

The Eye of Providence

By Rev. David Poecking

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Readings: Proverbs 8.22-31; Romans 5.1-5; John 16.12-15

Like every American, I had seen the Eye of Providence from the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States, as depicted on the dollar bill and elsewhere. But I first encountered it in its original, devotional context when as a late teen I visited the Mother of Divine Providence Chapel in Allison Park, Pennsylvania.

At the time, I was not yet Catholic, and the chapel had not yet been renovated “into compliance with the documents of the Second Vatican Council,” per the chapel’s proprietresses, the Congregation of Divine Providence. So the apse wall of the grand chapel displayed a larger-than-life Eye of Providence, encased by the Trinitarian triangle. As I recall it, painted gold rays of the Holy Spirit radiated from the Eye past the altar toward the nave, as if to say, “*ex Patre Filioque procedit.*”

To see the Eye was for me a memorable moment of religious awe. I then knew little more Trinitarian theology than the formula for the Sign of the Cross, but standing and then kneeling before the Eye, I felt that distinctive mix of fear, wonder, and adoration at the God of infinite knowledge and transcendent purpose. “What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the Son of Man that you should care for him?”

The Eye of Anti-Providence

J. R. R. Tolkien predisposed me to that moment of awe. As I child, I’d eagerly devoured *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and even *The Simarillion*, and though the books’ religious import then eluded me, they imprinted me with the *mens ecclesiae* so deeply that when in college I encountered the Catholic Church, it seemed to me a living incarnation of Tolkien’s imagination.

In Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the protagonist, Frodo, is a literary type of Christ the High Priest. Frodo carries the burden of sin on his own *via dolorosa*, and much of the way he is haunted by Sauron, a type of Satan in the form of a malicious Eye. The satanic Eye of Sauron discourages Frodo with the perpetual promise of failure, threatens him with constant malice, and tempts him to surrender to sin by co-opting it in order to dominate others. Waking or sleeping, Frodo is progressively encumbered by the evil of that Eye, until at last he surrenders. He would have fallen in final failure, but for an act of providence at the climax of the story.

It can happen that exposure to the antitype is a kind of preparation for the type itself, and thus my childhood exposure to Tolkien’s satanic Eye prepared me for awe at the Eye of Providence. For while the Eye of Providence, like the satanic Eye, is superhuman, it threatened me with worldly failure only for the sake of heavenly victory. We can even “boast of our afflictions, because affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope.”

Providence and Mercy

The Eye of Providence, like the satanic Eye, also induced me to fear. In particular, that was because I was not then able to bear the thought of forfeiting my selfish, worldly purposes, as is still often the case. More generally, my fear is an artifact of unrepented sin, for the Eye of Providence, like the satanic Eye and even more perfectly, sees all my sin and holds me to account for it. Yet unlike the satanic Eye, Providence sees through the eyes of mercy (as the Venerable Bede puts it) and intends my rehabilitation.

In the Mother of Divine Providence Chapel, the Eye of Providence only indirectly hinted at mercy insofar as it looked to the nave from the apse, above the crucifix and tabernacle and across the altar of Jesus Christ. Tolkien made the role of mercy clearer to me. Frodo, and his friends and predecessors, self-consciously spared the life of wicked creatures deserving of death. That mercy makes possible the final act of providence by which Tolkien's world is redeemed.

Thus the providence of the Father can never be separated from the grace and mercy of the Son. The first Christians reinterpreted everything in terms of Jesus' Paschal sacrifice. They recognized in his divine Person the Wisdom of God, who acted also as a kind of philosophers' Logos for God the Father in the act of creation. That is to say, they heard it as the voice of the Lord Jesus when they read, "When the Lord established the heavens I was there . . . beside him as his craftsman." In God's providence, all creation, and especially mankind, is made according to the pattern of Jesus Christ, whose singular victory is his death on the cross. And all creation is sanctified insofar as it receives Jesus Christ as its new, divinely given purpose: We "have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God."

Providence and Fellowship

Neither can the providence of the Father be separated from the Fellowship of the Spirit. As the Eye of Providence in the chapel looked down on the nave, the assembly of people become the body of Christ because of the *communio* animated by the Spirit. Thus in *Lumen gentium* 8:

Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. But the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body.

Tolkien was keen on this point and in many ways anticipated the Second Vatican Council's ecclesiology. The first book of the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* is entitled *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and the eponymous fellowship is a type of the Church, beginning as a small band of apostles but ending as the divine instrument by which redemption is extended throughout the world. Fellowship on a grand scale, as with the reconciliation of alienated peoples, and on a small scale, as with the humble fellowship between Frodo and his gardener Sam, both condition the act of redemption. Tolkien deliberately slows the progress of his plot with digressions into parties, dinners, songs, and other simple manifestations of camaraderie, reminding his readers that heaven is neither the outwitting nor the outfighting of enemies, but the shared life and love of fellowship.

More poignantly, it is fellowship by which the satanic Eye is blinded. Satan has renounced the *communio* of the God of Love. He now knows only domination and submission. He can neither recognize nor understand true fellowship. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Satan-type has all the evidence he needs to deduce and defeat the plans of his enemies, but the mind of this fallen angel misunderstands them and is ultimately defeated because he cannot imagine that they prefer to live in fellowship than in domination.

Thus our Lord explains to us that divine truth is available to us only in the context of the fellowship of the Spirit, the Church. "When he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth." The Eye of Providence sees far beyond what we can see with our own eyes, but when our eyes are enlightened by the Spirit, we can begin to see God's purpose.

And ultimately, God's purpose is that we should share in the life of God by fellowship. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that "man was destined to be fully 'divinized' by God in glory," but per Maximus the Confessor, "seduced by the devil, he wanted to 'be like God,' but 'without God, before God, and not in accordance with God.'" [CCC 398] But how can man be like God apart from fellowship with God and man, since God himself is fellowship – the fellowship of Father, Son and Spirit?

In the providence of the Father and according to the grace and mercy of the Son, God wills that we should be nothing less than like God. "You have made [man] little less than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor." And to be like God is to be in fellowship, the fellowship of the Church participating in the Fellowship of the Holy Trinity. The Eye of Providence looks down on the Church to see, and to cause us to be, the communion of the saints.

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For Further Reading

- [***Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##279-324***](#)
- [***Rev. Herbert de Launay, "Divine Providence: God's Care for His People"***](#)
- [***St. John Paul II, Catechesis on the Holy Trinity***](#)
- [***Holly Ordway, "Tolkein's Catholic Genius"***](#)
- [***Nigel Zimmerman, "John Paul II and the Significance of the Trinity for Human Dignity"***](#)

In Short . . .

- *Through the eyes of mercy and intending my rehabilitation, the Eye of Providence perfectly sees all my sin and holds me to account for it.*
- *The providence of the Father can never be separated from the grace and mercy of the Son.*
- *All creation, and especially mankind, is sanctified insofar as it receives Jesus Christ as its new, divinely given purpose.*
- *Neither can the providence of the Father be separated from the Fellowship of the Spirit.*
- *Divine truth is available to us only in the context of the Fellowship of the Spirit: "When he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth."*
- *In the providence of the Father and according to the grace and mercy of the Son, God wills that we should be nothing less than like God.*