

A Rock Higher than Ourselves

by the Rev. Erik E. Sandstrom

*From the end of the earth I will cry to You when my heart is overwhelmed;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I (Psalm 61:2).*

These familiar words give us a picture which we can hang onto in our daily lives. For doesn't life always have its problem areas? Don't we often come to "the end of the earth" and cry to the Lord? Either daily problems or drastic events invite destructive feelings. We become their first silent victims, and—through us—they drag down as many innocent bystanders as possible. That is an "end of the earth" condition in us.

But that's exactly why everyone is allowed to think evils without blame (see *True Christian Religion* 659). Even the worst evils can come to view, so that we can avoid them *without* having to do them. Thinking without cherishing prevents doing (see *Divine Providence* 294:4). We should stop condemning ourselves for just having evil thoughts. They flow in without choice. As long as evils are not loved, such thoughts are therapeutic. We may be further along the road to heaven than we realize. For the Lord's help is present right in our mental processes.

How is the Lord present with us?

The Lord is present with us by means of His Word in our memories(see *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 78). No matter how indirectly the Word is taught—for example, by teachers or parents—it is still taught directly by the Lord. We read, "To be taught *from* the Word is to be taught by the Lord Himself" (*Divine Providence* 172:5, emphasis added). The Lord is present in our thoughts about the Word; He is the ever-present Rock of Truth. When we turn to our knowledge of the Word, we turn to Him as a "rock that is higher than I."

And the "end of the earth" and "heart overwhelmed" refer to feeling "at the end of our wits"—lonely, depressed, disappointed, upset, slighted by others, sorry for ourselves, just miserable. The reasons for these feelings may be feeble or very, very valid. But, whatever the reason, at times we feel so low that even going to church may be almost more than we can manage. We can't bring ourselves to read the Word. A totally negative attitude takes over, and we become spiritual hermits. We may even get a perverse sense of satisfaction in spreading our misery to others. In our own hurt, we feel justified in hurting others by being grumpy or insulting. Misery needs company, so any unfortunate would-be helper is landed with loads of self-pity. Although personal contact may be just the right thing to allow us to snap out of this hermitage, it can also be an excuse for shouting in our private thoughts, "I am feeling so miserable that I can't stand happy people. I want them to be as miserable as I am. I am hurt so I want to pass it on, and absolutely anyone will do."

What does feeling miserable have to do with praise?

But this feeling is in fact a cry for help. It is when we place that sign on our door saying, "Keep out; misery in progress" that we need to turn to "a rock that is higher than I." The Lord knows where we are in this state because He has been there Himself. When the psalm says, "From the end of the earth I will cry to You when My heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I", it is, in fact, talking about the Lord's victory over the hells on Easter and our worship of Him because, at that

point, the Father and Son became One, just as soul and body make one person (see *Prophets and Psalms* and *The Athanasian Creed*).

Just think: in this psalm the Lord is singing praise because of the help He received! “So I will sing praise to Your name forever, that I may daily perform my vows” (61:8). What does feeling miserable and lonely have to do with singing praise? That is the beauty of turning to the Lord’s rock: we can change our misery by praising the Lord (as, for example, Job did, saying, “The Lord gave; the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”). All we need to do is to turn to a rock that is higher than we are. There are millions of them.

Just as the Lord felt the same temptations of loneliness, self-pity, personal hurt, *etc.*, and turned to the Divine within Himself as the higher rock, so we, too, can turn and praise. But, in order to turn to the Lord *tomorrow*, or whenever we are going to feel miserable, we need to resolve *now* that we *will* turn to Him. *Before our need*, we have to tell ourselves, “When next I feel lonely, depressed, hurt, or have waves of self-pity or self-extinction, I *will* turn to a rock that is higher than I.”

It does not take a world-famous actor to portray some earth-shattering agony in order for you to know what misery and despair are. They are every day. Despair is worry about the future, often with financial overtones: “How will we live? How can we afford it? Others always have more!” Evil feelings may spur wicked hopes which secretly laugh at other people’s misfortunes. Because of the harm we do to ourselves through this, we should realize that we are crying from the end of the earth. It may be so serious that we feel our life is at stake. We are in that enclosure with “Keep Out” signs.

What are these higher rocks?

We need to realize that no matter what precautions we take to nestle in our misery, one of the Lord’s rocks has made it into our private enclosure. No matter how carefully we may try to clear the deck of helpful hands, our very memories of the Word stand as silent, comforting sentinels.

These positive messages counteract all possible misery, real or imagined. In every state of mental hell the Lord is present with His help. In all our meditation, when we try to organize our emotions, the Lord gives us guidance. If we seethe with anger, if we feel a pain in our stomach from despair or bitter disappointment, or disgust with either ourselves or someone else, no matter what the cause—our subjective, lonely hell does have the Lord’s direct presence. As the psalm states, “If I make my bed in hell, behold You are there” (139:8). No situation is without one of the Lord’s rocks. His refuge is ever-present. Anywhere we turn, we can see a rock higher than ourselves, close at hand, easy to reach. You can count on it.

What precisely are these rocks? *They are any combination of your faith and obeying the Lord.* It is your confidence in calling upon His Name, in terms of your own memory of the Word. As we know from another well-known story about a rock, “He who hears the Lord’s sayings and does them builds his house upon a rock.” A rock means hearing the Word and obeying it in your life.

But it is more specific than that. The Lord’s rock is doctrine, teaching. As the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church states for us, “The Word is the only doctrine which teaches how a person must live in the world in order to be happy to eternity” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8939). Doctrine means reasonable revealed teachings from the Word about a religious life leading to heaven. How do we use reason together with religion? We do it by simply applying doctrine from the Word as well as we can in our

daily life. We hear and do the Lord's sayings: the house built upon a rock.

