
NEW BEGINNINGS

Stretch out your hand!

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A New Year has begun. Have you made a New Year's resolution? Have you decided what part of life you are going to attempt to start over or attempt to change? The New Year is a time when we reflect on the past year. We sum up all the things that went right and pause for a moment on the sadness and troubles that we had to endure.

We might decide that something has to change; a new job, a new car, more friends, healthier eating plan or start exercising. These are all changes that we want to make either to our physical health or to the environment around us. We have our reasons for wanting to make these changes. The job is boring and I'm tired of working with those annoying people, the job has to go. Or this year I'm going to succeed at growing my relationships with people and finding more friends this will improve my social life and living will become more fun. I'm going to stick to a healthy eating plan this year and start exercising five times a week because it's important to feel physically good.

These are all good things to want to improve on and to change. But how more lasting and fulfilling a spiritual change would be? As we journey into the New Year wouldn't a resolution, a commitment to spiritual change also be in order? When we talk about a New Year's resolution we are talking about changing and start anew. How blessed are we in the New Church that we have been given the ultimate guide to a new beginning, to a fresh start, not just for the start of a year but a rebirth and renewal of life.

We are blessed with knowing the process of regeneration as described in the teachings for the New Church. We are able to begin a new life, a spiritual life, the rebirth that the Lord spoke about to His disciples and followers, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Every story given to us in the Lord's Word has some input into how rebirth works in our lives.

Our story today tells us about the new beginning of Noah. Once the waters had settled he sent out the dove to look for new life. Then how he was able to break through and remove the covering of the ark and experience the new world in which he found himself. The journey that Noah had to endure to get to this new beginning was not an easy one.

We can picture Noah in the ark. It has no glass windows to let in any light, so it's dark and damp. He is trapped. There is no way out and no were to go. We can only imagine how a ship in a gigantic storm is at the mercy of the thundering waves, being lifted up and thrust back down.

The image of Noah in the dark ark, trapped and helpless is an image of how our lives feel dark and restrictive before we realise that we need the Lord. It is an image of our first state. It's a state that we get from our parents by heredity.

Each of us is born with a predilection to love ourselves and the world, and subject to all kinds of evil that have these forms of love as their wellspring. It is the pleasures of these loves that guide us; and they render us unaware of our involvement in evils. (Divine Providence 83)

In this state we are at the mercy of our feelings and emotions. We are not lead by rational thinking but by what feels good. When we feel good, we are up, we're happy and life is great but soon we are lead by our feelings into unhappiness and anger. We have no anchor for our ark, no rudder to steer our lives. We are at the mercy of false thinking and selfish loves that lift us up and throw us down. We are spiritually in a dark place, and spiritual trapped, totally unaware of our involvement in evil.

This is how we feel before the Lord restores our life to order. We have to come to the acknowledgement that the Lord is our anchor point. That He gives real purpose to our lives and He fills our core and makes us feel whole. We also have to know what the Lord wants for our life, like a rudder which guides a ship.

When we have purpose and direction from the Lord we are able to open a small window and let a small amount of heat and light into our ark. We are a step closer to being free from the darkness and bondage in our lives.

Before Noah could be released from the ark there were step that he had to take to see if new life was beginning to grow. Part of those steps was to stretch out his hand and to release a dove. He had to release the dove three times before he was sure it was safe to leave the ark. The three releases of the dove represent the three stages that we all experience on the path to spiritual change and the freedom from bondage. There are no short cuts in spiritual change. We all start off in the same state and all progress through the different state to spiritual renewal.

I want to read the three abbreviated accounts of the release of the dove and note the words and images used.

“[Noah] also sent out from himself a dove...and she returned into the ark with him....So he put out his hand and took her, and drew her into the ark to himself”
(Genesis 8:8, 9)

“And again he sent the dove out from the ark. Then the dove returned in the evening, and behold, a freshly plucked olive leaf was in her mouth.”
(Genesis 8:10, 11)

“And [he] sent out the dove, which did not return again to him anymore”
(Genesis 8:12)

The three releases of the dove are showing us the process that we go through to become truly loving and truly charitable.

The first time Noah “stretches out his hand,” is a statement to the first efforts that we go through in trying to do what is good and loving. The dove represents our intellectual understanding of what truth is. And what does truth teach but that we should love others outside of ourselves. So we stretch out our hand to others. But note, when Noah first

stretches out his hand and releases the dove the words “from himself” are used and again when the dove first comes back, he “draws her into the ark to himself.” Our first efforts of loving and helping others are from selfish motives, “I am doing good to others,” “people will respect and admire what I’m doing.” We want to control and own the good works that we do, But the dove goes out, and come back and has not gained anything. From ourselves we cannot change ourselves. We cannot make ourselves happy to eternity. We cannot make ourselves good.

The first stretching out of the hand, the first efforts of putting what we know to be true into effect in our lives comes from mixed, selfish motives. But that is where we all start, in selfish tendencies. There are no short cuts. Every time we realise that we need a new start, that we need a rebirth in our life , we don’t automatically start with a clean slate, or in a better state, we have to start from where we are now. We have to start from the selfishness and work our way out of it. That is why change is hard work. We start in the condition we are now.

