

Keeping Priorities Straight - Integrating Faith, Family, and Work.

There is surely no one who does not struggle to balance the demands of one's professional work, with family life, with one's civic and religious duties, not to mention hobbies, finances, and so on. To explore the central themes of faith, family, and work, I will share some personal experiences in my own life, as I think it will show, better than pure abstractions or tidy theories, how we each struggle to live by our core values, how we struggle to keep our priorities straight. And I will also offer 12 specific ideas for your consideration, drawn from those experiences, as we go along. In conclusion, I will try to show how the hidden life of Christ might offer us key insights into these areas.

The first idea, which no doubt sounds uninspired, is actually an important motif through all these remarks: You've no doubt heard it many times: **Idea #1 - Ideas Have Consequences, or better, Ideas Should have Consequences.**

And let me adjust that into more of a personal challenge: **May I have the courage and integrity to allow my key ideas to have consequences in my life. In other words, may I strive to identify my core values and then work to align my lifestyle and daily behavior with those ideas. If I do that, I am keeping my priorities straight.**

What I can tend to do, and you are probably similar, is I can allow immediate circumstances and superficial pressures to direct my life and actions. I let the "urgent" override the

“important.” I can spend most of my time “putting out fires” and very little time reflecting on what started those fires in the first place. Sound familiar? This reflection will hopefully help us step back a bit, taking the time to work toward formulating priorities for those three key areas of Faith, Family, and Work.

Let’s begin with Faith. I will go back quite a ways in my own life. I was brought up in a home without any religion or faith life whatsoever. My family lived in an affluent area near Philadelphia, though my family itself was quite middle class. Interestingly, one idea seemed clear to me, even as a young, unformed teen growing up - that the rampant materialism I saw around me was not enough to make life meaningful. I knew there must be more.

At the time, Christianity struck me as hypocritical, and not to be taken seriously, because it preached about service of the poor and love for the poor, but all I saw were supposed Christians chasing material wealth with all their heart, mind, and soul.

Looking elsewhere, I came upon Transcendental Meditation. Basically it is a simple form of Eastern meditation, where you sit quietly and repeat a mantra, and supposedly, this can eventually lead you to enlightenment, or nirvana, a state of complete detachment from material things.

For me this seemed a legitimate antidote to the consuming materialism I saw around me, and also to the escapism of the drug culture that was popular at the time. Instead of spending holidays at the beach, or hanging out with friends,

several times a year I would go on retreats, which were times of complete silence and extra meditation.

In fact, when Junior year of high school came around and it was time to look at colleges, I never even contemplated attending any college except Maharishi International University (MIU), located in Fairfield, Iowa. I was so enthused about going there that I skipped my Senior year to get there as soon as possible.

The reason I share all this from my distant past is because I was taking an idea about my spiritual life, in my case the idea of spiritual enlightenment, and making it a priority in my life. I was letting an important idea have consequences!

One of the more sensational techniques I learned at MIU was levitation. We actually practiced it together, twice a day, transforming the gymnasium into a "flying center" by covering the entire floor in thick foam, where we could practice our hopping and flying techniques....but that is a subject for another talk and another day....

I was actually very happy at MIU. I spent three idealistic, wholesome, and academically intense years there. And I would have to admit I left not so much because of another spiritual call, but because I was getting restless. I had done very well academically at MIU and I wanted to see if I could succeed in the "real" academic world, and get top grades at a "respected" institution.

And also, frankly, I was weary of living such an austere, chaste lifestyle.

So I took summer classes at the University of Pennsylvania, fell for a lovely girl from Brown University who was also taking summer courses there, and, well, decided not to return to the idealistic bubble of MIU.

One could say my priority shifted from the spiritual to the more carnal.

Was making **that** a priority the key to finding happiness? Any votes? No, it was not, and after I graduated from Penn I was still searching. I decided to hitch-hike around the world, and see what new wisdom and insight I could gather in foreign countries.

