

Courage Ministry
Article 80 – April 2014
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Providence

Introduction

For a long time I have pondered the wisdom of writing about Providence. I am convinced now is the time. We have seen the wonderful effect of Pope Francis upon the Church and indeed on the World. His influence and work came about because Pope Benedict had the providential courage to lay down his mantle. I like the metaphor being touted abroad about Pope Francis: *As cyclone Francis*. In my work and in my life I have experienced the providence of God and the providence of the People of God. I believe that it would be good to narrate the stories of how providence has been experienced in my life and that of others. By so doing we might be encouraged to acknowledge and welcome it in our lives and begin to live more providentially.

Lucky or Providential

Some years ago before a Sunday Mass a person told me that she was lucky. I mentioned that the situation was providential and the person agreed. I believe that many events are providential but we negate this in favour of a more seemingly acceptable social word. When I am now with people of faith, I rarely use the word lucky but suggest that providence is working or has intervened in a person's life. Providence helps us immensely in our faith life and development. I think of providence as a felt connection with the persons of the Trinity.

Karl Rahner's definition of providence

In Karl Rahner's edited *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi* of 1975 we can read a number of views about providence. It can variously be the revelation of Jesus Christ's saving work, the sense of being in the saving hands of Jesus by following Him, the conservation of the world constantly upheld by God revealing the radical dependence on Him. Yet in all this there is a cooperation between the divine and the human. As Rahner writes on page 1314: "But the divine co-determination does not mean that human freedom is eliminated and that its acts under providence are valueless. There is no rivalry or competition in the relation between divine and creaturely freedom." Oftentimes the experience and work of providence or the sense of being connected with God is shown to us by our brothers and sisters. A 'chance' remark by a friend, or a work mate can lead us to follow through on an action that we had not thought of before. Even the television or social media can provide a connection with the Godhead.

An Occasion of Providence: The gospel of the day example

I strongly believe in the Incarnation and so believe that the gift of providence is both human and divine and thus allows our freedom in collaboration with the freedom of God. I will give an example. Last year my wife and I were staying with friends at their home in Gippsland. We had gone for a walk along the beach and my wife lost the front door key on the beach shore. As we were searching for the missing key we remembered the gospel reading of the day from Matthew 8:23-27 “Men of little faith”. Relying on that as our base for prayer we asked God to help us find the key. At lunch time we temporarily ceased our search and during lunch our house hosts joined us in a particular prayer to find the key. Straight after lunch, as we resumed our search I saw about four or five high school age children. I stopped them and asked if they would help us find the key. Within seconds one of the boys found the key in a spot that had been searched prior to lunch. We rejoiced with the youngsters. And there was great rejoicing in the house soon after. I have no doubt that was an act of providence.

The Word of God inspired my confidence

That event helped me to be more confident in my prayer and boosted my faith. My journal examen note for the day was this: “*My trust in Yahweh never wavers. Test me, Yahweh and probe me, put me to the trial, loins and heart; for your love is before my eyes, and I live my life in loyalty to you.* Ps 26: 1(b) and 2. Well today I placed my trust in God and Saint Anthony to find the lost key. I was moved to pray for this given the Gospel of Matthew 8:26. I was quite confident and knew that I should stop searching before lunch and return post-lunch to search. As I was describing the colour of the key (to the young boy) I had just finished saying this – he bent down and found it. Praise God.... Deo Gratias!... Saint Anthony thank you!”

Prayer as an exercise of providence

Rahner's Encyclopedia says that “Faith in providence is exercised in prayer, not only in praise and thanksgiving for the goodness of God already experienced, but also in the petition for the fulfilment of the promises”. One of my favourite scriptures is: “everything works for good with those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose.” (Rom 8:28). On this particular day I was more confident than I usually am when praying this sort of prayer. I am sure it was the meditation in the morning on the Word: *Ye men of Little Faith* that galvanised Hilary and me to pray fervently with the fruit being a very joyful and blessed outcome. I cannot insist often enough on the necessity of meditating on the word of God during the day and then when necessary appropriating it for our need and that of others.

Blessed John XXIII's example of providence

Pope John XXIII, who will be canonised later this month, served the Bishop of Bergamo for ten years as his secretary. When the bishop died suddenly, John

XXIII stated in his *Journal of a Soul*, “I will endeavour not to feel any anxiety about my future, nor to allow myself to be influenced in this matter by the opinions, even if benevolent, well-intentioned and apparently well-founded of anyone else. I was born poor and I must and will die poor, sure that the the right time Divine Providence, as in the past, will provide what is needed, sending me what I require and even more.”(p.187) Well, the rest is history – a man of providence for the Church and the world.

A family example

A mother of small children informed me recently about how providence has been experienced in her family life. As the number of children increased there was the need for a larger car. Without asking anyone formally but praying for an adequate car, a totally new car was provided by a benefactor. This mother, to this day, has been able to have more confidence in her prayer for people and occasions. While some doubts arise from time to time, the overriding emotion is one of trust in God. This to me is an Incarnation moment, when we see our humanity wrestling with the divine for a need not a want. I see it, as others may put it, as receiving a touch from God. When we receive such a touch we experience a reality that is substantial and solidifies our faith – it is like the wall built by Nehemiah the prophet: stone upon stone that increases our faith.

A Courage example

As the Courage director and counsellor I have had the blessing of helping many men and women for fifteen years. Over that time a number of the men who were assisted by me have gone off the track. Nonetheless; I have prayed for many years for them. In the past two months two of the men, now in different States of Australia, that I had prayed for at least five years have contacted me. Both have come back to an examination of conscience and sought forgiveness and counsel in one form or another. I had quite detailed communication with both – per email. I rejoiced with both and told them how pleased I was with their act of communicating with me again. I informed both that I had not forgotten them in prayer. This revelation to them brought tears to one and joy to the other. It was the touch of God for them – a providential moment not just for them but for me.

Conclusion

The working of Providence occurs in so many ways and sometimes catches us off guard, even when we are afflicted in some way. If we can develop an attitude of providential hope and aspiration we will have a deeper peace and tranquillity, yet still enjoy the human and divine elements of life. I rejoice in the many

providences. Psalm 42:7 “Deep calls to deep ...v. 11 my help and my God.”

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