

Christmas Readings 2008



From the Old Testament, the New Testament, and
the Writings for the New Church

Trust, Confidence, and Strength in the Lord

An Introduction

This year's Christmas readings are gathered around the theme of trust, confidence, and strength in the Lord. This theme appears in the book of Psalms where we read, "Blessed is the one whose strength is in You.... They go from strength to strength." (Psalm 84:5-6)

The qualities of trust, confidence, and strength in the Lord are evident throughout the Christmas story. We see them, for example, in Zacharias and Elizabeth, who were righteous before God, and who walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. We see them in Mary's response to Gabriel when she said, "Let it be to me according to your word;" also in Joseph who was a just man, who did as the angel commanded him, and who took Mary to be his wife. We see them in the shepherds, who went to see the great wonder that had come to pass. We see them in the man Simeon, who waited patiently for the Consolation of Israel, and in Anna the prophetess, who served God with fastings and prayers, and who also spoke of the Lord to all in Jerusalem who sought redemption. And finally, we see these qualities in the wise men, who followed a star with determination, who fell down and worshipped the infant Lord, and who followed divine guidance—refusing to return to evil king Herod and departing for their own country another way.

Each daily reading features either a prophecy of the Lord's birth or a part of the Christmas story, followed by readings from the Writings for the New Church. Each doctrinal piece talks about some aspect of trust, confidence, or strength in the Lord that is reflected in the Scriptural account. Italics have been used in certain places to highlight parts of the Scripture and to help link them to the doctrinal points.

At the end of each reading there is a reflection that is offered, along with a question or a simple task. The purpose of these things is to help tie the readings together and to connect them to daily life.

We hope you will enjoy these Christmas readings, and that they will touch your heart with peace and assurance at this special time of the year.

This pamphlet was prepared by the Rev. Peter Buss, Pastor of the Glenview New Church and the Glenview New Church staff. Special thanks to Coleman Glenn, candidate for the priesthood of the New Church, for his extensive research and for other help on this project.

Merry Christmas from the staff of the Bryn Athyn Church.

“New Light Shining” December 1

*The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them a light has shined.* (Isaiah 9:2)

The words of Scripture, “and God remembered” means the end of spiritual conflict and the start of renewal. In particular it means His being merciful. His remembering is mercy, and this is attributed to Him especially when spiritual conflict is past, because at that time *new light is shining*. As long as spiritual conflict lasts, a person assumes that the Lord is not present, for he or she is being harassed by evil genii, so harassed in fact that sometimes he has so great a feeling of hopelessness as scarcely to believe in the existence of any God at all. Yet at such times the Lord is more present than that person can possibly believe. But once the conflict subsides he receives comfort, and for the first time he believes that the Lord is present. Consequently, because He appears to do so, “God’s remembering” means the end of spiritual conflict and the start of renewal.

(Arcana Caelestia 840)

As part of the process of waking up in heaven after death, *a kind of light appears*, though dim, similar to the light which someone sees through the eyelids when first waking up. And he or she is experiencing a state of calm, for the celestial angels who are present with him or her at that time are protecting him. At the same time a kind of twilight descends, the color of the sky when one small star is showing. [Note: This teaching is talking about physical death and resurrection, but perhaps there may be a similar, spiritual experience that we have any time there is a letting go, giving up, or “dying unto ourselves” that we do in the process of regeneration.] (Arcana Caelestia 184)

Reflection: The words of Isaiah, above, brought hope to people prior to the Lord’s birth on earth. The “great light” that would shine is a renewed sight of the Lord’s love and wisdom after a time of darkness. These words can bring hope to us as well in times of spiritual darkness and conflict. A new light can dawn in our minds - the start of spiritual renewal - and in the end the Lord can be born in our hearts as a spirit of charity. What is one way that you can seek spiritual renewal this Christmas?

The Lord's Infinite Power

December 2

*...Unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
Of the increase of His government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.* (Isaiah 9:6-7)

The words of Scripture, "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder" are said of the Lord, and of His power and might. (Arcana Caelestia 1085:4)

The case with the new life in a person who is being regenerated is this: at first he or she is in a state of tranquility; but as he passes into a new life, he also passes at the same time into an untranquil state; for the evils and falsities with which had before become imbued emerge and come forth and disturb him or her, and this at last to such a degree that he is in spiritual conflicts and vexations inflicted by the diabolical crew, who are continually striving to destroy the state of his new life. Yet inmosty the person is in a state of peace, for unless this were with him inmosty, he would not combat, for in his battlings he is continually looking to this state as the end. (Arcana Caelestia 3696:2)

The words of Scripture, "placing onto the shoulders and carrying on them" means preserving forever in a state of good and truth through all exertion and power. (Arcana Caelestia 9836:6)

The words of Scripture, "the zeal of Jehovah will perform this," means that the Lord will do it from the ardent love of saving the human race. The Lord's zeal looks to the salvation of humankind. (Arcana Caelestia 8875:4, Apocalypse Explained 693:2)

Reflection: The words of Isaiah, above, are a powerful promise of what the Lord can accomplish in our lives, and of what He is working to accomplish in us even now. The images of the "government upon His shoulder" and the "zeal of the Lord of hosts" remind us of the Lord's infinite power. What thoughts come to your mind when you hear the words, "Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." How could you make room in your mind for reflections on the Lord's infinite power? What do you think it would do for you if you let that truth sink deeply into your consciousness?