I'll skip over that time, except to say that after about a year and a half on the road, and traveling through 20 countries, I came upon a community in Switzerland called "L'Abri" which, in french, means "The Shelter."

L'Abri was a Christian community founded to present the case for Christianity to people like me - non-believers and disbelievers. A wonderful place.

And while I did not become a Christian there, my life **was** completely changed, and by a very important **idea** - It was there that I confronted the issue of abortion.

Up to that point I had simply accepted that abortion was a necessary, even compassionate response to the problem of an unwanted pregnancy.

But when I read that after an abortion the pieces of the child's body have to be reassembled to be sure everything has been evacuated, I immediately saw that abortion was a brutal act of violence that could not be justified.

Remember my opening theme for consideration: Core values should have consequences. Align your lifestyle with your core values.

Well, there I was, staying in a tent outside the L'Abri community — with a young lady. We were touring Switzerland together at the time - so small wonder really, that I did not embrace Christianity while I was there - I had other priorities. I'll make my ponderings at that time short and to the point. What if that young lady became pregnant? Would I make a mockery of marriage and marry someone with whom I had little in common? Or would I be the ultimate coward and abandon her to raise the child alone or give it up for adoption? Or would I support killing my own innocent child, my firstborn son or daughter?

Now there, gentlemen, are a set of ideas that have consequences!

As I reflected on this issue, my faith in modern, secular society began to unravel. If my culture could be so wrong in calling something as horrific as abortion “liberating” and a

“fundamental right”, then maybe it was just as wrong in its total disdain for Christianity.

Also, secular society was wholeheartedly promoting this idea of “sex without consequences”, an idea from which I was benefiting at that very moment, but which I now saw as nothing but a deceptive and dangerous illusion.

I believe this illusion that there is such a thing as “sex without consequences” (thanks in large part to the use of artificial birth control) is numbing the consciences and castrating the spiritual sensitivities of countless young men and women. It is one of the reasons that the pro-life position is so important. It is such a powerful and fundamental idea that it just might help young people see through the deceptions of our modern culture, it just might puncture the bubble of false promises. **So idea number #2: Be unapologetically pro-life, and encourage your kids to confront and think about this core value and to act upon the consequences that follow from it.**

We shouldn't be preachy or judgmental, just help kids confront those three options I saw so clearly.

This talk is on keeping priorities straight. At that time I had to honor **my** newly formed pro-life convictions and live a chaste lifestyle. I also knew it was time to take a closer look at Christianity.

I decided to return to America and volunteer at a pro-life office. Shortly thereafter I was blessed with the grace of an

intense conversion experience, and, thanks be to God, a deep faith has remained with me to this day.

I did in fact return briefly to Europe - this time for a pro-life conference in Germany, and there I met Jenny, the woman who was to become my wife - she was from Ohio but was also attending the conference. At that same time I was accepted into the graduate school of Education at Harvard, so when I returned to the US I enrolled there and completed my degree just before Jenny and I were married.

Upon graduation there were various job offers, but my passion and therefore my priority, my core value, remained the pro-life cause, so I chose to accept a very low paying, administrative job at the local pro-life office in Boston. Here we come upon idea **#3 Don't be afraid to put convictions above comfort, ideals over income.**

Now I am sure each of us has a story to tell of an unpredictable turn in his or her professional life. If you don't have one, or two, or several - trust me, you will. Life rarely goes in a straight line. One of my professional surprises happened early on...

I was living on a small salary of \$16,000 a year — even in those days not a fraction of what I needed to afford a home, so I accepted an offer from a married couple (actually friends from my MIU days who had also moved to Boston) to joint own a two-family house in Waltham, Massachusetts. They both had good jobs with good income, so we qualified for a loan, and I had just received enough for a downpayment from

a modest inheritance from my grandfather. It seemed a wise choice.

However, less than a year after moving in and not long before my wife Jenny was to give birth to our first child, this other couple announced they were moving.

