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Topic 5: God's Providence

It is legitimate to wonder about the possibility and effectiveness of divine interventions in our world. The daily acceptance of providence is an act of theological hope, which does not exclude the responsible exercise of freedom, which is part of God's plan. Providence leads the Christian to an attitude of filial trust in God in all circumstances.

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1. Introduction: Can God intervene in history?

Some forms of religious practice can be real distortions of the image of the God of providence found in the Bible. While everything is going well, many people hardly remember God. But when they experience the difficulties life brings, they turn to God as though He had forgotten them, blaming Him for the evils that befall them, and demanding his urgent intervention. This is the conception of a God who “plugs holes,” a caricature of the God revealed in Scripture.

But beyond these caricatures, many people today think it is legitimate to question the possibility and effectiveness of divine intervention in our world. For some, God cannot intervene as a matter of principle, for once He created the world He withdrew from it, since it functions

on its own with its own laws. Others hold that God does intervene at certain times, especially when the course of events needs to be corrected. Still others think that God is constantly acting in a fragile and corrupt creation. The correct answer needs to reconcile the omnipotence of the Creator with the autonomy and freedom of creatures.

2. Providence and conservation

Creation is not yet finished. God created the world *in statu viae*, that is, pointing towards an ultimate goal still to be reached. “With creation, God does not abandon his creatures to themselves. He not only gives them being and existence, but also, and at every moment, upholds and sustains them in being, enables them to act and brings them to their final end” (*Catechism,* 301). Sacred Scripture compares God’s action in

history to his creative action (cf. Is 44:24; 45:8; 51:13). Wisdom literature makes explicit God's action in keeping creatures in existence. "How could anything continue to exist if you do not will it, or how could it be preserved if you had not called it into being" (Wis 11:25). Saint Paul goes further and attributes this preserving action to Christ: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17).

The Christian God is not a watchmaker or an architect who, having completed his work, turns his back on it. Such images are typical of deism, which claims that God does not interfere in the affairs of this world. This is a distortion of the true creator God, for it drastically separates creation from divine preservation and governance of the world. Deism implies an error in the metaphysical notion of creation. As the gift of being, creation entails an

ontological dependence on the part of the creature, inseparable from its continuation in time. Both constitute one and the same act, even if we can distinguish them conceptually: “the preservation of things is not a new action by God, but the continuation of the same action by which he gives them being, which is effected without movement or time.”[1] The concept of conserving things in being, therefore, is the “bridge” between God’s creative action and the divine governance of the world (providence). God not only creates the world and keeps it in existence, but also “leads his creatures to the ultimate perfection to which he himself has called them” (cf. *Compendium*, 55).

3. Providence in the Bible

Sacred Scripture shows us God’s absolute sovereignty, and also constantly testifies to his fatherly

care, both in the smallest things and in the great events of history (cf. *Catechism*, 303). The authority of the Creator is expressed as the solicitude of the Father, who both "governs" and "cares for" all creation.[2] The early creeds of the faith allude to his governing of creation with the Greek term "Pantokrator" (Almighty Ruler), which should be understood in harmony with the image of the Shepherd: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Ps 23:1). Divine care and authority are presided over by wisdom, which "spreads out with strength (fortiter) from one end of the earth to the other and rules all things aright (suaviter)" (Wis 8:1). In the New Testament, Jesus confirms this vision by his actions and teachings. Indeed, He reveals himself as the "incarnate" providence of God, who as the Good Shepherd cares for the material and spiritual needs of people (Jn 10:11,14-15; Mt 14:13-14), and teaches us to abandon ourselves

to his care (Mt 6:31-33; Mt 10:29-31; Lk 12:24-31; Lk 21:18). Thus, the same Word who created, sustains and guides everything, when He takes on human flesh shows us in a visible way his providential care.

But to grasp this truth fully we ned to realise that the destiny to which we have been called, the Kingdom of God, is a plan of the Father that precedes creation. For "he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He has destined us through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to be his children, to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Eph 1:4-6). "The predestination of mankind and the world in Christ, the eternal Son of the Father, confers on the whole doctrine of Divine Providence a decisive soteriological and eschatological characteristic,"[3] placing it on a different level from previous

concepts of destiny. We are not doomed to an inexorable fate, but rather are on the way to an encounter with our Creator and Father.

4. Providence and freedom

Once we have excluded the view that God cannot act in the world, other questions arise. Does this mean that creatures, particularly free creatures, are not true causes? If everything that happens is governed by a loving God, why does evil exist? Does God always act, only sometimes, or must we perhaps resign ourselves to his never acting?