Hope and an Affirmative Outlook December 3

Arise, shine;
For your light has come!
And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you.
For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth,
And deep darkness the people;
*But the LORD will arise over you,
And His glory will be seen upon you.*
The Gentiles shall come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60:1-3)

It is said in the Scriptures that two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and that Lot urged the them strongly to turn aside into his house and to spend the night. Lot's urging them strongly signifies a state of spiritual conflict when a person overcomes. Spiritual conflicts involve feelings of doubt regarding the Lord's presence and mercy, and also regarding His salvation. The evil spirits who are present with a person at such times and who are the cause of conflict do all they can to infuse a negative outlook; but good spirits and angels from the Lord in every way disperse that doubting attitude, all the time preserving a feeling of hope and in the end strengthening an affirmative outlook. Consequently a person undergoing spiritual conflict hangs between a negative outlook and an affirmative outlook. Anyone who gives way in spiritual conflict remains in a doubting, and sinks into a negative, frame of mind, whereas one who overcomes still experiences feelings of doubt; yet he who allows himself to be filled with hope remains steadfastly in an affirmative outlook. Because a person seems during such conflict to urge the Lord, especially through prayers, to be at hand, to take pity, to bring help, and to free from condemnation, this is described at this point where the spiritual conflict of those who are becoming members of the Church is the subject. It is described by the angels first of all saying, No, they would spend the night in the street, but by Lot urging them strongly, so that they turned aside to him and came into his house. (Arcana Caelestia 2338)

Reflection: As with earlier readings, the above words of Isaiah are words of hope that speak to each one of us here and now. No matter what states of mind we may be experiencing this Christmas season, hope can always be stronger than doubt. In times of doubt, however, we may need to urge the Lord and His angels to come into our minds, before we can see things in a better light, and before we can feel a renewed sense of hope. What is one way that you can urge the Lord and His angels to come into your heart and mind this Christmas, and as you do, what is one hope that opens up for you?

“Do Not Be Afraid”

December 4

So it was, that while Zacharias was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. But the angel said to him, “*Do not be afraid, Zacharias...*” (Luke 1:8-11, 13)

There is a kind of fear within all worship which is holy fear. Holy fear is not so much the fear of hell and of damnation, as it is of doing or thinking anything against the Lord and against the neighbor, and thus anything against the good of love and the truth of faith.

(*Arcana Caelestia* 2826:13)

As regards the fear of the Divine, let the following be said: With those who are upright fear is an internal experience. It is fear for the sake of salvation, namely, lest they should perish as to their souls, and so lest they should do anything contrary to conscience, that is, contrary to the truth and good which are of conscience. Consequently, they have fear lest they should do anything contrary to what is just and fair, thus contrary to the neighbor. This is holy fear insofar as it is conjoined with the affection of charity, and still more as it is conjoined with love to the Lord. Fear then becomes like that of little children toward the parents whom they love. Such is the “fear of God” so frequently spoken of in the Word.

(*Arcana Caelestia* 7280)

Reflection: There are several parts of the Christmas story where an angel says, “Do not be afraid.” Holy fear – the fear of harming the Lord’s love – can leave us feeling weak. But it is at just those times that the Lord restores us with His strength, replacing our sense of our own weakness with a sense of His infinite might. Zacharias was a good, faithful, and dutiful man. He wouldn’t have wanted to do anything that might hurt the Lord or his fellow human being; he would have wanted just the opposite. Each one of us has a “Zacharias” within us. What is one way in which this part of you can influence your choices today?