Jenny was in no condition to move and create a new nest. And I did not make enough money to get a place of our own. What to do? I rented out the other side of the house, and voila, became a landlord.

My first tenants were very quiet and paid rent on time - plus their rent covered most of our mortgage. So I concluded that being a landlord was easy! Wow, was I a naive kid back then. But back in the late 80s real estate was booming and banks were almost begging people for loans. So I worked out with our friend to buy out their half of the house, and a year later bought another two family directly across the street, moving in as the home owner in order to keep the interest rate low and qualify more easily, then fixing it up, and renting it out.

My side-career in real estate was born.

What I want to emphasize however, is it did not start as a financial decision, but as a family one - putting the needs of the family first, and keeping my low paying but rewarding job. It was an attempt to keep my priorities straight.

Allow me to jump forward a few years to finish this part of the story: The name for the corporation I formed a few years later was “Plus Five Management” as by that time I had 5 kids, planned more, and planned for my real estate to be the main asset that would help them through private school, college, etc. In fact, I resolved, the good Lord willing, to buy one property for every dependent in my family, and to stop there. I kept that resolution, and have owned 10 income properties (that’s nine kids plus one wife!) up until retirement.

Now jumping back in time with one house and work in the pro-life office: I had been named the Executive Director of the organization, though I still lived on a very modest salary. Like many young men in their 20s, hoping to save the world, I probably worked too long and too hard, and in fact my health started to deteriorate. I saw I needed to re-align my priorities. In order to be home more and have a more balanced lifestyle, I made the decision to move to New Hampshire and restrict my hours working at the main office, come what may - even if it meant losing my job as Executive Director.

Fortunately, other right to life groups had seen the rapid growth in the Massachusetts organization and had been asking me for help, as fundraising seemed to be my specialty. What non-profit doesn’t need fundraising, right? So I ended up forming my own company and being a consultant to a number of non-profits around the country. This allowed me to work out of the home every day, and involve the kids.

This in fact is idea **#4: Whenever possible, involve your kids in your work.** At least expose them to it. Otherwise Dad can be this mysterious being who disappears nearly the whole day, almost every day, and that “disappearing act” is somehow mysteriously related to keeping a roof over their heads and having food on the table. My advice is - Let your kids in on the secret of your work, as best you can. Bring them with you now and then, or better, get them involved somehow, maybe start something together.

When I started my own consulting business I remember - “hiring” all my kids (and all their friends) to, for example, open the thousands of letters that came back from direct mail fundraising campaigns I had orchestrated. I marketed those long hours of work as “pizza parties!”. Slave labor? Absolutely, and I remain unrepentant to this day. **So Idea #5: Work is good for kids - their minds and their bodies. Kids can work better, and longer, and at younger ages than you think. In today’s culture we spoil kids to the detriment of their character.**

That consulting business continued to expand, and I was offered national fundraising positions with good salaries and benefits. But I turned them down, not wanting to move the family. And I even decided to slowly phase out the consulting, as it was demanding ever greater amounts of time. My priority was not to work more and more in order to make more and more money, but to stay close to the family. I chose to focus on one start-up pro-life outfit, one that did not even have the assets to offer me any salary at first so I even worked for a time on 100% commission. That job eventually took me

around the world on various speaking tours. And in this case I made the decision to bring children with me: I took one daughter to Dublin, another to Rome, a group of 3 teens to Austria, and all 8 children and my wife to Kenya.

Now for another change in topic.... Those were very busy years, and I found going to the gym to be indispensable in releasing stress and clearing the mind. Men - Go to the gym! It is so helpful - I might even say, essential. Not just for your body, but for your overall sense of balance, for your family, for your soul!

As my interest in fitness grew, I became very interested in the parallels I was noticing between developing **physical** fitness and developing **spiritual** fitness. It sounds strange, I know, but, for example, we make the same excuses to avoid committing to either one.

