

Reflections on the Ten Blessing

by Rev. Walter E. Orthwein

In our schools we are concerned, not just that the curriculum be New Church, but also that there should be a special sphere, a sphere of charity, pervading all that we teach and do. In addition to the knowledge we want to give the children, we hope they will acquire certain values: love of the Lord, trust in the Lord for guidance in all things of life, and mutual love. These things are even more important than knowledge for they provide the “good ground” in which the seeds of knowledge can take root and grow. A sphere of charity is vital, literally; it is the *very life* of our schools.

Establishing a sphere of charity isn't something we can work out or program quite as tangibly as we can the curriculum. It is a more subtle thing. Yet we can try to identify the elements that go into it, and consciously promote such a sphere in our schools.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the words: “And seeing the multitudes, He went up into a mountain....” Whenever the Word speaks of the Lord “seeing” people, it means, spiritually, that He sees and knows their spiritual condition. He knows exactly what is in each one's heart and mind, and what each one needs to become better. This reminds me of the importance of seeing what is going on in the classroom. The teacher has to be ever watchful, ever aware, ever alert for signs of trouble so it can be averted before it develops. This may sound rather negative, as if the teacher is like a jail guard, but it is really more charitable. It is necessary to preserve a happy and harmonious sphere in the classroom.

“He went up into a mountain....” As in the case of the Ten Commandments, these blessings were given on a mountain. At Mount Sinai there was fire and smoke, thunder and lightning, an earthquake and trumpets sounding, but the scene is tranquil here. And whereas the people had to stay behind a boundary at the foot of Mount Sinai while Moses alone went up to receive the Lord's Law, here the people are with the Lord, and He sits in their midst. There is much more of a feeling of closeness and cooperation with the Lord, and of the essential gentleness of Divine truth.

This difference in setting corresponds to the spiritual difference we are conscious of between the Ten Commandments and the Ten Blessings. The former are more harsh and negative in tone (“Thou shalt not”), while the latter are gentler and positive; they are not so much commands as promises of happiness or blessing. They are less concerned with actions, but focus more on what is in the heart. In the Ten Blessings we see a definite advance in spirituality over the Ten Commandments. Yet they are two sides of the same coin, so to speak, the Ten Commandments being addressed to a more natural or primitive state, the Ten Blessings to a higher and more spiritual state. The Law is the same, it is just expressed differently. One who is merciful would not want to kill. One who is pure in heart would not want to commit adultery.

No one ever outgrows the Ten Commandments; in times of temptation that stern Law is needed. But we can see that they are especially adapted to a more primitive or childlike state. Children need to be told what to do very often, whether they understand the reasons for the rule or not. But insofar as possible, we want to raise them to a level of understanding and free cooperation. This is something we can work toward continually; there can be progress in it as the grades advance, and depending upon each child's individual state. Again, we have to perceive their states. They can at least sense that we have our reasons, that we are not acting arbitrarily or capriciously.

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The Lord gave the Law, but even in the Old Testament He seeks to introduce men into the spirit of the Law. It says in Leviticus 19, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart,” adding a new dimension to “Thou shalt not kill,” which is similar to the teaching of the New Testament. In Micah, we are familiar with the words: “What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with Thy God?” (Micah 6:8).

The Lord is always seeking to raise us from an external to an internal state; from a state of mere obedience to a state of loving to do what is right, and understanding how to do it. We can see this from the nature of the progressive revelations in the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Heavenly Doctrine. The Divine Love and Wisdom revealed in the Sermon on the Mount was always within the laws of the Old Testament, and in places this shines through. We must let our love shine through, too.

In our schools it might be said that we are dealing with persons in a natural state, a state in which obedience is most essential. And it is true that in a large degree we will have to relate to the children as the Lord related to the people in the Old Testament. Obedience is basic, it must be required; but as we have noted, even in the Old Testament it is not all the Lord sought, and we, too, can hope for more. And so, also in emulation of the Lord, we can try always to act ourselves from a higher love and wisdom (though the children may see us, as the Israelites saw the Lord, as angry and vengeful), and we can strive continually to bring the children into this higher perspective, in whatever degree they may be prepared to enter it.