The Power of the Lord's Teachings

December 5

...The angel of the Lord said to Zacharias, "...Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. *For He will be great in the sight of the Lord.... He will also go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*" (Luke 1:13, 15, 17)

It was said of John that "he should go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah," and that he was Elijah, because John, like Elijah, represented the Lord in relation to the Word, and thence signified the Word; and as Divine wisdom and Divine power are in the Word, these are meant by "the spirit and power of Elijah." (Apocalypse Explained 724:9)

The power of Divine truth is directed especially against falsities and evils, thus against the hells. The fight against these must be waged by means of truths from the sense of the letter of the Word. Moreover it is by means of the truths in a person that the Lord has the power to save him or her; for a person is reformed and regenerated and is at the same time taken out of hell and introduced into heaven by means of truths from the sense of the letter of the Word. (Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture 49)

The order of influx is as follows: As a person instructs his or her understanding, he prepares it for the reception of light and hence for wisdom from heaven. As a person does the goods of charity, he or she prepares the will for reception of the heat of heaven, or of love. Like one who cuts a diamond, he makes preparation for the splendor of light to be diffused from himself. (Additions to True Christianity, IV:1-3, part of Posthumous Theological Works, vol. 1)

Reflection: We know that John the Baptist represents the Lord's Word, and that the spirit and power that are contained in the Word are things that are directed toward our lives – to help remove obstacles to happiness and productivity, and to introduce us into regular experiences of heaven. What is one thing that you can do today to work in harmony with the Lord – to "cut the diamond" so to speak – so that "the splendor of light may be diffused from you" to others?

Confidence, Tranquility, Joy

December 6

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, "*Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!*"

(Luke 1:26-28)

The words of Scripture, "God blessed" means the Lord's presence and grace. This is clear from the meaning of "blessing." In the external sense of the Word "blessing" means being enriched with all earthly and bodily good. This is also how all people who keep to the external sense explain the Word. But in the internal sense "blessing" means being enriched with all spiritual and celestial good, a blessing which neither does nor can possibly exist unless it comes from the Lord. The Lord's presence and grace carry such blessing within them.

(Arcana Coelestia 981:1)

The varying states in the other life are according to the perception of good and truth with those who are there, thus according to their perception of the Lord's presence. According to this perception they have tranquility; for they who are in the perception of the Lord's presence are in the perception that each and all things which befall them tend to their good, and that evils do not reach them; hence they are in tranquility. Without such faith or confidence in the Lord no one can possibly come into the tranquility of peace, thus neither to the bliss in joy, because this bliss dwells into the tranquility of peace.

(Arcana Coelestia 5963)

Reflection: We know that Mary was troubled at the angel's saying, and that Gabriel told her not to be afraid. What could Mary have been afraid of? She could have been afraid for her future: What would happen to her after the angel's visit and after the Lord was born? Yet the sense that we get from the story is that Mary wasn't afraid for the future. Perhaps she felt the Lord's hand, and trusted His providence, in what was happening. Perhaps she was confident that things would turn out well. Things often turn out well in our lives too. What is one way that this has been true for you over the past year?

Peace About Things to Come

December 7

...The angel said to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. *Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God."*

(Luke 1:30-31, 34-35)

He or she who leads a good life and who believes that the Lord governs the universe, and that He alone is the source of everything good and true trusts solely in the Lord and has no anxious cares about all else; she or he is quite sure that all things work for her good, blessedness, and happiness for ever. (Arcana Caelestia 2892)

Those who trust in the Divine are not anxious, let alone worried, when they give thought to the morrow. They are content with their lot. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness, and that no matter what happens at any time to them, it contributes to that state. It should be recognized that Divine providence is overall, that is, it is present within the smallest details of all, and that people in the stream of providence are being carried along constantly towards happier things, whatever appearance the means may present. Those in the stream of providence are people who trust in the Divine and ascribe everything to Him. (Arcana Caelestia 8478:3-4)

Reflection: Today's reading picks up where yesterday's reading left off. Mary's question to the angel wasn't one of doubt. She simply wondered how such a thing could happen since she "did not know a man." The angel's answer signaled to her that everything would be alright, and that the conception would be a miraculous one. What is one thing you can remember happening in your life which at first may have troubled or confused you, or even invited fear, but which turned out well in the end? What thoughts or feelings do you have about this fact, and what conclusions do you come to based on it?

“With God, Nothing Will Be Impossible”

December 8

...The angel answered and said to Mary, “Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. *For with God nothing will be impossible.*” (Luke 1:35-37)

There are several reasons why faith in the Lord healed people in the New Testament; first, because they acknowledged the Lord’s Divine power, and that He was God; and secondly, because faith is acknowledgment, and acknowledgment brings a sense of the Lord’s presence. So, whenever a new church was to be established by the Lord, it was this acknowledgment of the Lord’s Divine power from which people were first to look to the Lord.

(Apocalypse Explained 815:5)

Jesus answered and said to them, “Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his or her heart, but believes that those things He says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says.” (Mark 11:22-24)

With God all things are possible. (Matthew 19:26)

Reflection: The fact that Elizabeth (who was barren) would conceive a son in old age would have seemed impossible. In a similar way there may be things we hope and long for this Christmas (in terms of our own growth and development, for example, or in terms of relationships that we care about), and it may seem impossible for these things to happen. But the Lord is more powerful than that, and we’re told that the first thing we need in order for any “impossible” dream to come true is to believe that He has the power to make the dream a reality. What is one thing you wish for right now in your life that you don’t think can happen? Can you believe that the Lord has the power to make that dream come true? What thoughts do you have about this? With God all things are possible.