For example, see if nearly all of these mental excuses I'm going to list don't sound familiar. Imagine you are out of shape and just joined a gym, and there you are, starting to lift weights on one of those big contraptions, or..... a completely different idea.....Suppose you are just starting to make time for the daily habit of sitting down to pray, in silence, alone in your room: You can be quite sure that either scenario will seem very alien at first. See if these reactions are not likely to arise in your mind in BOTH situations. Ready?

“I am **not** cut out for this.” or

“This doesn't **feel** right.” or

“I don't have the **time** for this.” or

“I am getting nowhere - nothing is changing” - why bother”,
or
“This is a great idea some other time -
today I am just too tired or too busy” or
“such and such is much more important right now” and so on.
Haven’t we all made these excuses to ourselves?

And there are also positive parallels: For example, in both cases to make any lasting progress you need the same two things, and I will make this **idea #6 For either spiritual or physical development, you need: 1) a long range vision clearly in mind and 2) concrete, daily actions that are in line with that long range vision. Neither spiritual nor physical improvement is something you can just sprinkle onto your life and expect magic. Improvement in either area takes time, it takes patience, it takes hard work and perseverance, and it takes coaching.** Both require a proper set of priorities!

Anyway, in addition to my regular jobs of real estate and pro-life work, I became a certified personal trainer, and was hired as a personal fitness trainer at a local gym. And I did this to gain credibility, so that I could launch a website presenting the interesting parallels between faith and fitness, as well as offering fitness consulting online. My hope was to encourage people focused solely on their physical health, to see that spiritual muscles need exercise too. After all we are not born with spiritual muscles any more than we are born with bulging pecs and six-pack abs. Somehow we have this idea that you are born with “spiritual genes” or you are not, and

that is simply **wrong**. As idea #6 outlined, it takes time and practice, just like anything else.

This idea of becoming a certified trainer and starting a website were again not motivated by a desire for financial gain, rather they were a natural response to my passionate interest in fitness and spirituality and a desire to share my ideas with others.

Now for another twist in the road of life. I did make one career decision based solely on financial gain. At about this time the value of the real estate I owned had grown considerably, and I thought I could just about retire if I sold my properties, made good investments with the money, and kept to a very tight budget. Great theory! But I made a bad decision, or was given bad advice, and I made a six digit investment in a company that went bankrupt just weeks later.

The Good Lord sure didn't want me to retire early!

It turns out it was fortunate that I had followed my passion and become a trainer at a local gym (remember Idea #3 - ideals over income?), because I was the personal trainer for a man who was involved in retail, and he was looking to expand his business. I liked the imported products he sold, and he was willing to advance the merchandise required without payment upfront. So I opened up two stores that very year, with no training in retail whatsoever. I had never even touched a cash register in my life! I remember when I had my first sale I panicked a bit and thought "What do I do now! - What button do I push?"

But - we survived, and it turned out to be a good choice, as I was able to rather quickly make back the money I had lost, and eventually I established my own retail company, and have opened 35 temporary, seasonal stores over the last 12 years, across 7 states.

Here again I involve the family, and every single one of my nine children and my wife has been involved in opening, running and closing at least some of those stores. In fact, my 17 year-old paid her own way through Catholic high school and private violin lessons by helping at my store. I paid her very generously but within legal standards, and she paid all her own school tuition, music lessons, and personal expenses out of her own bank account. And Dad gets a great tax write off for his business.

It works the same with travel, as I can write off most of my expenses when I go to different countries with the kids or my wife and we buy merchandise for an upcoming store.

This is a key financial advantage to having your own small business - it may be the greatest legal loophole in the entire tax code - as a business you are allowed to write off any legitimate expense BEFORE you are taxed, whereas as an employee you are taxed first before you even get your paycheck, so certainly before you can spend anything. The difference in taxable income between the two can be enormous. While somewhat out of step with this talk, I'll make this idea **#7: If possible, start your own small business to**

promote something you are passionate about, and among other things, enjoy substantial tax benefits.

I will wind down my own story with probably my craziest idea...

