

The Joy of Teaching in the New Church

An Education Council Banquet Address

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It is the Lord's will for us to be joyful. If the purpose of creation is a heaven from the human race, then the purpose of creation is that we might experience joy. As the Writings say: "...whether you say heaven or heavenly joy it is the same thing" (*Heaven and Hell* 397).

In the New Church, therefore, we have reason to take joy seriously. It is not just a matter of wishful thinking, or something abstract that has no practical significance; but it is a realistic expectation. We should experience joy. We need to experience it. I would even go so far as to say we have a responsibility to experience it!

But it takes some thought. We're told that "hardly anyone at present knows what... heavenly joy is" (*Heaven and Hell* 395). It is not an outward thing, but pertains to the inner man. Joy comes from love.

As teachers, we need many things: various skills, and such virtues as patience, resourcefulness, empathy, compassion and others—but underlying all these is love of the use we are serving.

At the heart of all our educational uses, deeper than any stated principle, system or goal, there is love: love of the Lord, love of the truth for its own sake, and love of establishing the New Church on earth and this especially in the hearts and minds of the young people in our classes.

So when I speak of "the joy of teaching," I don't mean being cheerful and upbeat every moment, but teaching from a spiritual love, and the inner sense of satisfaction this brings. The love that led us into this profession in the first place is the basis of our hope of finding joy in our work today.

Some time in your life you saw a shining city on a hill, the New Jerusalem. Maybe you even went in through one of the gates. The memory may be somewhat vague; but it was a joyful experience, and affected you strongly. It is essential to return to that first love, to renew that vision, again and again. Even in a low state, when the ideals that first inspired you seem distant and obscured by clouds, remembering the joy and enthusiasm you felt in the beginning can be a source of renewed inspiration.

We won't always be consciously aware of the spiritual delight involved in our work, but it is there upon reflection, and it is a source of inspiration and renewal.

As an example of someone who was affected by a sense of joy, I'd like to call to mind a scene from long ago, in ancient Egypt, as recorded in the book of Genesis, where it tells of the reunion of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 45).

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Joseph was so overcome with joy that he wept. He “wept aloud,” it says, “and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard it” (Genesis 45:2). And later, a “voice was heard in Pharaoh’s house, saying Joseph’s brethren have come; and it was good in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants” (Genesis 45:16).

The fact that Joseph’s weeping, and then the report of his good news, was heard in Pharaoh’s house, and pleased him, seems to be only a minor detail in the story, but actually it is most significant.

In the spiritual sense, this represents a perception that the truths of the church (“Joseph’s brethren”) are now present in the natural plane of life (“Pharaoh’s house”), and, as a result, there was “a feeling of joy throughout all the natural, even to the lowest things of it” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5932).

This is a beautiful representation, I think, of what New Church education is all about. Its aim is to instill the spiritual truths of the church in the natural minds of the students. And when it is perceived that those truths are present there, in the minds and lives of the students, it gives us a feeling of great delight and satisfaction.

Most of us aren’t engaged in teaching theology per se, of course, but in New Church schools all knowledges, when rightly ordered and understood, are seen as serving spiritual ends.

We often think of the religious foundation we seek to provide in terms of future benefit: the uses and sound judgment and spiritual development the truths of the church will make possible for those who receive them; and the strengthening of the church as they are more firmly received. And it is true that in the work of education we are providing for the future.

But the truths of the church also bring an immediate blessing, a sense of inner delight. But what is “inner delight”? Can there be such a thing as delight of which you’re not conscious? Yes. The Writings describe it as “a blessedness that is hardly perceptible...hidden away in [the] interiors...dulled by the cares of the world” (*Heaven and Hell* 401). But, although it is largely unperceived in this life, it is a real thing, and it does affect us. It is a source of inspiration for us as teachers and for the students as learners.

The peace and joy of heaven are ineffable. We only become fully conscious of heavenly delights after leaving this world. And yet... there is some glimmering of awareness, which affects those who have it, inspires them, cheers them from within, and, like a hidden current, draws them toward its source (see *Heaven and Hell* 401, *Arcana Coelestia* 3796:3). These inner affections, and inner delights are the deepest source of the joy that inspires and re-inspires a teacher.

We’re told that “in uses all the delights of heaven are brought together and are present...” (*Heaven and Hell* 402). This general rule surely applies to the use of

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teaching, also. Think of the loves involved in this use: love of the Lord and His New Church, love of the children, love of learning, love of communicating useful knowledge, love of society, ... and many other good affections. Where such loves are active, joy must be present.

There are things in everyone which are opposed to the truth, but the Lord also provides affections that enable a person to receive the truth gladly.

I think this must be the basis of the experience C.S. Lewis describes in his book, *Surprised by Joy*, in which he analyzes the nature of man's "immortal longings," to use his term. There is a yearning in people for something—something ethereal, something spiritual, a mysterious source of vital joy, unlike any worldly pleasure, greater than any earthly delight. The thing that interested Lewis so much was that the very longing itself has a powerful effect. There was a feeling of rapture, just in the dim awareness that there was this... something.

