

### The Mystery of Providence

Last month we reflected on conformity to the divine will, which is at the heart of holiness. In the first place, this is conformity to God's *signified will*, made known to us in advance of the event – whether by his commandments, by the evangelical counsels, or by his inspirations in our hearts. Then there is the further stage of abandoning ourselves to God's *will of good pleasure*, trustingly accepting all that ends up actually happening, as somehow being part of his wise and loving providence. (Here we forestalled some misconceptions of this, that could leave us passive in the face of evil and suffering.)

St Francis de Sales' classic *Treatise on the Love of God* is a major guide for understanding this doctrine; we also looked at Fr Jean-Pierre de Caussade as a great teacher of this way. It is good to listen further to their words, which sum up what some have called the 'sacrament of the present moment'. St Francis de Sales writes: 'Every moment comes to us pregnant with a command from God, only to pass on and plunge into eternity, there to remain forever what we have made it.'

And Fr de Caussade tells us: 'You would be very ashamed if you knew what the experiences you call setbacks, upheavals, pointless disturbances, and tedious annoyances really are... Nothing happens to you except by the will of God, and yet his beloved children curse it because they do not know it for what it is.'

'There is not a moment in which God does not present Himself under the cover of some pain to be endured, of some consolation to be enjoyed, or of some duty to be performed. All that takes place within us, around us, or through us, contains and conceals His divine action.' 'God speaks to all individuals through what happens to them moment by moment.' 'The present moment holds infinite riches beyond your wildest dreams.'

Love for the will of God was also central to the spirituality of St Mary of the Cross. The Office of Readings for her feast quotes one of her letters, where she writes: 'I cannot tell you what a beautiful thing the will of God seems to me... I feel a joy when things go well, for I see His will in this, and an equal joy when they seem to go wrong or against our natural desire, for there again I see His will, and am satisfied that He has accepted my prayers and those of many more for some other object at the time nearer to His adorable will. To me, the will of God is a dear book which I am never tired of reading, which has always some new charm for me.'

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In this context of conformity to the divine will, we look more deeply at the doctrine of divine providence itself. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us: 'By his providence God protects and governs all things which he has made.' (302) 'The solicitude of divine providence is concrete and immediate; God cares for all, from the least things to the great events of the world and its history.' (303) 'Divine providence works also through the actions of creatures. To human beings God grants the ability to cooperate freely with his plans.' (323)

Our faith in providence is especially confronted by the mystery of evil and suffering. If God is all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful, how can he allow suffering and evil to happen? No mere 'academic' answer to our questionings will fully satisfy us, let alone take away suffering. And in the end, we should not be surprised at the presence of mystery. This word is not an evasion of the question but an acknowledgement of the obvious truth that the human mind, its

concepts and its information, are a drop in the ocean compared with the reality of God and his plan for the universe. Yet it is still worthwhile to listen to the wisdom of the great saints and theologians as they have struggled with these questions.

St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas developed the insight, coming from Greek philosophy, that evil is not a positive entity but essentially a ‘privation’ – that is, the *lack* of a good which ought to be present. This can refer to a ‘physical’ evil, such as sickness (the privation of bodily health, order and harmony) or death (the privation of life); it also applies to the moral evil of sin, the deepest evil, in which a freely chosen act of a person lacks due harmony with reason and moral law. Because evil is an ‘absence’ of being rather than a positive thing, we do not logically need to trace its existence back to the direct activity of God, the First Cause. Since God is Being and Goodness, his creative act (which always produces a reflection of himself) can only be of being and goodness.

Still, there is mystery: it seems that God, while not creating evil, often lets it happen when he could have prevented it. The *Catechism* tells us, ‘The fact that God permits physical and even moral evil is a mystery that God illuminates by his Son Jesus Christ who died and rose to vanquish evil. Faith gives us the certainty that God would not permit an evil if he did not cause a good to come from that very evil, by ways that we shall fully know only in eternal life.’ (324)

What are some of these goods, for the sake of which God refrains from preventing evil? First, created freedom itself is a great good, since it is a necessary condition of love, in which lies our ultimate fulfilment. However, this means that there is the possibility that any individual will instead choose to reject love. God permits that possibility to be realised, and, respecting the human freedom he has created, allows our evil choices to have their natural consequences.

Even from these consequences, further good is possible. Certain goods, such as compassion, patience and forgiveness, are only possible as responses to perceived evil. Acts of mercy, or of courageous resistance to injustice, are good and beautiful, not merely because of their usefulness in fighting evil, but in themselves. The world would be a lesser place without them and would be a less complete reflection of the full range of divine goodness.

These acts of loving response to evil are not mere passing moments. United with the Cross of Christ, they also share his triumph over evil in his Resurrection: each of our loving actions will bear fruit in an everlasting reality beyond our understanding. The mystery of the Cross thus reveals the nature of God’s providence, which works, not by preventing all evils, but by bringing life from death.

In the face of the mystery, the *Catechism* concludes with words of confident faith, quoting St Catherine of Siena: ‘Everything comes from love, all is ordained for the salvation of man, God does nothing without this goal in mind.’ And St Thomas More, shortly before his martyrdom: ‘Nothing can come but that that God wills. And I make me very sure that whatsoever that be, seem it never so bad in sight, it shall indeed be the best.’ (313)

‘We firmly believe’, the *Catechism* declares, ‘that God is master of the world and of its history.’ (314) ‘But the ways of his providence are often unknown to us. Only at the end, when our partial knowledge ceases, when we see God “face to face”, will we fully know the ways by which – even through the dramas of evil and sin – God has guided his creation to that definitive sabbath rest for which he created heaven and earth.’