

CHAPTER 2

A Particular Providence

“The living One who sees me”

“The universe sings of the Providence of God.” The saying is familiar to devotees of Providence. Indeed, for the first millennium and a half of the Christian era, emphasis was largely on God as the primary cause of all creation. In this basically religious understanding of the whole world as sacral, Providence was all embracing to the point where individual freedom could, for some people, seem stifled. A positive effect of the 18th century enlightenment was an emphasis on the autonomy of the human person within the larger universe, without necessarily negating our dependence on the Creator.

The global view of Providence does not mean that we see the human person as a faceless creature in an overwhelmingly large and complex world. We have it from the New Testament that God knows each one of us by name, that every hair on our heads is counted, that the Father in heaven knows our needs, that we are more than the birds of the air whose needs are obviously met (Luke 21:28 and Matthew 10:29-30). John Henry Cardinal Newman, in one of his Sunday sermons, reiterates this truth under the title, “A Particular Providence”. Belief in our uniqueness forms the basis not only of our personality but even more so of our special mission in life.

Such a view is not commonly reflected in the Old Testament, when only a few were favoured with personal attention from God. For instance, in the Book of Exodus chapter 33, though Moses is singled out as he receives his mission, he is seen as leader for the chosen people in general. However, in a story related in the Book of Genesis, a woman by the name of Hagar sees herself as the object of special attention from God. According to Mesopotamian law a barren wife could present one of her female slaves to her husband, and then acknowledge the issue as her own. In this instance, Sarah, Abraham’s wife, presents the slave girl Hagar to her husband and Ishmael is the offspring. Eventually, the two women run into interpersonal problems

and Hagar decides to run away. An angel persuades her to return. She attributes this advice to a direct divine intervention from God, who is for her “the living One who sees me”. It is her way of situating within general divine governance a specific involvement in individual human lives. Still, in many of the psalms, people saw God’s Providence mainly in the course of human affairs in general.

This deficiency is remedied in the gospels. Jesus makes it clear that the same general Providence which lets the sun shine on the good and the wicked alike is the particular Providence which surrounds each one of us with benevolence while not interfering with our gift of freedom.

We may wonder why it is difficult for us to be comfortable with the idea that we are meant to have an easy, trusting relationship with God. It seems that we do not pay enough attention to the God-given energies within us. We allow ourselves to follow blindly many current fads and this is because we have not grasped the meaning and existence of a particular Providence. We think that God operates only on a larger plan in which our contribution is non-existent or at least minimal. And yet we are very much aware that God creates each one of us as a particular person and does not repeat; no two of us have the same fingerprints and dental structure that identify us as unique individuals. Why are we afraid to acknowledge our close Creator/creature relationship with God? Are we influenced by the idea that one does not have the right to let another, even God, take charge of us? Or perhaps our recourse to other “providences”, (e.g. welfare states) puts us on the road to passivity. There are those who would interpret de Caussade’s views on abandonment to Divine Providence as favouring such passivity, but Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* and John Paul II’s treatise on Providence see our relationship to God as respectful of our human liberty in a communion of love.

Our belief that God is everywhere implies a divine presence here and now both around us and within us. Luke refers to the external when, in the Acts of the Apostles, he speaks of the Spirit creating community among the early Christians.

John in his gospel refers to the internal when he reminds us to let the words of Jesus inhabit us through the indwelling presence of the Spirit within us. A presence as silent as the one in the growing plant on our windowsill but just as real. Many of us know of persons, in past or current history, whose lives manifest an awareness of God's presence around and within them. Even as they pay attention to the sights, sounds, persons around them, they have a vivid perception of the invisible world, some even convinced of having been given a glimpse of heaven. It is an otherworldliness which can integrate spiritual realities with an intense interest in the affairs of this world. All of us, as we journey together, involved with yet detached from one another, are conscious, sporadically perhaps, of a transcendent reality which is there yet escapes us.

Our interest in human incidents, our sharing in the joys and burdens of others, can take us along the pathway to spiritual growth, from external factors towards increasing internalization. The divine indwelling within us is the centre and heart of what is meant by a particular Providence. This often comes home to us when we experience the limitations, the vanity and suffering encountered in our lives and that of others. All of this can lead to a reassessment of our values and make us turn to God's action within us, and know true spiritual joy and beatitude. We can now liken our dark hours to the seed that is in the earth, breaking apart and showing little sign of what is to come.

At such times we are not only sought out and pursued by God but we freely and deliberately seek God. To use the terminology of spiritual ascent, we have lived through the stages of doubt and wonderment, have sought happiness in various avenues, and have come to acknowledge the action of the living God within us.

