

# Character: The Ultimate Aim of Education

Rt. Rev. George de Charms

Do you know what character is? Could you give a definition of it? How does this sound? Character is a love of what is just and fair and honest, upright, true and good—a love of those things more than of self. Where there is a love of what is right, more than of one's self, then that love prompts a person to sacrifice his or her selfish desires in order to protect and sustain that right. (The opposite of this would be what we call self-indulgence.) Doesn't that express the essence of what is in general meant by character?

There is quite a difference of view among educational philosophers as to what character is. In the New Church, we also have views about what character is and about what the objective of education should be. Our concept of character differs from that of the secular educational world in its stress upon the spiritual side of life, particularly a person's immortality. There is no development of character, in the sense in which we understand it, without spiritual temptation, so we speak of character in terms of what spiritual temptation is and what it does for us.

Spiritual temptation is an assault upon a spiritual love. It is difficult for us to isolate our spiritual loves because they are so easily confused with natural loves. A spiritual temptation arises when we feel that something of our religion, something of our faith, is injured or in danger. But we can easily fly to the defense of our Church as much to defend ourselves and our own reputation, as to defend the truth itself, and it is pretty hard for us to tell the difference. Lastly, knowledge of spiritual truth is a prerequisite to any spiritual temptation. For this reason, children cannot have spiritual temptations because they do not yet have spiritual understanding.

Nevertheless, children do have temptations that are an outward representation of spiritual temptations and are an essential preparation for them. Children do not yet have truly spiritual motives, but they can have all the external appearance of them, fighting for things they have been taught to believe in. It is by means of these natural temptations that children develop character. *The essence of temptation is always a struggle between two loves, a higher love and a lower love, a higher delight and a lower delight.* Character is formed by effort, perseverance, struggling against odds, cheerfully bearing discomfort, and refusing to yield to discouragement or doubt. All these elements are present throughout childhood, from infancy to adulthood, and a child's growth involves them. These qualities are higher delights that appear difficult and yet which must be mastered if the child is to develop.

All these qualities are the essence of character. But it is important to note how they can be mixed up with very wrong ideas, especially in childhood. Here is an example of the choices temptation presents between higher and lower loves. There is a story about a little girl in the slums of London and the way that she reacted to the German blitzkrieg. She had been taught that the police were her natural enemies and that anything you could take without being caught was to your credit. During the blitzkrieg, she took advantage of the burning buildings and the confusion to gather quite a store of valuables that she had had a covetous eye on for a long time. The trouble was that she was caught and punished. Obviously, her standards of morality weren't very high. But, in the midst of all this, this same little girl got caught in a building that was bombed,

and she was pinned under the debris. With her was a little boy who was working with her, and they also had a baby that they had to take care of. And that little girl was brave, able to stand pain without flinching, and utterly selfless in wanting to see that the little boy and baby were safe, regardless of herself. So there you see the strange combination between actions we would consider the opposite of signs of character and actions that would be recognized, at once, as true signs of character.

This is typical of the confusion between right and wrong. We see it all the time. We see it in our own children, perhaps not in quite as extreme a way, but we see it nonetheless, and it shows us that this matter of character is deeper than we might suppose. While the little girl's standard of morality was low, yet it was the best she knew. There was nothing wrong in stealing from her viewpoint, because she had been taught it was all right to get ahead of the police if you could. She didn't believe in anything else than that. Therefore, it is unfair to judge her on the basis of what she did compared with those who had been taught differently.

Children move from believing one thing to be right to learning for the first time that something else is right. They must distinguish between what they had been doing previously and what they now know they ought to do. This is what we call a higher delight—discovering and seeing something that is right on a higher plane. What is right for an infant may not be right for a child, and what is right for a child may not be right for a youth. What is right is the best that every person can know and understand *at their current age*. Children's struggles come in attempting to live up to higher delights rather than remaining in what is easy for them, in what has already been established. These struggles, throughout childhood, are the basis for developing a spiritual conscience at adult age. The formation of a person's character depends upon his or her will and determination to overcome natural childish temptations.

Essentially, this is a struggle that children must make themselves. But there are three ways in which we can help our children in this struggle. The first is *instruction*. We can instruct our children to help them see higher truths, higher rights that are still within their grasp. Secondly, we can help them by *compelling* them to live by what they have been taught is right. And thirdly, we can help them by *putting them in situations where they have the opportunity to do what they know to be right, as of themselves*. The first two are necessary, for without them children would never come to a point where they could choose as of themselves. They are necessary, but they are only the means. It is the last that is the most important, because the end is that children will be led to make choices as of themselves. The ideal is self-compulsion, which, in the true sense, is possible only in adulthood. But self-compulsion, under the inspiration and influence of adults, is possible in childhood, and this is what prepares children for spiritual temptations as adults.

Everything about our educational processes and methods should be directed to stimulating this self-compulsion. We need to use a great deal of judgment here, for if we ask too much of children we will discourage them. But, if we ask too little of our children, we are not helping them to grow. So our demands upon children should be carefully gauged, according to each individual.

After World War II, many educators were against anything that might give youths a war-like spirit. They said that we had to tear war out from the roots and cast it away from us. Everybody

was now going to act with perfect honor and uprightness—with consideration, and everything would be settled by a friendly discussion. But is this view right? Consider the nature of character: a love of something outside ourselves, which we believe is right and just and which we love more than ourselves and are ready to defend. This needs a strong spirit, strength, perseverance, and the ability to stand suffering and to undergo hardship.

How can we help our children to practice these qualities, while they are children, according to their abilities? It takes a great deal of judgment, but all the teachings of the Writings tell us that we have been born into this world to overcome evil in ourselves. The character that will enable us to face this conflict has to be built upon the natural training that comes in childhood, *the ability to face natural hardships and trials and difficulties* and to persevere in the face of obstacles. So, unless we expose our children physically and mentally to hardships, trials and difficulties, we are not preparing them for spiritual temptation.

Now, whatever our desire to protect our children from the horrors of conflict, it is not right for us to raise them to be weak. This challenge is with us continually in our decisions about what to do with our children and what to allow them to do. We have a struggle between our natural fears for their welfare, our natural desire to protect them from danger, and the realization that if our children are to grow up to be strong, they must face some difficult things. For example, there is opposition to some games because of their possible danger. Yet just suppose we had our children grow up without any idea of danger? How will they be able to face the realities of life, if they haven't been taught by experience that life is not a bowl of cherries?

We need to consider very carefully and use our very best judgment about how to teach our children, while they are children, to face the realities of life when they grow up. We need to train them, above all things, to face spiritual temptation as adults. Character comes from a love of what we believe to be just and right and fair and honest, and the willingness to sacrifice everything of ourselves to protect what we believe to be right. Character is one of the most important things we can teach our children.