

FAITH IN DIVINE PROVIDENCE

(Lecture delivered in Shanahan Hall, Onitsha, on 24 August, 2019)

God is creator. He is the one and only creator of everything that exists. He has gifted every creature of his with capacity to act according to the nature that he has given to that being. Therefore angels, human beings, beasts, trees and stones, each has its God-given nature and type of activity.

God the creator has given human beings the great gift of intelligence and free will, so that men and women can know and also choose to act in this way rather than in that. Considering that God knows everything, that he enables every creature to act and that he provides for every detail in human life, the question arises about the faith and trust which human beings should have in divine providence, and also on what is expected of people in this important matter.

We shall begin our reflections by stating briefly what we mean by divine providence. What Holy Scripture teaches us about it in the Old and the New Testaments deserves our close attention. Some Saints have spoken about the question and it is in our own interest to listen to them. Thereafter, we shall list some situations that do test faith in divine providence. Some people have assumed behaviour towards divine providence which is not correct and we need to be on our guard against such positions. What the Church teaches on divine providence will be stated. We shall conclude with suggesting how people can react when crosses arise in their lives.

1. Divine Providence: Notion

God the creator enables beings not only to exist but also to act, each one according to its nature. No creature, whether they be angels, men, animals, flowers or rocks, can act without God's concurrence. God is First Cause. Creatures are secondary causes. "God is the sovereign master of his plan. But to carry it out he also makes use of his creatures' cooperation. This use is not a sign of weakness, but rather a token of almighty God's greatness and goodness. For God grants his creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus of cooperating in the accomplishment of his plan" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, henceforth CCC, 306).

This means, in the case of human beings, that men and women can and should work on the things that God has made, like wood, crops, water, metals and food items. In this sense, God created the first man and woman and gave them dominion over what he had created to "fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every

living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1:28). In this sense, human work is cooperation with divine providence on what God has created, to perfect things both for society and for himself. Therefore, the action of secondary causes cannot be denied: angels and human beings act freely; dogs, cats and horses act instinctively; and trees and stones act necessarily.

“The truth that God is at work in all the actions of his creatures”, says the CCC, “is inseparable from faith in God the Creator. God is the first cause who operates in and through secondary causes; ‘For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure’ (Phil 2:13; cf 1 Cor 12:6) Far from diminishing the creature’s dignity, this truth enhances it. Drawn from nothingness by God’s power, wisdom, and goodness, it can do nothing if it is cut off from its origin, for ‘without a Creator the creature vanishes’ (*Gaudium et Spes*,36). Still less can a creature attain its ultimate end without the help of God’s grace” (CCC, 308).

By Divine Providence, therefore, we mean that by his wisdom and power, God orders everything that he has created in the entire universe to function in a way that will lead it to attain the purpose for which God created it.

2. Divine Providence in the Old Testament

The narration of creation in the Book of Genesis manifests God’s plan, protection and continued action on what he had created: darkness, light, water, seas, dry land, trees, sun, moon, seasons, sea and land creatures and finally man.

Abraham called by God, given special promises, tested in his faith in God, is abundantly rewarded for his fidelity.

The people of Israel are chosen by divine providence, as manifested in the choice of Jacob, the care over Joseph, the protection of the chosen people in Egypt, the exodus, the 40 years in the desert, the Covenant relationship and the introduction into the promised land.

The Book of Job is a teaching piece on divine providence and on how people should react in front of unexplained and unmerited suffering.

The Book of Psalms shows a beautiful elevation of the devout soul to the Creator in faith, trust, reliance on providence, thanksgiving and praise.

The Wisdom Books invite people to bow in front of the greatness of God, to obey his commandments, to avoid evil and not to be misled when they see wicked men prosper.

The prophet Isaiah and the other prophets kept alive among the chosen people of God a belief in God's caring providence. And that God was calling all nations to his holy mountain, was their instruction. No one should think that God has forsaken him or forgotten him. "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?", God says through the prophet Isaiah. "Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have gravened you on the palms of my hands" (Is 49:15-16).

We can say, therefore, that in the Old Testament, humanity was being prepared for the New Testament, for the coming of the Saviour of the whole world.

3. Divine Providence in the New Testament

The Incarnation of the Son of God is the supreme and central demonstration of the providence of God in the New Testament. In the fullness of time God sent his Only-begotten Son for the redemption of all men and women. The Archangel Gabriel brought God's plan to Zechariah, to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to Joseph, announcing to each what Divine Providence was assigning to that individual. The great details of the mystery of redemption unfolded in the Nativity of the Saviour in Bethlehem, the visit by the magi, the flight into Egypt and the many years of the Holy Family in Nazareth.

