

## Enter into His Gates with Thanksgiving

by the Rev. Hugo Lj. Odhner

*“Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise.  
Be thankful to Him, and bless His name” (Psalm 100:4).*

Human life is ordered by the Lord to consist of a continual series of introductions or initiations into new states. Whenever we are confronted by new knowledge, or make contact with new conditions, or encounter new people, or meet with new states in others and in ourselves, we find ourselves standing before the gate of some new opportunity—a gate to a new and more abundant life which the Lord is offering us. And all the opportunities which the Lord opens to us, from our very birth, are given in anticipation of our future needs, even to salvation. No one is born under conditions so evil that he cannot be saved. A person’s freedom always keeps pace with his opportunities, and his responsibilities are numbered by the gates which the Lord holds open before him.

The “gates” mentioned in the 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm refer, in the spiritual sense, to knowledge—the knowledge about what is true and good, knowledge which introduces a person into the church and into spiritual life. Now, mere information does not by itself introduce a person into the church. Rather, that knowledge must also be part of a person’s “acknowledgment.” That is, the knowledge must be accompanied by a recognition that it is true.

Even so, the acknowledgment of and knowledge about faith and charity is still not sufficient. We must enter into His gates “with thanksgiving.” The word that is translated “thanksgiving” in the original means “to hold out the hand,” as in making a vow, showing adoration or in confession. The confession is not only of our own unworthiness, but also of the Lord’s goodness and unceasing mercy—a confession that His truth is eternal.

The idea that people should render thanks to the Lord has been inscribed upon human hearts from the first and has been represented in all religions. This feeling gave rise to the use of offerings and, later, to animal sacrifices, in humble confession that the Lord was the Creator and Provider, and that the world and all it contains is His. Sacrifices were abolished in Christian times, and thanksgiving and confession took other forms. But it is not enough to show love and gratitude to the Lord by occasional acts of piety. True thankfulness consists in a life lived according to His commandments—a life of use and charity to others. “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren,” the Lord said, “you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40).

Now, the Lord could rule the world without any human beings. He creates and preserves—makes forests grow and fields flourish—and instills His life into every living thing. But to awaken in a person an as-of-itself life—to make a person an image of Himself, responsible and capable of receiving the delight which can come only from the realization of freedom—He has given people an apparent share in His government. He allows people to serve as His instruments in carrying out the ends of His creation, even to the extent that a person can transgress against the Divine order and in fantasy create false heavens for himself, closing against himself the gates of the Lord—the gates that lead to mercy and truth.

A person is allowed to share in the uses which the Lord performs so that he may partake of the

Lord's delight and of the love which the Lord pours forth toward all His creatures. Indeed, the appearance is that the Lord depends on people to perform uses in this world, and that without human help or co-operation they would not be performed. This appearance is granted to give to people a sense of responsibility. And finite uses, which are limited to each person's capacity and co-operation, do depend on people, who live within the finite limits of time and space.

A person is born into this network of human uses, and so it is through other people that the Lord offers His gifts of love and wisdom, and opens the gates of knowledge and of realization which lead to spiritual life. We are taught that no human being can think from himself, nor directly from the Lord, although the Lord gives the faculty of thinking. Rather, every person thinks from others, and these again from others (see *Divine Providence* 287-294).

It is through others that we learn things to promote our spiritual life. The Lord alone is the teacher, and He alone provides the knowledge by Divine revelation, but He presents this knowledge through human instruments. Even the Word could not exist in written or printed form unless it were translated and reproduced by people. And it must also be read and taught, first by parents in the home and later by teachers and priests. Each form of teaching provides a gate which can only be entered in a spirit of thanksgiving, confession and appreciation. No one can profit by instruction unless he appreciates its use. Knowledge is a closed gate which can be opened and entered only in a spirit of gratitude.

For this reason, the Lord, in His mercy, has provided every person with many natural loves, implanted from birth, which serve to make his mind eager for knowledge. These loves equip a person for natural life and for natural usefulness. They make him grateful for information about the world he lives in and the fields of thought in which he seeks delight. Although these natural loves are not unselfish or regenerate, they serve as foundations upon which human society is built. For all the uses of society are possible only through mutual appreciation. The love of family and community and country, the love of the sexes for each other, the love of friends, the loyalty of comrades—all depend upon mutual appreciation, mutual benefits, and common needs. These lead to common uses in which the individual is willing to subordinate some of his ambitions in order to gain the approval of others, and thus attain to a greater delight and to self-esteem and self-respect.

