

PICTURING THE LORD

Adapted from a series of articles by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss
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Unless in heaven the angels had in respect to God the idea of a human shape, they would have no idea, or an unbecoming one; and thus they could not be conjoined with the Divine either by faith or by love.... Therefore in heaven they perceive the Divine in a human form; whence it is that the Divine Human in the heavens is the all in their regards, and hence is the all in their faith and love; whence comes the conjunction through which is salvation... (Arcana Coelestia 7211).

We ought to picture our Lord in a human shape. We ought also to have visual pictures of Him. The passage above makes this clear. I think it is particularly important for children to have visual pictures of the Lord. The question is, “What kind of pictures?” Another question might be, “Should they see one picture or many?” And a final question may be “How do pictures help children to have a proper idea of the Lord, and what kind of care should we use in showing them pictures?”

Here is another important teaching about how to see the Lord. A teacher in the world of spirits was talking to some boys (presumably approaching adult age, perhaps teenagers). He told them that they should think spiritually of God—that is, from His essence—and not materially or from His person. The teacher also said they should think spiritually of heaven—not as a place, but as a state of mind.

They replied that they had indeed thought of God from His Person, and of heaven as a place. Was that bad? The teacher said, “no, you are still boys, and could not think otherwise!” Then he went on to teach them to think more deeply, adding that if they did, they would then think of the Lord’s person in the right way. Here is the essence of the teacher’s instruction on this topic. It sheds light on how we should think of the Lord and how we should picture Him.

[T]hink of God from His essence and from that of His person, and not of His person and from this of His essence; for to think of His essence from His person is to think materially of His essence also; but to think of His person from His essence is to think spiritually even of His person (Apocalypse Revealed 611).

In the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church we are taught to think of the Lord from His essence, not merely from His person. This means that it is important to think of the infinitely human qualities of the Lord—of His love and compassion, His understanding and power—and to love Him for these, rather than simply for the personal sacrifices which He made or the physical pain which He endured for our sakes.

Thinking mostly about the *physical* aspects of the Lord’s battle for humankind when He was on earth, or about the more external mental setbacks which He might be thought to have

encountered (such as blows to His pride or impatience with slow-witted and vacillating disciples) draws our minds to the *humanity* of the Lord instead of to His *Divinity*. It can lead us to the feeling (which may later become a thought) that He was, after all, just a man, if a very good one.

Yet we cannot simply forget our senses or leave them behind. All our thoughts are founded on the things of sense. It is true that, as our minds develop, we rise above a total dependence on the evidence of the senses, but we never leave the sensual altogether. Something of it continues to cling to our thoughts. We are told that “Nothing is possible in a person’s thought, even as to the deepest secrets of faith, that is not attended with a natural and sensual idea” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3310).

The idea of God as a Man is inscribed upon every detail of the universe. If we think from essence, we see a spiritual Man. His countenance radiates with His love. His hands are the power which reaches down and leads people, even from hell into heaven (Psalm 139:5,10). His eyes are the all-seeing providence which marks the sparrow’s fall. His nose is the sensitivity to the moods and varying whims of all His people. Of course God is a Man, with all the characteristics of humanity (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 18), and we are to be *re-created* into His image. It is therefore not only natural but also right that our minds should see a human figure when we think of the Lord.

And the Lord has provided us with a way in which we can think of Him as a Person, without superimposing our own ideas about His possible personality (which can detract from thinking of His Divine essence). For example, the Lord left no record of His physical appearance, and we cannot but believe that this was of Providence. When people insist that the Lord must have looked like a certain picture, there is an emphasis on the character traits which the face in the picture is said to “reveal.” The particular shape of the features have been used to claim certain human qualities for the Lord—such as strength in the line of the mouth, or power in the eyes, and so on. Such an attitude can clearly be harmful since it focuses us on external particulars.

As an example, consider the way a husband thinks of his wife. When a man first meets a woman, he may be impressed with her looks and external characteristics. If he is a thinking man, he tries to see deeper traits within these things. For example, smiling eyes may reflect a depth of kindness. When his infatuation passes into love, however, and is strengthened and confirmed by years of marriage, he comes to know her interior qualities even better than he knows external characteristics that mirror them. When such a man is away from his wife, he thinks of her as she is in interiors. If he tries to recall her face, he may be surprised to find that it is an effort to picture it clearly. He is left with only a general memory of her face, but with a very full memory of her true nature (see *Conjugal Love* 330).

Similarly, a mature idea of the Lord from His essence still retains some picture of a Man in the mind’s eye. This picture must be like the one a husband has of his wife when he is away from her. Our minds have a picture of the Lord, built up through the stories of the New Testament, yet no features are clearly visible. The general impression of a Man gives form to the interior idea that all the Divine qualities of the Creator and Savior make up Humanity itself. Each one of His qualities is an infinite source of those virtues that we human beings, who are to be re-created into His image, must come to possess in limited form. If we allow our minds to form a picture of the

Lord from the New Testament, then that picture is most perfectly prepared to receive the concept of the Lord's essence.

Now children first learn of the Lord as a Man, and they picture the Lord as being similar, even in looks, to men whom they know. This is aided by the fact that in the New Testament the Lord clearly presents Himself as a Man. As children grow, they see infinite love and wisdom in the acts of Jesus, and so they come to understand how this Man can be God. Later, when they learn the details of His Divine love and wisdom from the Heavenly Doctrine, they can come to think of the Lord primarily from His essence.

While this development process is taking place, it is not only natural, but almost essential, that children have some visual experience of the stories which are told to them. The more senses that are used in the learning process the better, and the sense of sight is the shortest path to the imagination. Children's ideas are most frequently formed on the basis of appearances. It is therefore important that any pictures of the Lord present Him with a pleasing countenance, which more easily mirrors the qualities of Divine love. Even the very external idea of the Lord always wearing white appears to be a good one, especially since He was described as being in a garment "white as the light" during His transfiguration (Matthew 17:2).

In my opinion, the best idea is for children to see a *variety* of pictures of the Lord, based on the stories of the New Testament. A single picture of the Lord could stress the characteristics of a particular face, as noted above. But a variety of pictures can form a general impression, and it is this general impression which we are trying to cultivate. The essence is what we seek after; we use the person as a means. This is how the Lord Himself worked, when He came on earth in person, and then revealed, at first partially, and then in fullness, His Divine Human.

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church describes how a wise person would react,

if he were to see a picture of one Divine Person with rays of heavenly light about His head and with the inscription over it: THIS IS OUR GOD, AT ONCE CREATOR, REDEEMER, AND REGENERATOR, AND THEREFORE THE SAVIOR. Would not that wise man kiss this picture, carry it home in his bosom, and by the sight of it gladden his own mind, and the minds of his wife and his children and servants? (True Christian Religion 296).

In summary, pictures are an important basis for our thoughts concerning the Lord's Human. Use them wisely, for they will delight children's minds (and they will delight our's also). Then focus on the essence of the Lord as He is revealed in all three parts of the Word, so that the mind is raised up to think of who He truly is.