A particular Providence is evident when Jesus reaches out to individuals, to strangers. He does not wait to be introduced but makes the first move toward the rich young man, the woman at the well, the good thief on the cross. These are very different personalities, and Jesus relates to each. He discriminates as to time, place, situation. He even suspends the laws of nature, as on his ascension into heaven.

For all these reasons, it behooves us to recognize the ways of a particular Providence in the lives of others as well as our own, and to respect this individuality without imposing our own. The only thing we have in common is our creaturehood, which invites us to discover what is our mission, our response, whether it be personal or communal. Beyond this point, say the philosophers, it is not possible for us to know each other except as we manifest ourselves in distorted shadows to the eyes of others. We do not even know ourselves, how can we really claim to know a neighbour? Who knows, besides God, what pain is behind virtue and what fear behind vice? Only God knows what makes a person, the personal thoughts, joys, bitterness, agony and injustice committed by others and by the self. All of these are but a prelude to love beyond the grave, where all is understood and almost all forgotten.

Providence has been spoken of in terms of a God who does everything. "*Quand Dieu fait tout*", says Tavad. But he does not see Providence as a cold system which would ascribe to God the exclusive role of governing the universe by laws and final causes, noting that not the least of our God-given gifts is that of freedom. Are not our talents gifts from God, and what we do with them our gift to God? Is it not because we have received that we have something to give? In recent years many a workshop has helped us identify our personal resources, and shown us how to keep in mind the parable of the talents as we take inventory of who we are and what we can achieve. No one can do this for us, for no one else has been provided with exactly the same gift.

Richard Rohr issues a warning which others have echoed: respect for our individuality should not be allowed to disintegrate into selfishness and individualism. Each of us is called upon to share our gifts, to integrate them into a community of love and life. Emphasis on uniqueness was at first received with enthusiasm, probably because for too long most of us had known much anonymity. It seems that having discovered individuality, society has been slow to move into the next level of human development, namely the gift of our particular self to others, in mutual support and cooperation. A recurring comment today is that a growing spiritual problem in the West is the lie of individualism. Taken too far it can lock us into a false notion of privacy. It can make

community almost impossible. It can make church almost impossible. It makes compassion almost impossible. We are unique but within a society. The Bible itself is a social history. It situates each of us as part of a larger mystery, living in a river that is bigger than the self. It is a river of love. Life is not about me; it is about love; and God, our source, is Love. What is love if not a unifying force, an emphasis on relatedness, not on isolationism. Our individual sense of mission is fulfilled within societal situations as we minister to one another, our contributions filling the gaps in our relatedness.

As we look back on our past, we find critical moments and acts which at the time seemed most indifferent, such as the school we were sent to, the persons we have met, the seeming accidents which determined our calling. We have to admit that much of who and what we are today has to be credited to individuals other than ourselves. No doubt we have played the same role with regard to others, and may never know how and when we have influenced their lives. Such experiences many have been of the kind we would never have chosen, but may have contributed to much happiness and growth. God's hand is ever on ours and that of others, linking us to one another within a divine embrace.

A persistent stumbling block in any discussion on a loving Providence is the problem of evil. There is the evil of hatred among persons and among nations, an evil which makes forgiveness difficult, and almost an anomaly. There is the evil of unsolicited suffering, both in terms of sin and of any form of moral and physical unease. Cardinal Newman reminds us that our difficulty with reconciling a loving Providence, whether particular or general, with the mystery of all forms of suffering, is due to the fact that we have not accustomed our minds to feel that God loves us with a love of mercy, a love "in spite of". We have allowed our minds to wander from one opinion to the other, where our hearts did not follow. The same general Providence which lets the sun shine on all of us in times of fidelity and of infidelity, on the good and the wicked alike, is also the particular Providence which surrounds Judas with benevolence without interfering with his gift of freedom.

There is a mysterious link between the social interaction and what we interpret as evil. We know that even in the sharing of our individual gifts, we risk allowing ourselves to be hurt as well as praised. Reaching out need not be always in terms of success and personal enrichment. Where would our capacity for compassion take us, and to whom, if not toward those who experience suffering in any shape or form? We are surrounded by victims of evil, whether it be within themselves or at the hands of others or at the mercy of some kind of environmental disaster. The problem of evil challenges us to think deeply about our mission to try to surmount it and be the human face of Providence.

Edouard Seguin, a physician, said something significant when he laid the cornerstone to one of the first schools for the handicapped in Syracuse, New York.

“God has scattered about us, rare as the possessors of genius, the retarded, the blind, the deaf, in order to bind the rich and the poor, the talented to the incapable, all welded together by a tie of indissoluble solidarity.”