But there is hope. The second time Noah stretches out his hand and releases the dove, the dove returns with an olive leaf in her mouth. The more we look to the Lord for help and guidance to make changes in our lives, and as we practice doing what is good and loving towards others so we are given a small sense of hope. I would compare this first sense of hope to inner warmth that one feels after successfully helping others.

This spark of warmth that we feel is the leaf from the olive tree. An olive tree represents what is good and loving and a leaf the truth from what is good. The dove or our intellect, returning with the olive leaf can be compared to understanding what is true not from facts that have been learned but understanding what is true because we have experienced it. We have tried loving someone and we have experienced the warmth of love. This is the dove returning with an olive leaf, the first warmth of true live, the hope that keeps us working towards changes.

No change can be effected without the Lord changing us on an internal level as we are trying to effect physical changes to habits and attitudes on an outward level.

With the Lord’s help we will be able to stretch out our hand, as Noah did for the third time, and the dove won’t come back. The Lord is able to effect a change in us where we are able to love, and give to others with no selfish intent, no thought of anything returning to us. We will give from a love for giving. We will love from a deep love for others; we help for the benefit of others. We will perform our duties at home or at work honestly, justly and to the best of our abilities because we love our neighbour and see the part we play in the “whole.”

When we are able to share our life with others by simply sharing our love through thoughtfulness in words and in actions, we break through the covering of the ark. We break from a life of being at the mercy of engulfing storms and crashing waves, which take us from heights of seeming happiness and joy into the depths of troubles and sadness. We then break through the roof of the ark into the light of a new day, a new state filled with the light and warmth of the morning sun which is the Lord’s life.

What is the first step that we can take in not only affecting the external physical changes but the higher spiritual changes for this New Year? First we need to remember

there are no short cuts, but then to stretch out our hand as Noah did. We have to stretch out our hand in practicing doing what is right according to our intellectual understanding, even if we don't love it yet, even if there is a part of us that does want a reward, or is looking for recognition from others.

Any change is hard work and that includes spiritual changes. But spiritual change is like breaking through the roof of the ark, bringing with it freedom from the bondages of our selfish lives and the pleasures and delights of living in the light and heat from the Lord.

So make this New Year's resolution a spiritual resolution of change. Stretch out a hand to your neighbour, to a loved one, to a stranger and give of the Lord's life and love to others.

“And Noah sent out the dove, which did not return again anymore.” (Genesis 8:12)

Amen

Lessons: Genesis 8:1-19, Luke 18:9-14, AC 874, DP 83.

This describes the first state following temptation in the regeneration of the people of the Church, a state common to all who are being regenerated. It is a state when people imagine that they themselves are the source of the good they do and of the truth they think. And because they are still in the greatest obscurity, the Lord lets them cling to that opinion. But as long as they cling to that opinion which is false, no good deed they do nor any truth they think is the good or truth of faith. For whatever a person carries out from himself cannot be good since it has come from self, an impure and most unclean origin. From that impure and most unclean origin no good can possibly emerge, for the individual is thinking all the time about his own merit and righteousness. Some go even further, and look down on everybody else, as the Lord teaches in Luke 18:9-14. And others' attitudes are different again. People's selfish desires intermingle in such a way that the outside may look good while the inside is filthy. The good therefore that a person does in this state is not the good of faith. And the same applies to the truth he thinks. What he thinks may be the perfect truth; but as long as it is from what is his Own, though it is in itself the truth of faith, he does not have the good of faith within him. To be the truth of faith all truth must include from the Lord the good of faith. Only then do they become good and truth. (Arcana Caelestia 874)

The reason no one can enter heaven without being born again is that we are involved in all kinds of evil through what we inherit from our parents; we also inherit an ability to become spiritual by the removal of those evils. Unless we do become spiritual, we cannot enter heaven; and changing from being earthly to being spiritual is being reborn or regenerated. [2] Our first state, the state of damnation, is the one we get from our parents by heredity. Each of us is born with a predilection to love ourselves and the world, and subject to all kinds of evil that have these forms of love as their wellspring. It is the pleasures of these loves that guide us; and they render us unaware of our involvement in evils. [3] If we justify these loves within ourselves and the evils that spring from them because of the pleasure they give us, then we remain bound by the material world and become imprisoned in our physical senses. In our own thinking, the thinking of our spirits, we are insane. [4] Our second state, the state of reformation, starts when we begin to think about heaven in terms of its joy and therefore to think about God as the one who gives us heavenly joy. At first our thinking is prompted by the pleasure we find in self-love, and heavenly joy is that kind of pleasure for us. As long as the pleasure from that love and the pleasure we find in the evils that arise from it are in control, though, ...all we know is that salvation comes by thinking about what our religion teaches us, whether that is what we call faith or whether it is what we call faith and charity. The reason we are totally convinced that thinking about these things saves us is that we are not thinking about the evils that give us pleasure, and as long as these pleasures are with us, so are the evils themselves. [5] As long as these evils stay in the compulsions of our love and their pleasures, the only faith or charity or devotion or worship we have is on the surface. [6] Our third state...begins when we stop doing wrong things because they are sins, advances as we abstain from them, and becomes complete as we fight against them. Then, as we overcome in the Lord's strength, we are regenerated. (Divine Providence 83 – New Century Edition)