

Our Daily Work

by the Rev. Grant H. Odhner

It is a common phenomenon that something we begin doing with a sense of higher purpose, in time loses its higher purpose and becomes a rote habit that serves self. For example, we may begin giving of our time or money to some cause from an unselfish sight of its value, an idealism and willing sense of duty. But, after a while, our motives and thoughts subtly drift to our own advantage. First, the thrill of the newness wears off. We do it without much forethought or reflection. Then we find ourselves thinking of our financial contribution (for example) as a tax deduction. Or we find ourselves helping out because we “said we would” or because we want to be thought well of.

This isn't *always* the case with noble actions that become habitual. Over a long period of time, many of the things we do “on principle” become internalized so that we don't reflect self-consciously about them. We do them spontaneously from unselfish love.

How does this happen? How do our values become internalized in this way? It happens with effort. We need to go through the process of applying principles to our daily lives in a deliberate, self-conscious way. This involves something we might call “pairing,” that is, we *deliberately* pair our “working thoughts” with higher thoughts about what we are doing and why.

For example, when we're doing the dishes, we might reflect that washing dishes is a rather low-level job. But if we reflect on the *uses* associated with it we can realize that it protects us from disease. We think of the impact that a messy, dish-strewn kitchen has on our attitudes, on the atmosphere of our home, on our own sense of initiative. We think of the uses involved in eating: nourishing the body so that it can work, relaxing and delighting the mind after work, and physically and spiritually bringing household members together. All these higher uses depend on dishes. And many more things could be mentioned, because *all* higher uses rest in lower ones. Spiritual uses rest on the *natural, domestic, and physical*. Eternal uses rest on the daily.

In anything that we are doing—any act, task, recreation—we can do this; we can pair our present enjoyment or drudgery with higher thoughts. This lifts us to a new plane of functioning. And with time and practice it brings a greater sense of delight and purpose to whatever we are doing.

The Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church provide us with many “higher thoughts” that have the power to elevate the quality of our lives. Among these are some about the neighbor, whom we are to love. Indeed, loving the Lord and loving one's neighbor as oneself are the essence of religion. But how do we go about expressing this love? How do we love rightly?

There's a lot of confusion in the world about what charity (love of the neighbor) really is. Many people see loving the neighbor primarily as feeling pity for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, and for victims of social inequity or injustice. They suppose that love is best shown by giving money and providing assistance of various kinds. Other aspects of life are viewed as *means* to the higher end. Having a job, for example, is a *means* to earning money and affording leisure time, which we can then share with the needy.

In contrast, the Heavenly Doctrines teach that the primary way we love the Lord and our neighbor is by doing the work of our particular calling sincerely, justly and faithfully. This is “charity” in the proper sense. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 4730:3, 4783:5; *Divine Wisdom XI:5*; *Doctrine of Life* 114; *Spiritual Experiences* 6105; *True Christian Religion* 422ff). Our “calling” is whatever we happen to be doing as our main employment, what we are busy with day-to-day, whether we are retired, a mother, a professional, a laborer, a student, or whatever. It is what we are spending most of our mental and physical energy on. It is where Providence has placed us. This is the main arena of our usefulness (or our *potential* usefulness) to others and to society.

To appreciate why our job should be our main focus, and how doing it “sincerely, justly, and faithfully” is loving both the Lord and our neighbor, we need to understand the concept of “use” as the Heavenly Doctrines teach it.

Everyone’s life and happiness depend on the common good. We owe so much of our well-being to the health of our nation, our society, and to the health of the various groups of which we are a part. (We all too easily take this for granted!) And what makes for the common good? It springs chiefly from the jobs that individuals perform in society and, particularly, from the integrity, both personal and occupational, which they bring to their work. When everyone is useful in his or her work, the whole of society benefits. Each person’s use fits into a complex of interdependent and complementary uses. Together these make up the common good. Contributing to this common good, *from love for it and for the people it blesses*, is the essential expression of true love and charity (see *Charity* 126-157).

It is easy to be misled into thinking that love is expressed most strongly in acts of generosity and kindness toward people. When someone does something kind for us personally, we notice it. We are aware of the delight that it gives us. This kind of action is tangible. Therefore, we tend to think that such acts are the primary acts of love.

But this is not the case! Such acts are important (as we will touch on later), and yet they are *secondary*. For the greatest good that can be given to any person is the good that comes to them from the common good. And this could not exist without each person doing his or her own daily duties faithfully, justly, and sincerely.

Heaven, we are told, is a “kingdom” of uses that together make a one. Note how the angels of the highest heaven view their main job:

They have no idea that loving the Lord is anything else than doing goods which are uses, and they say that uses are the Lord with them. By “uses” they understand the uses and good works of ministry, administration, and employment, as well with priests and magistrates as with merchants and workmen. The good works that are not connected with their occupation they do not call uses; they call them alms, benefactions, and gratuities. (Divine Love XIII)

We find a similar teaching in the *Doctrine of Life* which applies to life on earth:

Christian charity with everyone consists in faithfully performing what belongs to one's calling; for by this, if one shuns evils as sins, one is doing goods everyday, and is himself his own use in the general body. In this way also the common (or general) good is cared for, and the good of each person in particular. All other things one does are not the proper works of charity, but are either its signs, its benefactions, or its obligations. (Doctrine of Life 114, emphasis added)

This passage gives another reason why our occupation is to be our primary focus: namely, that by it a person is doing good *every day*. Our work (in most cases) brings us into contact with people daily. Through it we can touch others and find opportunities to affect them for good. What's more, in our daily work we are led to shun evils. This is where real evils show themselves—standing in the way of our doing our work properly or in the right spirit.