God preserves creatures both in their being and in their action. Things not only remain in being, but act in time, producing effects. Spiritual creatures act freely. Their works are their own, not God's, who nevertheless sustains them, guaranteeing their freedom.

With Saint Thomas, therefore, it is appropriate to distinguish the creative causality of God from the causality of creatures, that is to say, the first cause from second causes.[4] Each is a cause one hundred percent in its own order, and so there is no contradiction between recognising that without God we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5) and that our actions are our own and not God's.

That God governs everything does not mean He fails to respect the autonomy of creation. The image of an overly "meddlesome" God is typical of approaches that confuse creation and providence by virtue of the view that God must constantly be correcting the course of the world. This image is opposed by deism, according to which God does not intervene in history (or, at most, intervenes only at critical moments). If the first view stresses God's continuous intervention in creation,

deism insists on divine transcendence and the consequent autonomy of creation. The former unites creation and providence too closely, while the latter overly separates them.

According to Thomas Aquinas, in order to govern the world God makes use of the action of second causes, while respecting their own sphere. This manifests his goodness, which wants to rely on creatures to lead creation to its end.[5] Since God guides everything, in a certain way the second causes serve the designs of providence. Creatures, especially free creatures, are called to cooperate with God in the fulfilment of his plan.[6] This applies first of all to the angels, whom Scripture presents as special sharers in his providence. “Bless the Lord, you angels of his, you mighty executors of his commands, ready to obey the voice of his word” (Ps 103:20).[7] This

is also true for human beings, to whom God has entrusted dominion over the material world (cf. Gen 1:28). Being free, angels and men can also oppose God's will or behave contrary to it. But does this mean that providence is not fulfilled? How, then, can we explain the presence of evil in the world?

5. Evil

If God creates, sustains and directs everything with goodness, where does evil come from? "To this question, as pressing as it is inevitable, as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice. Only the whole of the Christian faith provides an answer to this question . . . There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil" (*Catechism*, 309).

Hence we need to face squarely the question of evil in a world created good by a good God. Thomas Aquinas argues that divine providence does not exclude evil in the world. God does not cause it, but neither does He suppress the action of second causes, which can fail; the defect in an effect of the second cause is due to it, and is not imputable to the first cause.[8]

It is common to speak of the divine "permission" of evil; this means that evil is subject to providence. "The all-powerful God, being supremely good, would in no way permit any evil to exist in His creatures if He were not so good and powerful that He could bring good out of evil itself."[9] Aquinas states that God prefers to bring good out of evil rather than not allowing any evil to exist at all. It belongs to God's goodness to permit evils and to obtain greater good from them. God is the "universal foreseer

of all being (*universalis provisor totius entis*)."[10]

By granting men and women a share in his providence, God respects their freedom even when they do wrong (cf. *Catechism*, 302, 307, 311). Some people find it surprising that God "in his almighty providence can bring good out of the consequences of evil" (*Catechism*, 312). The whole of human history can be interpreted in light of this key: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12,21).[11]

So often evil seems stronger than good. Nevertheless it is difficult to uproot the natural human tendency to trust that in the end good must triumph, and does indeed triumph, since love is more powerful. The experience of evil brings before our eyes the tension between divine omnipotence and goodness throughout history, which receives a

mysterious response in the Cross of Christ,[12] revealing God's "way of being."

The definition of evil as a privation, and not a constitutive part of the world, is Christian. To hold that evil exists, but has no substance, overcomes the dilemma presented by those who deny the reality of evil in the name of God's goodness and infinite power, and those who deny God's goodness and infinite power in the name of the reality of evil. The truth of creation, taken to its ultimate consequences, implies that there is no deprivation without a being deprived of something, i.e. there is no evil without a good being to support it. Absolute evil is impossible. Good is more fundamental and powerful than evil.[13]

To the question "If God exists, where does evil come from?", Thomas

Aquinas answers: “If evil exists, God exists. For evil would not exist if the order of good, the deprivation of which is evil, disappeared. And such an order would not exist if God did not exist.”[14] The world exists, though imperfect and with evil within it; therefore God exists. Evil needs a subject in which to take root (there would be no blindness without someone who is deprived of sight). Without any paradox, evil points to the existence of God, since it helps us discover that the existence of a contingent subject postulates the existence of the Absolute.