“Let It Be To Me According To Your Word”
December 9

Then Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:38)

Peace is like the dawn on earth, which fills people’s minds with over-all delight. At the heart of true peace is trust in the Lord, the trust that He governs all things, and provides all things, and that He leads towards an end that is good. When a person believes these things about Him she or he is at peace, since she then fears nothing, and no anxiety about things to come disturbs him. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8455:1)

Those who trust in the Lord are constantly receiving good from Him; for whatever happens to them, whether it seems to be advantageous or not advantageous, is nevertheless good, for it serves as a means contributing to their eternal happiness.

(*Arcana Caelestia* 8480:2)

Reflection: Today’s Scripture contains one of the most powerful and poetic statements of trust in the Lord that exists in the Word – “Let it be to me according to Your Word.” A statement like this, when genuinely felt, comes from a heart that is at peace with the Lord’s leadership; also from a belief that all things are under the Lord’s charge, that He has our best interests in mind, and that everything that happens to us is an opportunity for something good in our lives. Take a moment, now, to put yourself in Mary’s place. What is one promise of goodness that the Lord is making for your life right now, and how do you respond to that promise from the heart?

Serving Without Fear

December 10

Now Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

“Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,

For He has visited and redeemed His people,

And has raised up a horn of salvation for us,...

To grant us that we,

Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,

Might serve Him without fear,

In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.”

(Luke 1:67-69, 74)

This is a prophetic saying of Zacharias concerning the Lord and His advent. The horn of salvation signifies omnipotence of saving by means of Divine truth from Divine good. The enemies from which He should save us are the falsities of evil, for these are the enemies from which the Lord saves those who receive Him.

(Apocalypse Explained 316)

A single angel has greater power than myriads of infernal spirits, yet not from him- or herself, but from the Lord; and he has it from the Lord in the proportion that he believes that he has no power from himself, thus that he is the least; *and this he can believe insofar as he is in humility and in the affection of being of service to others, that is, insofar as he is in the good of love to the Lord and of charity toward the neighbor.*

(Arcana Coelestia 3417)

Reflection: The readings for today focus on the strength that exists in a life of useful service. One of the main goals of the Lord's birth and life on earth, in fact, was to free us from the spiritual ties that bind us so that our lives could bear fruit for others. What is one way that you enjoy being of useful service during the Christmas season, and in what way(s) is this a blessing in your own life and in the lives of others?

Confidence in the Lord's Providence December 11

(Continuing with Zacharias' prophecy)

"Blessed is the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited and redeemed His people....
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins;...
To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:67, 76)

Humankind can never be led better than it is. It has been foreseen from eternity, and thus provided, that all things down to the very least tend toward the final purpose that they may be parts in the Kingdom of the Lord. In addition, it should be known that the Lord's infinite Power can arrange all things in the best way.

(Spiritual Diary 3114)

When the Lord is with someone He leads him or her and makes provision so that all that happens, whether sad or joyful, may bring him what is good. This is Divine Providence. (*Arcana Coelestia* 6303)

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. (Psalm 37:23)

Reflection: Our reading today reminds us that the Lord is always working to bring good things out of our life experiences, and to lead us to deepening levels of peace. It also reminds us that the way He arranges things in our lives is the best that they can be arranged. As you look back over your life, in what ways can you see the course of your life confirming these truths? In other words, in what ways can you see that the Lord has arranged things for your best growth and development, and for your good?

Confidence Arising Out of A Good Life

December 12

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. *Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.* (Matthew 1:18-19)

To believe in the Lord is to have confidence that He will save, and as no one can have this confidence except one who lives aright, therefore this also is meant by believing in Him. (*Doctrine of Faith 36*)

The very faith itself which saves is confidence; but this confidence is quite impossible except in the good of life. Without the good of life there is no reception, and where there is no reception there is no confidence, except at times a certain apparent confidence. (*Arcana Caelestia 2982*)

By faith in the Lord is meant confidence that He will save, and they have this confidence who immediately approach Him and shun evils as sins. (*Apocalypse Revealed 949:2*)

Reflection: One of the things that the Lord wants us to have is confidence that He is able to save, that He does save, and that He will save each one of us as we respond to His love by making wise choices in our lives according to His Word. This truth cannot fail, and this confidence is something that grows deeper and deeper in us as a life of good increases with us. Perhaps Joseph was a man who had this kind of confidence in his God. How would you describe your own confidence in the Lord and in His work in your life?

