

Ignatius and Providence

by Fr. James Swetnam, S.J.*

In this our post-Enlightenment age mention of the word “providence” may well evoke thoughts of cultural conditioning. But cultural conditioning is a notion that cuts two ways. Ignatius lived on the other side of the Enlightenment divide, before Deism and much else robbed the public mind of the conviction that God was interested in the affairs of man and showed it by his providential care. But those who live in the post-Enlightenment age are just as much culturally conditioned as those who live before. The constant in the picture is the role of faith. Faith in God’s providential care has not been abandoned by the Catholic Church, as a look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* will attest.

The witness of Scripture is unanimous that the solicitude of divine providence is *concrete* and immediate; God cares for all, from the least things to the great events of the world and its history (CCC §303).

Faith in this providential care provides the background for the dilemma posed by the problem of evil, a problem which the Catholic Church addresses but does not even attempt to resolve in terms of reason (CCC §§303-309).

The faith of Ignatius of Loyola in the providence of God is one of the fundamental principles of his life; one need only look at a few of the large number of texts elaborated by him to see this. One obvious place to begin is the Preamble to the *Constitutions*. There the “Supreme Wisdom and Goodness” is singled out as that by which God “must preserve, direct and carry forward in his divine service this least Society of Jesus, just as he has deigned to begin it”. But this “divine providence”

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requires “cooperation from his creatures”. Thus a careful reading of the text indicates that providence is an essential element in the thinking of Ignatius as he introduces his brethren to the basis of Jesuit life. If Ignatius regarded providence as such a pervasive element as he begins the legal organization of his life’s work, it must have been pervasive in his own life.

At the beginning of Part X of the *Constitutions*, the idea is repeated and developed: “The Society was not instituted by human means; and it is not through them that it can be preserved and increased, but through the grace of the omnipotent hand of Christ our God and Lord.” Ignatius and the first Jesuits obviously held a high Christology, and this belief was reflected in their everyday lives.

Shortly thereafter, in the same Part X, the word “providence” is given an arrestingly far-reaching significance:

... the natural means which equip the human instrument of God our Lord to deal with his fellow human beings will all help toward the preservation and growth of this whole body, provided they are acquired and exercised for the divine service alone; employed, indeed, not so that we may put our confidence in them, but so that we may cooperate with the divine grace according to the arrangement of the sovereign providence of God our Lord.

These simple words indicate a mind-set that is as challenging as it is instructive. This mind-set indicates an essential presupposition in all that a Jesuit does in making use of natural means by way of preparation for his ministry.

Given the background of the way Ignatius looked on the pervasive presence of God’s providential care in all human affairs, it is hardly surprising that he looks on religious obedience under the light of that same divine providence: “We ought to act on the

principle that everyone who lives under obedience should let himself be carried and directed by Divine Providence through the agency of the superior as if he were a lifeless body, which allows itself to be carried to any place and treated in any way; or of an old man's staff, which serves at any place and for any purpose in which the one holding it in his hand wishes to employ it." Reaction to such a challenging statement has tended to focus on those "who live under obedience," and not without reason. But it would seem that the challenge is two-pronged, and that it should result in regular soul-searching not simply by those "under" but by those "over."

It was in Spain that the author of these lines first heard the saying, "Superiors always represent God's will, but not always his intelligence" -- which only served to confirm him in the belief, arrived at with much soul-searching shortly after taking first vows, that Ignatian obedience is not livable without a firm belief in divine providence.

Considering the centrality of divine providence in the thinking of Ignatius, it is surprising that the term is not found in the *Autobiography*, nor in the *Spiritual Diary*, nor in the *Spiritual Exercises*. But reading between the lines one can note such belief. For example, in the *Autobiography*, in making provision for his trip to the Holy Land, Ignatius initially accepted a sum of money, but then, on reflection, got rid of it on the grounds that it seemed to him to indicate a lack of trust in God's care, whereupon he embarked penniless.

In the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius' belief in divine providence, though obviously underlying the text in a variety of ways (for example: the implicit belief in divine guidance in his "Rules for Thinking with the Church"; the presupposition behind the Contemplation for Obtaining Love, *viz.*, that God shows his particular love in the life of each person; the teaching regarding the movement of God's Spirit in the heart of each individual in the discernment of spirits), is not manifested even by explicit use of the word "trust." What is striking is the fact that the word "faith," which occurs a

number of times, seems to be taken primarily as assent to divinely revealed truth, rather than the preliminary stage to this assent, that is, trust in God's providential care in bestowing the gift of faith.

Ignatius' letters, on the other hand, make frequent explicit mention to God's providential care. For example, in writing to Jerónimo Vignes of Naples, a benefactor of the Society who had been considering becoming a Jesuit, Ignatius writes in 1555 that he should continue praying to be able to make a decision with peace of soul; he should not let himself become a prey to unrest, but leave to divine providence what he himself was unable to bring about.

