

Natural Charity

by the Rev. W. Cairns Henderson

*What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

These words describe the life of charity without which there can be no salvation. This is what the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church calls *genuine natural charity*, the kind that can be found among all the religions of the world.

The Importance of Natural Charity

Even natural charity is spiritual in origin. It does not belong to a person, but flows in from the Lord out of heaven. From hereditary nature a person can love only himself and those who promote his selfish ambitions. He has no concern for the welfare of others. It is only because the Lord gives everyone heavenly affections during infancy and childhood that they can feel any regard for justice, or mercy, or humility. But because such affections are deeply implanted in the consciousness of all children, everyone in the world is gifted by the Lord with the spirit of charity.

It is of supreme importance that this should be so, because otherwise people would have no possibility of choosing between good and evil, or truth and falsity. They would be slaves to their own selfish loves and could think only in accordance with them.

Furthermore, without the Divine gift of charity, human society could not exist. Every person would be a law unto himself. There would be no respect for the rights of others, no basis of mutual trust, no willingness to cooperate with others except for the sake of self-advantage. Suspicion, jealousy, and hatred would lead to constant strife and warfare.

For this reason natural charity, wherever it exists, must be highly honored and protected. Parents must cultivate it with their children. It must be encouraged by every religion, and zealously guarded by every civil government, for without it there could be no established order, and no individual freedom.

Guiding Natural Charity with Knowledge and Understanding

The Heavenly Doctrine defines natural charity as “an internal affection which consists in a heartfelt desire to do the neighbor good, this being the very delight of life, and this without any reward” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8033). But a person might feel this affection and yet be quite mistaken as to *how* the neighbor may truly be benefited. How can one really do good? Without knowing this, someone’s efforts to help the neighbor might be altogether ineffective, or even harmful. Without realizing it, a person could give temporary relief that is permanently injurious. Nothing can guard against such a possibility except an accurate knowledge and intelligent understanding of the needs to be met.

If a person is guided by accurate knowledge, he may do much to improve the external conditions

of human society through natural charity. By this means civil order and freedom may be established and maintained. By it physical suffering, hunger, poverty, and want may be greatly relieved. It can also provide the opportunity for the enjoyment of greater external delights and pleasures.

Natural Charity as a Foundation

Yet natural charity alone is not sufficient to overcome the deeper evils of society. It can only restrain the external manifestations of evil, keeping hatred and violence within bounds, lest they wreak utter destruction upon humanity. The real use, and the highest benefit, of natural charity is to provide the foundation from which spiritual charity may grow. Natural charity preserves a remnant of innocence, a willingness to learn, which opens the way for instruction. It is the means, therefore, by which the Lord keeps the way to heaven open for all people who are willing to “do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with (their) God.”