“With God’s Help I will Conquer This”
December 13

But while Joseph thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for *He will save His people from their sins.*”
(Matthew 1:20-21)

The Divine power of the Lord is the Divine power of saving the human race; and the power of saving the human race is power over the heavens and over the hells. ...A person is saved by this power of the Lord, and not by any other....
(*Arcana Caelestia* 10019)

All who are in heavenly love have confidence that they will be saved by the Lord; for they believe that the Lord came into the world in order to give eternal life to those who believe and live according to the commandments which He taught; and that He regenerates these, and so makes them fit for heaven; and that He does this Himself alone, from pure mercy, without the aid of a person. This is meant by “believing in the Lord.”
(*Arcana Caelestia* 9244)

The smallest amount of Divine power, every time it is called upon, tames instantly the entire devil's crew, even if it consists of millions.
(*Arcana Caelestia* 8626)

People who believe in God say to themselves, "With God's help I will conquer this." And they pray for it and obtain it.
(*Doctrine of Charity* 203, part of *Posthumous Theological Works*, vol. 1)

Reflection: One of the greatest and most helpful messages at Christmas time is the one delivered to Joseph by the angel – “He will save His people from their sins.” Today we are reminded that we are saved from our sins by the Lord’s power and not our own, that the Lord’s power to save us is unlimited, and that His power is available to us any time we need it and remember to call on it. What is your experience of going to the Lord for power against sin, and what happens - both inside of you and in your outward life - when you call on that power? How do you react to the teaching which asks us to say and believe within ourselves, “With God’s help, I can conquer this”?

Guardian Angels and the Help They Bring **December 14**

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host....* (Luke 2:8-13)

With regard to the inflow of heaven into a person the case is this: Heaven in general flows into a person; and specific communities do so as well; and each community consists of very many angels. The more angels there are the better and stronger the correspondence is that exists between what is spiritual and what is natural. This accordance of the many leads to a more perfect and stronger endeavor acting into individual parts. (Arcana Caelestia 3629)

Scarcely anyone in this world can know the nature of the power that is in truth from good. They who are in truth from good, that is, in faith from charity, are in power through truth from good. In this power are all the angels, and from this the angels are called in the Word “powers.” (Arcana Caelestia 6344)

Reflection: We know in the New Church that there are always at least two guardian angels with us. This means that there can be more than two angels present with us at any given moment in time – even whole squadrons (AC 842) or communities of angels! Each of these angels has tremendous power – the power of the Lord’s goodness and truth. This is something the shepherds experienced in a living way as they kept watch over their flock by night. What is one powerful message (“good tidings of great joy” if you will) that the Lord is trying to get through to you in a resounding way this Christmas season?

The Power of “Goodwill” December 15

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, *goodwill toward men!*” (Luke 2:13-14)

Spiritual power is to will the good of another, and to wish to convey to another as far as possible what is with oneself.
(*Apocalypse Explained* 79:2)

Heaven consists in desiring from the heart the good of others more than one’s own, and in serving others with a view to their happiness, not with reward as an end, but from love. (*Heaven and Hell* 408)

Nothing is more pleasing to one who loves any one, and who believes any one, than to will and do what the other wills and thinks, for it is his or her sole desire to know his will and thought, thus his good pleasure. (*Arcana Coelestia* 10143:5)

Love consists in this, that its own should be another’s. To feel the joy of another as joy in oneself, that is loving.
(*Divine Love and Wisdom* 47)

Reflection: For many people, the angels’ words – “on earth peace, goodwill toward men” - capture the entire spirit of Christmas. Christmas is a time when the icy-ness that we sometimes experience in our hearts at other times of the year can melt away, and we may find ourselves enjoying family, friends, and loved ones in an atmosphere of human warmth and good will. This is one of the greatest blessings and promises of Christmas. What is one way in which the message of the angels – “on earth peace, goodwill toward men” – can come true for you this Christmas?

Patience as a Sign of Trust

December 16

And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said:

*“Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;
For my eyes have seen Your salvation
Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,
A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel.”* (Luke 2:25, 27-32)

When a person is in a state of love or celestial affection, he or she is in an angelic state, that is to say, as if not in time, *provided there is no impatience in the affection*; for impatience is a bodily affection, and insofar as a person is in it, so far he or she is in time; but so far as a person is not in it, so far he is not in time. By the affection of genuine love a person is withdrawn from bodily and worldly things, for his or her mind is then elevated toward heaven, and thus it is withdrawn from the things of time. (Arcana Coelestia 3827)

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
And in His word I do hope. (Psalm 130:5)

In your patience possess your souls. (Luke 21:19)

Reflection: Simeon was a wise and patient man – he waited patiently for the Lord’s coming. Likewise, the promise of spiritual rebirth and the growth of healthy relationships takes understanding and patience, as we await each new arrival of the Lord in our lives. In what way can the virtue of patience add itself to your Christmas season this year, and in what ways might it benefit you and others?

