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## **The New Church Newsletter**

### **Hurstville Society May 2024**

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#### **Understanding Mental Illness and Spiritual Accountability**

by Rev Todd Beiswenger

On Saturday, 13<sup>th</sup> of April, Joel Cauchi stabbed and killed 6 people at the Bondi Junction Westfield, and injured another 12. He was shot dead by a police officer, who put an end to the rampage. Then, three days later in Sydney's west, Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel was giving a sermon, which was being live streamed on the internet, when a 16-year-old – who has not been named - approached and stabbed him multiple times.

This wasn't the teen's first offense. He was known to police after being caught with a knife at a train station last November, but was released on a good behaviour bond. He also had been found with knife at school in 2020.

I don't know where your mind goes when you read of stories like this, but I spend more time wondering about the perpetrators more than the victims. I think it's because I care more about a person's afterlife, so the victim will presumably, hopefully, wake up to eternal happiness while the Lord and His angels attend to those who were left behind. But as for the perpetrators... I wonder about their eternal soul. As a result, I usually look through the stories for one thing: reports of mental illness. If they're mentally ill, then perhaps they're not actually evil and can find their way to heaven. So here's what I found in an ABC News article about the teenager who stabbed the Bishop:

As a result of these prior offenses, the teen had seen three psychologists and a school counselor, and had an appointment to see a psychiatrist, his lawyer said during Friday's court hearing... The 16-year-old's lawyer, Greg Scragg, said the boy had a "long history of behavior" consistent with a mental illness or intellectual disability.<sup>1</sup>

What about Joel Cauchi? I found this on Wikipedia:

Cauchi suffered from mental health issues and was first diagnosed as such at the age of 17 with investigators stating that he was believed to have schizophrenia. Cauchi's mental health had deteriorated in recent years while his parents, who said that he had stopped taking medication noticed that he had

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<sup>1</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/teenager-charged-terrorism-offenses-stabbings-bishop-priest-sydney-109409046>

become fascinated with knives and began collecting about six of them in January 2023, adding that Joel had previously reported his father to police when he tried to take away his knives.<sup>2</sup>

Now, it might be fair to take these claims of mental illness with a grain of salt, because it might just be claimed because the lawyer thinks it is a solid defence. I also think you could make a good argument saying, “If a person does things, *of course* they have a mental illness.” So where’s the line between being spiritually accountable for your evil and not?

Whether or not they have a mental illness though is key to how culpable the perpetrators are for their crimes, both in this world and in the next. The Writings actually don’t say a whole lot about mental illness, but we get a couple of key passages in *Divine Providence*. This first one says: “No one is reformed in states where freedom and rationality are absent... There are many states that lack freedom and rationality, but in general they can be assigned to the following categories: states of fear, emergency, mental illness...” (DP 138).

Reformation is where our spiritual path starts, so if we can’t reform, we can’t regenerate. The next question that needs to be answered then is “What is the definition of a mental illness?” We get that a few paragraphs later: “Such illnesses are ones of melancholy, of spurious and false conscience, of various types of delusion, of grief of heart arising from misfortunes, of distress and mental anguish owing to some physical disorder - conditions which are sometimes regarded as temptations, but are not” (DP 141).

Over the years I’ve pondered these statements, and have taken them to give us a bit of free pass on bad behaviour if we meet the criteria

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024\\_Bondi\\_Junction\\_stabbings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Bondi_Junction_stabbings)

laid out. Do you think these two perpetrators have some “type of delusion?” Probably. So does their soul get a free pass on their stabbings? I wouldn’t call it that. To me, a best case scenario is that they’re going to have some work to do in the World of Spirits, which likely won’t be any fun. There may be a pass, but it won’t be free.

But what I find intellectually interesting about these passages is that they don’t say what I would have expected them to say. To my mind, I would have thought that “mental illness” would have been defined in a way such that having the mental illness was not the individual’s fault. It would be the equivalent of being born with bad eyes. You were just unlucky. And we do get one example of that *could* fit that description: mental anguish owing to some physical disorder.

Yet, if you look at the illnesses listed, it can also be something that we acquire through our life. “Melancholy,” or what we would probably call “depression,” can come about because we make bad choices... for example, we’re not nice to be around, then people choose not to hang out with us, and finally we’re depressed because we’re all alone. That can turn into a mental illness, and then it seems that we have lost our ability to regenerate. Who’s fault is that?

My cold heart wants to say, “Hey, it’s the individual’s fault!” But I don’t think that’s what the Lord is actually trying to tell me. I may be right, but what the Lord is saying is that He’s actually a lot more merciful than I am. I’ve seen plenty of children make a series of bad choices and their parent has to rescue them. Why would the Lord do any less?

These perpetrators have done some truly horrific things, and yet the Lord still wants to save their eternal soul and give them a place in heaven even if the mental illness came about through their own doing! Sure, they’ll have to cooperate with the Lord’s plan, but still... I don’t

know about you, but I think that's pretty amazing. God isn't good... He's Great.