The word for this higher state is *charity*. If we, as educators, act from charity, and try to bring the children into a sphere of mutual love, this will help establish such a sphere in our schools. Much of our speaking to them will have to be along the lines of the Lord to the rebellious people of Israel, yet, if they sense the love behind our words, they will rely upon our guidance and perceive that we are leading them to ultimate happiness, as the Israelites followed the Lord. As with the Israelites, there will be grumbling and rebellion at times, but we can seek their overall cooperation.

Inasmuch as possible, we can invite them to sit down with us on the mountain, and appeal to their higher nature. Children have a higher as well as a lower nature, even though, generally speaking, they are in an external state. It is a continual challenge for us to retain a higher viewpoint, to remain on the mountain—to *act*, rather than *react* to them; that is, to act from the Lord.

The mountain is Divine Love. And when we speak of acting from love, we do not mean love of the children *personally*, but love of the potential angel within each of them, and love of the *use* for which they are being prepared. In this sense we can love even a child who has given us a hard time and whom we don't even like at the moment. Moreover, if we can explain to the children the potential we are trying to nurture (*their* potential, which they have from the Lord), they can see that they have a common purpose with us, and that we are all together trying to cooperate with the Lord's purpose of a heaven from the human race. If the children can be made to understand this, it will certainly help establish a sense of unity and harmony among teachers and pupils.

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The spirit represented by the Lord sitting down with His disciples on the mountain is one of, “Come now, and let us reason together.” And if this sounds a bit naive for the classroom, note how that phrase from Isaiah continues: “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). So there is acknowledgment that the children are not wholly rational angels even as we seek their cooperation in moving toward that end.

“And He opened His mouth and taught them...” and each item of the teaching begins with the word “blessed.” The idea here is that there is an order of life, which we must learn from the Lord, and that blessing or happiness from the Lord flows in wherever this order is present. The purpose in all the Lord’s teaching is nothing else than man’s happiness.

Is not the case similar in regard to our teaching? What is the purpose of it except to make a useful and fulfilling life, a happy life, possible for the students? Ideally, then, the same spirit of Divine Love and blessing which shines through the Ten Blessings is also what inspires the classroom teacher wherever he or she speaks to the children. Our highest purpose is to provide for the opening of the children’s minds to the Lord, who is the source of all blessing.

With this comparison between the classroom teacher and the Lord as teacher giving the blessings, in mind, we can see that the source of charity in the school must be the teacher. Just as the Lord’s disciples learned about charity from Him, so our students must learn about it from us. Of course, the Lord is the true source of all charity—the teacher gets it from Him—but it is through the teacher that the sphere of charity comes into the school. The sphere in any community depends upon the nature of the spheres emanating from the people there. Surely the teacher’s sphere is the dominant one in the classroom; it should be, in any case. So if there is to be a sphere of charity, it must come primarily from the teacher. The teacher’s charity gives life and even form to the instruction offered.

The essential love of the priesthood is a love of saving souls, and of course a large part of this work is done through teaching. What is the essential love of the teaching profession? It is not focused so much on eternal life (the saving of souls), but more upon life in this world. However, since the purpose of life in this world is preparation for heaven, the aim of New Church education is one with the use of the priesthood. We can’t really separate life in this world from eternal life. The things that make for eternal happiness are also essential for happiness in the world. Life in this world is, in fact, a school in which we prepare for life in heaven.

This is why the General Church has established schools. They are a use of charity in the church, and not just in the sense of caring for our own children (which sounds rather selfish, even though it is a duty), but in the larger sense of serving the growth of the Lord’s kingdom by opening their minds to the Lord. If our schools represent an exercise of charity by the church, then surely charity should be evident in these schools. (It’s the same with evangelization—if evangelization is a work of charity, then surely it must be done from and with charity.)

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The essential love of the teaching profession is a love for nurturing growing minds, and in the New Church we have a very definite idea of what the mind is, why it is to be nurtured, and how. The mind is not just an instrument for earthly knowledge and use, but is also responsive to spiritual influences—its highest purpose is to know God, understand Divine truth, and rationally direct life in accordance with it. Furthermore, since all earthly things correspond to spiritual things, worldly knowledge is seen as having a deeper significance in New Church schools than it is seen as having in secular institutions.

