

The Face and Clothing of Love

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Of all the human relationships that exist, the most important is marriage. It is one we are drawn to over and over again regardless of our experiences. Even those who have had sad and painful experiences in a marriage frequently remarry. Even if they can't seem to get it right in their own lives, they have an inner sense that marriage is a vital component in life.

Considering that, it's amazing how little is said in revelation about it. The Old Testament speaks of two becoming one in Genesis, but there is no further explanation given. Yes, there are laws governing marriage—who could marry whom and who owned the property—but polygamy was rampant, as is seen in the stories of Abraham and Sarah and of Jacob with Leah and Rachel.

In the New Testament we might expect more, but how much is taught? The Lord does refer to two becoming one, but again, there is minimal, if any, explanation. Although the Lord did speak politely to women and treat them far better than most men of the time, He never married nor seemed to promote marriage or families in any way. And then the teachings of Paul are downright frightening! Marriage is a choice if one cannot remain celibate. It is better to marry than to burn. And women are clearly presented as subservient to men.

It is no wonder then that when the Lord was asked whether there was marriage in heaven, He said they are neither given nor received there, for the idea of marriage that was popular in those times simply does not exist in heaven. This points to one of the reasons that the Lord did not teach more—people simply were not ready to hear anything more. What little the Lord said was distorted or ignored, and with the tremendous confusion about the sexes, the Lord did everything He could at that time.

Unfortunately, as nature abhors a vacuum so the absence of information tends to attract ideas, many of which are not very productive. Often people view marriage in a very natural way. They see it simply as a legalized living together, providing for legitimate inheritance and protection of financial interests. And yet, even as people say this, everyone senses it's more than that. So the opposite false idea of identifying marriage love with romance or passion frequently arises. Love is blind, as Samson let down his guard for Delilah. Love is really lust, as David jeopardized his throne for Bathsheba. And love is a magical first-sight experience as seen in *Romeo and Juliet*. However, the danger in equating romance with a genuine love in marriage is that if we are not at a peak of passion we tend to assume that that we really don't love the other person. Such passion has a very limited life-span. No one can sustain the "falling in love" state for too long—it is exhausting!

So if marriage isn't simply a romantic passion nor a mere business arrangement, what is it? In the New Church we are given many teachings describing what marriage can be. Marriage is a gift from the Lord. It's not something that we create, but rather something that we receive from Him to the extent that we are open to it. He is present in all love and guides the process of two people finding each other and beginning to love each other. He is always the source of that love.

Moreover, marriage is a spiritual joining of two lives into one. From the wedding ceremony there is a joining of the very souls. Then, as the couple lives together, their minds become more and more intertwined so they become one in all things of affection, thought, and life. Couples who have been

married for many years seem to think and feel as a one, and cannot imagine being separate from the other. It is not simply that they live together, but that something special is taking place deep within their very lives, transforming them.

What is more, this is not done in a way that can be measured. There is no yardstick to see how much people love each other. Because the love is deep within, joining their lives, we only catch glimpses of it in this natural world. So there are times when the love is not felt on a conscious plane as much as at other times. This does not mean that it's gone, simply that some natural issue, such as financial worries, is preventing it from being felt as before.

And how is this genuine love of marriage seen? In friendship. Friendship is described as the face and the clothing of conjugal love. And friendship is something that we all have experience with, because we all have friends. These are people we spend time with and feel comfortable with.

Often friendship is based on very superficial things such as similar interests in music, sports or work. But what creates the solid and nurturing friendships in our lives are having fundamental things in common—our overall philosophy of life, our core values, the principles of religion that affect how we think and how we live.

From that kind of basis there is tremendous respect for the other person. There is a willingness to listen to what he or she has to say, to communicate our own thoughts and feelings (not hiding behind superficial masks that are the convenience of society). And because there is trust within that respect, we have the freedom to be imperfect. We can let our less-than-ideal sides show and know that we won't be rejected because the other person sees the good that exists in us.

In fact, genuine friendship is concerned for what is good in the other person. Only a close friend can suggest that we are being too critical of another, or not really being fair in how we treat others. After the initial sting of such a comment (for no one likes having faults brought to light) we have the freedom to respond, for the words were not spoken to harm, but to cherish what is good in us.

So much of this is seen in the teaching of the Lord: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13). While this verse is frequently cited to express thanks to those who have defended their country in times of war, it also has application in friendships. For if we are to be genuine friends with others, we must set our selfish life down, giving up some of that life, that our friends may be supported.

Now, everything that we know about friendship comes into play prominently in the setting of marriage. For to be a good spouse is to be a friend, a genuine friend. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church describe the role of friendship in marriage as being three-fold: friendship is a bridge, a stabilizing factor, and then a means of resolving problems (*Conjugal Love* 214).

As a bridge, friendship creates a transition from the initial stages of love to a more normal genuine love between a couple. Everyone knows that the initial romance of the honeymoon state tends to fade with time. Those early phases of marriage are absolutely wonderful and exist as a prelude and a foretaste of what heaven will be like. It is an incredibly selfless time, as we would do anything for the happiness of our new spouse. But because no one is regenerate, especially in the early phases of marriage on this earth, that honeymoon state tends to be of short duration. We return to whatever spiritual developmental stage we were at previously.

If there were no friendship between the two, the marriage could come to an abrupt end when the passion dies down. But where a relationship is based also upon friendship, then the move into the normal warp and weft of marriage is made easier and new joys in being together are found.

Friendship also adds stability to a marriage because of trust. If we are secure in our friendship with our spouse, we have the freedom to see problems and to work on them rather than to hide them in a very dysfunctional way. If we do not have to keep up false appearances, if we know that even if we're not perfect our spouse will still love us and stand by us, it's far easier to recognize problems and to deal with them openly and honestly.

The spouse who fears the end of marriage if he or she is not absolutely perfect will often spend much time frantically trying to keep the other person placated, usually while an inner sense of resentment and anger grows. This can build within, creating unbearable pressures that inevitably explode into strife, bitterness, and intense pain. But where there is friendship, where there is trust, the normal growth pains in marriage can be dealt with without the inner love being harmed.

The final way in which friendship plays a critical role in marriage is when there are significant problems. In states of cold, when little if any warmth is felt toward the other person, the hells are present, trying to convince us that there is no love left. In fact, they suggest to us that because that other person is irritating us or making our life miserable, we have the right to ignore, abuse, or mistreat our spouse—worse than we would anyone else we know.

At these times the challenge is to force ourselves to treat the other person with decency and respect. This is how we would deal with a friend, even if that friend is in a state that we don't like. Almost any two people can get along if they attempt to be friends. So when we act in a friendly way, even if we don't especially feel like it, it says much about who we are trying to become. It also gives the Lord material with which He can work—creating an atmosphere in which the flood of the hells can eventually subside and the genuine love within re-emerge.

What then is the result of striving to become friends in marriage? The answer is love truly conjugal—a relationship found only in marriages, but one which the Lord wills to give to everyone.

As we strive to become friends, sometimes forcing ourselves to act against our instinctive feelings, something unique and precious is growing inside. It will create an atmosphere in which the union of souls and the joining of minds can take place and even be felt. As we think of what we can do for our spouse, friendship will become a genuine face and garment of that intense and eternal love which the Lord is giving us. For they “who so dwell together on earth dwell together as angels after death” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2732). Indeed, the joy of dwelling together increases in this world and then in the next forever. So our marriage will become the source of the deepest and the most intense happiness that we can ever experience. This is the promise of love truly conjugal—a precious gift from the Lord that He is ever offering to us.

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 2:18-24; Matthew 19:1-12; *Conjugal Love* 214