

## Church Growth: Expect Persecution

Third of Three Sermons by Rev. Michael Gladish

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“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues.... And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake.” – *Matthew* 10: 16-17, 22.

One thing we can certainly expect when we take the message of the New Church out into the world is persecution. Whether we declare the teachings by our words or by our actions we are bound to be criticized. Why? - Because the worldly life – our own and that of others – is completely opposed to the heavenly life, and will not give in to it easily (AC #9256:3).

The Lord warned His first disciples about this repeatedly, even saying that their foes would be those of *their own household* and that they had better be prepared for the worst (Matt. 10:35-38; 16:24-25). In fact it is among His very first formal teachings, in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, where He does NOT say, “Blessed are you IF they revile and persecute you,” but “Blessed are you WHEN they persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you, falsely, for My sake” (Matt. 5:11). But then, of course, He goes on to say, “Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven....”

Rejoice? – amidst persecution? Well, it’s all a matter of perspective, isn’t it? Either the spiritual is better and more important than the natural or it’s not. But if it is, and we really believe it, then we ought to be able to endure some short-term losses in exchange for the long-term gains. Indeed, the Lord said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him **deny himself, and take up his cross**, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever **loses his life** for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains **the whole world**, and loses his own soul?” (Matt. 16:24-26).

The same point is made in a different way in the Lord’s conversation with the rich young ruler who famously had kept all the commandments of the second table of the law, refraining from various evils. But when the Lord told him “If you want to be perfect [that is, whole], go, **sell what you have**, and give to the poor...” the man “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Matt. 19:16-22).

Now we know that in these and the many other lessons the Lord taught about self-sacrifice, all the worldly things mentioned correspond to spiritual things. So the loss of one’s natural life refers in its deeper meaning to the loss of one’s worldly and self-centered spiritual life. Same with one’s possessions: wealth in the Word corresponds to knowledge, which is spiritual wealth, and to sell it is to use it for the sake of others. But neither of these commitments takes away anything from the literal sense of the Lord’s teachings, since very often doing the right thing for others

means giving up something of our own – *as if it were really our own to start with* – and that may even include our natural lives. Remember Salome, the mother of James and John, who came to the Lord asking that her sons be allowed to rule with Him in His kingdom? In response He referred to the rulers of the Gentiles “lording it over people,” but He said, “It shall not be so among you; **but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant**. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave” (Matt 20:26-27). So much for serving ourselves, or having things our own way!

The Acts and the Epistles, by the way, are full of teaching like this, and the accounts of the early church show that the first Christians were regularly persecuted for their teaching, which often included harsh criticism of the Jewish hierarchy. Some, like Stephen, were actually stoned to death or crucified for their efforts. But, to take an example, some of them on one occasion, after being beaten and released, “departed from the presence of the council, **rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name**. And [then] daily in the temple, and in every house, **they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ**” (Acts 5:41-41).

But what does all this have to do with church growth? Well, one thing we learn from these historical accounts is that the church grew in spite of being persecuted. In fact the apostles expected persecution and in many ways provoked it, counting it a privilege to suffer for the Lord’s sake. Of course they had the physical miracles to confirm their faith, but even then they could have shied away from sharing their faith to avoid being abused or killed, but they didn’t, and because they didn’t the church grew **daily**, one time by 3,000 in a single day (Acts 2:41), another time by 5,000 (Acts 4:4). Paul, by the way, who was a Pharisee, was one of the worst persecutors – until his conversion, and then he became the most successful of all the Christian missionaries, at which point the Jewish authorities turned right around and began persecuting **him, too**.

The point is, these early Christians were so deeply committed to the Lord that nothing could stop them from proclaiming the good news of His life and teaching. And because of this the church grew at a phenomenal rate.

Now it’s certainly true that the New Church is not the same as the primitive Christian Church when miracles had the power to convince and strengthen people through adversity. Today the Lord invites us to think more deeply and to understand not only the spiritual causes of events in our lives, but also the spiritual issues that we need to be dealing with no matter what we may experience on the physical plane. **But in many ways there’s no difference at all between our basic teachings and those of the first Christians**, it’s just that we have been given thousands of pages of new insight and rational arguments to **support** those basic teachings. So in a way we have every reason to be even stronger in our faith than they were, even more committed to the business of sharing it, and even more resolute **and resilient in the face of persecution**. But are we?

