

Divine Providence in the Least Particulars of Your Life

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, August 18th, 2013

“...[D]o not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you” (Luke 12:29-31).

Possibly no teaching of Divine Revelation is more reassuring and yet more puzzling than that *all things*, even to the least detail, are under the government of the Lord’s Providence. “The very hairs of your head are all numbered,” we read in Luke (12:7), and in another place, “not a hair of your head shall be lost” (21:18). “Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin (or five for two in Luke 12:6)? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will.... Do not fear, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:29, 31).

In many different words like this throughout Revelation we are encouraged to believe that the Lord watches out for us in every least detail of our lives, protects us and provides that we will not be hurt in any way if we co-operate with Him. Yet, time and again we face the fact that apparently good, faithful people suffer dreadful crimes, diseases and “accidents.” We ourselves may experience miserable things for which we honestly cannot assume any direct responsibility. And we may wonder that we are not granted the protection of which the Lord speaks even though we make every effort to obey Him: we fall on bad times; we experience tragic losses; we suffer when it really looks as if we should be enjoying the blessings of faith. WHY?

At times like this if we retain our belief in God at all we are inclined to think of His Divine Providence as a sort of general or *universal* influence *not affecting the details* of our lives, these being left to human freedom and even casual impulses, wise or foolish. At best, with some humility, we may assume that hard times indicate defects of character so that, whether we know it or not we *deserve* to suffer, and the suffering is punishment for secret evils that we need to uncover in ourselves. This may or may not be the case. Either way, though, if some good people do suffer, and evil ones have success, how can we reconcile this experience with the Lord’s teaching that His Providence operates in the least particulars of life?

Well, first, let’s be sure we understand what is meant by Providence, and let’s be careful to consider the variety of teachings that relate to it. For example, though the Lord often spoke of watching over us, and of taking care of us, we should remember that He never promised us a life free of trials or temptations, hurts or hardships in this natural world. In fact He warned His disciples many times that they *would* suffer *many* things for His name’s sake, even death (Luke 21:16-17). So when He said that not a hair of their heads would “perish” or “be lost” it must be obvious either that He meant something other than physical loss or that He used the term “hair” symbolically. In fact both things are true, for the Word from beginning to end actually teaches us about our *spiritual*, not our natural lives, so every natural image simply represents something in our spiritual lives. Hair stands for the most outward aspects or details of our *spiritual* lives, namely, the choices, and the consequences of the choice we make. And loss, well, that obviously refers to a spiritual state, or what’s the point of the parable of the rich man who built big barns to

store all his worldly goods but neglected to care for his soul? “What,” we read, “shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” Or, conversely, what shall it harm a person if he should lose the whole world, and gain his soul?!

Remember the blessings in the sermon on the mount: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are *you* when they revile and persecute *you*, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. *Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad*, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:10-12).

One of the most important teachings of this church is that there can be no Providence in any general or universal sense unless it also exists in the least particular things. To say otherwise would be like saying that the whole of anything can exist without its parts. True, the whole may be more than the *sum* of its parts, but it can’t exist without them. Or, to take an example from human life, what king or queen, or what prime minister could govern a country without other ministers, officers and civil servants to administer the laws? Or what human body can function without a heart, lungs, liver, kidney, spleen, ears, eyes and so on? Sure, we can get by without some of these organs, especially if we compensate by other means, but the point is that we then have to compensate, since the whole depends on its parts, and functions accordingly. So the human race could not be preserved or sustained without the governing principles of the Lord’s Providence operating *all the time* and in every thing or action (AC 5122:3). Unlike ministers and civil servants, though, who govern only in outward external things, the Lord governs from within, so every natural *and spiritual* detail is included.

Of course, it goes without saying that God works in mysterious ways! Being finite we cannot possibly appreciate His *infinite* view. But again, the more we try the closer we get, and the more we focus on merely natural or external things the more we are inclined to think that Providence, if there is any at all, is merely general, and not in the details of our lives (AC 10775).

Furthermore, to see the *whole* picture (or at least as much as possible of it) the Lord tells us we need to look toward the end or purpose of Providence. Concerning this we read,

“The Divine Providence differs from all other leading and control in this, that Providence continually regards what is eternal, and continually leads to salvation, and this through various states, now glad, now sorrowful, which (we) cannot possibly comprehend, but which still are all conducive to eternal life” (AC 8560).

Again, it is angelic wisdom “that the Lord’s Providence is in the most singular of all things, but not in such an order as (we) propose to ourselves” because, after all, no one can see into eternity, still less manage or govern all the intricacies of the created universe so that they most perfectly serve the purpose of eternal life (AC 6486). But remember, eternal life is *spiritual* life – the timeless life of the spirit, so it follows from these and other teachings that the minute we lose the concept of spiritual life we lose a true concept of Providence.

