

## A RESPONSE TO "NOT A SPARROW FALLS": ON PROVIDENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY IN HISTORY

I should like to begin by expressing my admiration and appreciation for the address Dr. Anne Carr has given us. It surveys the field, raises the questions, suggests some of the answers, and invites us to discussion—and all this in a truly scholarly and competent fashion. I feel privileged at being able to make a first response to a paper so representative of how theology should be done today.

My remarks will begin with a short reflection on theological metaphor, then raise out of Dr. Carr's paper two central issues, one dealing with God, the other dealing with the world within which God is working.

### I

My short reflection on theological metaphor is intended to forestall misunderstanding and possible unintended offense. Language about God is largely metaphorical, as Dr. Carr has reminded us, and most of these metaphors are drawn from the human sphere. Furthermore, these metaphors are not arbitrary constructs or simply the product of poetic imagination. They arise from religious experience and prayer. In this way we use both masculine and feminine images of God. We speak of God and address God as Father or Mother or Spouse, because we find that these metaphors of personal relationship reflect something of our experience of God.

It seems to me that just as we use masculine and feminine nouns as metaphors to refer to God, so we may in the same context use masculine and feminine pronouns, to avoid awkward turns of language and sometimes even theological impoverishment. Thus with Pope John Paul I we may call God Mother, and then speak of *her* compassionate love and tenderness. And with Jesus we may call God Father, and then speak of *his* strong protection and the commands *he* lays upon us. This use of pronouns is strictly metaphorical and it would go beyond the intent of the metaphor to see in them a suggestion that God is either male or female.

In this connection, it seems to me, that divine providence, like divine wisdom, is a feminine metaphor, and the appropriate metaphorical use of pronouns would be feminine when referring to providence in a personal fashion. It is perhaps not irrelevant to note that one of the personal names of the goddess Athena was "Pronoia" or "Providence" (See Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, sub v. *pronoia*).

### II

To come now to the two questions suggested by Dr. Carr's paper, one concerning God, the other concerning the world. The doctrine of providence, of course, is an attempt to articulate the relationship between God and the world, especially

the relationship between God and the human sphere. It involves then some view of God and some view of the world. The view of God that prevailed for more than a thousand years in Western Christianity derives largely from St. Augustine and focused on God as supreme and irresistible power. A favorite quotation of Augustine was from Psalm 135:6: "The Lord does whatever he wills in heaven, on earth, in the seas." It was this thought that led him to deny God's universal saving will, saying that if God truly willed everyone to be saved, then everyone would be saved.

It has become more and more clear to Christian consciousness that this understanding of God corresponds neither to the total biblical picture of God nor to religious experience and attitudes. How can I call God "Father" if even before I have sinned he has some reason for letting me go to hell? Nor can we accept a God who is so totally transcendent as to be utterly unaffected by anything we do. And we cannot believe in a God who works out in detail the whole course of our lives beforehand, and then arranges to have us bear the responsibility for whatever happens, even for our own damnation.

It is therefore necessary to speak of God, as the Bible does, as one who is involved in history, initiating events, and responding to human choices. It has seemed to some that the only way we can have God involved in history in this way is to make him subject to time in some way, so that what is future to us is also future to God. But if time itself is a product of the creative power of God, I find it impossible to say that God exists in time so as to be somehow subject to it and measured by it.

It seems to me that in the divine duration there are no successive moments, where something truly comes to be that was not there before. I can recognize an order of priority, as we say that the Father is before the Son, and the Father and the Son are before the Holy Spirit. But there never was a time when the Son or the Holy Spirit was not. Similarly, though the choice to create is a free choice, and God is different intrinsically for making this choice, there never was a time when he had not chosen to be creator. In the very depths of the divine eternity, from the very beginning, God chooses to share the abundance of the divine goodness with others who are not God. This created world may nor may not have had a first moment of its existence; but throughout its existence it has always depended on this free choice of God.

This choice of God seems to me to contain the whole divine initiative toward creation. It supposes the total awareness of all that is possible, for God here makes it possible. And God's providence here determines how every possible eventuality may be directed to the goal of her loving purpose. She does not determine in this creative choice what those eventualities will actually be, but she foresees all that can be, and decides how the creatures involved may be led through every situation and occurrence toward the divine goal, if only we are willing.

