

If Denial Is a River in Egypt, Providence Is a City in Rhode Island!

June 25, 2017 – Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Mike Aquilina

Readings: Jeremiah 20.10-13; Romans 5.12-15; Matthew 10.26-33

I've heard and read countless testimonies of people who impulsively prayed one day to God: "I'd like to get closer to you" – and then found themselves visited with innumerable plagues and trials. The moral of the story is always the same: in the end, amid the suffering, they drew closer to God, and they came to know a much deeper happiness.

I believe them all, and their witness confirms all that I've been told about God's providence.

But I confess that my pain-avoidance mechanism kicks in very early in my hearing of such stories. Like most folks, I have a deep aversion to sorrow, suffering, and loss – the very things these good people seem to have brought upon themselves by cozying up to God. So I make a mental note *never, ever* to voice anything like that sort of prayer.

I behave the way my children often did when they were toddlers. When it was time for bed or a new diaper, they'd try to make themselves invisible by turning away from me. If they couldn't see me, they reasoned, maybe I couldn't see them either – and then they could avoid whatever summons threatened their private games.

I found the maneuver amusing. They relied on my adulthood when it was convenient for them, but really *they* knew what was best for their lives. They didn't quite trust me to use my adult powers intelligently when it was time for bed or the changing table.

A Matter of Trust

I hope that God finds me similarly amusing, because my distrust is really no different from theirs. I check the boxes on God's omniscience and omnipotence. I believe what Jeremiah says in this Sunday's readings: "But the LORD is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph." I believe, as Jesus said, that all the hairs of my head are counted. I've never been tempted by process theology. If God could be deficient in knowledge or power, my entire understanding of the world would crumble to rubble. If God were not provident, he would not be God. Yes, I believe, but help my unbelief.

It's a matter of trust, of course. It was only after hundreds, and maybe thousands, of diaper changes that my kids were ready to concede that their old man's will was the better course in life.

And I, too, have come grudgingly to such conclusions about my heavenly Father.

Suffering, it seems to me, is the ordinary means of growth in the spiritual life. I wish I could be the kind of person who falls spontaneously into prayer of praise and thanksgiving whenever I see a sunrise or sunset, a bank of wildflowers, or a mountain range. I'm not. At both sunrise and sunset I'm thinking primarily about coffee. Amid flowers or on mountains, I'm thinking about antihistamines or where I put the Deep Woods Off. If my growth depended only on praise, I'd be permanently stunted.

Prayer – of adoration, contrition, and thanksgiving – is often a struggle for me. My dogs have better powers of concentration than I do. So I depend upon the habits I've formed with help from Catholic tradition.

But I have no trouble with the fourth category of prayer: supplication. I have no trouble asking for stuff; and I focus on this task especially well when I'm suffering. In times of physical pain and in times of grief or worry, I've passed entire nights in prayer – prayer for strength, prayer for deliverance – and it seemed hardly more than minutes. “Lord, in your great love, *answer me!*”

Well over a millennium ago, St. John of Damascus defined providence as “the will of God by which *all things* are ruled by right reason” – all things, even those that I would certainly have ordered differently from God's way. The definition leaves no room for chance, no hair uncounted, no sparrow unaccounted for.

“Fear is useless,” Jesus said, “what is needed is trust” (Luke 8.50). Yet my own fear remains.

Quite recently, in 1931, Jesus appeared to a young Polish nun named Faustina and told her: “Paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the signature: ‘Jesus, I trust in you.’” In the Divine Mercy devotions she promoted, St. Faustina taught us to say the line not once, but three times: “Jesus, I trust in you. Jesus, I trust in you. Jesus, I trust in you.” For people like me, there's nothing vain about this repetition. What I need is trust.

God Will Test Us

For God will indeed test the just, but his tests are different from any others. He's not waiting for the outcome and wondering how we'll score. He gains no new knowledge from the effort. We gain everything as we recognize our weaknesses, deficiencies, fears, and aversion strategies. Our tests are for our sake, not his.

Perhaps I'm not alone in my hesitating trust. Some years ago I sat for coffee with a scholar I revere. He told me that he had never doubted God's existence, but he found God's goodness hard to believe. Nature, after all, is red in tooth and claw; and mankind – the crown of creation, made in God's image – is no less bloody, and uniquely cruel.

I recognize his hesitations. My scholar friend would not have ordered things this way.

And then there's Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., the poet who composed his “Terrible Sonnets” with excruciating politeness and deference.

*Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?
Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me?*

Again, the poet's measured argument strikes me as familiar. He addresses the Lord twice as “sir,” once as “friend.” But he keeps a safe, respectful distance. He's merely asking questions, because things aren't working out the way he'd planned. But his circumstances move him gradually to complaint, and then to a passionate inventory of grievances over his failures in life. Beneath this sonnet is a rage at first suppressed, then vented, and finally abandoned in the final line:

Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

I don't know a line that better conveys the breakthrough I want for myself. What we see here is the end of a son's struggle to trust his Father's providential powers. Hopkins was a man who knew sorrow. His family had disowned him when he entered the Catholic Church and the Jesuit order. He lived a sort of exile in Ireland. He endured the pain and embarrassments of Crohn's disease. He suffered from persistent melancholy. As a poet he published little in his lifetime. As a teacher he was quirky, and he never felt particularly effective. He died of typhoid at age forty-four.

Yet his last words, which he repeated many times, were: “I am so happy, I am so happy.”

This is the view from the other side of the “Terrible Sonnets.” Happy is where we all want to be. And it’s where our Father wills us to be. For good reason, I’m sure, we cannot arrive at the fourteenth line of the sonnet except by way of the other, terrible thirteen.

Life may be hard. Nature is brutish. People are cruel. God’s providence, however, is never lacking, never caught short. What is needed is trust.

About the Author

Mike Aquilina is an award-winning author or editor of more than fifty books, including [The Fathers of the Church](#), [The Mass of the Early Christians](#), [The Resilient Church](#), [Living the Mysteries](#), and [What Catholics Believe](#).

FOR FURTHER READING

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##302-314

“St. Faustina Kowalska,” Catholic Online

“How to Overcome Worry by Trusting in God’s Providence,” Integrated Catholic Life

St. John Paul II, “Faith in Divine Providence Strengthens Our Reasons for Hope,” General Audience (April 30, 1985)

Leslie Walker, “Divine Providence,” The Catholic Encyclopedia

IN SHORT . . .

- *Suffering is the ordinary means of growth in the spiritual life.*
- *St. John of Damascus defined providence as “the will of God by which all things are ruled by right reason.”*
- *God tests us – for our sake, not his.*
- *We gain everything as we recognize our weaknesses, deficiencies, fears, and aversion strategies.*
- *God’s providence is never lacking, never caught short. What is needed is trust.*