

Realigning Our Priorities

All of us have, at one time or another, named certain things as our "priorities." From time to time, when we become aware of our not doing something that is really important, we say, "I have to make that a priority." Lent is an important time to do a top-to-bottom review of what we value and what we actually do, in our every day lives. Whenever we do this, we always discover that something needs re-aligning. We discover that there are values we hold, commitments we've made, growth we desire, that simply don't make it on the list of our "actual priorities" - that is, the things that take the "first place" in our lives. For example, I might say, "My family is my first priority!" My family might say otherwise. I might say, "My faith is among my top priorities." But, an honest self-examination may show otherwise. I may say, I hear the words of Jesus that we will be judged really on only one thing: how we care for "the least" of his sister and brothers. I may only occasionally even notice that feeding, clothing, caring for or defending the marginal never makes it to my priority list.

A thorough review of what is most important to us, and what seems to be important to us by virtue of what we actually do, is prime Lenten activity. If what we are hoping to do during Lent is to grow in personal freedom, based upon our growing sense of God's love for us, and our clearer vision of who we are, and our deepening desire to be more closely aligned with the heart of Jesus, then we will want to do this personal review very carefully. How else might we ever hope to get to a heroic, courageous, self-sacrificing service of others? What chance will care of the poor ever have of making it into our priorities? How will we ever be able to break old self-defeating habits and secure the establishment of new ones that help us be who we want to actually be?

Getting Started

I can start a variety of ways, but it would be wonderful if we could start with prayer. We can ask God - in our own words, and with desire - for the grace to do this review with real honesty, and with a real desire to grow in freedom and integrity.

Who am I? What is my purpose?

Then, I might want to spend a few days reflecting upon - in the background all day long - who I am, and what my purpose is. Then, I might spend a few more days reflecting upon who I say Jesus is, and what this means for me. It doesn't make sense to start with a review of what I really value, if I haven't first examined if my values "fit" the truth of who I am and who I am called to be.

Naming my values

Then, I can name what is most important to me. A piece of paper would be very helpful, so that I can put it into words and keep "editing" or refining the words as I go along. I will try to be as explicit as possible. Instead of saying, "My kids." I might spell out the values that are important to me in my saying that my kids are a value, e.g., "It is extremely important to me that I be there for and with my kids when they are

encountering key growth moments in their lives, in so many areas - homework time, for reflection time, in relationship struggles, in wins and losses, in relaxing and having fun." We want to "open up" our values, as we name them. What does it mean to say I value "my faith" or "my relationship with God" or "service to others"?

Spelling out the values in actions

Then, with each value, I will list what that value will mean in concrete behavior. For example, I may have written a value statement that is quite wonderful, "My relationship with my wife is the most important relationship of my life: I need her for my faith, and for my everyday strength; I want to be there for her, supporting her faith, affirming her, and caring for her in all her needs; I want to spend the rest of my life growing together in service of others." That would be an incredibly important set of things to say about what my wife means to me. The real work, the real "choosing" happens when I spell that out in real actions that will give life to that valuing. The true test of a value's importance to me is how it survives, in competition with other important values, in the contest for time in my everyday life. I can tell what I really value, by what I really do. When I feel like I'm not doing what I really value, then I need to realign my priorities.

Don't forget to be complete

One of the serious "mistakes" in trying to realign priorities is that I can easily overlook "operational priorities" that I might not be too aware of, or that I might not be too proud of. If I'm going to "re-arrange" what is important to me - moving some things higher up on the list and others things lower down - then I need a complete list. There probably are things in my life that I just do regularly - I read the paper every morning at 6 a.m.; we go out to dinner every Saturday night; I have "season tickets" to something. I need to name these. If "watching TV" is a big priority in my life (something I spend 4, 6, 10, 20 or more hours a week doing), or if I have to watch something every week, I should name it. If escaping into sexual fantasy is something I do quite regularly, I should name it. Smoking, drinking, surfing the net, collecting little ceramic things, fixing up the basement, are things that can become pretty engaging, are often time and resource consuming, and should be named.

Establishing new priorities

When all of my priorities are lined up like this, I am then ready to re-value them. We don't want to rush this part of the process. Perhaps we will want to discuss this review with some of the people who are intimately involved with the choices I will be making. And I will want to assess if I have the freedom and grace I need to make the decisions I want to make and to begin to establish new patterns. That is precisely when it is important to turn to God with my fresh desires (trusting that they have been inspired by God's initiative already) and ask what I need.

The next step is to name what my "first priorities" are. This may sound ironic: how many "first" priorities can I have? In this sense, my first priorities are those that I will always do. In any competition for time, these choices will win out. That is what defines them as my priorities. My relationship with God, with my family, with my faith

community, with my friends, with others in need, might be in this category. This is what I do not want to neglect any more.

Then, it is very important to name the second level of priorities. These are very important, and I don't want to neglect them either, but I want to make sure to distinguish them from my top priorities. I may, for example, have "my work" priorities here. They are very important to me, but I want to realign my priorities so that my first ones actually come first.

Then, I will clearly put a lot of other stuff in the third level of priorities. Now this process gets to be purifying. I may discover that I spend more money on smoking or recreation or knick knacks than I give in support of my faith community or the poor. I may realize that I spend more time watching TV than I do praying. I may find it difficult to surrender something I "always do" for something I now want to make sure I always do. Since this is where we may need the most grace, this is a very important time to turn to the Lord and ask for help and freedom. Dying to self, in order to be who I am called to be for and with others, is not easy at first. With practice, it can become a source of great joy and fulfillment. And, with God's grace, it will be part of my contribution to the Reign of God's coming closer and closer.

Building in a review time

Because this realignment will take practice, it will involve some back sliding at times. In times of crisis or under pressure, we all regress back to behaviors we were most comfortable with. Our new priorities can vanish. That is why it is critical to keep reviewing how we are doing. During this Lenten time, we may build in a daily examination of how we are doing. With time, we may want to develop the practice of reviewing our day to day fidelity to our priorities every Sunday morning, or some other time during the week. With each examination, we need to give thanks to God, for the grace that has inspired and sustained this life-giving realignment of our priorities.