Another passion of mine is music. In our house every young child must practice a musical instrument for two years, at which time they can elect to stop playing, switch instruments - whatever they like. And since I played piano and we had two pianos in the house, I taught piano and basic music theory to most of the kids, one on one. I found it to be an intimate, intense, and fun form of communication — and you all know, or you will learn, how hard it is to communicate with your teens at all, not to mention make it intimate and fun! I had found a goldmine of an opportunity to deepen my relationship with each child and wanted to see it **grow**.

I also felt strongly about the importance of exposing the children to other cultures, particularly through the discipline of learning a foreign language.

But modern american life doesn't leave much room for these extras, does it? The kids have to get up early, they have a very long day at school, maybe followed by sports, followed by homework, and I had long days of work.....at the end of the day how much gas is left in the tank?

I was looking for some way to better align my priorities with our daily lifestyle, and one day I had a kind of epiphany - it was actually just after a piano lesson with one of my sons.

If we home-schooled our children instead of putting them in expensive private Catholic schools, we would save the vast bulk of our annual expenses and still give them the religious and moral training we valued. AND if I rented the home we lived in it would bring in extra income. Soooo, home school the kids, take them to Europe to live, learn another language (we chose Italian), focus there on musical development, rent my home to help fund the trip and have my assistant at the time continue to manage the other real estate. As the retail stores were seasonal, we could just skip a year or two. No problem!

What is missing here? Well, needless to say, the wife and all the kids had to buy into this wild idea, but we did in fact rent our house and move to Europe for about two years. A terrific experience. And this whole venture is an example of **Idea #8: Be willing to take risks and to be creative in finding ways to keep your core values at the forefront.**

Allow me to end by revisiting in a more general way each of those main themes that dominates our lives: Work, Family, and Faith.

To keep priorities straight, I find it essential to regularly contemplate the reason why I am here in the first place. If I have in mind my ultimate end and purpose, then I can better evaluate the daily steps I am taking that lead me there, or, as the case may be, take me away from my true end. After all, if you don't know where you are going, you can't very well gauge if you are on the right track.

So let's look at Work, Family and Faith with two "lenses" - each of which focuses on our ultimate purpose from a different angle. The first lens is our original destiny, our nature and purpose before the fall. The second lens is the example of how Christ lived these areas of work, family, and faith. So you might say we are considering the **ideal of man**, by viewing his status before the fall, and the **perfection of man**, as shown in the life of Christ. The two, of course, complement each other, and, like two eyes, can help put into greater focus one's own purpose and thus help in the setting of key priorities.

Let's start with work.

Lens #1. (The Ideal of Man before the Fall) Recall that in the Garden of Eden man was expected to work, even before the fall. So daily labor is divinely planned, and, in a state of perfection, we would still be **working** - quite a thought! I think that can be very helpful to contemplate when you get up to go to work each day, as so often it just seems a burden, a daily grind, a distraction from deeper things. No, work is how we express and develop our very humanity.

Lens#2 (The Perfection of Man in Christ): Almighty God, creator of all that is, chose to use **one** human life to reveal himself to us and to show us the perfect man.

And what did that God-man do? After about 15 years growing up in his family, he apparently worked as a normal

carpenter for the next 15 years. It was only the last 3 years of this life, the last 10%, that he began his public ministry.

What does this tell us? It tells us a very very great deal. About half (45%) of his life was committed to professional work, without any miracles or public preaching that we know of. And we can be absolutely sure that Christ continued his dialogue with his father God right through all that day-to-day responsibilities. He prayed with and through his daily work. This leads to idea #9: **Let us never think that professional work is not part of God's original plan, OR that work is a distraction from our spiritual life. God himself clearly did not think so, so we cannot. We can and should bring God into our work, and bring our work to God.**

Now to the second area: family life.

