

New Church Day Banquet Zoom to Canada June 20, 2020

Welcome to our first (and hopefully our last) virtual banquet.

The reason we have gathered here tonight is to celebrate the birthday of the New Church. It is if it were the birthday of a beloved member of the family, we'd tell stories about that person that illustrated how they affected our lives. So, here we go.

The Church, like a person, has many different faces. For example, to some people I'm their pastor. To others, I'm a friend. To the various members of my immediate family I'm a husband, a father, a brother, and a son. Each relationship is different and unique, even though they do cross boundaries in some places. I think of my wife as my best friend as well as my wife, and at other times I have been her pastor, and even her boss! In the same way, our relationship with the Lord has many different faces, and the best way to see them is through our relationship with His church. So, let's look at some of the different ways that we see our relationship with the Lord through His church.

The Church as a place of learning

Since the Lord created the whole universe and all the living things within it, one should start with the assumption that He knows how it all fits together and how it works. So as the author and creator, He should be considered our primary source of information about the world around us, and the people in it.

At the same time, we can observe that He made us smart and inquisitive. We have learned how to provide ourselves with food, clothing, and shelter to such an extent that most of us don't even have to involve ourselves in the process. We are free to spend most of our time doing other things. We figured that out for ourselves because the Lord gave us the tools to take care of ourselves. But He also knew that we'd never be able to figure out spiritual things while we were still in our bodies in the natural world. We simply don't have any way of seeing or measuring the spiritual world. So, He gave us the things we needed to know about spiritual life through revelation – the Word. We don't go to the Word to learn how to build a bridge – we're supposed to figure that out on our own. We go to the Word to learn that there is a life to come, to find the tools that we need to do spiritual work, and to learn what we have to do while we are in this world to prepare ourselves for that life.

We might ask where the spiritual tools are needed. There are so many crazy ideas in the world today, and thanks to the World Wide Web, they are

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widely distributed. How are we supposed to make sense of it all? When I was young, we went to the Encyclopedia to find articles that were carefully written by recognized experts in their field, and then vetted by their colleagues. That kind of thing could be trusted! But now, anybody can publish anything they want on the Web. Articles found in Google and Wikipedia are NOT peer reviewed. We've been cast out onto a sea of information in a little boat. How do we sort it out? How do we get safely back to land?

The doctrines of the New Church provide a foundation of rational ideas that are both reasonable and kind. One of the tools that the Lord gives us is this test of truth. Look at in application. Does it lead to lasting (eternal) good? Then it's probably true. The Word provides this touchstone that allows us to test the ideas from the world against the Divine thought of the Lord. The Word is not always 'politically correct' in that it sometimes conflicts with the current popular views, but it certainly is spiritually correct because it leads through the mess and confusion to heavenly life.

When people first discover the Heavenly Doctrines, they think about the ideas they find there. At first they can understand the teachings and even explain them to others, but they are external to their inner person. The wonderful thing about New Church Education, when it continues throughout life as an interest in the things of the Word, is that one eventually comes to think from the doctrines because they have been brought into that inner, spiritual life. And when that happens, it all comes into focus. We can see that the world and all the things that are going on are all a part of a big, complex, orderly whole and that the Lord really is in control, constantly striving to turn people away from their base inclination towards heavenly things, while AT THE SAME TIME allowing them perfect freedom in SPIRITUAL things.

(It's important to remember that the Lord cares first for your spiritual life and may allow some unhappy things to happen in your natural life to achieve His goal of leading you to heaven.)

Another Face of the Church is as a place of worship

All these rules about social distancing and watching church services online instead of attending in person raises useful questions about what is really at the heart of worship. Is it just an external ritual that needs to take place in a dedicated church building, or is it just a worshipful attitude of mind that can take place wherever you are?

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I think both are involved.

No matter how good our ministers get at delivering sermons to a camera in an empty chapel – whether they are in the Bryn Athyn cathedral or just in their own back yard – it's just not the same to passively watch a service on TV or a computer while sitting in a comfy chair in your living room and enjoying a cup of coffee. Getting up, getting dressed, and getting to the church on time are all active things that help us prepare our minds for what is to follow. Our affections are stirred in a way that happens nowhere else when we enter a building that we have come to associate with worship and sit down in that spot where we usually sit. That sense of community and belonging are increased when we say or sing those sacred words in harmony with others. As we all know, influx is according to the receiving vessel, and the better prepared the vessel, the better the quality of what can inflow.