The idea of nurturing something that grows calls to mind the parable of the Sower. Perhaps we could say that the priest is more concerned with sowing seeds, while the teacher is more concerned with preparing the ground and caring for the seedlings; though of course both professions have an interest in each aspect. (And actually the Lord does it all—it is His blessing to us that we are able to serve Him in these uses.)

The teacher and the priest then share a common purpose, but with a different emphasis. The teacher also is affected by a love for the spiritual well-being of the students, not in the sense of “saving souls,” but in the sense of providing knowledge for the growth of the spirit. And not just providing knowledge, but trying to introduce the students into productive habits of reading and studying and thinking—awakening their minds to the wonders of creation, encouraging them to become sensitive to Divine Order—that they might seek to come into the stream of providence. There is a vital difference between the way a New Church teacher would introduce the students to astronomy, mythology, math or history and the way a completely secular teacher would do this.

The priest attends especially to spiritual things such as he teaches in religion classes, or knowledge of the Word per se; the classroom teacher attends more to worldly knowledge, but always has in mind that it provides a basis for spiritual understanding (the raw material for rationality, so to speak) and thus is to serve the students’ spiritual well-being, as well as their worldly pursuits. This perspective will have an effect on what and how things are taught.

There are two foundations of truth, the Word and nature; and they agree, if only we have eyes to see the agreement (*Spiritual Diary* 5709). Let us say that the Word is the special province of the minister, while nature or natural knowledge is the special province of the teacher. But these two go hand in hand and make a one in New Church education. Nature and worldly knowledge such as human history cannot truly be understood apart from the Word, nor can the Word be understood without knowledge and understanding of natural things, since the Word is written in correspondences. This is how I see the priesthood and educators working from similar loves. Charity with a priest is not exactly the same as charity with a teacher, but both are from the same source, and are closely connected. Both are concerned with *instruction*, which the word has in it the idea of building up the mind, making it a temple or house in which the Lord can dwell. And, as with any home, this building is done from love and for the sake of love.

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The classroom teacher, more than the minister, has opportunities for influencing actual behavior, and applying to conduct the things learned in church. Daily contact in the school gives the teacher opportunities to help the child develop a conscience, and to act from conscience, the Writings say, is to be “internally blessed” (*Arcana Coelestia* 9118).

In the remainder of this article we will consider just the first two blessings, which really summarize the essence of all the rest, to see how they might be applied to charity in the school.

We can consider these two blessings together, as they really make one. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” The meaning of these two is similar—to be “poor in spirit” is to acknowledge that we have no good, no charity, no heavenly love of our own; while “mourning” refers to the corresponding acknowledgment in regard to knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

“Poor in spirit” seems to describe an advanced spiritual state and we may wonder what it has to do with children. But then, when we recall that the Lord said we must become again as a little child in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, we realize that “poor in spirit” does describe the state of children. They are, by their condition and situation, dependent upon help “from above,” that is, their parents and teachers. Their innocence is external, but it is innocence.

The very setting of the school says that the children are there to learn, to be instructed; if they already had sufficient knowledge to be self-sufficient they wouldn’t need to be there. And they are there to learn not just knowledges, but self-control, proper attitudes and behavior and charity.

At times the children seem rebellious and arrogant—like the “stiff-necked” Israelites—but generally they cannot help but be aware of their need for continual help and guidance. Their spiritual poverty, their lack of knowledge, judgment, and self-discipline is evident, and generally they accept this.

The principle in these first two blessings is *humility*, and this is the essential idea in all that follows, because the first thing mentioned in any series in the Word gives the universal principle which rules through the whole series. The principle of humility must be established in a person’s heart and mind (and for the sake of our discussion, let’s say in our schools, also) in order for all the blessings that follow to be received.

But how can we get this across to the children? Occasionally you’ll hear a child running himself down (“I can’t do anything! I’ll never learn! I’m just no good!”), but what he’s expressing probably isn’t what is meant by “poor in spirit.” He may just be wallowing in self-pity, or making a bid for sympathy, perhaps hoping to avoid some assignment. Or it may be that the child actually does have some realization of his limitations. Perhaps he is, at this moment, “poor in spirit” and “mourning” his own lack. Then it is up to us to show him the answer, to direct him to the Lord. For the most important realization involved in being “poor in spirit” is not that we are nothing, but that the *Lord* is everything. The point is not that we are to lack confidence, but simply that we should have confidence in the *Lord*, realizing that we can do nothing good *of ourselves*, but only from the Lord.

