

Loving and Serving One's Country

First of five sermons on Preparation for Heaven
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“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21).

This well-known verse from the Gospel of Matthew has become a sort of proverb about the separation of church and state. But if you think about it you’ll see that the Lord didn’t say the church and the state should be separate, only that we have a duty to both. And that duty relates to the internal and the external aspects of life – the duty to what is spiritual and the duty to what is natural, specifically, moral and civil. Far from being separate these are meant to be one! For what is spiritual flows down into what is natural and gives it life.

The truth is we have a big responsibility to bring our religion into our civil lives, and not only that, but a good civil life prepares us and builds a foundation for heavenly life, since it requires that we “practice what we preach” and that we cultivate the disciplines of service and self-sacrifice for the sake of others. This is all about the love of the neighbor, or what we call the doctrine of charity, and this is our primary theme today.

What is True Charity?

For most of us here today it probably goes without saying that true love of one’s neighbor is the love of what is good IN the neighbor. If it were not so we would be obliged to love every aspect of everyone close to us, and that would imply loving the evil as well as the good, since every one of us has both good and bad traits.

Still, we know that we can love the whole person by doing what is good FOR the person, and that may at times involve difficult judgments about what we can or cannot support, even to the point of rejecting or condemning certain actions. Punishments also are sometimes necessary for the sake of amendment of life – not that we can go around willy-nilly punishing people whose lives or opinions differ from ours, but when there is a general consensus based on the Word that something is out of order, we may be called upon to join in the effort to curb, control or eliminate that behavior. All this is just common sense – but it is also clearly taught in the revelation for the New Church.

The really interesting thing about it, though, on this weekend of patriotic observances, is that the same rules that govern our relationships with individual people also govern our relationships with groups of people, and institutions. We read,

“Not only is an individual person one’s neighbor but also a group of people; for the community whether small or large is one’s neighbor, as is one’s country, the Church, the Lord’s kingdom, and above all others the Lord. All these are meant by the neighbor whom one should be moved by charity to benefit. They are also *ascending degrees* of the neighbor, for a community composed of a group of

people is the neighbor in a higher degree than an individual person, one's country in a still higher degree than the community, the Church in a still higher degree than this, and the Lord's kingdom in a still higher degree than that. But the Lord is the neighbour in the highest degree. These ascending degrees are like a flight of stairs which have the Lord at the top" (AC 6819).

Concerning the country specifically we read,

"One's country is the neighbour over the community because it is like a parent, for being the place where the person is born, it nurtures him and protects him from harm. *One ought out of love for one's country to do good to it according to its needs*, which have regard primarily to its sustenance, its public life, and its spiritual life. Anyone who loves his country and out of goodwill does good to it will in the next life love the Lord's kingdom, for there the Lord's kingdom is his country. And anyone who loves the Lord's kingdom loves the Lord since the Lord is the All in all of His kingdom, for strictly speaking the Lord's kingdom is the goodness and truth which reside with the inhabitants of that kingdom, and which they receive from the Lord" (AC 6821, also HD 93, HH 64 & TCR 414).

What is True Patriotism?

Now let's think seriously about this for a few minutes, and observe not only how our patriotism can serve to prepare us for heaven, but what true patriotism is. For a start, it is NOT blindly following our elected governors to do whatever they may suggest, for they, like the rest of us, have their flaws and limitations, their evils and falsities, and their conflicts of interest. This is why we have laws, and why no governor is (or should be) above the law. Rather true patriotism is doing what is GOOD for the country, in return for the GOOD it does for us – and not just *in return*, but in unselfish service, that the good may be developed, and the evil either shunned or removed. When we act in this manner we act from heavenly love, which is the key to heavenly life. And heavenly love cannot exist without heavenly wisdom, all of which comes from the Lord through His Word.

This is where religion and politics converge. For while it is true that they require separate allegiances (as in our text) it is also true that without revelation from the Lord we would have no idea what is really good – for ourselves, for our communities or for our country! So as good citizens we have a responsibility to turn to the Lord for guidance even in our love for our nation.

That said, the little work on the doctrine of charity has some important things to say, for example, that "(everyone) is born that he may become (a form of) charity; and this he cannot become unless he perpetually does the good of use to the neighbor, from affection and delight." Furthermore, "The *general* good exists from the goods of use which *individuals* perform; and the goods of use that individuals perform subsist from the general good" (Ch 126). "In a well constituted commonwealth, therefore, provision is made that no one shall be useless." (Ch 128).

