

“The Ball Is In Your Court”

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One of the things that has always struck me about the teachings of the New Church is the significant role the Lord gives us in charting our own destiny. Not only is this true in the big picture of our lives, namely whether we choose to live in heaven or in hell, it is also true of so many facets of the life we live along the way. We are called to obey the Lord’s teachings, to repent of certain things, to be life-long students of the Lord’s Word, to believe in the Lord and trust in His providence, to seek enlightenment, to pray, to engage in worship, to be useful, to care for one another, and to figure things out for ourselves. It’s true that the Lord’s part will always be larger than our own, and that we are called to acknowledge that we don’t do anything good without His help, but there is no doubt that He has set up the system in such a way that requires our engagement.

There are three phrases that I’ve discovered which now serve as a consistent reminder of this theme of “doing my part.” One came in the context of marriage, one arose out of a mental exercise I was asked to engage in, and the third came out of my pastoral work.

“I choose to love you.” Taking marriage first, I don’t pretend to have all the answers about how to make a marriage work, or how best to prepare for marriage, but I do know some of the things the Lord teaches on the subject. One such teaching that I’ve come to believe is pretty central to a long and lasting marriage is the following: “Consent is the essential element in marriage” (*Conjugal Love* 21).

Not surprisingly, the context for this teaching is a marriage ceremony before a priest. The heart of a wedding ceremony is the couple’s consent to be married. The priest says, “Will you, in the presence of the Lord, pledge your love and promise faithfulness...?” “Will you now be united together in marriage as husband and wife according to the laws of Divine order?” “Will you have this woman for your wife...?” “Will you have this man for your husband...?” The answer in each case: “I will.” I want to do this. I choose this path. It’s all “consent.”

The beauty is, consent doesn’t end with the wedding ceremony. The message is about marriage in general. One of the best pieces of advice I ever received relating to marriage is that it is a daily choice; every day I can wake up and say, “I choose to love you.” Every day I have the opportunity, and responsibility, to act in loving ways toward my wife. Every day I also have the ability to choose the Lord’s path with regard to marriage. I can choose to be useful. I can choose to learn more about what He has to say about marriage. I can choose to turn to His Word for counsel on some of the issues that arise. I can choose to work on changing one of my behaviors that is compromising the quality of my marriage. I can choose to listen, to respect, to apologize when necessary, and so forth. Not only that, but consent implies that I *want* these things: I want this relationship to succeed. I want this person in my life. I want to make her day better, and to see if I can help some of her dreams come true. Again, it’s all about consent, leading me to see that it really is the essential element of marriage. I have a major part to play in its success.

“Figure things out and find direction.” The second phrase that captures the concept of “doing my part” came from an unexpected source. In a recent graduate school program, I was

challenged by a professor to define a “position statement” for myself, in a marketing sense (you may be allergic to business speak, but don’t puke; it was a useful exercise). For me, this exercise was an opportunity to take another look at the big life-question, “What am I here for?” The phrase I eventually settled on is, “I’m here to help people figure things out and find direction.” It doesn’t just relate to my chosen profession, although I think it’s one way of describing the value of the New Church. It is something I can strive to do for the people in my family, for my friends, in my volunteer work, and so on.

Moving away from a personal mission statement, there are several teachings that lead to the conclusion that we are to figure things out for ourselves. There’s a famous teaching in *Divine Providence* about “prudence”, saying that if we “did not manage all the concerns of our function and life as though by our own prudence” we would be “like someone standing with hands hanging limp, mouth open, and eyes closed, holding his breath and awaiting influx” (*Divine Providence* 210). There’s another teaching in the same book about the fact that we’re not allowed to know the future. “If we did,” it says, “we would no longer think about what we should do or how we should live in order to reach some particular goal” and would strip ourselves of the very freedom and rationality that make us human (*Divine Providence* 179). The Lord calls us to use our minds to engage with our experience of life. I love how succinctly it’s stated in the book of Isaiah: “‘Come now and let us reason together,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 1:18).

“Be a blessing.” The third way in which the concept of charting our own destiny has hit home for me is in the discovery of a three-word directive from the Lord. So often, you can read the same text in the Word and miss something that jumps out at you the next time you read it. That happened to me when I read in Genesis about the call of Abram. God said to him, “I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). The phrase that “popped” for me is “...be a blessing.” What started to meld in my brain around that phrase were all the teachings about being useful—that we are created to use our gifts and talents to make the lives of other people better (*True Christian Religion* 406); about the ways the Lord has created us—with hearts that can love, brains that can figure things out, and bodies that can do many useful things; about the call to love our neighbors as ourselves (the second Great Commandment, Matthew 22:39), or to love one another as the Lord loves us (the “new commandment,” John 13:34); about the energy of angels to share all their blessings with others (*Heaven and Hell* 399); and about the essence of love, namely “loving others who are outside oneself, wanting to be one with them, and blessing them from oneself” (*True Christian Religion* 43).

“Be a blessing!” It’s such a powerful directive. Again, it’s something I can hear as a calling in the big picture of life, and it’s also something I can choose to do every single day. I can wake up and ask myself, in what ways am I called to be a blessing today? I can engage in any situation I find myself and strive to make a positive difference. I can consider the most important people in my life and ask myself how I can brighten their day. I can regard the organizations that I associate with in the same way. There truly is no end to the ramifications of this simple, very memorable teaching.

They say things come in threes, and that’s one final reflection I would offer. “I choose to love you” is largely a “heart” issue. “Figuring things out and finding direction” is largely a brain or intellect issue. “Being a blessing” are words to live by, with the emphasis on doing. Hearts,

minds, and actions really define who we are as human beings. Or we could call it love, wisdom, and use. Either way, these three things demonstrate that the Lord has created us to be extremely capable people. He also gives us the responsibility to use these incredible gifts for their intended purposes, namely to cooperate with Him as He leads us to serve others.