It is natural for us if we feel hurt or limited in some way to assume that God’s power is hurt or limited, that He doesn’t care, or that things just happen by chance. But what kind of God can

govern a universe full of chance events? How could anything occur “by chance” to an all-seeing, all-knowing God? And if God doesn’t *care*, what’s the point? – we might as well be on our own.

On the other hand if we think in terms of laws – intimate *spiritual* laws that are constantly working within us to provide for us no matter what occurs in the world – our entire lives can make sense. And if we raise our thoughts to a spiritual perspective that includes an infinitely patient love for our freedom and rationality, our lives can have meaning. Note, though, it’s not just about some *future* life in some *other* world. It’s about where we are here and now. We read,

“If anyone takes Providence acting in an overall manner to mean the general preservation of the whole natural world in line with the order stamped on it when it was first created, he does not take into account the consideration that *nothing can remain in being unless it is constantly being brought into being*; for as is well known in the learned world, remaining in being is a constant *coming* into being, and preservation is accordingly *constant creation*. Consequently **Providence is present all the time in specific situations**” (AC 6482).

Natural, material or worldly blessings are not necessarily Divine blessings; conversely, although natural, worldly or material disasters are all consequences of some kind, they are not Divine punishments. Material things are important, but *focussing on them* inevitably detracts from the fulfilment of spiritual life. On the other hand, with the right perspective they can help:

“Therefore also,” we read, “the Lord provides the good, who accept His mercy during their time in the world, with such things as contribute to the happiness of their eternal life. He confers wealth and important positions on those to whom they can do no harm, *and withholds wealth and important positions from those to whom they can do harm*. To the latter nevertheless, during their time in the world, He imparts the ability to be glad with a few things instead of important positions and wealth, and to be more content than those who have wealth and important positions” (AC 8717:e).

In the end, therefore, as we know or *ought to know*, it is not what happens to us that reflects the Divine in our lives; it is how we *respond* to those things.

Take an example. Let’s say you live in an urban area (like this one) where you often hear fire sirens. One day you’re coming home in the car and you particularly notice the sirens in *your* neighborhood. What’s your first thought? – “Oh, man! I hope it’s not MY house?” Well, which one of your neighbor’s houses would you like it to be, then? Or would you rather that no careless action ever resulted in a fire? What are the implications? Would you alter the rules of cause and effect for every different situation? Of course we all wish people – including ourselves – would not be careless, but if we were not *permitted* to be careless we would not be human, for we would have no freedom and no sense of responsibility. In short, nothing we ever did would matter.

The same principles could be applied to a car crash, a disastrous flood or an epidemic of disease. The Lord doesn’t cause these things to happen but He permits them and provides in spite of them for our eternal life – including us, by the way, in the hope and joy of resolving the problems!

Given our heredity and our natural environment, we all have inclinations that are contrary to Providence. We all have limited vision and at best a very obscure picture of the blessings of spiritual life. We tend to think of ourselves first instead of the Lord or our neighbours. We tend to think of our material comfort instead of our internal states (even though our internal states are what suffer the most). These attitudes are not Provided by the Lord; they go against His will and so invite disasters, one after another, just as surely as if we were driving the wrong direction on a freeway! Within the framework of Providence we are free to do this, of course, but to do it brings consequences. So, to follow the analogy, the Lord has put up signs all along this freeway of life pointing out which way to go; He provides countless turn-arounds, bridges, cross-overs, on and off ramps, barriers, guardrails, even patrol cars and emergency vehicles so that we can avoid trouble, get help or change direction any time we're ready. In fact, this, really, is Providence itself: - *the continual, specific, detailed operation of the Divine Love and Wisdom to preserve what is good and restore what is lost.*

Of course, most of the time the operation of Divine Providence is secret, well hidden from our conscious view. Why? Because if it were not we would simply become enraged at the feeling of interference with what *we* wanted to do. The Lord knows better. He knows that He must lead silently, gently, subtly, *from within*, so that at any given moment we can look back from a state of improved spiritual life and really recognize and be thankful for His patience, mercy, wisdom and support, rather than worrying about His opposition to our plans for the future. Indeed, we may even be able to look back at times from an impoverished state and recognize these same Divine qualities with respect to our freedom and our need to take responsibility by learning the hard way. So He protects and preserves our identity as individual human souls, and He provides for the spiritual blessings that we really want, at whatever level we want.

Everything, absolutely every least thing, exists in the framework of the Divine Providence. It cannot be otherwise. Therefore when we see something fortunate and think, "Wow! *That* certainly was in Providence," let's stop and think again: *so is everything! So is everything.* Therefore the Lord said,

"Fear not, little flock, for it *is* your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32).

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all (that you need) shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 139:1-12
Children's talk on the Lord's Provide-ence

Luke 12:22 - 34 & Arcana Caelestia #6481, 6489-90, 6493