

IN HIS HAND ARE ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

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ONE OF THE most consoling truths of our faith is what theologians call the universality of divine providence. It is the doctrine that God extends His fatherly care to all things—even to the least. Nothing is so trifling, nothing so made that it is left to itself. Every *thing* and every *happening* has its place in the plan of the world's Architect, and is directed to its goal by the Ruler of the universe, Who created all things in order to reveal His goodness. (*Summa Theologica*, I, I, 44, 4)

God's rule over all things by His providence is a consoling truth, because it inspires one to trust in God and to abandon himself to His holy will, even as a child surrenders to the embrace of his father. This sentiment is often sung in the Psalms: "Protect me under the shadow of thy wings." (16, 8) "Thou art my God; my lots are in thy hands." (30, 16) "Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." (30, 6) "Cast thy care upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee." (54, 23) "I am thine." (118, 94)

THE PROBLEMS

Yet there are few who have a living faith in this unfailling providence of their Father in heaven. We believe firmly enough that God is indeed provident, having care for His creatures, but we seem to stagger when required to believe that *nothing* is outside of His providence. We are beset by problems which seem to argue against everything being or happening by divine design.

For one thing, if all that happens is forseen by God and is under His direction, how can anything be said to happen by chance? To speak of it and to ascribe things to luck—good or bad—would seem to be foolish. This problem leads to another. If God controls everything by His providence, then it appears that nothing could happen in any other way than it does, that everything must be just as it is. But is this so? How too, if we are free, and have the power to act and not to act, and to act as we please—how can it be that our actions are always in accord with the plan of God? Do not our very sins frustrate His providence?

This question of sin raises a still larger problem—the ancient mystery of evil. How many evils we witness in the world: crimes and calamities, diseases, premature deaths, and suffering of every

kind. Surely God could prevent these evils if He wished. And why are vicious men often permitted to prosper and the good to suffer? This is the most trying problem of all. Even King David cried out in anguish: "I have studied that I might know this thing: it is a labor in my sight." (Ps. 72, 16) Such are the age-old questions which buffet men's faith in the universality of divine providence.

WHAT GOD HAS REVEALED

And yet we may no more doubt this doctrine than we may doubt that of the Blessed Trinity. Both are revealed to us by God, and both are proposed to us by the Church. In the sweet words of Sacred Scripture the Holy Ghost assures us that God's providence *does* embrace everything. "There is no other God but thou, who hast care of all." (Wisd. 12, 13) "Thou hast ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight." (Wisd. 11, 21) And of divine wisdom we read that "she reaches from end to end mightily, and ordereth all things sweetly." (Wisd. 8, 1) Not only does God by His providence "reach" all things, but He does so "mightily"—His power is not lessened for seeming to reach further—and even "sweetly!"

Our Lord in Person tells us that God cares for even the most trifling things. "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered." (Matt. 10, 29) And He speaks of God "feeding" the birds of the air and "clothing" the grass

TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

Holy Mother the Church solemnly seconds the teaching of Scripture. Echoing the words of the Book of Wisdom, she instructs her children that "all things which He has created, God governs and protects by His providence, reaching from end to end mightily and ordering all things sweetly."¹ And turning doctrine into prayer, she praises God's universal providence in her liturgy.

O potent Ruler, truthful God,
Who rulest all with tempering rod,
Flooding the morn with splendors bright,
Kindly the noon with fires of light:²

In another hymn she sings:

O God, creation's secret force,
Thyself unmoved, all motions source,
Who from morn to evening's ray
Through every change dost guide the day:³

¹ Vatican Council.

² Byrnes, Aquinas, O.P., *The Hymns of the Dominican Missal and Breviary*. Hymn for Sext.

³ Byrnes, *ibid.* Hymn for None.

And in the prayer of the Mass for the seventh Sunday after Pentecost the Church prays:

O God, whose providence in its ordering faileth not: we humbly beseech thee, that whatsoever is harmful thou mayst withhold, and whatsoever is helpful, thou mayst bestow.

WHAT IS PROVIDENCE?

St. Thomas Aquinas, the Common Doctor of the Church, helps us to appreciate the doctrine of God's providence by showing us the reasons in Sacred Theology upon which it stands. He first clarifies the notion of just what is meant by God's providence. It might be described as the divine Architect's blueprint of the universe. Like an architect who by his blueprint orders or arranges many different things—stones, lumber, windows, etc.—in such a way as to make a house, God in somewhat the same way has a plan or idea in His mind according to which He directs His creatures to the end for which He has made them. And this is what we call His providence. For providence, or providing for the future, is the major task of the man of prudence, whose *total* task is to order or dispose the means to the end. A prudent father, for instance, takes the measures necessary for the support of his family. So, in general, providence is a person's idea of means to end, and *God's* providence is *His* idea or plan of the order of creatures to their goal. (I, I, 22, 1) God, of course, carries out and fulfills this plan, He directs things to their end, He governs them.⁴ So when we say that by His providence God governs all things, we mean that He has a plan for the universe and that He *fulfills* it.

