

## **The Stream of Providence**

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“Be it known that the Divine Providence is universal, that is, in things the most minute; and that they who are in the stream of Providence are all the time carried along toward everything that is happy, whatever may be the appearance of the means; and that those are in the stream of Providence who put their trust in the Divine and attribute all things to Him....” (AC 8478:4).

If you have ever sat by a river of water and watched how the current flows – faster in the middle, slower at the edges, quietly in the deep places and with more or less turbulence in the shallow, rocky places, rippling and tugging at anything that falls into it, circling in little eddies in the backwaters – if you’ve ever watched the current of a river flow you can have some idea of how the Lord’s Divine providence works in human life. For the water, even in the current of an ocean, is symbolic of the Divine truth which from good in the Lord’s mercy flows through all the events of our lives, coursing through the depths and shallows, carrying us along whether we know it or not, at times swiftly and urgently as if through rapids, and at other times quietly, with a subtlety that makes it almost imperceptible.

The Psalmist referred to this water of life when he spoke of the “river whose streams shall make glad the city of God” (Ps. 46:4). And Isaiah spoke of it when he said concerning Israel, “Oh, that you had heeded My commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your justice like the waves of the sea” (Is. 48:18).

There is something profoundly peaceful about a river. Even a little stream represents great power as we reflect on how in the course of time it carves an ever-changing pathway through soil and rock to reach its destination. Such power inspires peace because it puts our short-term anxieties in perspective and reminds us that we live in a world of marvelous and constant natural order, the laws of which are utterly free of whim or prejudice, moving steadily toward their goal of equilibrium and rest. Furthermore the energy of a stream can be used to spin turbines (or, in the old days, water wheels) to produce useful work, saving hard labor.

A river also calls to mind the beauty and harmony of life as we note the variety of plants and animals we always find along the banks of even the smallest creek. On a journey without a map, how do you find a river? Easy! - look for the trees that line its course. Part of the peacefulness of the river is its ability to support and provide for life – an obvious correspondence with the truths of religion that support and provide for our spiritual life.

Big rivers are especially restful because in them we sense the grandeur of God. Whether we stand at a point of deep silence where the water flows unobstructed, or at the edge of rushing rapids, or at the base of terrific, thundering falls, somehow we know and feel the sublime majesty of our Creator there, and find it at least a little easier to let our burdens go. It may not even be too much to say that something inside of us identifies with the flow of water as a symbol of the flowing energy of life. Where does it all come from? How is a large river so wonderfully replenished, drop by drop from thousands of percolating sources in tributaries that stretch out like the nerves of the human body to the farthest extremities of what we call a natural watershed?

The teachings of the New Church contain many references to rivers and currents of water in illustration of the principles at work in our spiritual lives. For instance,

“There is actually a sphere elevating all men towards heaven, which proceeds continually from the Lord, and fills the whole spiritual world, as well as the whole natural world. It is like a strong current in the ocean, which with hidden force carries a ship along. All those who believe on the Lord and live according to His commandments, enter that sphere or current and are raised upwards; but those who do not believe on Him, have no desire to enter that sphere, but turn aside and are caught up by the stream which flows into hell” (TCR 652:3).

What a beautiful, reassuring concept! Notice that it takes us into an appreciation of the Lord’s silent power as He leads us, yet it affirms the vital principle of human freedom to enter that sphere of power or to turn some other way. In other words, it characterizes us as vessels with rudders or sails (or strong engines of our own) able to turn ourselves into the current of Divine providence or against it. According to this teaching it is as easy as it is important for a person to know which direction he is steering, that is, either into or away from the current of providence, and this is done by learning and practicing the commandments, the laws of order. But it may still be impossible to FEEL the operation of that providence directly, since this involves many hidden forces and effects. Let’s just say by way of illustration, we might think we are in a terrible state of the doldrums (which is a sailor’s term meaning no wind, hence no progress), but because of our commitment to the spiritual laws of order we are actually in the very center of a strong current silently drawing us toward heaven. If we look down we don’t appear to be moving at all, but if we look out to the landmarks around us, and especially if we look up to heavenly things we will realize how forcefully the Lord is leading us.

Maybe not many of us have experienced an ocean’s current far from land. Most of us, though, can picture ourselves in a rowboat or a raft or canoe gliding peacefully down a wide river. Think about it. Picture yourself leaning back or lying down in that boat. All is quiet and perfectly still, or so it seems until we pass swiftly under an over-arching tree. And suddenly we see how we’re being carried along. At this point we may be stirred to action – to make sure we don’t go somewhere we don’t want to go, or... we may be soothed by the delightful feeling of making progress without any effort! (Of course there is no real progress without effort, so the analogy is only valid to the extent that we bear in mind the determination needed in the first place to get into that river, or into the current that will carry us along.)