6. Providence and Christian life

When reading Scripture, we find explicit texts on providence, especially in the wisdom books, and also implicit texts of an historical and salvific type. In the latter, we can have the impression that God

sometimes intervenes and sometimes does not, as if there were gaps, moments when He seems to be hiding. What can we say in the face of this? Is there a contradiction in the Bible? In reality, no. Providence is constant, real and continuous. It is men who do not always know how to consider what happens as God's providence. God manifests himself both in what appears to be good and in allowing evil and suffering. The Old Testament teaches that we should seek and find the traces of God in everything, as Job's reply to his wife after he had lost children, goods and health makes clear: "If we accept good things from God, will we not accept evil" (Job 2:10).[15]

The apparent ambivalence of providence receives a definitive answer in Christ crucified, "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24). "If we discover through faith this power and this

‘wisdom,’ we find ourselves on the saving paths of Divine Providence . . . Divine Providence is thus revealed as God’s walking alongside man.”[16] From the mystery of Christ’s passion and death, which is the greatest injustice in history, God has drawn the greatest good, the redemption of mankind.

This consideration has consequences for Christian spirituality. It frees us to know that we are governed by a Father and Provident God, and not by a blind destiny. The witness of the saints (cf. *Catechism*, 313) encourages Christians to discover the need to understand that “to those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28).[17] The daily acceptance of providence is an act of theological hope that does not exclude the responsible exercise of freedom, which is part of God’s plan. Thus faith in divine providence leads Christians to a filial trust in God in

every circumstance: with gratitude for the goods received, and with childlike abandonment in the face of what may seem bad, for God draws from evil greater good.

Basic bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 302-324; *Compendium,* 55-58.

Saint John Paul II, Catechesis on Providence, 30 April to 25 June 1986.

Saint John Paul II, *I Believe in God the Father. Catechesis on the Creed (I).*

[1] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 104, a. 1, ad 4.

[2] Cf. Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 14 May 1986.

[3] Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 28 May 1986.

[4] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, Bk. 3, ch. 95; ibid. ch. 148.

[5] "The divine operation does not exclude that of second causes. Moreover, the effects proceeding from the operations of the second causes are subject to divine providence, since God himself orders the singular, as was stated. Therefore the second causes are the executors of divine providence" (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, Bk. 3, ch. 77).

[6] Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 30 April 1986.

[7] "This last verse of Psalm 102 indicates that the angels take part, in their own way, in God's government

over creation, as ‘powerful executors of his orders’ according to the plan established by Divine Providence” (Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 30 July 1986).

[8] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, Bk. 3, ch. 71. Thomas presupposes the Augustinian distinction between evil as guilt and as punishment. Here he is speaking of guilt. Cf. also *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 49, a. 2.

[9] Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Manual of Faith, Hope and Charity*, 3, 11.

[10] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 22, a. 2, ad 2.

[11] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, pp. 13-43.

[12] “To the question of how to reconcile evil and suffering in the world with the truth of Divine Providence, no definitive answer can

be given without reference to Christ. Indeed, on the one hand, Christ – the incarnate Word – confirms that God is at man's side in his suffering; indeed, that He Himself takes upon Himself the multiform suffering of man's earthly existence. Jesus reveals at the same time that this suffering has a redemptive and salvific value and power . . . The truth of Providence thus acquires through the 'power and wisdom' of Christ's Cross its definitive eschatological meaning. The definitive answer to the question of the presence of evil and suffering in man's earthly existence is offered by divine Revelation in the perspective of 'predestination in Christ,' that is, in the perspective of man's vocation to eternal life" (Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 11 June 1986).

[13] An extensive reflection on this question can be found in *The*

Meaning of Evil by Charles Cardinal Journet.

[14] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, Bk. 3, ch. 71.

[15] Saint Gregory the Great comments: “Goods are God’s gifts, both temporal and eternal. Evils, however, are the present misfortunes of which God speaks when He says through the prophet: ‘I am the Lord and there is no other, who forms the light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil’ (Is 45:5,6,7). He forms the light and creates darkness, because through the scourges of pain that create darkness on the outside, the light of his teaching is kindled on the inside. He makes peace and create evils, because when we are with God peace is restored to us, but when we use wickedly what is created good, what is good in itself becomes a disgrace to us. Through

sin we come into conflict with God; it is right, therefore, that we should return to his peace through misfortunes. Thus, when a thing created good becomes for us a cause of pain, we are corrected and our mind humbly returns to the peace of the Creator" (Saint Gregory the Great, *Morals*, 3,9,15; vol. 1).

[16] Saint John Paul II, General Audience, 11 June 1986.

[17] In continuity with the experience of so many saints in the Church's history, this Pauline expression was frequently found on the lips of St. Josemaría Escrivá, who lived and encouraged us to live in the joyful acceptance of God's will (cf. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow*, 127; *The Way of the Cross*, IX, 4; *Friends of God*, 119).

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