

Handling the Present with a Sense of Hope for the Future

by Rev. Eric H. Carswell

I recently ran across this quote: "We are all faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations." This statement aptly describes a fundamental challenge for teachers. We regularly are faced with situations that cause us concern for a variety of reasons. Students show us signs of existing problems or develop habits that lead us to worry about what the future will hold for them. There are two parts or influences in our mind that affect our response to our day-to-day experience with students. One part tries to convince us that our students are hopeless causes, calling us either to give up or to control them completely so some great calamity won't befall them. But would this be the Lord's perspective as He looked at these same developing lives? The second influence in our mind is His presence. He would rather we see our daily work as a series of great opportunities. Which of these two influences has the greater effect on our daily work? Any teacher at a particular level of teaching could come up with a long catalogue of the various pitfalls that endanger students at that point in their development. It could be problems with insecurity, irresponsibility, inattentiveness, poorly developed thinking abilities, social maladjustment, and so on. The challenge we face is: What are we going to do about these problems and how are we going to avoid being overwhelmed by them?

Each day we have many opportunities to reflect on what is the Lord's part and what is our part in helping to solve these problems. This is by no means a simple question, but considering it can change our perspective of our concerns. It is quite possible to have a very grim view of the world (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 1949:2), but the New Church is called the crown of all the churches because it is to worship a visible God. Where do we see the Lord working in the lives of our students?

It is not easy to balance our responsibility to act in the best interests of a student with a sense of trust that the Lord is doing far more than we can imagine to lead him to a better state. What is the Lord's part and what is our part? We know that we need to act according to our best understanding. If we become apathetic, the Lord will be lacking one of the key means He uses in the development of the student's life. At the same time, we don't want to take too much on ourselves, making too much of our own plans and efforts. We want to have a living trust in the Lord's daily presence and activity.

We believe that there is an Infinite God working with all of His love, wisdom and power to prepare children to be useful, happy adults and eventually useful, happy angels. We know that compared to His understanding and breadth of effort, our work is minute. Consider how far natural language is stretched to convey this idea in the following passage:

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“The Lord’s foresight and providence are present within the tiniest details of all the smallest individual things with a person, and in details so tiny that it is impossible to comprehend in any manner of thought one in many millions of them. For every smallest fraction of a moment in a person’s life entails a chain of consequences extending to eternity” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3854:3).

We know that the Lord is doing countless things in the lives of the students we teach, but we also have our part. A teacher could say a prayer each day for a whole year asking that his students write better essay answers, but if the teacher does not work towards this goal, he will see few changes.

We can face our daily work as teachers confident in an all-powerful ally who cares far more than we do about the most important aspects of our students’ lives. This confidence can profoundly affect our behavior and our influence on others.

The Word contains many stories that illustrate confidence and the lack of it. In the parable of the talents, two men have the confidence to use the talents while a third is so paralyzed by his fear that he buries his talent in the ground despite apparently knowing that this is not the best thing to do. The story of Peter walking on the water at first illustrates an awe-inspiring faith as he walked toward the Lord, but when the wind and waves distracted him, he began to sink into the water. Perhaps we should picture ourselves as being like Peter walking on the water as we confidently move forward with the children and young people we teach each day; but when we are overwhelmed by problems and become less effective in our work, we are sinking into the waters of fear and discouragement.

Still another story of confidence and the lack of it was when Saul and Jonathan faced an overwhelming Philistine army with only a small force and just two swords. Saul’s response was to sit under a tree, perhaps waiting apathetically for some outside event to change the situation. In sharp contrast, Jonathan decided to confront a garrison with only his armor bearer. He knew that the Lord didn’t need a large force to win a victory. The result of Jonathan’s nearly single-handed effort was a complete rout of the Philistines. A person who moves forward confident in the Lord’s presence, can accomplish far more than anyone might expect.

Genuine confidence should never lead us to apathy. It is easy to see the problems it brings, but what of its opposite—over-control? When a teacher forgets the Lord’s presence and perspective, he tends to take too much responsibility himself. It becomes his job alone to solve the problem he confronts.

A teacher can have a terribly negative effect if she decides that she absolutely must solve a student’s problem. She may feel inadequate or like a failure. This won’t come from just having a problem pointed out, but rather it may be triggered by the tone of voice that the teacher uses, the impatience that creeps into their interaction. This problem is worsened if the parents are involved through poorly worded notes, tense

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critical conferences, perhaps including emphatic suggestions of professional testing and help. If done without a sense of hope, these things can bog down a child and his parents with an overwhelming discouragement.

Over-control has another very common negative result: not only no improvement but actually greater resistance to change (*Arcana Coelestia* 1947). Nothing seems to close a student's mind to the recognition of a problem faster than unwise efforts to fix it. A student's mind can easily be closed to the light of heaven by a coldly insistent line of argument or an angry tirade from an otherwise distant adult.

Our interactions with students are heavily influenced by the fundamental point of view we hold. Consider this image: we have a sword of truth and shield of good that can accompany us in our work. If we express ourselves wrongly, we confront the students with the sharp end of the sword and find ourselves defending some principle with the shield. When our actions, words and tone of voice carry this image the students will most certainly recognize that they are the enemy and in many cases pursue this role with a guerrilla warfare that we will never completely control. We are far more effective if our actions, words and tone of voice invites the student, if he is remotely willing, to come behind the shield and to be protected by the sword. Together the teacher and student can look objectively at the problem the teacher has observed; in the light of heaven the student himself can recognize its dangers.

To use our sword and shield wisely, we need several things: we need to have a sense of the Lord's presence and power; we need to be aware that the Lord wants the young person to recognize the things that would harm him and others; and we need to trust our surest Ally in the most important things we are trying to accomplish. But there is a catch: this sense of the Lord's presence with the hope that it can bring is the product of regeneration. Because this sense of a visible God is so important to good education, I like to say (with tongue firmly in my cheek) that since we are paid to become better teachers, then in a sense we are getting paid to regenerate!

If we do our part to teach and lead students, meeting them where they are, and bending and guiding them along their pathway of life, we can gain great satisfaction from our work. We know as we look back over the last day, week, or year that we did the best job that we could. The results may not look impressive. Sometimes we may have only maintained the status quo or perhaps even merely slowed a decline that was in progress. But we hope that through the combined efforts of the teacher and the Lord, that child or young person will recognize a need for change, will see the value of the knowledge he needs to learn, of the habits he needs to foster. Even if this does not take place for twenty years, our efforts may provide the foundation that the Lord will use at that time to work His miracles. Can we be content providing that foundation? We can be if we handle the present with a sense of hope for the future. If we do the best we can, the Lord will use what we have done and will add to it a thousand times in His unending work of leading each of us to an ever new and better life.