Now natural loves are centered around self and can serve as a basis of society only so far as society is seen to be of service to self. But if something of self-interest is seen, natural loves lead to an appreciation of others and thus to feelings of obligation, duty, and loyalty to community and country. In the same way, many natural loves contain natural truths, which are attended by an unswerving fidelity to factual discoveries and which have led to marvels of achievement in science and invention. And every profession has a professional integrity which is founded on self-respect. This is the basis of what we call moral life, which exalts the dignity of humanity and expresses itself in various forms of courtesy, appreciation and gratitude of person to person. These humanitarian virtues add grace and charm to an otherwise crude and ugly world.

But, although important, this is not the appreciation that is required when the Word says, "Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise." Our gratitude to the Lord must be conjoined with an appreciation of the uses which the neighbor performs, but those human uses

must be seen as His gates leading into His courts. All truths—whether of science, art, philosophy, or of the Word and of doctrine—must be seen to lead to a spiritual and eternal purpose, which is a heaven from the human race.

For this reason it is of the utmost importance for people to turn appreciation away from self and, by degrees, direct it toward the Lord—who is the only Father and Teacher and High-priest—and toward the church—the spiritual mother, whose function it is to provide a home on earth for the spiritual thoughts and affections which are the offspring of charity and faith. Only in this way can we make our own *finite* uses into gates to the Lord. To do this requires a wisdom which comes only after repeated errors and failures. For the love of one person for another must not be broken; the gratitude and mutual appreciation which bind people in social bonds of human co-operation must be fostered rather than discouraged. There must be natural loves to support and dignify our human uses, lest those uses perish and can no more serve as gates to the courts of the Lord. There must be love for parents, respect for elders, admiration for men and women of achievement, loyalty to family and to country.

These natural loves, when they are used in the service of spiritual ends, are called “mediate goods” in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church. We are taught that without them no person could be led into genuine good. For it is through mediate goods that an affirmative attitude is established with a person, and without an affirmative attitude no one can really enter the gates of knowledge which lead into the church, and come to see its truths and goods, appreciate its uses, perceive the purpose of its teachings, and, above all, recognize the essential fact that the church is the guardian of the Word wherein the Lord speaks to His people.

So, we are taught that there are two possible principles from which our thoughts can proceed. One is the negative principle, which leads to all folly and insanity, and closes the gates of knowledge so that a person cannot enter into them with thanksgiving to reach the courts of the Lord. The other is the affirmative principle, which opens these gates of doctrine from the Word and perceives therein the paths of His mercy, which lead to all intelligence and wisdom, and to co-operation and charity and mutual uses among people and angels (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2568, 2588).

The gates of human life are open and accessible to anyone who has an appreciation of what is good and true, wherever it may be found and in whatever degree or plane. Without being blind to faults and failures, without acquiescing in evil or endorsing falsity, a person can cooperate in the uses that must be done and assist in directing them toward what is honorable and becoming, just and equitable, and finally toward what is good and true in the sight of God. Knowing that all good comes from the Lord, a person can still be moved by gratitude toward his fellow human beings. He does not then look upon his own achievements with pharisaical pride that he is not like other people, nor does he delight in looking for evil in others. He loves his neighbor according to the love of use which the neighbor shows. He regards uses as heavenly in proportion as they are “serviceable more or less, or more nearly or remotely, to the church, to the country, to the community, and to a fellow citizen, for the sake of these as ends” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1195: 3).

The Lord is not envious of the honor and gratitude people give to their fellows because of uses well done. Such thanksgivings do not detract from His worship. Indeed, His work among people cannot be done amidst carping critics, who minimize every performance and cynically scorn every imperfect beginning or simple effort. But the important thing is that we learn to see the hand of Divine Providence in every human work. This is especially so within the church. We are to enter into His gates, not with self-satisfaction or a lusting after heavenly rewards, not with pride of intellect, but with confession and praise! A grateful appreciation of the knowledge and uses of the church on earth opens the gates through which a person's spirit may enter into the sphere of heaven. So let us "be thankful to Him and bless His name."

Amen.

Readings: Deuteronomy 33: 1-5, 13-17, 24-29; Luke 17: 1-19; *Arcana Coelestia* 6933, 6820-6823.