

Duncan Gilbert Smith

November 2, 1942 to November 25, 2011

A Memorial Address by the Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
Glenview New Church—November 29, 2011

In His Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus Christ used two powerful descriptors for people, which teach us how to be His followers. First He said, “You are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). “Salt of the earth” means different things to people, but most commonly it describes an earthy, genuine, admirable person who “adds flavor” as it were, to the human race. The Writings for the New Church describe this phrase symbolically to mean “the truth of the Church which longs for good,” or the person of the Church who knows some truth and steadfastly puts it into action—in his or her unique way (*Arcana Coelestia* 9207).

Next comes the description, “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Again, there is an unmistakable symbol for the truth—light, especially from the mouth of the Lord, or from the Word of the Lord, which instructs us on the reality of things from a spiritual perspective. Then comes the directive, “Let your light so shine before men that they see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

These two phrases—two descriptors of desired human qualities—can serve as catalyst for all of us, in terms of life questions we really should be asking ourselves. What is my particular brand of humanity that “adds flavor” to the world, or to the Lord’s kingdom? What more should I be *learning* from the Lord’s Word? What am I supposed to be *doing* with the truth things I know and have been taught? “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.”

The man that we honor here today, Duncan Gilbert Smith, was a “salt of the earth” kind of guy. And all of us know that he took to heart the Lord’s call to be “the light of the world.” Thinking first of the phrase, “salt of the earth” it just fits with the Duncan Smith that we know. We note his approach to others, and his apparent view of himself. No one is above anyone else. Status isn’t important. We’re all in this together. Everyone matters. We know him to be a doer, a man of action, who didn’t wait on the sidelines for others to step in. Some describe him simply as a “force” to be reckoned with—a strong-willed man with a black and white, right and wrong view of the world. Others might be more inclined to use the words convinced of or determined in his point of view, even stubborn. Pragmatic is another word used to describe Duncan, speaking of his function-over-form, epoxy and duct tape, jury-rigged approach. Deeply spiritual is certainly an appropriate designation for this man, who read from the Holy Scriptures—the Old and New Testaments, as well as the Writings given for the New Church—every day of his life. So is the role of “provider” and “care-taker” and “champion of the underdog” that some have used to describe him. Then there is his generosity, his lack of concern for worldly possessions in comparison with the spiritual uses to be served, and his open door policy. Finally there is the integrity with which he lived his life.

There are few of us who are so defined in terms of our character that our very name describes our personality. But consider what powerful images come to mind when you hear the designation “Duncanism” or “Duncanesque”—most of you know what that means, which is telling in itself. As one of his friends put it, “There certainly will never be another Duncan Smith.”

From the vantage point of these personal qualities, let’s look at some of the strands of Duncan’s life—some of the ways he strived to let his light shine. Today I’d like to focus on four areas: marriage, family, good works, and the Church.

Marriage. Anyone who knows Duncan knows how important marriage is to him. How many of us, over the past twenty years, have heard him talk about Sylvia in loving ways, and

expressing his strong belief that they are still married, and that he will rejoin her when his time comes to cross over? I'm told it all began here in Glenview, or shortly before both of them came this way on their separate paths. Sylvia came to Glenview first, to take a teaching position here at the Glenview New Church School, then called the Immanuel Church School. The courtship began, apparently, when Duncan came this way to work at the Synnestvedt Tree Company. He made it to about an hour from here, and needed a ride. She went to fetch him, and on the drive back, their mutual interest in each other started in earnest. Duncan, I'm told, made a habit of stopping by the first grade classroom after hours to flirt. In his typical get-it-done fashion, he asked her to marry him before she was ready, and twice she said "not yet." But persistence is one of Duncan's qualities, and the third time, he was successful in winning her consent.

They were married in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, Sylvia's hometown, on January 3, 1969. Together they cooperated with the Lord to bring ten children into this world, and have built a life together that remains an inspiration to many—a relationship with echoes of that ideal state of marriage called in the New Church "love truly conjugal."

We know that this core relationship of Duncan's life was interrupted well before he, or any of their children, wanted. Sylvia's life in this world was cut short by breast cancer in 1991, leaving this family of eleven to manage as best they could without her powerful feminine presence in the home—at least not in bodily form.

