

The Church as Bride and Mother

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On Mother's Day, it is vital to honor mothers and to celebrate motherhood. Where would we be without mothers? Well, nowhere. In the context of church, Mother's Day calls to mind a question which thoughtful readers of the Word are likely to wonder about: *Where is Mother?* We daily pray, "Our Father" and He incarnated as a male, Jesus Christ, called the Son. God is, with only a very few exceptions, always described as male.

Yet in the very first chapter of the Word, we read that the Lord created human beings in His own image and likeness, male and female. We know this to mean that a loving heart and wise mind are of God, wisdom making us an image of God, and love making us a likeness of God. We read in Arcana Coelestia 51: "The spiritual person is an "image," and the celestial person is a "likeness." And in number 54 we read:

What is meant by "male and female" in the internal sense, was well known to the Most Ancient Church, ... The understanding in the spiritual person they therefore called male, and the will female...whereby the church itself, from its affection of good, was called "daughter" and "virgin"—as the "virgin of Zion" the "virgin of Jerusalem"—and also "wife."

The internal sense still begs the question, though, if all good and truth, all love and wisdom are of the Lord, in the Lord, and are the Lord, then why is it that we only are given to know the Lord as male?

There is a current trend of abandoning thought and worship of God as male, in favor of female, non-gendered, or both male and female. Many such individuals see the importance of honoring femininity as equal to masculinity, and understand that both genders are equally derived from the Divine, and so equally reflections of the Divine. Yet the whole of the Word presents God, as masculine. That should give us pause enough to meditate deeply on why that might be so, before making a decision to abandon that depiction.

If we can understand why in the Word God is portrayed as masculine and femininity is portrayed as non-divine, we may gain a truer and deeper relationship with the Lord. Having an answer is also extremely relevant in today's culture where gender equality and gender issues in general are at the forefront of conversation. If we understand the answer enough to express it clearly, we will be able to feed and serve the world around us in useful ways from the Word.

Though an answer is valuable, it is a question that very few pursue. Using a search engine to explore 130 years of papers and sermons in New Church Life yielded almost complete silence on the issue of gender and Divinity.

It is easy to simply read the Three-fold Word, and not think to ask the question. Also, ours is a culture with a long history of male dominance and male aggrandizement. Such a social context can lead one to believe that it only makes sense for God to be portrayed as male—God is portrayed as male, the subconscious thinking goes, because males are superior, and by the same token, males are superior because God is male. Another factor is that asking the question forces a probing and questioning of beliefs and doctrine, which can be disconcerting, especially if we don't really believe the Word has answers to our questions. We may feel that it is wrong to question the Word in such a way—a sort of “don't question your father” thought process.

Yet it is important to meet the Word with reverent curiosity. To those with spiritual thirst, the Word very much invites the question: *Why is the Lord always revealed as male? Isn't femininity of equal importance?* The answer as to why God is portrayed as male is not immediately obvious in the Word. The phrase “Divine feminine” is nowhere found in the Third Testament, and for that matter, neither is the phrase “Divine masculine.” We may think that the answer is not in the Word, but perhaps it is our mental paradigm that does not allow for us to see the answer.

As I read it, the Third Testament in fact has a very beautiful and moving teaching that answers the questions of why the Divine is portrayed as male and why femininity isn't given a similar distinction and the answer is at the very heart of what the New Church is all about. The answer requires tying together eight well known doctrines:

1. The teaching that the Church is the Wife of the Lord, and Mother of the good and truth in the Church
2. The teachings of regeneration
3. The glorification of the Divine Human
4. The teachings of the Lord's presence in the human will and understanding
5. The teaching of as-of-self work and ability
6. The teaching of the descent of conjugal love
7. The teaching on end, cause and effect
8. And finally, the teachings about charity.

Doctrine of the Church as Wife and Mother

It is well known throughout Christianity, old and new, that the Church is described in feminine terms, especially as the Bride, the Lord's bride. Understanding the Church as the Bride, and also Mother, does honor femininity, but we don't worship the feminine Church, whereas we do the masculine Lord. People don't worship the Church because the church is comprised of us human beings, who are not worthy of worship. Therefore, while elevated to importance, femininity remains inferior to masculinity—or so it seems.

Doctrine of Regeneration

The Church is indeed human, but also Divine. This is because it is Divine Love and Truth within the finite, human mind that together are the Church. Divine Truth exists in the Word in natural

language, stories, and natural-rational concepts. These truths enter the natural mind, and are like empty vessels, available and waiting to receive life from the Divine. Slowly, the Lord animates the heart such that it sees how these vessels exist for the sake of conveying Divine Love into the natural world. The vessels come to life with spiritual love, which enlightens the mind. The new light brings new truth, which in turn allow fuller reception and expression of love, and so on in a cycle to eternity—the circle of life, as it is named in the Third Testament.

