

Our Relationship with God or How to Comprehend the Infinite

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also, and from now on you know Him and have seen Him.... He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” - *John* 14:6,7, 9

The Difficulty of Trying to Comprehend the Infinite

Think for a moment about any occasion when you have been struck by the magnitude and at the same time the fantastic detail and order of the universe. Maybe you’ll recall a starry night at the beach or in the mountains when you gazed in awe at the wonder of it all, or maybe, on the other hand, you have been struck by such “simple” things as how the grass grows, how birds fly, or how a baby develops in a mother’s womb. Then again, maybe you are into science and are fascinated by the make-up and potential of atomic or sub-atomic physics. For some of us, the complexity of all these things can be simply mind-boggling.

And if we think about how God controls all these vast and intricately balanced systems, or, for example, what God was doing before creation, we can be so overwhelmed that we simply can’t begin to contemplate any of it. In fact, in many ways, it may seem simpler and easier to imagine that it all works automatically, each thing coming into existence and taking form spontaneously according to the conditions that allow for it, than to try to think of an intelligent Being consciously creating, let alone managing it all. In that case, no doubt we could still be thankful for what exists, but if we are at all concerned about *purpose* and *meaning* in the universe, we might be inclined to just shrug, and try not to think about it. But then where are we? The real, ultimate purpose of our lives is that we should have a relationship with our Maker so that we can be connected with Him in a joyfully conscious way, not just for life in this world but for eternal life. (See *John* 15:11 & 16:24 & TCR 43.)

Our third lesson about the importance of our New Church theology neatly summarizes the problem. The point is, we all think in natural terms and we all need sensory images to get clear ideas about anything. So, the passage contrasts a view of the vast expanse of the universe with the idea of a **Man** “*in* the air,” or a view of the sea “mid-ocean” with the vision of a **Man** “*on* the sea.” Even so, we need to be wary of a merely physical idea of the Lord. He is Human, just as we are human, not because of the shape of our bodies, but because of the love and wisdom that may be expressed *through* the body. In *Matthew* 14, the disciples saw the Lord in the midst of the Sea of Galilee but still didn’t know who He was until He spoke to them and did an amazing miracle for them. And even then, they didn’t see the Infinite God, they saw a natural embodiment of Him.

Why This is Important

In philosophical circles there is a tension between what is called “the immanent” and “the transcendent,” or, in other words, between what is close, personal or in some way accessible to the finite mind, and what is far off, cosmic or in some way beyond our finite comprehension. We

are confronted with both realities every day in our lives, and as you probably know, it can be difficult to reconcile them in our minds.

It's the same sort of problem we face in the church when we try to comprehend God, the infinite creator of all things, the timeless, formless energy or force behind the whole universe, now revealed through the James Webb Space Telescope in even more spectacular detail than anyone has ever imagined, including galaxies that are – or were – thousands of light years away, so that when we see them we are actually looking into the very far distant past: never mind what is being created anew every split-second.

The problem is featured in various passages of the Writings (e.g. HH 162 & 191, and TCR 31) that discuss the difficulty of thinking about anything spiritual from a perspective of time and space. For sure, there are progressions of state in the spiritual world (which can give an appearance of time and space), but the truth is that any thought rooted in time and space prevents us from truly understanding anything spiritual, especially the essence or nature of God. After all, the Infinite, by definition, is all-encompassing, without any limits or boundaries that would allow us to form an idea of it. So, for example, in the Star Wars movies, God is a complete abstraction, called simply, “the Force.” But God is more than a Force. God is love, and from that love comes wisdom, just as light comes from the sun. And from that love and wisdom *together* we get power. The question is, how to get a rational idea, that is, how to form a mental picture of all that purposeful energy, so that we can appreciate it as a source of *instruction, guidance and inspiration*.

And the answer is to think of it in human terms, of course, not in *ordinary* human terms, but in “super-Human” terms.

The Divine Humanity

Our concept of this begins for all of us in a very simple and natural way, when we are little children, with an appreciation of the love, wisdom and power – such as it is – of our parents. For the disciples in the New Testament, it began in a special way with the miraculous birth of an extraordinary, and clearly *precocious* child, whom they were able to observe growing in wisdom and power year by year, (Luke 2:42-47 & TCR 89) culminating in His resurrection from a brutal execution, followed by miracle after miracle in Jerusalem and on the shores of Galilee.

The point is, we learn what “super-Human” is first of all by learning what it is to be human at all. And then, as we grow, if we really think about it, we begin to understand that *our* humanity comes from the Divine Humanity of God. After all, it has to come from *somewhere!* Our consciousness isn't just a function of neurons in the brain somehow leaping to conclusions from a set of interactions in the material world. Chemistry has no power of perception; it has no ability to lift itself above the level of action and reaction, any more than a pair of pliers has the power to become the *mind* that controls it, or a two-dimensional *picture* has the power to project itself into the third dimension; it just does what it does. But what *animates* that chemistry, directs it, and provides for its purposeful function is *spiritual*, and more profoundly Human than anyone in this world can ever be. That said, we are created in the *image and likeness* of God (Genesis 1:26), and all the stuff of this world, including our physical bodies, exists to manifest and support that

otherwise invisible reality.¹

This is one of the reasons why love to the Lord is always tied together with love for the neighbor. (AC 6025) This will sound outrageous at first, but some of us obviously are more human than others, that is, more loving and wise, but we always *look* for what is human in one another. *And yet, how can we know what is truly human without learning from our Creator what that looks like?* So our Creator took on a natural human form, at first through visions of angels, priests, or prophets, and then in fact by showing up in His own body of flesh and bones. But even then, it's not the flesh and bones themselves that reveal the Infinite; it is the love, the purpose, the wisdom, the judgment and the emotional impact of that Man that reveal it. It's not the physical features of Jesus – or anyone else for that matter – that reveal His thought, affection and power, it is His words and His actions.