So far so good, but note the following: -

"The general good consists in these things: I. That in the society or kingdom there

shall be what is Divine with them. II. That there shall be justice with them. III. That there shall be morality with them. IV. That there shall be industry, knowledge, and uprightness with them. V. That there shall be the necessities of life. VI. That there shall be the things necessary to their occupations. VII. That there shall be the things necessary for protection. VIII. That there shall be a sufficiency of wealth; because from this come the three former necessities" (Ch 130).

On days like today we are perhaps accustomed to honor especially those who sacrifice for the defense of our nation, and we will be doing that this afternoon. It is the seventh in the list of eight necessities for "a well constituted commonwealth." But consider also number one – and two – and three and four and five. Generally a sufficiency of wealth comes from gainful employment, and the things necessary for employments come from other employments, including trade and innovation. There is a good reason why heaven is never filled, but always expanding, and that is because every new person that enters heaven contributes some new use, which adds to the whole complexity of uses that continue to enrich the lives of all who are there.

In other words, a sound economic policy is as good a reason to support one's country as any other, and one way we can "do good" to our country is to promote that very thing.

Still, the first four necessities should be of particular interest. Although we understand that an evil or self-centered person can be as useful to society as a good person (and sometimes even more useful because he is driven by the desire for personal gain), it is really critical for all of us that we do our best to secure and maintain the conditions necessary for the free expression, practice and promulgation of the things of religion in our land – *that the Divine may be among us, and that the nation may be known for true justice, morality and uprightness.*

What do you think? How are we doing in these areas? What is our reputation among other nations? Surely we have a record of enormous successes in critical areas but like any individual, as a nation we have many flaws and weaknesses we need to overcome. What can we do to help? What can we do to protect, enhance and contribute to the greater GOOD?

When our nation declared its independence from Britain it was dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, and that all have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Yet even then, human slavery was an accepted institution and an integral part of the economic engine that contributed to its prosperity for nearly a hundred years. It took a civil war to acknowledge the real meaning of "all men," and even then "men" still literally meant "men," and it was another 60 years before women were allowed to vote.

The point is, we can and we must continue to strive for ever greater wisdom in the application of spiritual principles to our civil life. Only as we do so will this or any nation truly prosper in the long run. And we can do it today on a wide range of issues from social justice to the economy, the environment, foreign policy, and of course personal freedom, just to name a few.

What is True Freedom?

Concerning this last, vital issue in American life we read in the heavenly doctrines that "it is a law of the Divine Providence that people should act from freedom according to reason" (DP 71).

But in the New Church we know that there are two kinds of freedom. We read,

*“There is infernal freedom and there is heavenly freedom. It is from infernal freedom to think and to will evil, and so far as civil and moral laws do not hinder, to speak and to do it. On the other hand, it is from heavenly freedom to think and to will good, and so far as opportunity is granted, to speak and to do it. Whatever a person thinks, wills, speaks and does from freedom he perceives as his own; for all the freedom which everyone has is from his love. Therefore those who are in the love of evil perceive only that infernal freedom is freedom itself, while those who are in the love of good perceive that heavenly freedom is freedom itself and consequently the evil and the good (both) perceive the opposite to be slavery. Still, it cannot be denied by anyone that *one or other of these is freedom, for there cannot be two kinds of freedom in themselves opposite, and in themselves freedom. Moreover, it cannot be denied that to be led by good is freedom, and to be led by evil is slavery; for to be led by good is to be led by the Lord, and to be led by evil is to be led by the devil*” (DP 43; see also #73).*

True freedom, then, is no license to do whatever seems good in our own eyes, or whatever we can get away with. It involves self-discipline and a good conscience drawn from the Word. It involves a willingness to subordinate one's own needs and interests to the greater good of the whole community. It involves courage, integrity, prudence, generosity, honest employment, community service, the payment of taxes, and, yes, at least the possibility of military service.

There is a slogan, “freedom is not free.” And yet to those who treasure the opportunity to be of service, which is an essential element of heavenly life, the *right to do any of the things just listed will be seen as a privilege*, and in fact even the need (if it be so) to step aside for the sake of another who is better qualified will be seen as *an honor* – that the greater good may be served.

We live in a democratic republic. That means we have a combination of personal responsibility to vote and participate in the government of the land, something we must all do with the greatest possible wisdom and prudence drawn from the spiritual principles revealed by the Lord. But it also means that we are obliged to honor our elected officials and abide by their legislative decisions until or unless we can throw them out and elect new representatives, or unless their government is patently corrupt, in which case we must be prepared to suffer the consequences of civil disobedience as we respond to a higher law.

The principle is, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” But the things that are truly Caesar's in this teaching are the things that truly serve the common good and build a foundation for life in heaven.

Amen.

Lessons: Jeremiah 1, selections
Children's talk on Willingness to Serve the Lord

Matthew 22:15-22
True Christian Religion #414