While many would almost expect a man like Duncan to remarry, given his situation, he chose not to. It just wasn't an option for him. On the contrary, after an understandable time of grieving, he set to the work that he believed was before him—work that brought him into contact with many people within and outside the Church, with whom he could talk about his marriage, and his conviction that he and his bride would one day be reunited.

In this regard I share a few perspectives from family and friends. Göran Applegren, a minister of the New Church who worked with Duncan in the Ukraine, wrote, "Especially touching was his way of lifting conjugal love to a level I think no one had ever seen before. The way he talked about his wife Sylvia was simply unheard of in that part of the world, thinking of a real spiritual world, thinking of getting together again one day - now." Then there was Kara Smith who shared a memory of when she and Brannon went to tell Duncan that they were going to get married. He sat them down for a forty-five minute lecture on the importance of marriage, and then congratulated them. Andrea Cranch spoke of him as a walking example of the eternal perspective of marriage, and Brad, her husband commented on Sunday, the day we believe he became fully conscious in the next life, that he would already be visiting with Sylvia, busy catching her up on the lives of her children, and "having a great time" together after all their years of separation. There is a passage in *Divine Providence* that says, "Who does not believe [who has any religion,] that after death he will see his wife, whom he has loved?" (*Divine Providence* 274). Then there is the one we heard earlier in the service, "The spirit of the deceased continues to dwell with the spirit of the one not yet deceased, and this until the death of the other, at which time they come together again and are reunited, loving each other even more tenderly than before, because they are in the spiritual world" (*Conjugal Love* 321).

Family. To say that Duncan was a family man is an understatement. He did, after all, have ten children with Sylvia. The family talks with affection of the "growing up" years. There are countless stories of childhood shenanigans, trips to the grocery store where two carts were needed—one just for the nine gallons of milk, "fifty-mile hikes" with Dad (or so it seemed) from the Grove back home, and family camping trips to such places as Cook's Forest. There are even more memories that the kids share of family worship, of church on Sunday, of Dad the disciplinarian, of the family cars, which turned into vans, and then into a bus, and somehow got them from point A to B—most of the time,

of the whistle-call that lives in many of our memories by means of which Duncan called his kids home from wherever they might be in the Park, of Sunday dinners with the nice place settings, a roast in the oven, and almost always some guests from Church, of the many people who streamed in and out of “the home in which all were welcome”—the home that was never locked, of the ebbs and flows of their “whatever was on sale” diet, of the morning “Mom and Dad” time as they read from the Word and got started on their day together, and on and on. Yes, several of them will talk openly about the struggles they had with their Dad’s forceful style, but they also speak of him with love and admiration. Brannon described his Dad as a provider—doing what it took to put food on the table, and using his modest financial means to pay for his children’s New Church education—all ten of them—through first year college. Wade spoke of his Dad’s resourcefulness, referring to his multifaceted career as a farmer, nursery man, newspaper deliverer, and then entrepreneur, and also his Duncan way of making machines work with whatever was handy—liquid nails, soldering irons, you name it. Derek spoke about his incredible work ethic. Kevin described him as one of the most responsible men he has ever known. It is a testament to their own love for family that all of them are here today to honor their father’s passing and new lease on life.

Good works. Another facet of Duncan’s life that was dominant in the reflections of his family and close friends was the care-taker in him, and the many good works that he did. In this regard we can bring forward the Lord’s call to “let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works,” so long as we remember that it wasn’t about being seen, but rather about doing the right thing, and giving the glory to God. The care-taker role for Duncan came out in the ways he worked with people like Paul Healy, and Martin Rodriguez—people who at one time desperately needed someone to take an interest in them and show them a productive path in life. Then there was the way he cared for his wife as she was dying. One form of that was the video feed he provided from the Church, so she could participate in worship on Sundays. This was obviously before the Internet, and therefore consisted of an actual cable strung from the Church across the street, all done in typical Duncan “doesn’t matter what it looks like, so long as it works” fashion. After Sylvia died, he offered this same service to anyone who could use it.