Lens #1: what was our original destiny, before the fall? To live in a loving community of persons - man, woman, (then children to follow of course), with God - as a family. In fact, take one step further back, to the trinitarian nature of God: Father, son and holy spirit - it too denotes a community of persons, a kind of divine family. So the concept of the family not only transcends national or social origins, it predates the fall, and it predates creation itself! How's that for the lofty stature of the family! Our families are intended to reflect, though admittedly quite poorly in our fallen state, that loving communion of persons - it is there that all the most important values and virtues are learned and shared.. Nourishing the family, and include God in family life, should clearly be among our highest priorities in life.

I realize I am in the stratosphere of abstraction here, so let's hazard going from the sublime to the "ridiculous" and propose one concrete resolution you could make: Don't worry too much about the expense, (it does not have to be expensive or far away), and resolve to take your family on a **wonderful** vacation, this year. And every year.

Now lens #2 - the example of Jesus as regards the family. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus spent about 15 years growing up in his family, apparently without much notice in the community. Again, about half of his life being...first a helpless baby - in diapers! - Then a toddler, then a young child, then an adolescent. What does this tell us? A very very great deal. If God made normal family life such a priority during his one, brief life on earth, we should too.

And the last consideration, what about our faith?

It might look as if I have let you off the hook..."Hey - Didn't he say 45% work, 45% family, and that leaves just a nice comfortable little percentage for faith, right? I can do that, I do that already...I'm doing just fine - I don't need to change a thing!

Well now, just hold on. We need to look at this more closely.

When it comes to actual spiritual or even religious activities, you and I probably tend to put these things on the "Wish List", the "To Do" list, at the end of all our other more pressing

activities. This usually means we never get to them - am I right? They are one more demand on our time, and usually, as mentioned earlier, we tend to let the urgent overwhelm the really important.

We tend to see life, pretty much, as one giant juggling act. We have so many demands to juggle: “hold down a full time job”, or another: “earn enough to support the family needs,” and “dinner with the family,” and “church on Sunday”; and “fix the kitchen sink”; and “get daughter to skating practice on Wednesdays”; and “go fishing with my buddy this weekend” and (most important)- “watch the Pats, and Bruins, and Celtics, and RedSox” - OK, I got this, OK ...

But then comes this voice of conscience deep within: “Hey, guy, you need to do more about your spiritual life!” And you submissively but naively answer, “**Yea, that’s probably true, I do...ah..OK...** I’ll join the Knights of Columbus...and show up for Nocturnal Adoration....and be on the parish council, and be a eucharistic minister...

What is going on here? What is going to happen? If I was acting this out, trying to juggle all these balls, very very soon I would, of course, start dropping balls all over the place. If you stack on new church activities, it is inevitably going to force out other things at work or in the family. Life is, after all, a zero sum game - meaning: Whatever you add to one area, you have to take from another.

Or is it?

Allow me to suggest we have this ALL WRONG. Authentic human life, as it is meant to be lived, is not a zero sum game.

This leads to idea **#10: What God wants from you and from me is not a few more church activities crammed into our busy day. Nor is he primarily interested in us following the rules of his church, though of course we should do so as best we can. What He most wants is relationship, communion. He wants our love.**

Now love is the furthest thing from a zero sum game as you can get - after all, the more you give it away, the more it grows! And, miracle of miracles, the more love grows in your life, the more room there is for it. This dynamic makes sense, as God is Love, and God is infinite, so Love is infinite.

From this perspective then, just adding more activities, even laudable church activities, might in fact do very little to deepen our interior life, our relationship with our Creator. Doing too much, even if they are charitable or religious activities, could even diminish our ability to live in loving relationship with God. In a word, prayer **must** come before volunteerism, relationship before activism.

So we can finally consider the third main area, namely faith, from the perspective of lens #1 - Man's life before the fall. Man was destined to live in **constant, uninterrupted** communion with his Creator.

To explore this I have to back up a bit. Quite a bit, actually. How old is the universe, as far as we know? 13.7 Billion years old. And life was started on this planet a little under 4 billion years ago, finally culminating in the astonishing creature called man. Each of us is a collection of about 37 trillion cells, each of which is complex beyond our comprehension, all working in precise coordination and balance and interdependence— in order to....