But there is also another way of looking at this picture in order to get a more comprehensive view, and that is to see ALL the elements in it as aspects of ourselves. In this view we are not just the raft or the person in the raft being swept away by some outside force; the raft AND the river AND the tree, and whatever other features we may find in the vision are *parts of us*. This seems strange at first, no doubt because we generally find it easier to blame outside forces for our life’s direction rather than take responsibility ourselves. But the New Church encourages us to go deeper. Consider this, from the book, Divine Providence: –

“...Every delight that anyone has is from his love, nor can delight come from any other source. To act from the delight of love is to act in freedom, *for a person is led by delight as something that is borne along by the current of a river*” (DP 73).

Here we find that the main current in the river of life is the delight of love operating silently within our hearts. The raft or canoe is the thinking part of ourselves, the rational faculty supporting our love as we glide along with the flow. In this view the surrounding landmarks such as the over-arching tree are the knowledge and perceptions that come to our awareness as indicators of our progress and direction. Again, we read,

“Thought flows on its own delight like a ship in the current of a river...” (DP 198, also 296:9).

Even the obstacles, the rocks, the driftwood and the falls that interrupt the flow of our delight on this journey are things within our character that stand in the way of fulfillment and rest. These may be incorrect or useless ideas, harmful, disruptive tendencies, fear and self-centeredness, all sorts of things that may cause violent swings of emotion, damage to spiritual life, lack of progress, even total destruction. Just think about how we get stuck in the eddies and backwaters of life, spinning around and around, getting nowhere fast, or how we rush headlong toward a spiritual precipice without even knowing it – and why? – not because someone or some thing outside of ourselves pushed us aside, or down that river, but really because we *turned* aside to do something irrelevant or fell asleep while we were meant to be steering in a better direction!

But now, let’s ask the obvious question: – if the Divine providence is like a river or a current in the ocean carrying us along toward what is good, and if our delights are also like a river carrying us along toward whatever feels good, how is it that the Lord truly governs our lives?

The answer is that He governs by gently *influencing* our loves, little by little to help us get on course, never forcing us but always providing us with new opportunities to recognize and follow the rules of spiritual order – in much the same way we are prompted by our experience of consequences to learn and follow the rules of nature. We are not created to change *suddenly*, but since we start out self-centered and focused on natural things we do need to change in order to prepare for heaven. But, we read,

“If a person saw clearly the operations of the Divine Providence he would go contrary to God and also deny Him, because man is in the delight of self-love, and this delight constitutes his very life. Therefore, when he is kept in the delight of his life he is in his freedom, for freedom and that delight make one. If, therefore, he perceived that he is constantly being led away from his delight he would be enraged as against one who desired to destroy his life, and would regard him as an enemy. In order to prevent this the Lord does not manifestly appear in His Divine Providence, *but by it He leads man as silently as an imperceptible stream or favoring current carries a vessel along*” (DP 186).

This may seem like a deceptive tactic, but in fact it’s the model of perfect government. No one is forced against his will; rather we are all drawn along by the power of love, and the Lord moves us in the spirit of *His* love and truth if we co-operate with Him. Therefore...

“Be it known also that insofar as anyone is in the stream of Providence, so far he is in a state of peace; also that insofar as anyone is in a state of peace from the good of faith, so far he is in the Divine providence” (AC 8478:4).

This is a challenging teaching for most of us, depending on the circumstances of our lives. We TRY to do the right thing and yet misfortunes seem to occur regardless. The “trick” is to remind ourselves again and again of the bigger picture of eternal life – heavenly life, spiritual life, *internal life*, that is, the life of our own affections and thoughts. We can’t control what other people think and do, even when it affects us negatively, but we CAN – with the Lord’s help – control how we respond to it. We can be miserable or we can be “content with our lot;” we can be bitter or we can be kind – truly kind from an inner disposition to see some long term good. We can be anxious or we can be still and wait for the Lord’s love and wisdom to become clear to us.

Inner peace is not always obvious, even in ourselves, but when we act according to our conscience it lies hidden within all that we do. So we read about the regenerating man: –

“...at first he is in a state of tranquillity; but as he passes into a new life, he also passes at the same time into an untranquil state; for the evils and falsities with which he had before become imbued emerge and come forth, and disturb him, and this at last to such a degree that he is in temptations and vexations inflicted by the diabolical crew, who are continually striving to destroy the state of his new life. *Yet inmostly the man is in a state of peace*, for unless this were with him inmostly, he would not fight, for in his combats he is continually looking to this state as the end, and unless he had such an end, he would in no wise have power and strength to fight” (AC 3696).

And so we affirm what was written in the very first Psalm, a psalm of David who himself famously suffered many temptations in his life.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.

“He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper” (Psalm 1).

Amen.

Lessons:     Ezekiel 47:1-12  
                Children’s talk about the water (truth) flowing out of the New Temple

Psalm 46 and Arcana Caelestia #8478:4-5