There is no questioning, of course, the fact that God does have such a plan. For the order of creatures to their end is something good, no less so than their very existence. This order then is something made by God, the maker of *all* good things. And God is an intelligent maker, He has an idea or plan of what He does before He does it. No intelligent builder builds without knowing what and why he builds. The same is true of God. To doubt His providence would be to doubt His mind.⁵

WHY PROVIDENCE IS UNLIMITED

But what reason does St. Thomas give for the *universality* of divine providence? How is it that God governs *all* things by it? As we might expect, it is because God is the First Cause of all things. Whatever is, in any way, is ultimately because of God—the stars and

⁴ Billuart, O.P., *Summa Sancti Thomae*, I, dissertatio ix, a. 1.

⁵ Billuart, *ibid.*

the course of the stars, the sea and the grains of sand, the hairs on our head and the beating of our heart, the drop of rain and the murmur of a mosquito, each thing and each event, everything great and everything small—*nothing* would be without God. "Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all things that are in them." (Ps. 145, 6) This is one of the first lessons of both reason and our faith. There are many causes, to be sure—anything that *acts* is a cause—but God is the one First Cause. Everything else causes by the power given it by God. And not only does God make and cause all things, but He does so freely, of His own free will. It follows then that God is the master and ruler of all His creatures, that He governs and cares for them. For just as *we* have power and control over those things which are subject to our free will—our own human actions, for instance—so God has control over everything which comes from *His* free will, directing it to the end He has chosen for it. And *all* things come from His free will, for He made all things freely. So He governs all by His providence. And this is to affirm nothing more, after all, than that God is the Lord and King of all creation. Because He gives being to everything He governs everything. (*Contra Gentiles*, bk. 3, c. 1)

Part of our trouble in realizing this is due to the fact that the defects and failures we experience in *human* providence make it hard for us to understand how divine providence *cannot* fail. In the activity or work of someone we see something happen which is not ordered to the purpose of his work, which is not a part of his plan. A man dashing to work, for example, is tripped up by a banana peel and goes to the hospital instead. This happens, of course, because of the action of another cause, which is opposed to the action of the man in question and is not intended by him; namely, the careless little boy who dropped the banana peel on the sidewalk. And so we are inclined to imagine that things like that interfere with the providence of God. Yet how could it be, since nothing could happen unless God Himself made it to happen or at least allowed it to happen? So again we see that God's control extends no less further than whatever He does or causes. And since He is the First Cause of all things, He governs all things, His providence embraces all things. (I, I, 22, 2)

Let's look at it from another aspect. We see that whatever produces anything takes care of the things it produces. So plants will not surrender their seed before it has reached maturity, animals nourish and defend their young, parents educate their children. And yet in producing these things creatures are simply *imitations* of the First Cause Who is God. How much more then does God care for the

things that *He* produces. (C. G. 3, 75) In the Old Testament He says: "Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? And if she should forget, yet will I not forget thee." (Isai. 49, 15) And in the New Testament Our Lord declares: "If you then being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father from heaven give the good Spirit to them that ask him." (11, 13)

THE PROBLEMS AGAIN

We see then that God does care for all things by His providence. What answers, therefore, shall we make to the problems posed at the beginning, which seem to show that some things are *not* a part of His providence? Again we turn to St. Thomas for an indication of the answers. It is well, however, to note first that God's providence is not without mystery to us. We may know something of it, but not everything, for that is the nature of a mystery. Providence indeed has its reasons, but it would be presumption for anyone to expect to know fully the mind of God. St. Thomas has written much on these problems of divine providence. We can hope here only to show the broad lines of his explanations.