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Confidence in your ability to do things is important. One can be quite confident in the performance of his use, while still acknowledging that any good he does is from the Lord. The Lord said we should “do good and lend, hoping for nothing in return” (Luke 6:35). How can we do anything good or give anything if we have no ability and nothing to give?

This brings us back to the idea of charity. To be charitable is to be useful. A person who feels he is useless can't experience the delight of charity. It is important in school for each child to feel that he is able to make a contribution to the life of the school. In our school in Detroit we have no paid custodian, and the children take turns helping parents clean the building after school. But being of use in the school would also include doing the assignments faithfully and well, participating in class discussions, helping maintain order in the classroom through self-discipline and not tempting others to misbehave, and so on. Use, then, is a key concept in regard to these first two blessings. We don't want a child to be crushed or feel worthless, and yet we do want to foster being “poor in spirit.” We don't want arrogance and cockiness on the one hand, nor a lack of confidence which leads to negativism (“Why try, I can't do anything anyway?”), sullenness, withdrawal, or silliness to get attention on the other hand.

The answer is: devotion to use. Being of use requires both subservience—subservience to the use, willingness to prepare for it and conform to the order required for its accomplishment—and confidence in your ability to do it. That is, confidence that the Lord will make you an instrument of use, with acknowledgment that it is only from the Lord that we can perform any use.

This is being “poor in spirit” in just the right way. Often when there is a lack of charity in school, we suspect that the problem is a lack of feeling of worth among some of the students (the bad kind of spiritual poverty), or just plain idleness. In either case, the answer is to get them busy doing something productive.

Just as good from the Lord immediately replaces evil when this is removed, so should we, when we try to lead a child out of a bad habit, lead him to good at the same time. If he has been delighting in some abuse, we'll try to introduce him to the delight of *use*.

This may involve, first of all, introducing him to a state of “mourning” for the wrong. Probably most of the “mourning” in school will be occasioned by some external punishment, rather than genuine repentance following self-examination. But this is not so different from the case with adults in the world. The use of adversity is to bring evils to our attention so we can repent of them. Evil cannot be combated until it is seen.

But certainly there are remains of innocence (willingness to obey) to which we can appeal in the children—this is the good we lead *from*; and there are uses to which we can direct them when they mourn their lack of good—this is the good we lead *to*. When selfishness is mourned, and love of self-put aside for the sake of some use, there is a loss, a kind of death, which is mourned, but comfort is found in the new vision and satisfaction of use.

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No one can truly mourn over evils which he perceives in himself unless there is something good in him from the Lord; in fact, it is only from this good that he can even see his evils. Teachers will tell a child he did something wrong, but they hope the child will see it for himself. It is the power of good from the Lord that can remove evil, and then the good rules. And this good, filling the heart and mind and life, so that it is consciously felt and loved, brings with it a sense of delight and happiness. This is why those who mourn are blessed.

But what is this first good from the Lord that enables one to mourn? It is *remains*. And much of our work as teachers would seem to be along the lines of implanting remains (or serving the Lord as instruments in His work of implanting them). There are certainly already remains of innocence to which we can and must appeal—there would be no hope otherwise—but a large part of what we do will be sowing for the future. So although we are speaking about how we might bring forth charity in the school, we have to realize that some of our work, at least, is to provide for the future blossoming of charity in the children. We may sow more charity than we reap ourselves.

All the Ten Blessings represent an advanced state of spirituality, yet they also express things which children can well understand. Our task is to enter into our work from the kind of spiritual charity represented in these Blessings, striving to prepare the children to receive these Blessings when they grow up, and also to introduce them into these states at present as far as possible.

Much of the fruits of our work will come in the future. We are preparing the ground and planting seeds. Becoming charitable is an arduous process involving combats with temptation. Children are just beginning this lifelong work, so we cannot expect sweetness and light to prevail every moment in our schools; but if we teachers are acting from a spiritual perspective and solid New Church principles, we can be confident that the cause of charity is being served even through tumultuous times.

This is an excerpt of an address given by the Reverend Walter E. Orthwein at an inservice in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania in 1984.