There were others that he helped, like Kathy Hugo, for whom he build a ramp and provided an electric wheel chair when she became crippled. His interest in the Immanuel Church Boys Club is another example of his good works. Of course there is the now traditional “Tuesday night dinner” over at the Smith household, which intentionally brought together many people from all walks of life. One person wrote in of “a young person from the broader Glenview community [who] ran into someone from the Glenview New Church and made some comment of what amazing, kind people were part of that congregation.” As the story goes, “when asked why he had that impression, he cited an example of running out of gas on a nearby major road (Lake Avenue) and this man (obviously Duncan) stopped in a yellow pickup truck with red lettering, found out what was needed and brought a gas can to solve the man’s problems.” In typical Duncan style he appeared to have made sure the person knew which church he belonged to.

All these, and so many other episodes, describe a human being who, as the saying goes, “saw a need and filled the need.” It was his way.

The Church. A reflection on the life of Duncan Smith would surely be incomplete without mention of his exemplary devotion to the New Church. Not only is he one of the most devout New Churchmen that many of us know, he has put the rest of us to shame with his commitment to spread the Church to as many people in as many parts of the world as possible. How many of us would sell our house to be able to spend the money on church-related projects? How many of us would forego many of the pleasantries of life, choosing instead to live on the basics, so that as many as possible others could have the basics?

We know of his earlier attempts at evangelism, including his sign project on the Edens Expressway, urging millions of drivers to “Read Swedenborg.” We’ve heard of his trips to the Ukraine, his sponsorship of translations of the Writings into Russian, and the establishment of a Swedenborg Center in that part of the world. Many of us can recall the boxes and boxes of books and computer equipment that he shipped to Ghana. We’ve seen slide shows of buildings going up in that country, and then in Kenya. Since he talked about it to anyone who would listen, we’ve heard his descriptions of the spiritual openness of the people in these countries, of the great need for the Church there, and the ways in which New Church worship and New Church education is being given a start.

After the service, we’ll have the opportunity to hear from some of the people he worked with in these places, who express much better than I can, their incredible gratitude for his devotion. For now we can reflect on three things in this regard. First, it is notable that Duncan received a “Glencairn Award” for some of these projects—a significant financial award that used to be given to people who have served the Church in many ways for many years. In typical Duncan style, all of it is now in bricks and mortar, in land, and invested in the salaries of some of the people doing the work that he was instrumental in setting in motion. Secondly, we note that he saw needs still unmet, and established a Uses Worldwide network to provide for these needs—while he was still here, and in such a way as would outlive him. Finally, I’ll share a personal story of the last time I saw Duncan, in the hospital shortly after the heart surgery which ended up, apparently, shortening, rather than lengthening his life on earth. We were in conversation about what else? Kenya. He had chosen to go through surgery because he wanted to finish up some projects there. In walks the doctor, who had obviously heard from him about the New Church faith. “Hey Pete,” he says, “give me the book in my bag there.” Out comes *New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine*, which he gives to the doctor, with specific instructions to read the section on Resurrection, which would describe to her why he wasn’t afraid to die, and why he believed so firmly that his wife was waiting for him on the other side. “Second coming” was mentioned, and I’m sure if he was able, an invitation to worship and dinner at his house would have followed.

The next chapter. As we draw to a close then, we reflect on what all of this information about Duncan Smith tells us about his life right now. We can take cues from this devout man, who was so thoroughly convinced of the reality of the life to come, that he is indeed there right now, doing the many things he told us he was looking forward to doing. It is easy to imagine him with his wife, exploring the world which he learned so much about in this life. We can rejoice in reunions with family members and friends who have gone before him. We can picture him in a body that is no longer crippled, with energy to do the many things his heart and his mind yearn to do. Perhaps he will be gentled in some ways by the more immediate presence of his wife. Certainly there will be many a doctrinal conversation, with people eager and willing to share on his level what they know from the Lord’s Word. Whatever his specific path, we can rest assured that the big man with a big heart for helping people, particularly with the truths that the Lord has given, will continue to be a force for good in the Lord’s kingdom.

