

# WHAT IS CHARITY?

by Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

## HOW DO WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER?

Perhaps the highest aim of the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church is to make it possible for us to obey the New Commandment and love one another. The Heavenly Doctrines have many—possibly hundreds—of beautiful definitions of charity. These are just a few. “The life of charity consists in thinking kindly of another, and in wishing him well, and in perceiving joy in oneself from the fact that others also are saved” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2884). “In its essence charity is to will well to the neighbor, to be affected with good.... [H]ence charity, because it is affected with good, is affected with mercy toward those who are in miseries” (*Arcana Coelestia* 5132). “He who is in charity toward the neighbor from an internal affection is in charity toward the neighbor in everything which he thinks and speaks, and which he wills and does” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8124). “Charity itself is acting justly and faithfully in the office, business, and employment in which a person is engaged, and with those with whom he has any dealings” (*True Christian Religion* 422).

In all these descriptions, there is an emphasis on the intentions, and the deeper feelings of a truly kind person. Charity, or love to the neighbor, is not primarily some good act we do. It’s what we are; it’s a quality of person that we become; it’s something down deep inside us, from the power of the Lord of love. “Love one another as I have loved you,” He said, and only He can give us that totally unselfish love, which makes us a loving person.

What the Heavenly Doctrines set out is contained in those three little verses from John: “This is My Commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (John 15:12-14). There are four principal messages: the Lord gives us that true love which is charity; to gain it we have to give up a certain kind of life; the friend in everyone is that part of him which does God’s will; and we must love wisely, as the Lord loves us.

## THE BARRIERS TO LOVE

It is part of religion to believe that the Lord gives us true love. What we tend to overlook, despite its frequent mention, is that there is a certain kind of life which we have to lay down for our friends. Not the earthly life, although the Lord used the image of a soldier dying for His country to portray unselfish sacrifice. But there’s something we must all give up: those faults and evils which would make us hurt people, however much we think we’d like to help them. You can’t love your neighbor if you’re willing to cheat him out of something, or if you bear him envy, or if you have the kind of anger that can burst out and hurt at any moment. The first, the foremost step of charity is turning from evils. Hence, the Heavenly Doctrines say, “Charity is not wanting to do evil to the neighbor...for...he who loves any one fears to do evil to him” (*Doctrine of Charity* 14).

Sometimes this seems such a negative teaching. We would perhaps rather think that we are ordinary people, and if we help others more than we hurt them, then the balance is on our side. Some people even feel that good deeds wipe out evil from our hearts. But the fact is that once we face up to our true faults, and remove them, then all the things we do are charitable! That's the wonderful part about facing evil: once it is removed, then all the kind things we have done from custom and habit become inspired by the Lord with true kindness—the type of warmth that only He can bring. Isaiah put it so simply: “Cease to do evil. Learn to do well” (Isaiah 1:16-17). The one follows the other.

### **WHOM SHOULD WE HELP?**

Once we have faced our faults, then to whom should we do good? “Who is my neighbor?” asked the lawyer who tempted the Lord. The answer is clear. The goodness in another person is the neighbor you are to serve. We are not asked to serve people blindly, indiscriminately. Sometimes there is a temptation to do this, to say, “I owe people service, without finding out their character.” The Heavenly Doctrines urge us not to think that way. True kindness is not blind; it is wise. It inquires into the quality of the people being served, and then it knows how to serve them as individuals. We do this instinctively when our own interests are at stake. A person won't employ someone who is dishonest to take care of his money.

The Heavenly Doctrines teach us that whoever you meet, you should regard him as your neighbor, but as an individual—you ought to search into the goodness that is in him, and care for that, and serve that. Don't serve his weaknesses. That's not being a friend to him; it's only going to make him unhappier in the long run.

The temptation is so strong. A friend has a grievance and brings it to you. The easiest thing is to agree that it is just, and *seem* a true friend, even though you sense it is unjust. Might it not be true friendship to keep silent? Or to speak of his own sense of justice as being able to lead him, so as to arouse his goodness? What do we care for more, seeming to be a friend, or truly being one?

True friendship is loving the goodness which the Lord has put into that other person: loving it, admiring it, respecting it, and caring for it. We are not asked to put people into categories, whether social or national or cultural. We are asked to regard them as born of God, and to look for those living, eternal qualities that the Lord has given them. Then we may look at their weaknesses, or their needs, from charity—from wise charity.

### **CHARITY IS WISE**

Charity isn't just sentimental. It's not an emotion that blinds judgment and makes a normally sensible person weak, easily hoodwinked. It is wise, in that it seeks to give true assistance: first to someone's soul, then to his mental and physical needs. And charity is strong. If judgment tells us that sternness or refusal is needed, then it is unkind to do anything else. It is unkind and it is cowardly, because that is the path of true help.

“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” He has laid out a path of charity. Acknowledge the Lord, who alone gives true love. Search out and reject evil in

yourself. Find out who is your neighbor, by seeking the good in him or her, and then act wisely, seeking to be a true friend, as the Lord would have you be. This is charity.