So, as we noted earlier, even the disciples who saw the Lord with their own eyes, didn't really recognize who He was just by looking. And most certainly, neither did the Scribes, the Pharisees, or the Romans who crucified Him. So, neither will we recognize Him just by reading the story of His natural life, His moral or ethical teaching, *or even His miracles*. In this age of science and psychology we can find all sorts of ways to explain this remarkable Man's power and influence without attributing Divine authority to Him – which is why we now have a whole new revelation in the Writings for the New Church, to give us the deeper, *spiritual* meaning of this amazing life. These teachings, in addition to the record of the Lord's natural life in the gospels, are really critical for strengthening, not just our faith, but our emotional relationship with God.

But Why Does God Appear as a Man, and Not a Woman?

You'll note that these doctrines consistently refer to God as a Man, that is, a masculine person. Yes, of course, many references use the term, Man, meaning "Human," without any specific gender or sexual implications. But many others do identify the personification of God as male. Why is that, and why is it important? This is a good example of the deep significance of the new revelation for understanding our relationship with God.

And in this revelation the classic definition of the masculine mind is that it is "intellect-oriented," whereas the feminine mind is "will-oriented" (CL 33). Of course, both the masculine and the feminine mind are composed of *both* will and understanding! The difference is that the masculine mind consists of "love veiled over with wisdom," whereas the feminine mind is the opposite, "wisdom veiled over with love." (CL 32, 88-91) This doesn't mean that men are more rational than women, OR that women are more emotional than men. It just means that the outwardly visible characteristics are driven by inwardly *invisible* ones that inspire or motivate us.

That said, why did God assume a natural human form? He answered that question Himself, saying, "For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth." (John 18:37) And now we can understand this more perfectly to mean that He came to present Himself *as the very form of that truth, expressing His inner love such that*

¹ Note, there's a big difference between this and the idea of creating God in our own image and likeness, a concept referred to as *anthropomorphism*, that is, attributing human characteristics to something that is not actually human. We *are* because He *is*, and not the other way around!

*He could restore order to the world through His own work **without compromising anyone else's freedom**. He was, in fact, the very epitome of "love veiled over with wisdom," the **Word** made flesh.*

Our teachings about the masculine mind brings this into a clear light. It was infinite love that brought God into this world, and infinite love that directed everything He did. But He did His work by clearly demonstrating the real **wisdom** of the Word, and then by absolutely joining that **learned**, finite wisdom together with His **infinite** love for our eternal happiness, making them ONE. We call this the process of glorification, and the end result was that no physical body of either sex could contain it. Now, then, it is the body of *teaching* that **describes** His life and work, still finite, still written in masculine terms, that fully reveals this Humanity.

The Lord as the Bridegroom and Husband of the Church

Naturally, we connect with this teaching not only through our understanding, but also through our will and emotions when we live according to it. So, in many passages of the Word, the Lord is referred to as a Bridegroom or Husband, and the church, consisting of both men and women, as His bride or wife. (See *Isaiah* 62:5, *Matt.* 9:15, *Rev.* 21:2.) What this means is that when we learn what we need to know, and practice it, that wisdom becomes a new inner core of OUR being, and then, whether we are male or female, the Lord gives us a new will through which we can express it, outwardly loving others as ourselves, living in genuine charity *because of the inner core of our faith*.

And that is how, as John wrote, we can see the Infinite in the finite, and cultivate a real relationship with Him. Remember, Jesus said,

He is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him. If we know Him, we will know His Father also, and from now on if we really reflect on His life, we **will** know Him and we **will** see Him. (*John* 14:6-7, adapted)

So, as John also wrote, and as our New Church doctrine confirms, the Word has become flesh for us, first in the form of a natural Man, but now, forever, not just in a body of flesh, but in **a body of teaching**, given with intellectual force drawn from the full weight and power of infinite love, so that we can indeed be conjoined with Him (*not It, but Him*), and enjoy a life of inmost blessing and peace among others who will also strive for connection and conjunction with Him as our infinite, otherwise incomprehensible heavenly Father.

Remember, we don't worship order, light or energy; we don't worship some vague Force, or Providence, as in "Providence did this," or "Providence did that:" we worship the Lord, Jesus Christ, the God of all the universe revealing Himself in a natural Human form, ideal and perfect for that purpose.

Amen.

Lessons: *Isaiah* 61:1-3, 10-11

John 1:1-4, 14 and 14:6-9

True Christian Religion 787

The Third Lesson

“This New Church is the crown of all the churches that have hitherto existed on the earth, because it is to worship one visible God in whom is the invisible like the soul in the body. Thus, and not otherwise, is a conjunction of God with man possible, because man is natural, and therefore thinks naturally, and conjunction must exist in his thought, and thus in his love’s affection, and this is the case when he thinks of God as a Man (i.e., Human). Conjunction with an invisible God is like a conjunction of the eye’s vision with the expanse of the universe, the limits of which are invisible; it is also like vision in mid-ocean, which reaches out into the air and upon the sea, and is lost. Conjunction with a visible God, on the other hand, is like beholding a man in the air or on the sea spreading forth his hands and inviting to his arms. For all conjunction of God with man must be also a reciprocal conjunction of man with God; and no such reciprocation is possible except with a visible God.” (TCR 787)