

Classroom Discipline from a New Church Perspective
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Classroom discipline is more than simply knowing how to deal with misbehaving children. It is also knowing how to run a classroom so that those difficulties are hopefully kept to a minimum. It is learning who a child is and how to best help that child make choices that will strengthen his or her relationship with the Lord. In this way, discipline is not necessarily something we do *to* children, but a tool we use to help guide them toward the Lord.

Hereditary Evil

The Writings teach us that a person is born with a tendency toward evils of every kind (*True Christian Religion* 520). But what does this mean for children? There is a difference between being born into an inclination toward evil and actually being evil. No children are actually evil. They may exhibit behaviors that show an influx from hell into this world, but, until children have chosen from freedom according to their own reason to do something, it is not their own. And this cannot happen until they are adults.

So, it is vital to realize that you are not disciplining an evil spirit. This may sound obvious, yet it is easy to slip into the idea that discipline is about controlling bad people. In hell, we are told that people are punished simply to keep their evil wants and desires under control, but we are not in hell. Children do not do something because they are evil. They may do something because they are *influenced* by evil, but we must be sure to distinguish between the evil influence and the child. Consider the following passage, “All evil flows in from hell, and all good through heaven from the Lord. But the reason why evil is appropriated to a person is that he believes and persuades himself that he thinks and does it from himself, and in this way makes it his own” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6206).

Elsewhere we read that it is the evil spirits who accuse and condemn a person for their evils, while the angels excuse and defend the person (*ibid.* 8131). We want to make sure that we are not siding with the evil spirits. Yes, children have evil tendencies that we need to recognize and deal with, but, if we are not careful, we may find ourselves appropriating those evils to a child by thinking of him and treating him as a “bad child.”

For this reason, using positive language in a classroom situation is important. For instance, we should not call children evil or bad, but rather look at what they did and why the decisions they made may not have been the best ones. In this way, we can make a distinction between a child and hell or the influence from hell. We thus give the child a chance to change. We don't want to throw the baby out with the bath water; condemn hell and its evil influence, but not the child. Remember that we are all predestined to heaven and no one to hell (*Divine Providence* 322). We need to deal with and work on bad behaviors and what are real hereditary evils, but let's always act from a vision of the potential of heaven in children, not from their potential of hell.

Teaching a Child to Choose

Perhaps the most important use of classroom discipline, then, is to help children become angels. In the end, all people go to either heaven or hell because they choose to. We are told that the Lord guards our freedom to choose like a person guards the pupil of his eye (*Divine Providence*

97). Therefore, discipline should always be instructional because we are not simply punishing children but guiding them through a process of learning how to make good decisions. And, we should not expect children to automatically know what is right and wrong. The Writings teach us that we are all born into ignorance so that we may be perfected to eternity as we become more and more closely conjoined with the Lord. This is true not only of knowledge but of affections as well:

A person does not come by birth into any knowledge.. .in order that he may come into every kind of knowledge and so progress into a state of intelligence and through this into wisdom. So, too, he does not come by birth into any love, in order that by applying various kinds of knowledge with intelligence he may come into every kind of love, and through love for the neighbor come into love toward the Lord; and this to the end that he may be thus conjoined with the Lord and by that conjunction become human and live to eternity. (*Conjugal Love* 134)

This is what discipline is all about: teaching children the knowledges they need in order to come into a love for the neighbor and thus for the Lord. And, as the passage indicates, we must not only teach them knowledges; we must do our best to help the Lord instill good affections in them as well. Elsewhere, in *Arcana Coelestia*, we read:

Nothing is of more importance to a person than to know whether he has heaven within him or hell, for he is going to live forever in one or the other. And to know this it is necessary for him to know what good is and what evil is... (7181).

Giving students the knowledges and encouraging the good affections they need in order to make good decisions is to give them their freedom. For true freedom does not come apart from a knowledge of what is good and true. In this sense, perhaps we shouldn't look at misbehaving children as being "bad" so much as being ignorant.