The Lord provides continual opportunities to love and serve Him through our life's work! Doesn't it make sense that He wants our primary focus to be here? And isn't it what we do day to day that molds us into the kind of person we are? Our daily job, and *especially our attitude toward it and in it*, forms us into a human being. It tests us, matures us, puts before us the most character-determining challenges that we face. *True Christian Religion* gives us the same basic teaching, emphasizing this last point:

*[Acting justly and faithfully in one's office, business, and employment] is charity itself, because charity may be defined as doing good to the neighbor daily and continually, not only to the neighbor individually, but also to the neighbor collectively. This can be done only through what is good and just in the office, business, and employment in which a person is engaged, and with those with whom he has any dealings; for this is one's daily work, and when he is not doing it, it still occupies his mind continually, and he has it in thought and intention. The person who in this way practices charity becomes more and more charity in form; for justice and fidelity form his mind, and the practice of these forms his body. (423, emphasis added; see also *Spiritual Experiences* 6105; *Charity* 158ff)*

Now, all of this does not mean that our work is the *only* area that we should pay attention to. Far from it! Living the life of charity involves prayer, worship, reading the Word, thinking and talking about its principles, instructing one's children, and similar things. These are healthy and proper "signs" or manifestations of our love (see *Charity* 173-183). Indeed, there are many duties that good people fulfill which lie outside their regular work (see *Charity* 187ff; *True Christian Religion* 429ff). And, charitable people take recreation of mind and body seriously (as well as joyfully). Diversions from work help us to stay "sharp" and actually fosters our enthusiasm for work (see *Charity* 189ff; *True Christian Religion* 433ff).

And, finally, there is the good will toward others which is shown through deeds of kindness or "benefactions" (see *Charity* I 84ff; *True Christian Religion* 425ff). Earlier I used this last aspect of the life of charity in contrast to "doing one's job." The reason for this is that the western world has largely made charity consist first in benefactions. This emphasis is wrong, and it has led to a lot of confusion and guilt, and even to types of "charity" that have done more harm than good. Nevertheless, it would be a great mistake to minimize the importance of good deeds to the life of

charity. First of all, children are initiated into a deeper concept of charity through simple, tangible good deeds. In the second place, the *common good* is greatly served through aid to the needy and poor such as through the funding of hospitals or support for educational programs. Finally, on a more personal level, good deeds are vital to fostering unity, good will, and friendship. Where would we be without acts of kindness? Where would society be?

Still, we need to remember that the greatest good depends on the uses which each person performs in society, the chief of which are through one's daily work. This is a difficult priority to hold at this day. It may seem as if our approach is selfish, a weak excuse and justification for maintaining our comfortable lifestyles. But, we need to be firm in our resolve to see a deeper picture of our religious responsibility and to hold on to it. For, if we make our job our primary focus for the *wrong reasons*, not for the sake of our neighbor and the common good, then what others might accuse us of becomes true: we *are* being selfish and narrow! We *are* in effect using religion to justify our pursuit of our own well-being. What can save us from this is *frequent and honest reflection* about why we do what we do, and also entertaining "higher thoughts" while we work. How we think and what we think day-to-day determine the spiritual quality of our lives, the depth and scope of our love.

Just think! We can deal with a client or pupil, co-worker or cashier, in so many different spirits! We can do it with only ourselves in mind. We can be focused on trying to gain a service from them. We can be trying to impress them, gain recognition, exert influence, get their business, or simply "get it over with" so that we can get on to what *we* want to be doing. On the other hand, we can deal with other people with *their* welfare in mind. We can be concerned with their sense of job-satisfaction, with their self-esteem.

More deeply, our thoughts can be lifted above the individual people to the uses in which they are involved. We can deal with them out of respect for their part in society. And we can try to further or support those uses (even when we don't like the individual people). We can think of the good for our neighborhood, school system, company, state, country and world! The higher our sights are, the deeper and broader the scope of our acts become—inwardly and outwardly.

This is where the pairing of higher and lower thoughts comes into play. Higher thoughts about what we are trying to do, whom we are trying to love and serve, and how we are going about it, lift our minds to function on a deeper plane, and to function more perceptively. And, by sincerely lifting our thoughts, over time our love, too, is lifted and ennobled. And all this happens through our daily uses.

May the Lord give us the strength and inspiration to do the work which He puts before us each day sincerely, justly and faithfully. And may we offer up with these, thoughts from His Word, to guide our hearts and bring eternal meaning to the works of our hands!

Amen.

Readings: Deuteronomy 15:1-2,7-11; Matthew 25:14-30; *Spiritual Experiences* 6105.