...Well, in order to do **what**? Because after all, the miracle of life (and it IS a miracle - remember we are just a collection of inanimate, dead molecules - mostly just hydrogen, carbon, and oxygen atoms - those are the main three, which somehow become self conscious and self replicating creatures), - this miracle of life is shared with millions of other creatures who can also move, they have the delight of all five senses, they mate and live in community, they have at least basic forms of consciousness and language. What can we do that is really different from the animals?

Again....humans are here in order to do what? Let me suggest that the crowning glory of the universe as we know it is the creation of a physical being who... could ...live in a loving dialogue with its creator, with God, in a word...to pray! **That** was our original destiny in the Garden that was supposed to last to the end of time, **that** is what creation was pulsing towards across all those billions of years. Your and my ability to pray is apparently worth 13.7 billion years of divine anticipation, and divine preparation.

I hope you feel special. You should! And I hope this is an idea which will you allow to have consequences in your life, as it has in mine...

It means prayer is not an **extra** in life, it is **not** just for priests and pastors, or for the idle, or for the desperate. Prayer is the *raison d'être* for our very existence. It is not something we just do in church, it is not just formal awkward phrases we cast heavenward when we need something, it is meant to permeate every activity, naturally, like an ongoing conversation with your closest friend.

Now of course we are on the other side of the fall, and these lovely abstractions sure don't fit our reality. Let's face it, prayer **is** often unnatural, it is hard, it is often empty and boring. But if we at least understand its importance as a core value, its intended purpose in the created order, we can work towards making it a higher priority even when it is hard and seems unrewarding. On this side of the Fall, everything that is really valuable is often really hard. And when we do start to pray daily, the payoff is enormous. Your life will begin to change.

Yes, we still have to juggle various demands on our time, that never stops. But we **don't** have to feel pulled in opposite directions - between what we think of as the secular world with family and work over here, and the spiritual world, with religious and faith matters over there. **Idea #11: We are called to live a *unified* life, in which we know our main reason for being is to love and communicate with God as our Father, during all our activities - whether work, or**

faith, or family. It is this interior dialogue that unifies our existence, not outer activities. Activities, whether in family life, professional work, or faith will constantly change, but this interior dialogue remains. That is what it means to live a unity of life.

Now consider, briefly, lens #2 - the life of Christ: Almost all of his years spent, at least outwardly, on family and professional work. But is there any doubt, as I mentioned before, that he was in constant dialogue with God the Father and with God the Holy Spirit, whether he was enjoying family life or hard at work? Of course not. That is the template for each human person, for you and for me.

But let us again confront hard reality - we **can** sometimes see our faith as vague, remote, or even as just a set of static beliefs. "Sure I'm a Catholic, I go to Mass on Sunday and I believe most of what the church teaches." Done.

Here is a challenging parallel...

Suppose I claim I am an active football player, and you, quite naturally, ask where I practice, and what team I play with. And I answer: "Ah, I actually don't do any of those things, I just **believe** in the rules of the game. In fact, ALL of them!" I very proudly announce, "AND on Sunday, every Sunday!, I watch a game for an hour. Impressive, eh? AND I am even on the committee to help plan the schedule. I am soooooe football player, aren't I?! "

Am I a football player? No... I am not a player at all. I am, truthfully, a mere spectator, and maybe a good one, maybe a faithful one, but not... even part... of the game.

Allow me to suggest that the real “game” of the Christian life is recovering this interior dialogue with God. That does not mean adding any new social activities to our lives. But it does mean at least some time set aside each day to re-learn how to talk to God, in a word, to pray. Try it. Set aside 20 - 30 minutes a day, 10 or 15 minutes in the morning and evening, and see if it doesn’t change your life from the inside out.

So what I am suggesting is two types of prayer: a fixed time when you “practice” being alone with God, and then an ongoing conversation with Him during your busy, secular life.