### **Upcoming Perth Visit**

With the announcement of my departure came an invitation to come out and visit the folks in Perth one more time. The trip is scheduled for May 23-26, which at first felt rather soon considering I'll be here until December, but we're thinking that Dave Lindrooth will be visiting in September, so me going in May will spread out the visits a bit. It's going to be a busy trip, trying to see everybody again for what could be the last time. If not the last time, it will at least be a while I would imagine before I manage to get there again.

I've always enjoyed my visits out there, and I've found it somewhat amusing that most of the Australians I've met haven't ever been to Perth, let alone as many times as I have. I suspect we'll plan to have a lay service here in my absence. We do have a Society Meeting here scheduled for that Sunday, so we'll have to either reschedule that or you can just proceed without me. Happy to get your input on that.

### **Council of Ministers Meetings**

Earlier this month we had a few days of what amounts to Australian New Church clergy meetings. Originally there was to be a New Church In Australia (NCIA) assembly that was going to happen in Stanwell Tops, and the Council of Ministers (COM) Meetings would follow on after that. Well, the Assembly didn't happen, but the COM meetings did.

The main item on the agenda was really spending some time brainstorming and working out what it is that the NCIA should be doing going forward. It's a bit of a different situation than those of us in the General Church are accustomed to because the NCIA is an umbrella

organization for its associated congregations, but NCIA really doesn't not have authority over the congregations. In practical terms, they really can't say, "This is what we're all going to do."

Nevertheless, we spent time looking at what it is that the NCIA currently does, and if those functions would even be missed. If they would be missed, were they something that a congregation could pick up? We also did a SWOT analysis, which is Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Essentially the strengths and weaknesses are things that an organization does well, or not, that could provide it with a competitive advantage. Opportunities and threats are a look at the world around us, and so the goal is to figure out what we're good at, and see how we can use that strength to meet some demand in the world.

By the end of the meetings, the COM did provide the NCIA Board a few ideas/recommendations for them to consider. The Board is going to work through a similar process and see what they come up with as well. Suffice it to say that there's still work to be done, and while it's tough to be peddling religion these days, there are people who want what we've got. We just need to figure out how to find them and get it to them.

### **Falling in Love – The Nature of Evil**

One of the presentations given at the meetings was given by David Millar, and he titled it "Falling in Love – the Nature of Evil." If I understood him correctly, one of the problems we have is that when we think of evil, we think of it in terms of being something outside of us. Something is stolen, or somebody does violence to another... the evil is "over there." But David challenges us to is seeing that evil, at its core, is really about being in love with the idea that I am an independent, autonomous being.

The reality is that the Lord gives us this sense of self, but only the Lord is a truly independent autonomous being. The problem is that our sense

of self, that appearance of independence, feels so real to us that we will defend it to no end. Over the last 10 years or so we've seen "identity politics" become a big deal, and this comes about because the drive of the "self" is to see it self as something.

But what the Writings want us to see is that the self is a developing, moving thing, and is by no means permanent. If I believe I am a "self," and that is fundamental to my "being-ness," then there's no possibility of change. But if we see self as an appearance, then it is something that can change. This is what regeneration is all about, the creation of a new will, which is in reality a new self.

In this presentation we were also provided with a diagram, and what it shows is just how this one idea – seeing ourselves as independent autonomous beings - can take us so far off course. It's like starting off on a 1000 kilometer journey, but you're not quite pointed in the right direction when you leave home... at first you're not that far off track, but after hours of travel, you find that you're nowhere near your intended destination. It's true in travel, but it is also true with our minds: getting basic ideas wrong about the nature of reality can take us far away from our intended destination of a mental state where we are happy and content with life.

To my mind, one of the strengths of the New Church is how we have the keys to human psychology, and this presentation summarized it very well. Maybe the New Church needs to develop its "self" and make these teachings central to our identity... I think we would be able to generate a broader appeal promoting a spiritual psychology than our traditional approach of trying to attract disaffected Christians or those interested in the afterlife. David wants to refine this presentation further, but I do hope that at some point during the year that we can have him Zoom in and present it to us.

## Birthdays

Happy Birthday to, Naomi Heldon (20th), Matthew Cooper (25th),  
Daniel Walsh (27th), Brian Walsh (31st)

### ***What's "new" about the "New Church"?***

This is a very common question, to be sure. Well, it all started just over 200 years ago... The main branches of the Christian church had shifted their focus on to rituals and beliefs, and one man named Emanuel Swedenborg had written volumes about how Christianity was missing the point. Some readers of Swedenborg realised he was right, and formed a new organisation that would strip away the centuries of politics and tradition and get back to what Christianity was supposed to be about: loving God and loving each other. Everything else could be seen as merely a difference of opinion if those two main principles reigned supreme through this new church.

As a result we believe in a positive Christianity, one where we look to the best in ourselves and others while still holding ourselves accountable to a higher standard and taking responsibility for our lives. Nowadays we're not so much "new" as we are "different". We still keep the name, and yet make every effort to incorporate the ideals that were instrumental in being "new" over two centuries ago.

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