

Idealism and Realism in Love Truly Conjugal

Rev. Andrew M.T. Dibb

Marriage love, having regard to its origin and correspondence, is more celestial, spiritual, holy, pure and clean than any other love the Lord confers on angels in heaven or people in the church (Conjugal Love 64).

People often frown on idealism. In our world a person who is idealistic is often dismissed as naïve or childish. Idealism is contrasted with “realism”, as if “realism” truly represents the realities of this world while “idealism” speaks of something otherworldly. More often than not we want people to think of us as “realistic”, because that means that we have our feet firmly planted in the world. We have to ask ourselves, however, is if this is a true perception of what life is all about. Perhaps we should be asking if people are not being a bit idealistic about all their realism?

Idealism touches each and every part of our lives, and it is only as naïve or childish as we, in our expectations, are. Without some ideals we become little more than animals, who exist from day to day tied to the routine of their instincts. But we are not like that. We are human, made in the image and likeness of the Lord Himself, with the ability to think and reason and the freedom to carry those thoughts into action. One of the things that makes us human is the ability to be idealistic and the freedom to convert those ideals into reality.

Today, I want to talk about the idealism and reality of marriage. Marriage is one of the most embattled institutions in the world around us, and it is so because people feel that they need to be realistic about their relationships. Not too long ago, while watching a panel discussion on TV, I heard the announcer pontificate that it was out of date to imagine that one would or could live out one’s years with the same partner. It is a commonly held idea that we can, and should, change our marriage partners when they no longer suit our needs, just as we discard an old pair of shoes.

These thoughts are twisted idealism. Only people with no higher motive in life than selfishness could ever accept this kind of belief and all the pain, anger and broken lives it involves. It is no wonder that Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that “true marriage love exists, but is so rare today that its nature is unknown and almost its very existence” (*Conjugal Love 58*).

Idealism takes its greatest form in marriage. Think of a couple planning to marry and consider the pure idealism motivating them. Their idealism awoke when they realised that the person they are looking at, the one they have been dating, is in fact the perfect person for them. This is the first step, and, we are told, the idealism increases during their engagement, building up toward the wedding, until, on that day, their ideal is about to become reality.

Marriages are based on ideals, and without them would lose their enjoyment and delight. Reality says that after the first year of marriage the spontaneity and fun gradually seeps out. The secular world suggests that when that happens we find a new partner. But that is really a pessimistic view of a relationship. It is a complete negation of everything we once believed.

When couples come to me for pre-marital counselling, I like to tell them that the moment when they stand at the altar will be the low point of their relationship. It is only going to get better for them.

This amazes some of them, for surely their wedding is the high point? It is a high point, but only of what has happened to them *so far*. Their life together will get better and better. Their enjoyment of each other's company, their excitement about each other's presence, will increase, not diminish.

This sounds very idealistic, and for many people it is—but so many people have been schooled in the thought that we shouldn't think this way. Instead we should be realistic, and build into our lives a self-fulfilling prophecy that eventually our marriage will settle down into a humdrum, boring co-existence.

But this is not what the Heavenly Doctrine teaches. It tells us that marriage comes from the Lord. The union between a man and a woman is an image of the relationship the Lord has with the church. Think of how often we are told in the Word that the Lord wants to save all people. Why? Because He loves them. He loves people so much He was willing to come into this world and lay down His life for them. That is love, and it is the kind of love we are capable of in marriage. And think of the love of the church for the Lord—we too should be willing to lay down our lives for Him.

In marriage this willingness to lay down our lives is key. The major thing keeping two people apart is selfishness. We can't love another person if we are only concerned about ourselves. Think of the fights people have in marriage—usually one or both of the partners is being selfish—they don't want to listen to their partner or give in to his or her wishes or point of view. Their own is more important. So often arguments are only resolved when the couple finds a compromise. And what is a compromise? It is a suspension of what we want in favor of something that is good for both people.