Time then exists as a genuine but incommensurable reality within the total expanse of eternity. The entire temporal continuum lives within the creative choice of God, distinct from that choice and yet totally dependent on it. In this temporal continuum creatures freely and responsibly choose among the possibilities that are opened to them by the creative love of God. And all of these choices from the beginning to the end without end, are present to the Creator in the eternity of the

divine choice. He knows them eternally because he causes them eternally in and through the free, self-determining choices of creatures, who are all present to him, even though they are not all present to one another, but succeed one another in time.

We need to say further that because this divine choice is an act of self-communicating love, it makes God in some sense truly vulnerable. If God truly loves us, then divine providence truly wills us to accept her love and to respond to it positively. Love which is united to the beloved is joy; love which is deprived of the beloved is sorrow. It seems to me, then, that the divine joy and the divine sorrow are not simply extrinsic metaphors, but are as internally real to God as love is. Hence, however mysterious it may be, we must say that God truly rejoices in the love of her creatures and truly sorrows in human sinfulness and human misery.

Within the eternal divine initiative that makes provision for all possibilities there is already contained how God responds to whatever takes place in time. We call the absolute, loving initiative of God Grace. We call the response of God to our responses Judgment. From the divine point of view there is however no interval for God between saying, "Let there be Light!" and saying "Come possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!" They are simultaneous in the eternity of God, though there is an intelligible order of priority between them.

I wish then to affirm in God duration without succession, and diversity without change. God is living in time and involved in history, is affected by what we choose to do, but remains ever transcendent in the genuine reality of his immanence. One can indeed speak of an intelligible or rational moment in God before creation, but there is no temporal moment before creation when God is waiting to speak the creative word. As Thomas Aquinas said in his trinitarian theology, when the Father speaks the eternal Word, he both speaks himself and all creation (cf. S.T. 1a p., q. 34, a. 3).

### III

The second issue concerns the nature of the world which God cares for. At one time it was thought that God created gaps in the natural order of things into which his power and action could be inserted. These insertions could be either miraculous interventions or ordinary responses to prayer. From this perspective the world was ordinarily closed in on itself, running on its own for the most part, with a general divine concurrence. But from time to time God interfered with it by special divine actions.

In reaction to this interfering God of the gaps some said that the events of the world pursue an entirely natural and fixed order, in no way influenced by God in special ways. Prayer cannot change what goes on in the world, only what goes on in our hearts.

However, some like Peter Geach, as Dr. Carr observes, argued that petitionary prayer is not asking for a miracle, since there is genuine contingency in the natural and human world, and thus scope for God's particular action without breaking natural regularities (p. 18). However, Dr. Carr thinks that this is to search for a gap in the world process where God can act. I am inclined to say rather that

this is to affirm the openness of the world process to the divine action where God can influence the natural order of things even in particular and unusual ways without in any way suspending the so-called "laws of nature."

This supposes that there is a certain radical indeterminacy in the way material things act. Large numbers operating over time tend to smooth out irregularities so that we can speak of laws of nature. But the regularity is statistical rather than absolute. If a somewhat less frequent path is pursued under a divine influence then an unusual result can emerge, but all within the basic framework of natural operations.

An analogy which helps make this clear to me is the control the mind and the will exercise over the body. Evidently, when I move my arm, a series of biochemical changes takes place. My arm moves, however, because I choose to move it. My choice does not interfere with or interrupt the ordinary laws of biochemistry, but it does influence the way they act. Rahner once observed that spirit and matter are more alike than they are different; and hence it is not surprising that spirit can influence from within the way that matter operates.

Similarly, it is not contrary to the natural order of things if God influences the outcome of something in response to prayer. And I would say that even the more striking divine responses that we call miracles are to be understood in the same way.

There are, of course, many more questions to be asked about providence and natural disasters, providence and human wickedness, and so forth. But I leave you to raise them during the discussion. Let me close by once again thanking Dr. Anne Carr for a splendid paper.

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