assisi referred to his body at times as “Brother Ass.” He meant ass in the sense of a “stubborn donkey that you have to drag through life.” Francis bore his share of serious maladies for a large part of his later years; he died in 1226 at about 45 years old. We must treat and care for our aging bodies all the time, to the point where sometimes it feels like we spend more time with doctors than with God. Right? But living with new limits? Some days it’s a sacrifice and takes too much energy to do everything necessary to keep the motor going, doesn’t it? But I’ve learned and am still learning something you may find enriching for your spiritual growth.

I am beyond grateful for our spirituality of St. Francis because it all centers on the Crucified Christ. The San Damiano Cross that began his conversion has been the major icon of our Order all these years; it was the image through which he experienced one of those contemplative moments when he knew God was right there, burning in his heart. The Crucified Christ was the foundation, and still is, of our way of life. We see in the San Damiano Cross the entire Christ Mystery: suffering, death, resurrection and glorification. It is our daily reminder that we baptized believers profess to “take up the cross” each day and carry it (or them!) until God raises us up to everlasting life. Some of you know from my writings of my physical crosses. They haven’t gone away and 2025 brought even more. But hey, I find it best to not concentrate on the pain or daily burdens; that myopic view lessens the time I spend with and for others. It cuts into time I can be creative and compose. For 32 years I’ve gone for radiation 1, 2 even 3 times a week. Sometimes I play the soundtrack from Ben Hur before going in the machine to strengthen my will to accept it. And then it’s finished and I can live fully elsewhere. Yes, phototherapy hurts some days, but if I don’t let the pain (from any source) hold me prisoner, I’ve found the pain fades away and I have power for other things. Seriously! We too often undersell the power of our minds over our bodies. Accept limitations, pain and suffering as part of our own Passion narratives. Our story does not end in death; death is just another phase of life as we someday all wing our way to the arms of our Creator.



Our Franciscan spirituality of the Cross is basically just living the Christ Mystery. This is why I suggest these few ideas about prayer and ways to bring new life to your relationship with God. Just as with any human relationship, so it is with God – the more time you spend with another, the deeper that relationship will be. I can only fall in love with someone by giving more of my heart; I can only fall in love with God by giving God more time and more of my heart. A good thermometer I offer people: if you want to know how you fare with God, check out the depths of your most significant friendships and how those have grown over the years. This can be very, very enlightening. Lovers find love.

Speaking of prayer, I want to let you know something about a project that has been a huge dream of mine for 18 years. The two new confessionals in the church are now under construction in the builder’s workshop! As contracted and estimated they will be installed in church by Holy Week and Easter of the new year! The design of both the exterior and the interior is simple and uncluttered. They are fully accessible for everyone and will provide people with a comfortable, private, prayerful and holy experience of God’s forgiveness. We are grateful to our many benefactors who have generously given financial support and are open to other donations. St. Peter’s has been renowned in Chicago as THE place for this Sacrament and soon we will provide an even more honorable prayer space to be reconciled with God and the Church.. This will free up the auditorium for programs that help people grow spiritually and appreciate the arts.

We enter 2026 with the usual anticipation that we will enter a more compassionate and respectful existence worldwide. I realize we are smothered all day long with lies, deceit, injustices, anger and myriad other negatives. However, look at the example of Mary and Joseph: birthing a baby in a barn with no family around, seeking refuge from the terrors of Herod in a strange country, the powerful and cruel presence of the Roman Empire, the uncertainty of not knowing who this Child would be, his future public enemies and execution. Sounds exactly like our lives right now, doesn’t it? God brought the Family to the climax of salvation history in the death and resurrection of their Son because they believed in the presence and power of God. We believe in the same God, the same power. All the more reason to continue to fall more deeply in love with our God and change the world with the joyful good news of Christ Jesus.

On behalf of all our dedicated friars in St. Peter’s, I thank you all for the constant support, care and love with which you shower us all year long! We remember you at every Eucharist and in our daily community prayer. God works through us, even our dreams, so be open to that uplifting yet challenging grace. And may the Most High, all powerful, all good Lord fill you with peace and everything that is good.

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