The “Fall and Rising” of Life December 17

And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “*Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.*” (Luke 2:33-35)

People uninformed about human regeneration suppose that a person can be regenerated without spiritual conflict, and some that he or she has been regenerated after he has undergone a single conflict. But let it be known that no one can be regenerated without spiritual conflict. The reason for this is that *regeneration takes place to the end that the life of the old person may die, and a new, heavenly life may be instilled.* From this one may recognize that conflict is altogether inevitable; for the life of the old person stands its ground and refuses to be snuffed out, and the life of the new person cannot enter except where the life of the old has been snuffed out. From this it is evident that fierce conflict takes place between mutually hostile sides, since each is fighting for its life. (Arcana Coelestia 8403)

Before a person can know what is true and be affected with what is good, there must be a removal of such things as hinder and resist their admission; *thus the old person must die before the new person can be conceived.* (Arcana Coelestia 18)

A person first starts to live when that which in the world he or she believes to constitute the whole of life perishes. What’s more, the life which he now receives, in comparison with the life he previously had, is beyond words and boundless. (Arcana Coelestia 3175:4)

Reflection: Isn’t it interesting to see the idea of falling and rising reflected in the story of Christmas? This tells us that ups and downs are part of the Christmas story, as it unfolds and comes true in each one of our lives. We also know that the “falls” that we experience in life don’t always feel very good, but that each experience of “rising” to a new level of human growth and development can feel wonderful. Each rising can make the fall that may have preceded it seem worthwhile. What is one fall and one rising that you’ve experienced over the past year, and in what way(s) has this dual experience opened you up to being a better person?

Turning to the Lord in Prayer

December 18

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess.... She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, *who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.*
(Luke 2:36-37)

Regarded in itself prayer is talking with God, and at the same time some inner view of the things that are being prayed for. Answering to this there is something akin to an influx into the perception or thought of the person's mind, which effects a certain opening of his or her internals towards God. But the experience varies according to the person's state of mind and according to the essence of whatever he or she is praying for. If his prayer springs from love and faith, and if they are completely celestial and spiritual things about which and for which he prays, something like a revelation is present within his prayer which manifests itself in the affection of the one praying in the form of hope, comfort, or some inward joy.

(Arcana Caelestia 2535)

In each thing that a person utters there is affection, and every person, spirit, and angel is his or her own affection, for his affection is his life. It is the affection itself that speaks, and not the person without it; therefore such as the affection is, such is the praying. Spiritual affection is what is called charity towards the neighbor, and to be in that affection is true worship. Praying is what proceeds from it.

(Apocalypse Explained 325:3)

Reflection: Anna was a person who may have felt a real closeness and connection to God as she served Him with fastings and prayers. We can experience a similar closeness to the Lord whenever He, in answer to prayer, offers us new and heavenly insights, new ways of perceiving people and situations in our lives, and new feelings of hope, comfort and deeply felt joy. What is one way that you feel most closely connected to the Lord at Christmastime?

Giving Thanks **December 19**

Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, . . . of the tribe of Asher. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36, 38)

In the Word “Asher” means blessedness, also the delight that belongs to the affections for truth and good. This delight corresponds to the happiness of eternal life. When anyone perceives this delight within him- or herself he is starting to become the Church.
(*Arcana Caelestia* 3939:1)

The words of Scripture, “to bless God” mean to glorify and give thanks because the Lord was to come into the world to save all who receive Him.
(*Apocalypse Explained* 340:3)

The Divine Providence has for its end nothing else than reformation and consequently salvation. This is its unceasing operation with everyone; and salvation can only be effected by the acknowledgment of the Divinity of the Lord, and by confidence that it is effected by Him when a person lives according to His commandments.
(*Divine Providence* 257:4)

After the general redemption that the Lord wrought during His first advent, He bestowed peace on those who believed in Him. Likewise He gives to a person after spiritual conflict a sense of peace, that is, gladness of mind and consolation.
(*True Christian Religion* 599)

Reflection: How often do we think of the spirit of thanksgiving in relationship to Christmastime? And yet it's a very real part of the Christmas story. A feeling of thanks to the Lord is something that we can experience spontaneously at times when we've invited the Lord's birth in us, and at times when we're enjoying the blessings of a good and true life. Looking over the past year, what is one thing that you feel genuinely thankful for in your life, and what additional thoughts and hopes do you have about this?