But if mere intimations of Divine truth are the source of "immortal longings," how great must be the joy of seeing the truth itself fully disclosed! The truth from heaven which the Writings reveal brings with it a sensible experience of great gladness. At least, the new revelation has that potential.

Perhaps we're too familiar with it. If we would compare the Writings to a map, we need to remind ourselves occasionally of what a great reality the map represents. New Church education is not just about the "map," but about the reality it represents—the marvelous land beyond this world, where all the greatest stories of mankind originate. Where Joy originates.

The need for practical knowledge is obvious, but the need for spiritual knowledge is not always so clearly seen. Yet the fact that there is such a need does not depend upon any explanation of it - it is felt by everyone, to a greater or lesser degree.

From the Lord, there is an innate yearning for spiritual life in everyone, whether its nature is known or not. As it says in *True Christian Religion*: "There is a universal influx from God into the souls of men of the truth that there is a God, and that He is one" (*TCR* 8). In the highest sense, I believe this is not just an intellectual affirmation, but a response of one's whole being. We might call it "instinctive." But it is an instinct which may be denied, perverted or covered over by natural interests.

The teachings of the New Church identify and satisfy this yearning. Whether it is known or not, what a person most longs for in life is the New Jerusalem. In the secular world, people learn to ignore, reject, or cover over this longing; they become "realistic" and "adult" and learn to value "objectivity." They become "disillusioned," not realizing that some of the "illusions" they leave behind were quite real.

But in the New Church we can say: don't undervalue, and don't lose this sense of spiritual joy—it represents something real; in fact, the most real of all human feelings. It is at the heart of all religion; as it is at the heart of marriage, moral sensibility and every human art and use.

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The joy I'm speaking of may sound mystical to you, and it is somewhat hard to explain, but I'm counting on the fact that you know what I'm talking about from your own experience. With our students, too, we can rely on the fact that they have some idea, from their own experience, of what heavenly joy is.

The doctrine of remains helps explain this. There are heavenly affections that stay with us and enable us to recognize and respond to what is good. The delight that was felt in Eden remains with us and inspires us to seek the New Jerusalem, in which the tree of life is found again.

The "Eden" or "honeymoon" state—the state of high idealism that gives such delight when a person first enters into his or her life's use—remains as a wellspring of joy throughout all succeeding states. If the well has been covered over, it can be re-opened. It *must* be re-opened; and the Lord can do this, as we look to Him continually and strive to do our work sincerely, justly, and well.

There are "immortal longings" in everyone. In fact, young people are especially affected by such feelings. In encouraging our students to think about the difference between merely natural life and spiritual life—or the distinction between merely sensual or worldly pleasure, and inner, spiritual joy—we are appealing to their "immortal longings."

This is one of the ways in which the Lord, who inspires this mysterious inner attraction for the things of heaven in people, is our Ally in the work of New Church education.

We can see how this works in regard to one doctrine in particular: conjugal love. The students' knowledge of the doctrine is limited because they are not actually in the state of marriage yet, but they are strongly affected by the ideal, which, in fact, represents spiritual reality. It is not just a theory, but something real that affects them. Only a naturalist would say this is merely physical; it is an "immortal longing," a longing for something eternal. And the very longing itself is a source of life and joy.

The Lord is our Ally, also, in that when we cooperate with Him in this use, we will experience the joy of having His Spirit flow through us toward others. This is where the highest joy of teaching comes from; it is from cooperating with the Lord in His work of opening a mind to heaven, and thus serving as a "conduit," so to speak, for His Spirit.

"Conjunction with the Lord" is a dry, abstract-sounding phrase, but we must help the students see what this means in terms of the highest ideals and deepest longings of their own lives; and that the purpose of religion is to make this joy possible. In this way

we cooperate with the Lord in cultivating the garden of delight He has planted in the students' minds. And at the same time we ourselves are joined more closely with Him, and thus with the Source of Joy.

A New Church educational program recognizes the reality of spiritual joy, knows its true nature and source, and takes it very seriously! There is joy at the heart of such a

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system, and it permeates all aspects of it, even the most mundane. To repeat the phrase from the Arcana in explanation of the Joseph story: "...a feeling of joy throughout all the natural, even to the lowest things of it" (*Arcana Coelestia* 5932). The challenge for us as teachers is to find this joy within ourselves, so that we can communicate it to our students. Not that we would give them our joy, but that we could help them discover the joy of heaven in themselves, as something real and powerful and obtainable.

There was rejoicing in Egypt, not just because the sons of Israel were in Pharaoh's house, but because they were reunited with Joseph. Similarly, it isn't just truth, but the *source* of truth, that gives us joy. When the truths of the church are firmly rooted and living in a person's mind, then the Lord is present also, since those truths are from Him and are Himself.

The greatest motivation for a teacher, I think, is to feel something of the affection expressed by Joseph for the brothers who had rejected him, didn't know him, but who needed him. Eventually, they realized how wrongly they had behaved, and when they finally recognized him and embraced him, Joseph was moved to tears. Similarly, a teacher may feel frustrated if students seem unappreciative, but there is a sense of joy when—perhaps not until later in life—the student embraces the kind of life which New Church education holds forth as the ideal.