So the Lord by His own life set the example of what our marriages should be like. He gives us the ideal. Each and every teaching of the Word finds a logical place in marriage. Most of us don't steal, for example, from our places of work. But we do steal in one way or another from our partners by withholding our love. We bear false witness against our partners when we deliberately misinterpret their words, or when we harbor thoughts and ideas about their motives against us, without ever checking to see whether they are right or not. Obviously committing adultery is a sin against our partners, and adultery destroys marriage by breaking the bond we swore to at the altar. We covet our partner when we are jealous of him or her. Sometimes we get jealous about the amount of time a partner spends on other things, or about the interest he or she takes in another person rather than ourselves. For example, it is not unusual for men to be jealous of the amount of time their wives lavish on the children.

Those who claim to be realists say that these things will inevitably happen and that we should accept a decline in our relationship. An idealist, however, says that while these things will happen, for marriage is a union of two imperfect people, they can become points of growth. Spiritual growth happens when we face down our evil feelings, thoughts, intentions, attitudes, and acts. The very essence of New Church doctrine is that we do not have to accept our spiritual place in life; we can change. Regeneration is change, and without change there is no regeneration.

The same principle applies to marriage. The existence of seemingly negative things in our relationships is not a cue for divorce, but a prompt to grow, to rise above the negatives, strengthening rather than weakening our mutual commitment.

In *Conjugal Love 57* we read that marriage is “more celestial, spiritual, holy, pure and clean than any other love” the Lord gives to angels or people. This gift is the highest ideal, and yet it is the most obtainable. To receive it we have to believe, and act on the belief, that marriage is ideal and that when we are faced with evil thoughts and feelings, when we are tempted outside of the marriage, we can overcome it.

Think of those words for a moment. Marriage is *celestial*. Celestial simply means heavenly. In the *Heavenly Doctrine* Swedenborg describes the highest of angels as celestial. They are heavenly because their minds are formed of the stuff of heaven, which is love toward the Lord and toward each other. When we think of marriage, the first thing we think of is love—love toward each other as husband and wife, a love so strong that it can and will survive the challenges life throws at it. This is an ideal, surely, but we can keep that love alive by living according to the Lord’s teaching, by repenting and regenerating. The Lord gives us this love, and He especially gives it to wives, and through them to the husbands.

The second word in the list is *spiritual*. The spiritual angels are those who love wisdom. True wisdom doesn’t simply know something, it is the way we use our knowledge. Marriages need wisdom, because, although the love binding the couple together may be strong, it still needs to be directed. Without wisdom love can degenerate into jealousy. Idealism in action is reality, and we need to be wise in how we express our love for each other in concrete ways. The Lord gives us that wisdom, and this time especially to the husbands, for men need to learn to rise above their masculine tendency to believe that they know everything and are always right, and learn to put their trust in the Lord. As they do this, so the Lord makes them wise, and the wife finds a focus for her love in this wisdom.

These two states—celestial and spiritual—together produce marriage. When they are together, then the bond between the husband and wife becomes “holy, pure and clean”. Marriages are “holy”, that is, whole, complete and sacred, because they contain, like a vessel, both love and wisdom from the Lord. We feel this as our own, but the completeness is the Lord. Because of His presence, a relationship like this becomes both pure and clean.

To think of marriage without these ideals is to think of something rather barren and empty. It is no wonder then, that millions of people, who have no concept of the pure ideals of marriage, have such a negative idea of marriage itself. Marriage is an ideal—yet it is neither naïve nor childish. It is an ideal of what people can and should become. This is how the Lord made us to be—and the joy of carrying these things down into our daily lives is the reality He wants us to have. Each time we subdue our inner selfishness for the sake of our marriages, we grow as a person and come closer to the ideal set before us. But that ideal doesn’t remain an ideal, it becomes a reality.

The greatest reality of marriage love is that during the course of their lives together a couple learns to focus more and more on the needs of the other, and to love and think and act in harmony with each other, until, in the words of the hymn, we “behold one angel, when the work is done.”

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 25:1-13; *Conjugal Love 57*