Willing and Intending To Serve the Lord **December 20**

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

(Matthew 2:1-2)

When a person who is looking at internal things from external things sees the heavens, he or she does not think at all of the starry heaven, but of the angelic heaven; and when he sees the sun, he does not think of the sun, but of the Lord, as being the Sun of heaven. So too when he sees the moon, and the stars also; and when he sees the immensity of the heavens, he does not think of their immensity, but of the immeasurable and infinite power of the Lord.

(Arcana Caelestia 1807)

The Lord's constant effort to reform and regenerate us, and so to purify us from evils, is realized when we will and intend it.

(Doctrine of Charity 203, part of Posthumous Theological Works, vol. 1)

Reflection: Who can miss the faithful determination with which the wise men sought the infant Lord – "for we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him"? Their faithfulness and determination are things that each one of us experiences in our lifetimes as well, beginning in early childhood. We experience them in the desire we feel to be good people, and also in each effort that we make to do the right thing, that is, to do what the Lord wants in our lives. What is one way that you've recently been seeking the Lord in your life, and how will you continue in that effort through Christmas – with all the faithfulness and determination of the wise men?

The Lord's Mandate That Good Prevail

December 21

Then Herod, *when he had secretly called the wise men*, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, *"Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."* When they heard the king, they departed.

(Matthew 2:7-9)

It is a fact beyond doubt that the Lord governs the universe, and this government is called Providence. There is no such thing as chance, that is, evil happening by chance, but all evils are controlled in such a way that not a single one of them is permitted to happen to a person on earth or to a soul that does not lead to good. Furthermore, nothing is permitted to happen that has not been foreseen, for otherwise it cannot happen.

(Spiritual Diary 1088)

It should be recognized that the spirits from hell who are allowed to attack the good intend nothing but evil. They wish with all their might to drag them down from heaven and cast them into hell; for to destroy anyone's soul, thus to destroy him or her forever, is the sheer delight of their life. But they are not allowed by the Lord to do anything at all except for the sake of the end that good may come out of it, that is to say, so that truth and good may be made firmer and stronger with those who undergo spiritual conflict.

(Arcana Caelestia 6574:3)

All evil which the evil in hell intend and do to the good the Lord converts into good.

(Arcana Caelestia 4493:6)

Reflection: The wise men had a challenge to face on their way to finding the infant Lord. We have challenges to face too. But one of the interesting things about the Lord's perfect providence is that no evil is allowed to tempt us, no evil is allowed to take place in our lives, and no evil is allowed to befall us that good cannot come from. In other words, there's nothing we experience – either in our outward lives or our inner lives – that is not an opportunity for new learning and new experiences of goodness. Think, for a minute, of one particular challenge that you've faced over the last year. Is there anything good that has come of that challenge? If so, what is it? And what good may yet come of it?

Humbling Ourselves December 22

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. *And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him.* And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2:9-11)

It is known that the church comes from the Lord Jesus Christ, and that it exists in people who go to Him and live according to His commandments. It exists in people who go to Him because the Lord's church in the Christian world is founded on the Word, and the Word is from Him and from Him in such a way that it is Him. The church exists in people who go to the Lord for the further reason that it exists in those who believe in Him. And no one can believe in Him unless he gets his belief from the Lord. In other words, no one can believe in the Lord without going to the Lord, because He is God of heaven and earth. Who else should one go to? Who else can one go to?
(Conjugal Love, a.k.a. Married Love 129)

In the Word, the angel of the Lord said to Hagar, "Return yourself to your mistress and humble yourself beneath her hands" (Gen. 16:9). This means that a person ought by self-compulsion to place him- or herself under the controlling power of interior truth. In the original language "humbling oneself" is expressed by means of a word which means to fling down. "Flinging oneself down" in the internal sense is compelling oneself to do good, to obey what the Lord has commanded, and to utter truths, that is, to submit oneself beneath the controlling power of Divine good and truth. The secret lying within this is that in so doing a person has a heavenly self bestowed on him or her from the Lord. This self which a person receives in this manner during his lifetime the Lord replenishes in the next life with limitless forms of delight and happiness.
(Arcana Coelestia 1937:1, 3, 6)

Reflection: Christmastime can be a time of humility and devotion - as depicted in the story of the wise men prostrating themselves before the infant Lord. We know that humility is one of the things that most invites the Lord's presence and birth in our lives; and what may seem counterintuitive, an experience of humility is one in which we can feel our greatest sense of selfhood, delight, and happiness. Think of a time that you felt humble before the Lord or before other people. What effects did this experience have on you, on your relationships with others, and on your relationship with the Lord?

The Lord's Constant Protection

December 23

Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. (Matthew 2:12)

The angels in heaven perceive quite clearly that everything good and true comes from the Lord, in addition they perceive that the Lord is the one who withholds them from evil and maintains in them what is good and therefore what is true, which He does with great force.

