

The Church as a Mother
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May 12, 2019

Then one said to Jesus, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You." But He answered and said to the one who told Him, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers!"
Matthew 12:50

On this day when many of us reflect with gratitude on the contributions made to our lives by our own mother and other mothers that are near and dear to us, Jesus's distance, at times, from His own mother can seem off-putting. For example, when Mary told Jesus at the wedding at Cana that they had run out of wine, Jesus replied: "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me?" (John 2:4). We don't usually picture people addressing their mother so distantly.

The Lord told His disciples that His life was an example for them. Some people regularly ask themselves as they face difficult situations, "What would Jesus have done in a situation like this?" But what are we to take from this particular example? Are we also to feel little allegiance to our own mother?

There is a profound way that the Lord, Jesus Christ, is different from the rest of us finite human beings. The teachings of the New Church make this clear in the following statement.

It should be recognized that right to the end of His life when He was glorified the Lord gradually and constantly separated from Himself and cast off that which was merely human. That is to say, He cast off that which He had derived from the mother, until ultimately He was no longer her son but the Son of God not only in conception but also in birth, and so was one with the Father and was Jehovah himself. (*Arcana Coelestia* 2649:2)

The explanation of the fourth commandment given in the *True Christian Religion* states that this commandment involves honoring, obeying, being devoted to, and showing gratitude to our mothers and fathers. This is an essential foundation for our spiritual lives as we grow from infancy toward adulthood. And it is also important that as we grow and mature that the first commandment comes more and more to be the central guiding force in our lives. The Lord has commanded us, "You shall have no other gods before me" and in the New Testament the first and great commandment is stated as, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (*Matthew 22:37*).

As we grow and mature hopefully the vast majority of us can grow in appreciation for the ways in which our mothers served our welfare in the upbringing they provided. But even the best mothers are still fallible human beings. And with some certain flaws are conspicuous. Our allegiance to the desires and principles of our mother should not supersede that of our allegiance to following what the Lord wants us to do. Anytime our allegiance to another human being or any motivation or principle exceeds our allegiance to follow the Lord we are transgressing the

first and great commandment to some degree. We would hope that children wouldn't be in the position of questioning fundamental issues with their mother. Sadly, enough there are some children who at very early ages need to start forming a somewhat independent life from their mother or their father because of fundamental flaws in these parents. The failure to form this independent life would be destructive to the child's growing spiritual health. Some children have a parent who so regularly puts down healthy qualities in them that they have to choose either to accept this parent's judgment as correct or they have to recognize that the person with the problem in this situation is their parent.

In the short story read as a lesson from Matthew, the Lord said, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers!" In doing this He was not rejecting his biological mother and brothers as unworthy of any attention. Instead He was qualifying their importance in relationship to higher priorities. For example can you picture it making any sense for a person to interrupt a crucial, time-sensitive task for an extended informal chat with that person's mother? If you were the one who answered that phone call, wouldn't you be inclined to say, "Can I pass on the message to phone you as soon as it is reasonably convenient?" This is true of all relationships. There are times when being willing to drop all other considerations to follow the inclination of one person can be quite spiritually unhealthy. This is true of parents with their children, and husbands and wives with their spouses.

But enough of this qualification.

It is very common for mothers to do wonderful things many of which can be so regular and can show themselves in such small ways that they become nearly invisible. Warm smiles, supportive words, gentle nudges toward different perspectives, even clear exhortations to better behavior are all part of the environment of the home that mothers can help create. As they oversee the daily natural pattern of wants and needs within a household, they can help create the environment that allows for healthy growth. For many of us the foundations we have in very deep parts of our perspective on what it means to be loved, to be safe, to be cared for have been provided by our mother. In many families the majority of the family patterns at holidays and throughout each day--all the different family rituals were directed and formed by the woman or mother in the household. Many of us can look back and recognize that our mothers did many wonderful things for which we can be grateful.

A powerful comparison is drawn in the teachings of the New Church between the role of a mother and that of the church. The church is called to be a healthy organization of human beings that is dedicated to being led by the Lord in His Word. Such a church can produce a powerful matrix for the birth and growth of our spiritual life. The connection between natural mothers and that of the church is drawn in detail. Quoting from the *Apocalypse Explained*.