Teaching children to choose may show up in classroom discipline in many ways. For instance, we can always try to give children a better alternative to behavior that isn't acceptable. Without this alternative, children may feel anxious or controlled. By presenting an alternative we are giving children the ability and freedom to choose. We are teaching them what is right, rather than simply saying "stop" to what is wrong. For this reason it is also important to explain in very basic terms why a certain behavior is unacceptable. (Again, we cannot assume that children know right from wrong.) And we should not only tell them why, but how to act. For instance, if a child is fidgeting, don't just tell him that he is disturbing the class and that everybody needs to be able to concentrate in order to learn; be sure to also give specific alternatives such as "please sit down," "put the ball away," and "look up at the teacher." In other words, be sure you are allowing children to grow by giving them a way out. Similarly, Isaiah teaches, "Cease to do evil, *learn* to do good..." (1:16-17).

A Means to an End

It is important to understand that the ideals or goals of classroom discipline are not going to be reached immediately. Although we are dealing with potential angels and are looking forward to

allowing children to choose in freedom according to reason, we are not going to get there without taking many intermediate steps. Indeed, this is the way that the Lord guides us all, for if He did not guide us slowly, by means of intermediate steps, we are told that we would not live through the changes. In terms of discipline we must understand that children are also going through a process of change where they will act out, will misbehave, and won't always listen. This is actually a part of the process. We don't need to get discouraged if our students don't always listen or do what we tell them to do with a smile on their faces. We need to have priorities, know when to bring attention to something and when not to in order to maintain a sphere in which all of the students can learn. Kids will be kids, and not everything is a life-or-death situation.

Another part of the process is that certain disciplinary actions may not seem ideal, but they are, again, a means to an end. For instance, we are told that children must learn to obey. It may not be ideal to force children to do something or to punish them when they do not, but in doing these things we are looking forward to a time when they will not be needed. The Writings tell us that to a natural person true spiritual freedom feels like slavery. Only by pushing through this apparent slavery are we able to eventually move from being solely natural people to being spiritual people. With children, learning obedience to teachers and parents is practice for eventually learning obedience to the Lord and His Word.

This idea of practice brings up another important intermediate end: the value of having children simply *do* something. Although we should always look toward teaching children to act from freedom according to reason, to choose, it is also useful to build up certain good habits in them. Those habits are not ends in themselves, but they can allow children to come into true freedom later on in their lives more easily. The Writings tells us that when people are trying to rid themselves of evils, part of the process is simply learning how to break their habits. We may resist an evil with great difficulty the first time; but the more we develop a habit of resisting that evil, even on very external terms, the easier it will become to resist it in the future. Good habits may be very external at first, but they will allow children to practice for times in their lives when they will be going through real temptations. Internals are important, but externals are important too.

Another example of means to an end is the use of rewards and praise. Of course, ideally, we do not want children living life simply to get rewards or to be honored by others. On the contrary, we are told that angels resist any praise from others because they know that praise causes them to focus on themselves and thus to slip slowly toward hell. But, again, nobody gets to a point of true love and charity without having some selfish ends initially. So we may, at times, offer children rewards and praise to help encourage them to eventually love what is good and true for its own sake. The Lord teaches us this in His parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). In this parable the first people hired needed to be assured that they would get a denarius for their work. This is equivalent to children being offered rewards and looking forward to the "reward" of heaven. However, by the later hours of the day the workers were content to simply know that "whatever is right I will give you." So, too, we should guard against using rewards *too much* and look toward teaching children to act for the sake of what is good and true.

Conclusion

As with anything in life, the most important aspect of classroom discipline is to have it come from love. Our end is to lead children to the Lord and thus to heaven. Here is a picture of that heaven that we are trying to lead them to: “[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 recompense as an end, but from love” (*Heaven and Hell* 408). This is the end that discipline and all classroom management look toward. And the practice of discipline looks at how to best help children to arrive at this end. In order to do this, we must always be working on our own relationship with the Lord and working to rid ourselves of our own selfish loves. The practice of discipline will be varied, and the skills involved in successfully implementing discipline in the classroom come with time and experience. But, hopefully, the principles can give us something to base our decisions on. For we want to lead and teach, not manipulate our children into doing what is right.

Discipline should always look toward allowing children to make healthy decisions, both inside and outside of the classroom. Our leading and teaching may show itself in very external and reward-based ways at times, but hopefully we are helping our children on their journey toward the Lord. We will be helping them not simply to behave, but to live a life that is all about relationships with the Lord and with each other—a life of harmony with the Lord and with other people. For discipline is the process of planting in our children the seeds of love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor.