

Keeping resolutions a matter of grace

Years ago a priest friend recounted a meeting with a couple in his parish. The wife had insisted that her husband, who had been drinking excessively, meet with him.

She contended that if he would make a pledge in Father's presence to stop drinking, all would be well. Thus it was that the wife, determined, and her husband, shamefaced, came to the rectory.

"He wants to take the pledge," announced the wife.

"How long do you want to take it for?" Father asked the husband.

"I usually take it for life," came the response. They had been through this before, with little success.

This is the time of year when folks make promises, resolutions and pledges. What motivates our new resolve early in the year can be varied — love, poor health, a few extra pounds, frustration, spiritual awakening, a kick from a loved one, the maturing process. Some resolutions are more easily kept than others, also for a variety of reasons. Some are of greater consequence than others, but ironically our success in keeping them does not depend on whether they are easy or difficult.

Accepting God's grace

The keeping of a sincere and worthy promise, resolution or pledge may appear to be a personal victory — "I did it!" — but in reality it is always a matter of grace. We unwittingly assume that we need God's grace only for the difficult challenges and that we can take care of the easy ones by ourselves. Or having beat the odds by keeping a difficult pledge, we may think our will



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power is greater than we had assumed, that our self-sufficiency is more expansive than we had experienced in prior attempts. "I'm getting better at this," we decide.

But blessed are we when we discover and admit, in matters great and small, that it is God who inspires every good intention, God who strengthens us to persevere, God who completes every resolution and fulfills every pledge.

If God does it all, if everything is a matter of his grace, what are we to do? Sit back and watch? Thank God when things work out to our satisfaction and blame him when they do not? Not at all. Rather, it is always a matter of accepting God's grace as a given and then cooperating with it.

It is presumptuous to assume that we accomplish things by the sheer force of will. It is not presumptuous to assume that God is the source of every good intention, that he desires only what is good for us, and that he is always working for our good.

Everything is grace

He only asks that we accept and consciously nourish the resolution, pledge or promise he has inspired in us — and that we avoid anything that works against his inspiration, anything he has shown to be evil and thus bad for us, even in areas of our lives which appear to have little or nothing to do with the matter at hand.

In "Christ our Brother," Father Karl Adam (+1966) wrote:

"To cooperate with grace means nothing else than reverently to accept and bravely foster the impulse and motion which my activity has already received from God; or, more precisely, not to interrupt it perversely or wantonly arrest its course. Therefore to cooperate with grace really means to be of good will ... Consequently my personal contribution is a very small and simple thing. In its nature it is no greater an achievement than the achievement of the little child which allows its father to lift it up that it may pluck an apple from the tree, and allows him then to take its tiny hand in his and wrench the apple loose. 'You plucked it and it is yours,' says the father to his child, and the child accepts its father's love without any resistance. And that is all we need, the small and simple acceptance of the little child."

Without question, some resolutions are more serious and more difficult to keep than others, particularly when they pertain to addictive behavior.

Give God credit

I do not know whether my friend's parishioner was an alcoholic or simply enjoyed beer more than his wife would have preferred. The crucial spiritual insight of Alcoholics Anonymous is revealed in the first three of the 12 "steps": "1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable. 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to san-

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ity. 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him."

God wants what is best for us. Everything is grace. He invites us to turn our wills and our lives over to his care. To make any worthy resolution or pledge means to cooperate with God's grace, to humbly let him do what he has always wanted to do: make us aware of his loving presence and bring all good things to fulfillment for us and in us.

There is another reason to place everything in God's hands and cooperate with his grace. He does not simply fulfill our resolutions, promises and pledges — he far exceeds them. Left to our own devices, we would expect far less than what he desires to give us.

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If we usually make resolutions "for life" this time of year and soon find that we have not kept them, perhaps we have been relying solely on ourselves. The best New Year's resolution is to give God credit for everything, strive to cooperate with his grace and avoid everything which works against what he desires to do in us.

God keeps every one of his promises.