For example, love thy neighbor as thyself. At first, it's a rule to follow because God tells us to—a good start, but not love. Later, however, we start to honestly want what is good for them, not because of their personality, or for how they treat us, but because the Lord's love is living in us and through us, as us.

This can occur with truth we gain from God's other Word—life. For example, a person who feels misunderstood and undervalued while growing up may gain the truth that everyone should be valued, and we should all make effort to understand others. This is a truth, but it is at first mostly animated by personal pain. With time, however, that same truth begins to shine with the light of love. The Lord fills the truth that came of pain with genuine, spiritual, selfless love. And yet the light and love remain in a unique form derived from the original, natural vessel.

Doctrine of Glorification

This is the process of our regeneration, but on a more interior level, it is the Lord glorifying within us because truth and love are the Lord's alone—they are the Lord. Only that which descends from heaven ascends to heaven says the Lord in the Gospel of John. It is a recapitulation of His life on earth, but within the individual—He cast off what was merely human and replaced it with what is Divine. On earth, Jesus Christ did this in relation to all love and all truth, fully even to the very outmost, the physical body, whereas within us, a certain unique array of truth and expression of love are glorified, which is what gives each of us our individuality, and so ability to have relationship with the Lord and with others.

Doctrines of the Lord as Love and Truth in a Person and As of Self

This Divine Process occurring within us, the circle of life and its components, Divine Love and Truth, only appear to be a person's but are the Lord in a person. And this presence of the Lord as the Divine Human in a person is what is called the Church, and is the only true Church. What is of the person is an as-if-of self participation, which is needed for reciprocity, though even that reciprocity is the Lord. Thus, within the finite human, the Divine Human comes to dwell.

The unique qualities of each individual remain as unique avenues through which God's love and light are expressed. The Lord's love is such that it gives of itself wholly to those it loves, including the freedom that is Divine Love. To the extent a person is animated by the Lord's love, that person acts in freedom to express that love and it is indistinguishable from being actually the individual's own love, the higher the love, the more so that experience, though simultaneously the more full the awareness that that freedom, love and life are not at all of the self. This preservation of a sense of self through which the Divine is uniquely expressed is why the Church is able to be the Bride and Wife of the Lord, rather than an extension of the Lord. More on this when we get to the doctrine of charity.

Doctrine of the Descent of Conjugal Love

This process is succinctly described by the doctrine of the descent of conjugal love. It starts with the union of Divine Love and Wisdom, or truth, which occurs within the individual. This Divine Human, now existing within the higher spiritual and heavenly reaches of our mind (the Divine Human is what makes heaven) unites itself to the Church, which is to say the unique spiritual compositions of each person as these are able to house it. Now a member of the Church, a person is filled with a purity of love that is able to experience conjugal love with a similarly purified spouse.

When we so love one another selflessly, especially in marriage, but in all our other relationships as well, unique spiritual and heavenly relationships are created, each shining with a unique array of hues of the light of Divine Truth, and a unique composition of the various affections within that relationship. Those relationships are Divine, and also human, inseparably so. Thus they are Divine, and yet they are the Divine as can only be expressed and exist within and as human relationships. This love is what the Lord can be wedded to because it is both Divine, and yet not just an extension of Himself. It is a Divine recreated from the ground up after a total emptying and investment of Himself into the receiving vessel, the human spirit, such that the selfless love felt and its freedom is so wedded to the person, that it is perceptibly indistinguishable from it. Still that Divine is not the person, nor the person the Divine.

We can see, therefore, why the Church is also Mother. It is only these relationships of spiritual and heavenly love that gives birth to spiritual life within the minds of others. This is because knowledge of truth alone does not have life. It must be couched in the experience of love for them to grow into something living and spiritual. The love we receive from the Lord through others, as others, is our spiritual Mother, and she is of equal importance as the Divine outside space and time, and she is Divine. And just as conjugal love causes two spirits to become one, and so are one, so God as Father is so united to Church as Mother, that they are distinguishably One.

Doctrine of End, Cause and Effect

In the doctrine of End, Cause and Effect, or in modern language, prime cause, means and effects, we read that the prime cause is the All in all of the means, and the All in all of the effects. The Prime Cause is Divine Love, the means are finite human beings, and the effects are the relationships of love. Divine Love is the All in all of whatever is truly human in the individual, and whatever of our relationships which is truly loving and wisely so. This is what is meant by the Lord bringing John and Mary together as son and mother, for Mary represents the Church, and John represents the outward expressions of love, that is the good works of love, which ultimately express themselves in love one for another. When we so love one another, we will see that our experience of the Lord in others, through others, as others, is no less important than our relationship to Him through the written Word, knowledge, understanding, and love and gratitude for Him there.