In 1554 Ignatius wrote a letter to Maria Frassona del Gesso, widow of Lanfranco del Gesso, administrator in the Duchy of Ferrara under Duke Ercole. After hearing that the lady was afflicted with illness along with difficulties of a spiritual nature as well, Ignatius wishes to remind her that "the providence of our most loving Father and wise doctor is accustomed to act this way with those whom he loves greatly" in order to turn their thoughts to participation in eternal happiness.

To Fr. Gerard Kalkbrenner, prior of the Carthusians in Cologne, Ignatius, writing in 1555, speaks of the "gentle providence of God preparing the souls of men to raise up colleges in Germany." The context is Ignatius' hope that young men in Germany will come forward to offer themselves for the ministries of the "orthodox Catholic Church." In the same year, 1555, Ignatius wrote to Cardinal Reginald Pole praising Jesus Christ for showing such gentle and powerful providence in raising up Mary Tudor as an instrument of reconciliation in England. Ignatius wishes to inform the cardinal of the universal consolation and joy in an intimate level which the Father of mercy and the God of all consolation has caused for the Holy See.

A particularly telling mention of providence in connection with Ignatius may well be contained in a text not written by Ignatius himself. In 1559, three years after

Ignatius' death, the first printed edition of the *Constitutions* was published. The preface was written by Pedro de Ribadeneira, and he remarks:

His Lordship Paul IV, by divine providence pope, submitted our Constitutions for examination to two most reverend cardinals, who returned them to us untouched, with not a word changed. Later, His Holiness gave his apostolic blessing not just to the congregation there present but to the entire body of the Society throughout the world, reconfirming and establishing by his apostolic authority all the favors, privileges, and indulgences granted us by his predecessors.

The point of mentioning Pope Paul IV was to give the final flourish to the grounds for Ribadeneira thinking that the *Constitutions* had been vetted in all possible ways. He continues: "In view of all this, beloved brothers in Christ, we have no hesitation in presenting and publishing these *Constitutions* for your observance, backed as they are by such extensive deliberation and consensus." Ribadeneira reminds his Jesuit confreres that Paul IV was pope by an act of providence; this explicit evocation of divine providence gives to his approval a cachet no other detail could have. That is to say, the absolute importance of the bishop of Rome was beyond dispute for Ribadeneira and for the persons he was addressing. The point of the evocation is to remind the Jesuits that Paul IV was the one whom God had selected to occupy this position at a crucial time in the existence of the Society. And if he approved of the Constitutions with absolutely nothing changed or questioned, and if, in addition, he bestowed his apostolic benediction to the entire Society, nothing more could be asked for in the way of approval by God himself. (For those of the Jesuits who were in Rome when Paul IV was elected to the See of Peter and who remembered Ignatius' expressions of dismay, this must have been a particularly telling point). Ribadeneira's invocation of providence in such a matter-of-fact way indicates a common heritage

which, at three years' distance from the death of Ignatius, could only have come from Ignatius himself.

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There are at least two areas where an active belief in Divine Providence can have an influence. For the sake of convenience they may be assigned to a microlevel and a macrolevel.

On the microlevel Divine Providence provides a Christian background for Christian initiative. As Christians Jesuits are called to make use of their talents for the service of the Church's teaching. The ways in which these talents have been used in the past and are used today is immensely varied. But all have in common the challenge of using one's personal talents in God's service -- and the resulting temptation to consider success as a result of these talents. But an active belief in Divine Providence would look at the use of one's talents as having as their goal the disposing of these talents for God's personal use, to use as He wills. If one has used one's talents as best one can and then surrenders the result to Divine Providence there will be no anxiety about success or lack of success. If one has used one's talents as best as one can and one's efforts are crowned with success, one will not be tempted to pride: one has used God's gifts and God has crowned the use of these gifts with success.

On the macro level, an active belief in Divine Providence enables one to have a more profound view of the world. For today the Church is locked in major struggles throughout the world. Not the least of these is the struggle in the domain of ideas. Ideas are of enormous importance in human existence. It is tempting to look at this key struggle within the vast apparatus of world communications as being defined and limited by the ideas themselves. But Christianity is not simply a matter of ideas. Christianity is above all a matter of persons. And the struggle in the world of ideas is even more fundamentally a struggle among persons. But above and beneath and

throughout this struggle among persons is a personal force with which no other force in the world can compare: it is the force of God's personal, providential care. It behooves us Jesuits to look to Ignatius of Loyola, our founder, for the example we need if we are to face the battle of ideas in our time with the same serenity with which he faced the battles of ideas in his.