What then is to be said for things that happen by chance? Is there really such a thing, if God foresees all? Yes and no. As regards ourselves, things do happen by chance. As regards God, no. When something occurs which we do not foresee and over which we have no control, we say correctly that it happens by chance, it's "our luck." But nothing is beyond the control of God. So far as He is concerned then, nothing happens by chance. "Lots are cast into the lap, but they are disposed of by the Lord." (Prov. 16, 33) It is as if an editor purposely sent a reporter and also a friend to the scene of an accident, without either one knowing the other had been sent. Their meeting then at the accident would be a chance meeting to them, but not to the editor. (I, I, 22, *ad* 1)

Does divine providence mean that everything happens of necessity? Does it also take away our free will? Most certainly not. As St. Thomas teaches, God in His providence does not destroy the nature of things, but preserves them. He moves each thing in accord with its nature. So for an effect He wishes to take place of *necessity*, He prepares a necessary cause: "Who made the sun to rule the day." (Ps. 135, 8) And for an effect He wishes not to happen of necessity He prepares a cause which can fail and be impeded: whether or not the tree bears fruit depends upon its growing power, which is able to be hindered. As far as our freedom is concerned, because God wants

us to act freely, He has gifted us with the power of choice. And not only for the gift, but also for the *use* of it we depend upon Him, the First Cause. "The heart of man disposeth his way: but the Lord must direct his steps." (Prov. 16, 9) God then being the First Cause of all these things, they are all under His providence. (I, II, 10, 4)

EVIL UNDER DIVINE PROVIDENCE

What, lastly, is to be said for the place of evil in divine providence? Should not a wise provider, such as God surely is, seek to prevent defects and evils from those things of which He has care? Before giving St. Thomas' reply to the question, we must remind ourselves that God in no way wills the evils of sin, for God does not wish that anyone should turn away from His divine Goodness, since He wills this above *all* things. He does of course *permit* sin, even as He permits physical evil and the evil of punishment for sin. The question then is why God does permit evil.

Someone who has care of only one or a limited number of things, as we see from experience, does seek to prevent defects from those things, as much as he can. But one who has care of a whole class of things, or God Who has care of *all* things, permits defects in some of them in order that the good of the whole, of all things taken together, may not be impeded. For if all evils and defects were prevented, many *good* things would be lacking to the world. "A lion would cease to live," says St. Thomas, "if there were no slaying of animals; and there would be no patience of martyrs if there were no tyrannical persecution." (I, I, 22, 2, *ad* 2) St. Augustine writes: "Almighty God would in no wise permit evil to exist in His works, unless He were so almighty and so good as to produce good even from evil."⁶

As regards some of the particular evils in the world, natural defects, such as monstrosities—these prove rather than disprove God's providence. For like the exceptions that prove the rule, the failure of these things to attain the end of nature, shows that nature does move toward a goal and is thus ruled by providence. Besides, these defects make us more aware of the perfection of the rest of nature. They are like the intervals of silence in a symphony, which enhance its harmony.

Neither are crimes and other sins outside of divine providence. Besides the purposes unknown to us, God allows them in order that there may be a place for His mercy and justice, that these divine perfections may not be hidden from our eyes. For after all, "his tender mercies are over all his works." (Ps. 144, 9)

⁶ *Enchiridion*, c. 11.

As for suffering in the world—common to both good and bad—it may be said that while it punishes the wicked, it instructs, purifies, and proves the good, and prepares them for the crown of heaven. Sacred Scripture confirms this truth: “Thou hast corrected man for iniquity.” (Ps. 38, 12) And “as silver is tried by fire, and gold in the furnace: so the Lord trieth the hearts.” (Prov. 17, 3)

Neither is the frequent affliction of the just and prosperity of the unjust without a possible explanation. There is no one so good that he has not sinned, nor anyone so bad that he has never done any good deed. So it is then that God, Who leaves no good unrewarded and no evil unpunished, chastises the sins of the virtuous in this life and rewards the good works of the wicked by temporal prosperity. For both, though, He reserves a greater payment in the life to come. Of unrepenting and prospering sinners we read in the Psalms: “As the dream of them that awake, O Lord; so in thy city thou shalt bring their image to nothing.” (72, 20)⁷

Without belittling then the fact that God’s universal providence is one of the *mysteries* of faith, we see that the difficulties involved in understanding it are not altogether without explanation. Faith itself is the light that dispels the darkness of deism and fatalism, showing us that God governs all things by His providence. He is the Lord of *all*.

Come let us praise the Lord with joy: let us joyfully sing to God our saviour.

Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving; and make a joyful noise to him with psalms.

For the Lord is a great God, and a great king above all gods. For in his hand are all the ends of the earth: and the heights of the mountains are his.

For the sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land.

Come let us adore and fall down: and weep before the Lord that made us.

For he is the Lord our God: and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 94, 1-8)

His be the glory, power and salvation,
Who over all things reigneth in the highest,
Earth’s mighty fabric ruling and directing,
Onely and Trinal.⁸

⁷ Billuart, *op. cit.*

⁸ Byrnes, *op. cit.* Hymn of the Common of a Confessor.