

Spiritual Children

by the Rev. John L. Odhner

Sometimes it seems unfair that the angels in heaven cannot have children. Instead, we are told in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church that they have spiritual offspring. “From marriages in the heavens, although married couples live together much as they do on earth, there are born not children, but goods and truths in their place” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1000). Goods and truths in place of children? What kind of picture does this present to our minds? Do we think of spiritual offspring as being like a breath or a puff of wind or ether? Or are spiritual offspring some mental creations that we can hardly understand until we come into the life after death?

Our idea of spiritual offspring may be clearer if we think in terms of the relationship between a married couple and the rest of society. Several passages indicate that the love a husband and wife have for other people is a product of their love for each other.

Mutual love, such as there is in heaven, is not like conjugal love. Conjugal love consists in desiring to be in the other's life as a one; but mutual love consists in wishing better to another than to one's self, as is the case with the love of parents toward their children, and as is the love of those who are in the love of doing what is good, not for their sake, but because this is a joy to them. Such angelic love is derived from conjugal love, and is born from it as a child from its parent (Arcana Coelestia 2738; see also Heaven and Hell 385; Conjugal Love 65).

There is a whole chapter in the book of *Conjugal Love* to tell us how the love of children or offspring is born from conjugal love (385-414). However, as the above passage indicates, a couple's love for their children is only one of the forms that mutual love can take. The offspring of a true marriage include all loves that are heavenly and spiritual. “Conjugal love is the fundamental love of *all* loves, celestial, spiritual, and therefore natural... Conjugal love then is as the parent and other loves as the offspring” (*Conjugal Love* 65; see also *Arcana Coelestia* 4277). Again, “From the marriage of good and truth in the heavens descend all loves, which are such as the love of parents toward their children, the love of brothers for one another, and the love for relatives, and so on, according to their degrees in their order” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2739, 2738).

One form of mutual love is a chaste love for members of the opposite sex. The whole Word teaches that we should love our neighbors, and our neighbors are both men and women. Yet if a love of the other sex is to be truly spiritual, it must be free from any allurements. So we are told that for friendships between men and women outside of marriage, “the conjunctions of minds and not at the same time of bodies, or the effort toward this conjunction alone is a spiritual and therefore a chaste love; and *this love they alone have who are in love truly conjugal* (*Conjugal Love* 55:7, emphasis added).

In general, these passages seem to indicate that a marriage which is spiritually productive will look not only inwards to the perfection of the marriage, but also outwards to loving and serving

others. For instance, imagine the common situation of the married man who has a female colleague. She is his neighbor, and he should love her. This can be an occasion for an unchaste love to arise. But if the man is wise enough to flee from adultery, and if his wife lovingly nurtures and encourages that wisdom, then a chaste love can be born. Wisdom will be the father, love will be the mother, and the offspring will be a chaste love for his colleague—a love which (when truly chaste) can become sweeter than any other love except conjugal love (*Conjugal Love* 55:3).

There is also spiritual birth involved in raising children. In most ancient times, children loved their parents “not on account of their birth from them, but because of the instruction and wisdom received from them, which was a second birth, in itself spiritual, because it was the birth of their spirit” (*Divine Providence* 215). It is easy to see that even in a disordered world a child’s ideas and attitudes are the offspring of his parents’ relationship with each other.

Of course, the mutual love which springs from a true marriage can take many different forms. A man who has worked for years on a book will often dedicate it to his wife. Why? Because she played a part in bringing forth the book which no one else could have fulfilled. The husband begins with an idea, a dream, a hope. His wife takes that idea and nourishes it, carries it in her mind, and gives inspiration and encouragement in hard times. After the book is born, she may continue to work on perfecting it, improving it, reading over it, just as a mother teaches her children and modifies their behavior. So, too, angels care for their spiritual children from spiritual parental love (see *Conjugal Love* 211).

Any time a husband or wife accomplishes something good, and gratefully acknowledges, “I couldn’t have done it without you!”—can’t we say that that good thing has been born from their conjunction, a kind of spiritual offspring?

The wisdom that is in men from the Lord feels nothing more delightful than to propagate its truths; and the love of wisdom which is in wives from the Lord feels nothing more delightful than to receive them, as in the womb, and so to conceive, carry, and bring them forth (*Conjugal Love* 115).