The public life of Jesus was marked especially by his inauguration of the Kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount, his preaching throughout the length and breadth of Palestine, his many miracles, his founding of his Church, and especially by the paschal mystery of his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension.

On his Church the Lord Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church spread with such unction that at the preaching of Peter, three thousand people believed in Christ and were baptized (cf Acts 2:41). The Council of Jerusalem declared to the Gentiles that they were not bound by the details of the Old Law but that it was enough to believe in Jesus and live the new life introduced by the Lord Jesus. The conversion of Saint Paul and his dynamic preaching of the Word to the Gentiles showed the power of divine providence in calling all nations to Christ. Indeed, the whole of the New Testament manifests the providence of God. It shows us a God "who so loved the world that he gave his Only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

Divine providence, contrary to what some people might have expected, used opposition and suffering in the earthly life of Christ to save humanity. Born

in a stable, compelled to take refuge in Egypt, having to live a poor and obscure life for about 30 years in Nazareth, faced with opposition in his public life of preaching and working miracles, Christ the Saviour suffered a bitter passion, died for all humanity on the cross and rose from the dead on the third day. Jesus Christ is the one and only Saviour of all men and women. In him God's plan of salvation for all humanity has been fulfilled, for "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

4. Divine Providence as testified by some Saints

It is instructive for us to look into what some Saints have said or done in manifestation of their faith in divine providence. We shall limit ourselves to an arbitrary selection of some recent Saints.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), in a letter written to all the faithful, draws the attention of all to how Jesus bowed to the will of his Father and thus left us an example. In the agony of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed the Father that if it was possible, the cup of suffering be taken from him. The saint continues: "Nevertheless, he reposed his will in the will of his Father" (*Opuscula*, edit. Quaracchi 1949, 87-94, in Second Reading, Oct. 4, of the Breviary).

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) teaches that God is the universal cause of all things. This does not exclude particular or secondary causes. Divine providence imposes necessity upon some things, not on all. Divine providence has therefore produced every grade of being: some act out of necessary causes, and others from contingent causes, according to the nature of proximate causes. The mode of necessity and contingency falls under the foresight of God (cf *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars*, q. 22).

Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) says to "those who are scandalized and rebel against what happens to them: Everything comes from love, all is ordained for the salvation of man, God does nothing without this goal in mind" (*Dialogue on Divine Providence*, Cap. IV, 138).

Saint Thomas More (1477-1535), during his unjust imprisonment crowned with martyrdom under Henry VIII, gave an excellent witness of his faith and trust in divine providence in his famous letter to his daughter Margaret: "I cannot but trust in his merciful goodness...I cannot, therefore, mistrust the grace of God. Either he shall keep the king in that gracious frame of mind to continue to do me no harm, or else, if it be his pleasure that for my other sins I suffer in this case as I shall not deserve, then his grace shall give me the strength to bear it patiently, and perhaps even gladly...Nothing can come but what God wills. And I am very

sure that whatever that be, however bad it may seem, it shall indeed be the best” (*The English Works of Sir Thomas More*, London, 1557, p. 1454; quoted in the Breviary on 22 June). Here is an obvious saint speaking on divine providence!

The Carmelite reformer, Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), is famous for her poem: “Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing away: God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices”.

The mystic who worked together with the last-named in the reform of the Carmelite Order, Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591), in his *Sayings of Light and Love*, advises us to seek to do God’s will rather than our own: “What does it profit you to give God one thing if he asks of you another? Consider what God wants and then do it. You will as a result satisfy your heart better than with something toward which you yourself are inclined” (*The Sayings of Light and Love*, n. 72, 73).

The youthful Saint Aloysius Gonzaga (1568-1591), in a letter to his mother during his last illness and in view of his impending death, advises his mother to accept God’s will in his coming death and to see it as an act of God’s love and care (see Second Reading in the Breviary for 21 June).

Saint Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897) is a great model in how to abandon oneself entirely to divine providence and to want only what God wants. Some of her sayings attest to this: “The good God will have to do all the things I want in heaven, because I never did my will on earth”. “The good God has made me desire always what he wanted to give me”. “I was ordered to pray for the cure of my father on the day of my profession (i.e. 8 September, 1890); but it was impossible for me to say anything but the following: My God, I pray to you, may it be your will that papa gets well”. “What the good God loves more and chooses for me is what pleases me more”. “I have only one desire, to do his will”. It is not by accident that this saint often says “the good God”. This is an indication of her trust in, and love for, divine providence. Is it then a total surprise that on 19 October, 1997, Saint John Paul II declared a Doctor of the Church this saint who died at the age of 24?

Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe (1894-1941) in his letters advises that obedience to superiors is a sure way to know and do God’s will because God who is all-knowing and all-wise knows best what we should do to increase his glory.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) distinguished herself by her total conformity with God’s will. She would often say: “May God help us not to spoil his work”. Her biographer testifies that “in everything she placed herself

completely and utterly at the disposal of divine providence. She did not want to develop strategic plans or worry about money matters -- from the very beginning she knew it was to be entirely his work. And the Lord rewarded her trust” (Leo Maasburg: *Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, San Francisco, 2011, p.27).

Saint John Paul II (1920-2005) tasted suffering to an intense degree. On 13 May 1981, Ali Agca shot at him to kill him. He suffered. In the following 20 years he was admitted to hospital eight times. In 1984 he issued an Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris, on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*. In it he teaches that when a person suffers and offers with Christ and through Christ, the person in a spiritual context of the work of redemption, as Christ willed it, is contributing to the salvation of his or her brothers and sisters. So, the Church holds in reverence all Christ’s suffering brothers and sisters as being the manifold instrument of his divine power. The saintly Pope says that suffering is rooted in the divine mystery of the redemption of the world, and it is likewise deeply human, because in it the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission.

Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi (1903-1964) was famous, among other things, for his total abandonment to God’s will. When, for instance, his Archbishop gave him a transfer from Dunukofia parish to Akpu in 1945, or from Akpu to Aguleri in 1949, he did not make a choice that was offered him, and he moved to the new parish within two days, without even informing the people he was leaving (cf Celestine Obi: *Facing Mount Saint Bernard*, Onitsha, 1998, p. 142-144; Francis Arinze: *Total Response*, Onitsha, 2015, p.231-242). He entered Mount Saint Bernard Cistercian Abbey in 1950 on the understanding and in the hope that later that monastery would make a foundation in his home country. Although in 1964 the foundation was to be made, not in Nigeria but in Cameroon, Blessed Tansi was reconciled and calm in front of God’s will. As if to vindicate the trust which he had in divine providence, fifty years after his death, there were no less than 21 monasteries in Nigeria (cf F. Arinze: *op. cit.* p.246-248).

The saints therefore teach us by word and action to trust in divine providence because a loving God is the director and master of history.

5. Situations that Test Faith in Divine Providence

Pain or suffering is a harsh reality in human experience. Before we can ask ourselves, what men and women can, or should, do in the face of suffering, it will be useful to list some of the possible sources or types of suffering.

There are some physical evils that can puzzle humanity and that are not the fault of any human being. Examples are natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, floods, hurricanes, drought and invasion by locusts. Snow storms have been known to blow down trees, cause motor accidents and leave many people in the cold for long. Buildings have collapsed on school children or on people in church on Sunday. There are diseases like cancer, ebola, lassa fever, cholera and HIV/AIDS which do not spare even innocent people, children and nurses. Severe heat also takes its toll. What shall we say of twins born with a single heart, of a poor woman who needs a kidney transplant, or of the death of an only child of a widow?

Sometimes suffering descends because someone has been careless. A child drinks poison left lying around by adults and gets very sick. Another child falls into the fire or into a pond. A man falls sick because he drank alcohol against his doctor's advice or because he smokes too much. Because of mistaken identity, an innocent person is condemned for murder which he really did not commit and is sentenced to life imprisonment. Another man is sent to prison for many years because someone believed him to have tampered with his wife, but after many years it was discovered that the accused was innocent. There is the case of the widow who put in all she had and borrowed to get her only son study in college and university. The month that the young man began work, he was crushed to death by a drunken driver who had no driving license. A boy of 7 years who was going to receive his First Holy Communion is crushed by a hit and run driver on his way to church on what would have been his day of joy. There is also the case of the businessman whose trade collapsed because, unknown to him, he fell foul of the tax office and had to pay so heavily that his business could not recover.

More serious still are man-made moral evils which have caused much suffering in human history. Think of the last two world wars, the action of Hitler who exterminated five million Jews, the killing fields of Cambodia in the 1970s, the My Lai massacres during the Vietnam war, the ex-Yugoslavia "ethnic cleansing" and the Rwanda massacres of 1994. Millions of unborn children are killed by abortion in country after country each year. Very many children have died of hunger and disease in Biafra, in South Sudan and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo because of fighting between populations. Two aircrafts have crashed, with the death of everyone on board, because of suicide pilots. At least three thousand people died in the 9/11 blowing down of two skyscrapers in New York in 2001. An angry man picks up a gun and kills many innocent people in a restaurant or at a concert show. Another angry or unstable person uses a hired truck to plough through a celebrating crowd in a city and kills and maims quite a number of people. Many road accidents, with consequent injuries or

death, are attributed to human fault. Modern slavery, human trafficking, kidnapping and prostitution are serious abuses of the dignity of the human person. Think moreover of people who suffer because of adultery, theft, false accusation and incompetence of public officials, of medical personnel or of building engineers. Also, defective economic policies of the government, the fanning of ethnic tensions, bribery and corruption and the oppression of the poor who have nobody to speak for them cause much avoidable suffering.