Today we honor this man for the ways in which he has set the bar incredibly high for all of us in terms of his obvious devotion to marriage, family, doing good works, and championing the cause of the New Church. We acknowledge the unique human being he is, and note the good things he stood for, with all of his being. We pray that his continuing journey together with his wife will be filled with love, with devotion to the Lord, with personal spiritual growth, and with the sense of usefulness together with others that he worked so hard for in this world. We say thank you to him for the “salt of the earth” man that he is, who “let [his] light shine” in amazing ways. We see his many good works, and we give glory to our Father in heaven. **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word **Including teachings from the Writings for the New Church**

- ⁹ O God, behold our shield,
And look upon the face of Your anointed.
- ¹⁰ For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.
- ¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
The LORD will give grace and glory;
No good thing will He withhold
From those who walk uprightly.
- ¹² O LORD of hosts,
Blessed is the man who trusts in You! (Psalm 84)

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16)

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

If people have loved learning and have developed their rational ability accordingly and thereby gained intelligence, and if they have acknowledged the Divine Being at the same time, their delight in knowledge and pleasure in reasoning changes in the other life into a spiritual pleasure that is the delight of firsthand knowledge of what is good and true. They live in gardens where you can see flower beds and lawns beautifully marked off, surrounded by rows of trees with arcades and promenades. The trees and flowers change from day to day. Looking at all this brings pleasure to their minds generally, and the specific changes make it constantly new. Further, since all this corresponds to divine qualities, and since these people are drawn to their knowledge of correspondences, they are constantly being filled with new insights and thereby having their spiritual rational faculty perfected. They enjoy these pleasures because gardens, flower beds, lawns, and trees correspond to information, insights, and the intelligence that ensues. (*Heaven and Hell* 489)

On an even higher level, the neighbor we are to love is the Church, and on the highest level, our neighbor is the Lord's Kingdom. We are born for eternal life and are introduced into it by the Church. Therefore we are to love the Church as our neighbor on an even higher level [than we love our country]. The Church teaches us the means that lead to eternal life and introduces us into that life. It leads us to eternal life by means of the true things in its body of teaching. It introduces us to that life through good ways to live. We are to love the Church as our neighbor on a higher level, even beyond our country, because our country initiates us into civic life, but the Church initiates us into spiritual life. Spiritual life is what sets us apart from a merely animal life. What is more, our civic life is temporary. It comes to an end. Once it is over, it is the same as if it had not existed. Our spiritual life, on the other hand, is eternal, because it has no end. Spiritual life has a quality of reality

therefore that civic life does not have. The difference between them is like the difference between what is finite and what is infinite—there is no ratio between them. (*True Christian Religion* 415)

Those who have lived in love truly conjugal... have been united in respect to their souls and so in respect to their minds; and this union, being a spiritual one, is an actual coupling of the soul and mind of one to the soul and mind of the other, which cannot in any way be dissolved.... Married partners so united think of and yearn for eternity in their marriage, and eternal happiness for them is founded on that idea...., (so) they are no longer two but one person, that is, one flesh. Such a oneness cannot be sundered by the death of the other partner. The spirit of the deceased continues to dwell with the spirit of the one not yet deceased, and this until the death of the other, at which time they come together again and are reunited, loving each other even more tenderly than before, because they are in the spiritual world. (*Conjugal Love* 321)

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.” (Matthew 7:23-27)

The kingdom of Christ, namely, heaven, is a kingdom of useful services. The reason is that the Lord loves all people and so wills good to all, and good means useful service. Now because the Lord performs good or useful services indirectly through angels, and in the world through people, therefore to those who faithfully perform useful services He gives a love of being useful and its reward. The reward is internal blessedness, and this blessedness is eternal happiness. (*Conjugal Love* 7)

[An] angel’s conversation with one who had a faith that was united to charity went like this:

“Friend..., what is your doctrinal point of view and your religion?”

“Faith and charity.”

“Those are two things.”

“They can’t be separated.”

“What is faith?”

“Believing what the Word teaches.”

“What is charity?”

“Doing what the Word teaches.”

“Do you only believe that, or do you also practice it?”

“I also practice it.”

The angel from heaven then looked at him and said, “My friend, come with me and live with us.” (*True Christian Religion* 391)