Every memory of the Word is like a rock. The more we refer to it, the more our life will be tested, turning our knowledge of doctrine to our lives. Doctrine combines the Word with our life, reason with religion, and is a rock higher than ourselves. Doctrine is *your own knowledge*, privately tested and *applied to your life*. It is your ability to reason about what you believe, referring to the Word not with hammer-blow justifications, but in reasonable explanations. It is your ability to help others in the way you yourself have been helped.

How did human life begin? And other questions...

Every doctrine is one of the Lord's rocks, higher than ourselves. Let's review some of these "rocks." The first is that doctrine is necessary. We cannot know anything about spiritual life unless we are taught about it from the Word (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8944). Once we know an outline of truths, this is doctrine or teaching. All doctrine comes from the Lord, who is Doctrine Itself (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5321, 3396, 3364). Even what we receive indirectly from priests, teachers, parents, or by reading for ourselves comes directly from the Lord (see *Divine Providence* 171, 172:6). You don't learn any truth by instinct, out of nowhere. Even the truth that love comes first, that love is most important, has to be revealed. This truth, once revealed, pops up everywhere, leading some people to think that love is all you need and truth is just like an instinct. But it is not so. Every truth we know, which really is a truth, has been revealed, including how important love is.

So doctrine always comes first. Doctrine describes what love is and all its orderly forms: love to the Lord, love for the neighbor, love of marriage, love of being useful or being of service. Doctrine always points to life. Doctrine is the rock; doctrine is all rocks.

And doctrine is all-pervasive. The Lord's higher rocks are everywhere. No area of life is exempt. The Heavenly Doctrine gives answers which no one could have thought up. For example, *How did the creation of the universe take place?* From a Sun in heaven, through which the Infinite God, by withdrawing His infinity, finited all stars and planets. *How did human life on earth begin?* By the Sower Himself successively sparking the earth's germinating urges into ever-new forms of life, up to one that could fully receive Him. *Why is the human race so varied and far-flung?* Because the Word has been revealed successively, spelled out through self-determined geographical migrations, conquests, explorations and trade.

And on a personal level: *Do you feel satisfied with your work?* The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church urges us to serve well the use found within our job. *How about romance and marriage?* The Heavenly Doctrine talks about eternal, idyllic, yet reasonable ideals, all but lost in modern life—and the self-discipline in the Lord's Name needed to reach them. *Do you enjoy rearing children?* The Heavenly Doctrine talks about the Lord giving happiness *via* the parents but not *from* them; also how we tend to punish our children just for reminding us of our own faults; also why forbidding promotes rebellion. *Do you have few friends?* There is an incredible range of proper types of friendships which copy the template of family trees.

Whatever the problem or challenge, the Lord opens up doctrinal answers. Because He has also experienced despair, we can turn to His rock of the Word whenever we reach the "end of the earth," whenever "our heart is overwhelmed."

What is the use of knowing about the Lord?

One important rock in our lives is the knowledge of the Lord Himself. The clearer your view of the Lord, the greater the improvements in your life. Some may question the practical value of knowing more about the Lord, perhaps saying, "What is the use of knowing about the Lord? Can that help my life?" Yes, it can. Listen: knowledge about the Lord, about the trinity and the glorification, has a universal application to our lives. For, on our view of God as Man (seeing the Lord as God in One Person within whom dwells the trinity), depends our very location in heaven. Every angel has a position in heaven depending on his idea of God as a Man (see *Divine Love and Wisdom* 13). For, we read "The idea of God enters into the whole of religion, and by it conjunction and salvation are effected" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 839).

So, our eternal "lifestyle" is improved by understanding the Lord. We can understand why this is if we ask ourselves, "Is it easier to worship the Lord if we first understand a bit about Him?" Of course, the answer is "Yes." Knowing more about the Lord brings our worship closer to our life. It is, after all, He who says, "Come unto Me all you who labor...I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you...for My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

What are your ambitions, wishes and desires?

How can you learn more about the Word, about the Lord? One way is by filling the unoccupied spaces in your mind with what the Lord says about your own goals in life. What are your ambitions? Look them up in the Word. Get a minister to help. Even an evil longing may prompt research. For example, look up your guilty feelings, your "secret desires, and murmuring or discontent." Think about them *without loving them*. Knowing your enemy without succumbing to him is a strategic advantage in temptations.

In one of our readings the Lord explains how evil desires are separated, purified, rejected and withdrawn by the Lord's secret processes (see *Divine Providence* 296:10). Thoughts about evils which break off connection with the love of them allow for their expulsion (see *True Christian Religion* 659; *Divine Providence* 294:4). So even when we are alone with our thoughts, or discussing our longings and hopes for success with friends, the Lord cares for us. He bundles our loves into groups and mixes them together with natural delights, and so secretly prepares to expel our problems for us. This is like mental metabolism. Knowing a little about this secret is also a rock of hope. For our very unhappiness can also be part of an expulsion process, and so misery is not for nothing.

To take the Lord's light burden on ourselves is a self-imposed test of faith, a challenge to head for a rock higher than ourselves whenever our heart is overwhelmed. Thinking about our evils allows for them to be worked through and expelled by the Lord. And the Lord is God-Man. He has endured what we endure. The clarity of our idea of Him gives us strength. All of this lets us find endless comfort and hope in the words, "From the end of the earth I will cry to You when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I." Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 61; Matthew 11:25-30; *Divine Love and Wisdom* 13; *True Christian Religion* 659; *Divine Providence* 294:4, 296:10