Not to be ignored are other causes of suffering which could be regarded by some people as minor, but which are real all the same, and people can differ in their ability to meet them. Examples are missing a bus, a train or an air flight. Rain can spoil a planned picnic. To fail in an examination or to lose a football match brings sorrow to students and athletes. To lose a desired political election, or a university appointment, or a hoped-for promotion in the civil service, police or army, can bring considerable sadness. Some ladies suffer because no man proposes to them, while others lament that after many years of marriage, they have no child. Family quarrels and land disputes can cause pain and loss of peace, apart from possible monetary loss. A priest, a religious brother or sister, or a civil servant, may find an appointment or a transfer difficult to accept, especially if there is suspicion that such a decision by the superiors was due to ill will or incompetence. There is also the suffering of a religious or political community which is saddled with a leader of known poor performance and which has no easy way to get the leader changed. Other people are suffering because they believe in witchcraft or in evil spirits, or because they believe that their sickness or lack of progress in trade is due to evil spirits or to people who do not love them. It is also understandable if some people ask why evil people seem to prosper and innocent folk tend to suffer.

As can be seen, the causes of pain or suffering can be very diverse. It matters very much how people react to these varying situations.

6. Erroneous Reactions to Unpleasant Events

We can classify the various wrongful reactions to unpleasant events in the following ways.

There are people who adopt a stoical, or quietistic, or passive attitude towards unpleasant events. They hold that what will be, will be, and that there is nothing that people can do about them. They therefore really despair of the capacity of man to change anything. They do not distinguish between physical evils that humans cannot control, and evils due to human carelessness or downright moral depravity, which people are bound to check and which they can

control, if only they make the needed effort. Pessimism does not do honour to men and women because they can, if they make the needed effort, make this world a better place in which to live.

Other people attribute all unpleasant events to a Principle of Evil, or the Devil, or to chance, and they regard human beings as helpless game-objects manipulated by some idiosyncratic spirits or by pure chance. While it is true that the Devil really exists and does, or can do, much evil in human affairs, the thesis of evil men who attribute all their choices to the Devil cannot be sustained.

There are people who question, or even deny, the existence of a good, all-powerful and wise God. They argue that an omnipotent and good God should be able to eliminate all suffering and pain. They do not know, or do not welcome, the teaching of revelation on the place of the cross or of suffering in human history and in the history of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Other people go the whole way of professing materialism and atheism. They deny the existence of the spiritual and of God and refuse to accept that there is an entire world of the spirit, of moral right and wrong and of the suffering that saves and elevates. Atheism can be lamented as a type of spiritual darkness, or lack of sight, if not sometimes as a manifestation of human pride, which reaches the depth of denying God's existence, and the dependence of creatures on him for the very fact of their existing, continuing to exist, and being able to act. Atheism stands condemned as a sin of direct offence and insult to God who is being, existence, creator and providence. "The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God'", notes the psalmist (Ps 53:1). On the other hand, agnostics hold that we cannot know whether God exists or not. Agnosticism can be looked on as an offence of spiritual absentmindedness, if not even nonchalance towards the Creator and sustainer of all that exists.

There are people who, without actually declaring it, presume that the human intellect should be able to understand everything that happens and the reasons for whatever occurs on earth. When, therefore, they encounter a situation of pain or suffering which they cannot explain, they tend to question the Creator, or, worse still, to revolt. Someone should remind them that God is "The most High". He "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim 6:16).

The error of some other people in their attitude towards divine providence is that they expect God to answer their every prayer exactly in the way they want it and at the time they want it. It is true that God answers our prayers. Jesus assures us: "Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" (Mt 21:22). But it is also necessary that every request be submitted to God's will

because he knows what is best for us and what fits best into his over-all plan. Jesus himself gives us an excellent example in his prayer in the Mount of Olives: “Father, if you are willing, remove this chalice from me; nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Lk 22:42). Some of the people who frequent healing centres need to attend to this.