Doctrine of Charity

Finally, we arrive at the doctrine of charity. Love to the Lord is a figment of the imagination outside of loving actions towards others. The Lord cannot wed Himself to any other love than

human to human love, because that is the only love—the love of blessing others, making their lives better, happier, more full of truth and love, in other words, being genuinely useful to them, is the only expression of Divine Love that isn't an extension of the Divine Itself. We read in True Christian Religion 457 that the Lord inspires us with goodwill towards others, and that this charity is what unites us to the Lord.

In Divine Wisdom number 11, we read this:

A human being cannot love the Lord from themselves, nor can they love being useful from themselves; but the Lord loves a person and reciprocates His own love in them and makes it to appear to them as if they loved the Lord from themselves. This, then, is love of the Lord from the Lord. And from this it is clear how love to the Lord exists in charity, that is, in the love of being useful.

Mother is just as important as Father, and they need each other for existence, for the end does not exist until present in the effect, and the effect does not exist except of the End, or First Cause. Charity is just as important as love to the Lord. This is because love to the Lord and love for the neighbor are not actually two different loves, they are inseparably, but distinguishably One Love. The Lord loves all people, so whoever loves people loves the Lord and whoever loves the Lord loves people. Again, this is why John, representing good deeds of charity, is made to be the son of Mary, representing the church. And this is also why it is John who is able to see the Holy City as the holy Bride, and then see that those of this Bride live so wedded to the Divine that there is no need for a temple or the Sun or Moon, because God is within it, and God's light is her light.

Because Mother Church exists only within human beings, as unique human beings, when we honor our earthly mothers—the good and wisdom we see in them—we are simultaneously honoring the Mother that is the church. Mother's day is secretly a sacred holiday, because Charity is sacred. In Nepal and India, they greet one another saying, "Namaste" which is understood to mean, "I honor the light of God within you." What incredible wisdom lies in that one word.

As you remember your mother no longer with you, or honor your mother still alive, look for the light of God within her, and know that you are honoring Mother, a command equal to honoring Father, and you are fulfilling the second great commandment, which as an earlier sermon explained, is not just like unto the first, but can just as accurately be translated, and very important to understand, as equal to the first. The two are an inseparable wedded pair.

Amen

Readings:

Isaiah 54:1-14

"Sing, O barren,
You who have not borne!
Break forth into singing, and cry aloud,
You who have not labored with child!
For more are the children of the desolate

Than the children of the married woman,” says the Lord.
2“Enlarge the place of your tent,
And let them stretch out the curtains of your dwellings;
Do not spare;
Lengthen your cords,
And strengthen your stakes.
3For you shall expand to the right and to the left,
And your descendants will inherit the nations,
And make the desolate cities inhabited.
4“Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;
Neither be disgraced, for you will not be put to shame;
For you will forget the shame of your youth,
And will not remember the reproach of your widowhood anymore.
5For your Maker is your husband,
The Lord of hosts is His name;
And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel;
He is called the God of the whole earth.
6For the Lord has called you
Like a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit,
Like a youthful wife when you were refused,”
Says your God.

True Christian Religion 306

306. In the spiritual sense honoring one's father and mother means reverencing and loving God and the church. In this sense father means God, who is the Father of all, and mother means the church. Children and angels in the heavens know of no other father or mother, since the Lord causes them to be born anew there by means of the church. This is why the Lord says:

Do not call anyone on earth your father, for you have one Father, who is in the heavens, Matthew 23:9.

This is said for the benefit of children and angels in heaven, not for children and people on earth. The Lord teaches the same lesson in the prayer shared by all Christian churches: 'Our Father in the heavens, may your name be hallowed.'

The reason why mother in the spiritual sense means the church, is that just as a mother on earth feeds her children with natural food, so the church does with spiritual food. This too is why in the Word the church is frequently called mother.

Conjugal Love 119

His mother was standing by Jesus' cross; and Jesus, seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing by, says to his mother, Lady, here is your son; and he says to the disciple, Here is your mother. So from that hour the disciple took her as his own mother. John 19:25-27.

This passage means that the Lord did not recognize Mary as His mother, but the church; so, He called her 'Lady' and the disciple's mother. The reason why she was called the mother of this disciple, that is, of John, is that he represented the church as regards the good deeds of charity; these are the church in its real action. That too is the reason why he took her as his own mother

Mark 3:31-35

1Then His brothers and His mother came, and standing outside they sent to Him, calling Him.
32And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You."

33But He answered them, saying, "Who is My mother, or My brothers?" 34And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers!
35For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother."

Revelation 21:1-5, 22-27

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among the people, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). 26And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.