(Arcana Caelestia 5758)

What else can Divine providence have as its end than the reformation of the human race and its salvation? Yet no one can be reformed of himself through his own prudence, but only by the Lord through His Divine providence. It follows, therefore, that unless a person is guided by the Lord every moment, even every least moment, he departs from the path of reformation and perishes.

(Divine Providence 202)

The Lord protects those who are in the good of charity.

(Arcana Caelestia 2379)

When people who have entered the other life have been prepared for heaven by instruction, they are brought to the way that leads upwards towards heaven. After this each one is led by the Lord into his or her own society, which is also effected by various ways, sometimes by winding paths. The ways by which they are led are not known to any angel, but are known to the Lord alone. *(Heaven and Hell 519)*

Reflection: The care that the Lord took to protect the wise men signals something He does for each or us all the time. He is guiding us "every least moment," "withholding us from evil and maintaining us in what is good," and showing us the most useful direction forward. He wants to guide us along a beautiful pathway to heaven, He alone knowing the course of that particular pathway. What has been your experience of the Lord's protection and guidance? How does it feel to know that the Lord is watching over you constantly?

Increasing in Wisdom December 24

Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart. *And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.*

(Luke 2:51-52)

When human beings were first created, they were imbued with wisdom and a love of wisdom—not for their own sake, but for the sake of their having it to share with others. Therefore it was engraved on the wisdom of the wise that no one should be wise and live for himself alone, unless he was wise and lived at the same time for others. This was the origin of society, which otherwise would not exist. To live for others is to perform useful services. Useful services are the bonds of society, there being as many bonds as there are good and useful services. *(Conjugal Love, a.k.a. Married Love 18)*

While He lived in the world the Lord was in continual combats of temptations, and in continual victories, from a constant inmost confidence and faith that because He was fighting for the salvation of the whole human race from pure love, He could not but conquer. But in all His combats of temptations the Lord never fought from the love of self, or for Himself, but for all in the universe, consequently, not that He might become the greatest in heaven, and scarcely even that He might be the least; but only that all others might become something and be saved. *(Arcana Caelestia 1812)*

Reflection: We often think of the story of Christmas as focusing only on the Lord, and in fact it does. At its heart and soul, the story of Christmas is only about the Lord. But it's a story that includes other people as well, because what the Lord most wants at the end of the Christmas story is for each one of us (like Him) to become something (AC 1812) – to increase in wisdom and stature. And we know that true wisdom in life lies in useful service. The Lord wants us to live so that He can live in us and through us, bless others. What is one talent that you have for serving others and for being a blessing in other people's lives? What is one way that you can put that talent to use this Christmas and on into the new year?

Turning to the Word

December 25

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of humankind. That was the true Light which gives light to everyone coming into the world. And as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:1, 3, 4, 9, 13-14)

In regard to the trust and confidence which is called faith itself, the case is this: Those who are in charity toward the neighbor and in love to the Lord can have such faith, for their heart is toward the Lord. This the Lord also teaches in John: "As many as received Him, to them gave He the power to be the sons of God, even to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of bloods, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Those who are "born of God" are those who are in the good of charity and of faith from the Lord.

(Arcana Coelestia 9241)

There are two things that constitute the church, namely, the acknowledgment and belief that the Lord has the power to save, and that the Word is Divine. The Lord reforms people and gives them faith and love, and the Word teaches the way in which they must go to the Lord that they may receive faith and love from Him.

(Apocalypse Explained 1070)

Reflection: Our last Christmas reading this year focuses on the Lord's Word. It is there - in the Lord's Word - that we find the story of Christmas, and it is by means of the Lord's Word that we are able to experience each new birth of the Lord in our lives. The Lord's Word is the source of all truth and power for wise and loving action in our world. What is one thing that the Lord's Word has done for you over the past year - how has it helped you? In what ways could you expand your study of the Word in the coming year, and what do you think that might do for you?

The Christmas Story

Every detail of the story is true, and every word has meaning. The bright star shone in the darkness to represent the truth that had come to a dark world. He was laid in a manger because He would spiritually feed those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. There was no room in the inn because there was no room for God in human hearts. He was not born among the rich and powerful but among the poor, because He was to “*put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalt the lowly*” (Luke 1). So the angels did not appear to rulers but to poor shepherds – symbolic rulers of the flock of Israel. He was born to a virgin because He was the Son of God, but also because a virgin stands for the innocent love in every person’s heart that first accepts God into their life. The angels of heaven rejoiced at every one of these events, which represented to them the purpose of His coming and the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies. They still rejoice whenever this story is heard or read – especially when it touches the heart of a child. For His birth takes place repeatedly in every person, and His work of salvation goes on continually.

Merry Christmas!



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