7. Church Teaching on Divine Providence

To the general notions on divine providence exposed in the beginning of this paper, we can now add a few specific elements of Catholic Church teaching on divine providence.

God is the creator of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. He guides what he has created towards an ultimate perfection yet to be attained. It is God’s plan and wisdom that human beings, for example, act on what God has created. Everything “did not spring forth complete from the hand of the Creator” (CCC, 302).

Providence is God’s all-wise plan for the universe, and the carrying out of this plan by his loving rule or governing activity. All events are parts of God’s over-all plan which is eternal. God’s ultimate purpose or plan for the world will not fail. God guides all things to their true end. He not only created things but guides them to their end. Nothing escapes God’s providence.

Abandonment to divine providence is what Christ teaches his followers. They are to behave like children towards their loving Father who is in heaven. They are not to be anxious about the future, or about food or clothing (cf Mt 6:31; 10:29-31). Secondary causes are not excluded by divine providence. “God grants his creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus of cooperating in the accomplishment of his plan” (CCC, 306). Angels and men, as intelligent and free creatures, have to journey toward their ultimate destinies by their free choice. They can therefore go astray. Indeed, they have sinned. God permits moral evil, but is in no way its cause. Mysteriously he knows how to derive good from it (cf CCC, 311). For example, from the moral evil of the brothers of Joseph selling their brother into Egypt, God made possible that later Joseph in Egypt provided for his father and brothers in the years of famine. From the greatest moral evil ever committed, that is, the rejection and crucifixion of God’s only Son, God brought the greatest of goods: the glorification of Christ and the salvation of humanity. For this reason, in the solemn Easter vigil chant, the *Exultet*, the Church calls the sin of Adam and Eve a *felix culpa*, a happy fault.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* beautifully summarizes Church teaching and faith: “We firmly believe that God is master of the world and of its history. 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’ (1 Cor 13:12), 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” (CCC, 314).

8. Action when Crosses arrive

Our concluding reflection is on what action is required of the person in whose life some pain or suffering arrives. The first requirement is to seek to identify the kind of cross in question.

If the suffering is a result of a physical event such as earthquakes or flooding, the first thought should be to have resort to emergency measures in quest for relief. Relief agencies may have to be called in. Medical personnel may be needed. The richer people may have to be persuaded to share with the needy. Other manifestations of solidarity, national and sometimes international, may be needed.

If the situation of pain or suffering is caused by human fault or carelessness, ways may have to be studied to promote the conversion of the guilty. Reconciliation may at times be called for. In some extreme cases, it may become necessary to have access to the public authorities.

Individuals should not shy away from the admittance of personal fault where such is the case. It does not help to blame the Devil, or evil people, where obviously the cause of the suffering is someone’s moral action. Family members or partners in a trade project should, for example, accept personal fault for the tensions in their community where this is the case, instead of alleging that they have bad luck, or that some evil men or spirits are striving to make them suffer. Students who fail in examinations had better study harder in future instead of simply blaming their teachers. A marriage partner who has been unfaithful will do better to admit fault, do penance and seek reconciliation, instead of getting aggressive and invoking points that have nothing to do with the existing tension.

If a person finds himself or herself in a situation of suffering where other people can help by advice, intervention with a third person who can help solve the problem, or other material or spiritual help, it is expected that the person in need will seek the required help. But it has to be accepted that sometimes after all steps have been taken for a solution, a problem does not entirely get solved. An example is a case of illness. Sometimes, even after the doctors have done

their best, the sickness remains. Therefore, those who pray for healing, or who go to hospitals, have to learn from Our Lord Jesus to add at the end of their prayer that the will of God, and not their will, be done. This is easy to say, and difficult to do. But it is the way taught us by Our Lord. Therefore, overdesire for miracles, or the fixing of an ultimatum date for God for an answer to our prayers, is not the proper Christian way.

Our trust in divine providence also includes trust in God's goodness when we do not understand why this person suffers, rather than that other person. The Book of Job teaches us that Job suffers for reasons that neither he nor his friends understand. In the account in Saint John's Gospel, the Apostles asked Jesus regarding the man born blind: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (Jn 9:2-3). This is an instruction for us to make room for unknown details of divine arrangements.

In the Gospel account of the Incarnation of the Son of God and of the infancy of Jesus, the various manifestations of divine providence are very striking. Mary and Joseph trusted hundred per cent in God's will. They teach us.

Respected brothers and sisters. God is our creator. He is our loving Father. No detail of our lives escapes his care. In his hands we are safe. He is Providence. May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Divine Love, obtain for us the grace to believe in God's providence, to love him, to trust him, and to live in accordance with his will.

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