Idea #12 then: “Make personal, daily, silent prayer among the highest priorities in your life. Prayer is the primary reason you exist”.

As to **how** to pray one on one, let me just say it should be **natural** - give thanks, complain, explain, ask for help - but never, ever put on a mask, or try to be something you are not. Don’t be eloquent, don’t be pious. Invite God into your normal, daily thoughts, emotions, and activities. He wants to share them with you.

In conclusion, I realize my own story, especially my career path is a bit unusual. I am reminded of those construction trucks you see on highway projects... “Construction Vehicle - Do Not Follow”. After all, if you do, you might end up in a

ditch somewhere. Maybe I should have something like that on my back, saying “Erratic Career Path - Do Not Follow.”

So the particulars of my own career may not be transferable, but my hope is that at least some of the ideas I’ve shared will be seen as relevant to your own situation, that maybe one or two ideas will take root and have real consequences in your life.

Each of us has to decide on our core values, on our true priorities, and then see if our day-to-day lives line up with those values. So by all means forget any of the particulars I have shared - but sit down...reflect on your own core values... and begin the life-long adventure of trying to put them into practice amid the clutter and chaos of daily life.

Best of luck on the journey.

Summary of Ideas from “Keeping Priorities Straight: Integrating Faith, Family, and Work

#1 May I have the courage and integrity to allow my key ideas to have consequences in my life. In other words, may I strive to identify my core values and then work to align my lifestyle and daily behavior with those ideas. If I do that, I am keeping priorities straight.

#2 Be unapologetically pro-life, and encourage your kids to confront and think about this core value and to act upon the consequences that follow from it.

#3 Don't be afraid to put convictions above comfort, ideals over income.

#4 Whenever possible, involved your kids in your work.

#5 Work is good for kids - their minds and their bodies. Kids can work better, and longer, and at younger ages than you think. In today's culture we spoil kids to the detriment of their character.

#6 For either spiritual or physical development, you need: 1) a long range vision clearly in mind and 2) concrete, daily actions that are in line with that long range vision. Neither spiritual nor physical improvement is something you can just sprinkle onto your life and expect magic. Improvement in either area takes time, it takes patience, it takes hard work and perseverance, and it takes coaching.

#7 If possible, start your own small business to promote something you are passionate about, and enjoy, among other things, substantial tax benefits.

#8 Be willing to take risks and to be creative in finding ways to keep your core values at the forefront.

#9 Let us never think that work is not part of God's original plan, or that work is a distraction from our spiritual life. God himself clearly did not think so, so we cannot. We can and should bring God into our work, and bring our work to God.

#10 What God wants from you and from me is not a few more church activities crammed into our busy day. Nor is he primarily interested in us following the rules of his church, though of course we should do so. What He most wants is relationship, communion. He wants our love.

#11 We are called to live a *unified* life, in which we know our main reason for being is to love and communicate with God as our Father, during all our activities - whether work, or faith, or family. It is this interior dialogue that unifies our existence, not outer activities. Activities, whether in family life, professional work, or faith will constantly change, but this interior dialogue remains.

#12 "Make personal, daily, silent prayer among the highest priorities in your life. It is the primary reason you exist".

For further dialogue or to obtain copies of "Keeping Priorities Straight: Integrating Faith, Family, and Work" contact Paul Swope at pointstoponderllc@gmail.com

And there are also positive parallels: For example, in both cases to make any lasting progress you need the same two things, and I will make this **idea #6 For either spiritual or physical development, you need: 1) a long range vision clearly in mind and 2) concrete, daily actions that are in line with that long range vision. Neither spiritual nor physical improvement is something you can just sprinkle onto your life and expect magic. Improvement in either area takes time, it takes patience, it takes hard work and perseverance, and it takes coaching.** Both require a proper set of priorities!

Anyway, in addition to my regular jobs of real estate and pro-life work, I became a certified personal trainer, and was hired as a personal fitness trainer at a gym. And I did this to