True conviction comes, not just with knowledge, or even with understanding, but when the truth is perceived with delight and the joy of heaven flows in. This is the culmination of a long process of spiritual development; it doesn't take place in the length of a school year. But if we teachers keep this end in view, and watch for signs of it in the students, there will be moments of joy.

There are various ways to express the goals of our educational programs. There are mundane requirements to be satisfied, as well as high ideals and great uses to strive toward. But surely the highest goal of all is to help prepare the students for a reunion with the Lord. I believe that their spiritual renewal and the attendant delight is what we, as New Church teachers, are striving for above all else.

Thinking again of the Joseph story, it is interesting that "weeping" may be a sign of sorrow or of joy. The same love that produces joy also grieves when its ends are not fulfilled. But when you think of it like this, even the pain which is sometimes associated with our educational efforts is a positive sign; it is evidence of the degree of love we have for this use. And that same love is a source of joy when we perceive some success.

The Lord compared regeneration to childbirth, the travail of which is forgotten in the joy that comes when the baby is born (John 16:21). As New Church teachers, we are really assisting in the spiritual birth of the students. Regeneration is a lifelong process, of course, and we can't expect to see immediate results in our students. Each year a new batch of unregenerate little wretches come under our care, and our travail is never-ending! Theirs is too, as they struggle to gain understanding.

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On the other hand, we all have our moments—teachers and students—when the joy of the Lord’s presence is felt. And the Writings speak of feeling the joy of another as joy in oneself. The angels are in such a sphere of mutual love. This is one way we could define “charity” in the New Church, and in New Church schools: a shared enthusiasm, using that word in its most literal sense, “to be inspired or possessed by God.”

This, I think, is the essence of the love of teaching which the Lord gives us—to share in the joy He and the angels feel when one of His children recognizes Him and turns toward Him.

How important it is, then, for us, as teachers, to possess enthusiasm, to be inspired by the Lord, and in touch with the joy of heaven. This is not just a surface enthusiasm, but something with real power to encourage us and affect the lives of others.

Of course, our spiritual vitality ebbs and flows as we go through the seasons of our own regeneration. But if we can just hold on to whatever experience of spiritual joy we have found in our profession, remember it as something real and powerful, and return to it periodically as a source of inspiration...surely there will be revivals and renewals of joy which will strengthen us in our use, and bring a vibrant sphere to our schools.

It would be a shame for a student to become excited about something, and yet perceive that the teacher, the very one who introduced the wonderful new insight, was unaffected by it.

I like Joseph Campbell’s phrase: “Follow your bliss.” The Writings add to the meaning of this expression by explaining that there are different kinds and degrees of bliss, or joy (*Arcana Coelestia* 543). Some of the things which those in a natural state find joyful are contrary to the delights of heaven, and as teachers we will find ourselves at times having to lead the students in ways they would rather not go. Not every “bliss” should be followed!

But in a larger sense, I think we should encourage our students to “follow their bliss,” or rather, the Source of eternal happiness. We must appeal to the good loves they have from the Lord, and work to awaken the joy associated with those loves; this is a “bliss” they should follow.

At these meetings we’ve been discussing what we might be able to do to limit our children’s exposure to harmful influences. It is difficult, because the sphere of the world, and even of hell, is so pervasive. And there is something in human nature—in people of all ages—that causes us to find enjoyment in things that we know aren’t good for us, and that don’t represent our own higher nature. But if we expose our children to what is pure and shining, and good and healthy and sane and useful, then, with the Lord’s help, they will reject what is foul and perverted—and ultimately joyless—and choose life. The evil sights and sounds they come in contact with, and even find shallow pleasure in, probably won’t become deeply rooted. In saying this, I don’t mean to underestimate the

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danger or the need to be aware of it; I simply want to emphasize the hopeful side of the picture.

In any case, one thing we can certainly do is to let our children see that good things are a source of joy in our lives. Be sure they are exposed to the fresh, clean, sunny and invigorating air of heaven, so they will recognize for themselves the contrast with the foul and deadly atmosphere of hell. Let them see that the New Church is a happy place! The Lord is here, and as it says in one of the anthems we sing: "... in Thy presence is fullness of joy; and at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." In the minds of our students, the New Church should be equated with "fullness of joy." Let this be our goal.

All joy is of love. If, in our teaching, we are inspired by love of the Lord, love of the truth, and love for the spiritual welfare of our students, our work will be a source of joy. It is not our joy, or the students' joy, but the Lord's, which increases as it is shared.

I'll end on this note, then: Joy is contagious! When the students "catch it" from us, they will receive the truths of the New Church very gladly, and retain them, and make them part of their lives. These truths will be a source of joy to them as they are to us.

A person is regenerated by means of the affection for truth, and one who is regenerate acts from the affection for good (*Arcana Coelestia* 3324:9).