In the Psalms it states: "But You are He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts. I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You have been My God" (Psalm 22: 9, 10). This describes the regeneration of the spiritual person by such things as belong to natural birth from a mother; therefore "You are He who took Me out of the womb" means that a person is regenerated by the Lord

and made a member of the church; "You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts" means that one is afterwards led and spiritually educated, "the mother's breasts" signifying spiritual nourishment in such things as belong to the church, "mother" meaning the church; (*Apocalypse Explained* 710:6)

Quoting from the *Arcana Caelestia*:

The Lord's kingdom on earth is the Church, therefore "the womb" also means the Church. For the Church exists where the marriage of good loves and true ideas exists. This explains why "opening the womb" means the resulting doctrines taught by the Churches, as well as the ability to receive the truths and good things of the Church, while "going out of the womb" means being born again or being regenerated, that is, becoming the Church since a person who is born again or regenerated becomes the Church. (*Arcana Caelestia* 4918:1)

Also quoting from the *True Christian Religion*:

Regeneration is effected in a manner analogous to that in which a person is conceived, carried in the womb, born, and educated. In each human being there is a perpetual correspondence between what takes place naturally and what takes place spiritually, or between what takes place in his body and what takes place in his spirit . . . It follows that this formation is like conception, gestation, birth and education. It is for this reason that natural births in the Word mean spiritual births, which are births of good loves and true ideas. (*True Christian Religion* 583)

This quality that is the Lord's church can grow within an individual's life and can be shared between two or more people. Remember the Lord said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." When we gather together to try to make a home for the church on earth, whether it be a family unit, among a close and supportive group of friends, or on the level of a congregation, this gathering to be led by the Lord through His Word creates a powerful spiritual climate that is good for each of us. It is a spiritual mother. It is a living presentation of the truth that makes the church. It can bring not just the hard rocks of truth to our lives but the living bread that the Lord offers us. By working together with others we can see wonderful examples of what truth in life means for the people around us. By gathering together to worship, and to share the ups and downs, joys and tragedies that exist within this world a quality that is very much like a mother's role in a family can take place within our lives.

On this Mother's Day, may we turn our thoughts in gratitude for what the natural mothers we have known have done for good. May we thank the Lord for His work through them, and thank them for their willingness to do so much. May we also recognize the importance of the church as a spiritual mother. May we thank the Lord for His work through the church, and thank the people who help make that church in our lives for their willingness to do so much as well. May each of us be blessed with a spiritual home that cares for us, guides us, and encourages us to be the kind of person that the Lord is leading us to be. AMEN.

Lessons: *Deuteronomy* 5:16, *Matthew* 12:46-50, *True Christian Religion* 305-306

Deuteronomy 5:16

Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you.

Matthew 12:46-50

While Jesus was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then one said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You." But He answered and said to the one who told Him, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother."

True Christian Religion 305-306

Honoring your father and your mother in the earthly meaning, which is the literal meaning, includes honoring our parents, obeying them, being devoted to them, and thanking them for the benefits they have given us - for feeding and clothing us, introducing us into the world so that we may become civil and moral people within it, and introducing us into heaven through religious instruction. In this way our parents have cared for our prosperity in time and our happiness to eternity. They do all these things from a love they have from the Lord, whose role they have played . . . In a broader sense, this commandment means honoring our leaders and government officials because on everyone's behalf they provide in a general way the necessities that parents provide in an individual way. In the broadest sense, this commandment means loving our country because it nurtures and protects us. . . In fact, it is the parents themselves who need to give honor to the country and those who serve it, and to sow this habit in their children.

In the spiritual meaning, honoring your father and your mother refers to revering and loving God and the church. In this sense "father" means God - the Father of all - and "mother" means the church. In the heavens little children and angels know no other father or mother, since their rebirth in that world comes from the Lord through the church. This is why the Lord says, "Do not call anyone on earth your father, for your father is the One in the heavens" (Matthew 23:9).

(These words apply to little children and angels in heaven, but not to little children and people on earth.) The Lord teaches something similar in the prayer that is shared by all Christian churches: "Our Father, who is in the heavens: your name must be kept holy." In the spiritual meaning, "mother" stands for the church because as mothers on earth nourish their children with physical food, so the church nourishes people with spiritual food.