If we’re going to be honest with ourselves, we’ll have to admit that, no, in general we’re not

more committed, and we're certainly not more outwardly enthusiastic about our faith than they were. In fact, as a group we tend to be pretty shy and cautious, even fearful about it.

First of all, we don't want to impose on anyone. Second, we don't want to mess up and say something that isn't quite right, causing people to judge our religion based on our poor explanation or expression of it. Third, we don't want to come across as know-it-alls or somehow better than the people we're addressing. And finally, we don't want them to think less of us if they disagree or don't get it; we don't want to lose their friendship. Basically, we hate the idea of being persecuted for our beliefs!

But let's look at these issues one at a time. As for imposing on people, the Lord plainly said, "The truth will make you free" (John 8:32). Do we care whether people are free or not? Do we care whether they have access to the truth or not? *Of course*, if there is no interest and the good news of the heavenly doctrine is rejected, we will move on and not bother them. But we'll never know this unless we put it out there in the first place. THEY don't know what they're missing until we tell them, and THEN they're in freedom to accept or reject it.

As for saying something that isn't quite right, that's almost inevitable – even for ministers! But it's not the truth alone that's important, *it's the affection for it* that really matters. And given the affection for truth we're in a good position to have a positive dialog with any who have a similar disposition; we may also learn a lot, even as we share our own information or insights with them.

Third, it's really pretty easy to avoid coming across as pedantic, or as they say, "holier than thou." We simply need to cultivate a vocabulary that includes phrases like, "The way I see it," or "You know, we have a teaching in our church that..." Or even, "Actually, I was just reading something relating to this (Divine Providence or any other topic), and it made the point that..." We wouldn't hesitate to recommend a video, a movie, a Face Book post or a restaurant we particularly enjoyed: why don't we want to do it about the most important things in the world?

By using deferential expressions like those mentioned we take the focus off ourselves and point to the ideas themselves, and let them stand on their merits. A person can even say, "Well, I certainly don't have all the answers, but it does strike me that (such and such) might be pretty important." Remember, we're not trying to grow fruit, or even trees, we're just planting seeds, and the seeds can be sown in all kinds of soil. The Lord does the rest (Mark 4:3-20 & 26-29).

But finally, we have this very serious business of persecution, or the loss of comfortable, friendly relationships. And yet of all the four concerns we've listed this is the ONE that the Lord Himself tells us we MUST be prepared and willing to endure. Remember, "...whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but *whoever loses his life for My sake will find it*. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matt. 16:24-26).

The idea that we should try to protect ourselves from abuse by not sharing the most important

gift the Lord has given the world is hugely ironic, at best, and really selfish, at worst. When a country goes to war – hopefully in self-defense – doesn't everyone accept the fact that it's a brave and noble thing to sacrifice one's life if necessary in that war? And if a companion or a spouse or one's little child is at risk, isn't it a given for most people that it is necessary to go to that person's aid, even at the risk of great harm to oneself? Why, then, are we so reluctant to step out of our "comfort zones" to defend the truth that provides for all of human life?

Again, the Lord said – quite plainly and repeatedly, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23)). Self-sacrifice is at the very heart of the gospel message, and it's no different in the Writings for the New Church. Sure, we have to provide for ourselves lest we also become the objects of charity, but the only reason for that is so that we can serve others – and the Lord. As He said, "Greater love has no one than this, than *to lay down one's life for his friends...*" (John 15:13).

One reason we want the church to grow is to ensure that we have companionship, mutual support, and help paying the bills. But as ends in themselves these really have no merit and no basis in the Word or the doctrine. The Lord will provide for His own church. What we're instructed to do is share the faith for His sake, and for the sake of the people who will benefit from its teachings. We are not supposed to be thinking of ourselves – our reputations, our limitations or our imperfections – at all. Remember the lesson; it's not a possibility, it's a fact:

"You *will* be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Matt. 10:18-20) – ***IF we really believe and trust in Him.***

To sum up, there are a lot of reasons to hope – and even pray – for the growth of the New Church (AR #956). And the Writings say it WILL GROW – slowly at first, as the falsities of the former church are exposed and removed, and as we do our part to reach out – gently but confidently – to people who are willing to listen. But it will NOT grow if we do not accept the fundamental principle of self-sacrifice and a willingness to face embarrassment, rejection, personal shame or even persecution for declaring our faith.

Amen.

Lessons:     *Exodus* 19: 1-18  
               Children's talk on the Lord's promise to Moses

*Matthew* 10:1-39 (yes, it's a long reading, but important)  
*Arcana Caelestia* #8768:2 and #6822