But that doesn't mean what we're doing now isn't valuable or effective. We are mindfully doing what we can to approach the Lord during a difficult time full of weird and unnatural rules. Just the effort to find a way helps prepare the mind to enter a kind of worshipful state because worship, in its essence, requires an element of submission, a recognition that we are doing something obediently because someone 'above' us has asked us to. There's a recognition that we don't know everything we need to know about spiritual life, we don't know how to make the changes we need to make to prepare ourselves for heaven, and we are coming before the Lord Himself to admit that we need Him and ask for His help.

We come to worship because it helps be certain that we are not alone, that the weight of the world's problems does not rest solely on our shoulders, but that God is in charge, and He has a plan. Our spiritual and emotional happiness depends on our getting in harmony with the plan, and that can't happen unless we worship.

We have a hard time with this. We really don't like humbling ourselves to another person. We need to step back and reflect on this for a moment. God is not our equal, or a competitor. He is our heavenly Father. It's okay to admit that He knows better than we do. And, there's some safety in putting yourself in the care of someone who actually knows what He's doing.

The Face of the Church as Community

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The last few months have been unique and challenging. Isolation. Unemployment for many. Unrest. Travel restrictions that divide families. Where do we find comfort in all this?

Many of you are familiar with the “Mr. Roger’s Neighbourhood” children’s television show. Mr. Rogers used to say to children when bad things were happening, “Look for the helpers.” Look around and see all the things that people have been doing to help each other. Medical staff and other front-line workers. Ministers prevented from traveling or holding church, quickly learning new ways to connect with people. But more than just social friendships, we need to remember the way we support each other, the way we can RELY on each other in hard times.

This is a strength of the church community.

The Face of the Church as a Communion of Saints

Yes, we have “saints” in the New Church. Not the Roman Catholic kind, but a more general term which means people who love the Lord and do what He teaches in the Word. And who love one another in word and deed. And we may be surprised to know how big that communion is.

Let me give you a quick summary of a story from the Old Testament that illustrates what I mean.

2 Kings 6:14-18 (NKJV) [The Lord has been telling Elisha where the Syrians are camped, so the King of Syria sends his army to capture Elisha]

14 Therefore he sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city.

15 And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?"

16 So he answered, "**Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.**"

17 And Elisha prayed, and said, "LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. **And behold, the**

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mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

There are millions of spiritual friends around us all the time, most of them unseen.

Both Karen and I are members of organizations not associated with the church. I'm in a flying club, and she's in the quilt guild. We meet lots of people from a variety of backgrounds. What's interesting is that we have found and become friends with so many people who have given themselves different labels about the nature of their philosophy of life and moral compass, but all the same they are people who know that they have to improve themselves, be kind to others, and do it because it's "the right thing to do." We and they together make a communion of saints. There are a lot more "saints" around than we can see.

Finally, the Face of the Church as the Lord's dwelling

We all know that the church is, for us, the Lord's dwelling place. At the same time, we recognize that there are a lot of churches, so the Lord dwell with a lot of people in a lot of places. If we raise our minds a little, we soon realise that God is not limited to some geographical location, no matter how lovely. His real dwelling place is in each of us, in our hearts and minds.

We are all being carried along in the stream of Providence towards our eternal, heavenly home. However, it does make a difference to our lives in this world whether we are swimming with the current or against it. If we look to the Lord in His Word and do the best we can to fit ourselves into the plan, we'll find that our life in this world, while it will still have its ups and downs, will go a little easier. We will find that we have a confidence in the future – even if we don't know the details of what it may hold, and we can even have confidence that there will be an eternal life where things will be just and fair and healthy.

So, Happy 250th Birthday, New Church (June 19, 1770 when the disciples were sent out through the whole of the spiritual world to preach the gospel that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns.) Thank you for the many different ways, the many faces you present that bring blessings into all of our lives.

Rev. James P. Cooper
Regional Pastor to Canada
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