

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN ON INDIVIDUAL PROVIDENCE

Lina Gaudette, a Sister of Providence from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, presented a paper: "John Henry Newman on a Particular Providence As Revealed in the Gospel." The paper focused chiefly on Newman's sermon of that title from the third volume of his "Parochial and Plain Sermons."

Newman begins that sermon with the story of Hagar who calls God "the living one who sees me." Newman sees providence as more than the divine governance of the universe; it always involves divine intervention in individual lives. He develops this idea by a series of "human interest" stories that show God taking a person along the path of spiritual growth. God's speaking to Moses "face to face" is one such incident.

In the Hebrew Scriptures such incidents are episodic: only happening to a chosen few on rare occasions. But in Christ the mission of every person's life is revealed as unfolding in a pattern. Such a pattern is not always evident to us, but it can at times be discerned by looking back over our lives.

Let me look back on my past life and I shall find how critical moments and acts, which at the time seemed most indifferent, as for instance the school I was sent to as a child, the occasion of my falling in with those persons who have most benefited me, the seeming accidents which determined my calling. Thy hand is ever over my own.

People do not often sense this particular providence of God because they drift along. "We have not accustomed our minds to feel . . ." that God loves with a love of mercy. Little do we realize that terms that characterize human personal relationships can be applied to God's particular providence: tenderness, consideration, discrimination of person from person. The love that allows the sun to shine on the good and the bad even washes Judas' feet, reaches out to the woman at the well, the good thief. Such a love is always seeking a willing response: a choice—even though it costs. Such a presence of the Lord works both externally and internally.

This is the law of Providence here below; it works beneath a veil, and what is visible in its course does but shadow out at most, and sometimes obscures and disguises, what is invisible.

David M. Hammond of the Department of Theology of Wheeling Jesuit College of West Virginia responded to Sister Lina's talk by developing an aspect of her paper: the relationship between the religious and the intellectual in Newman's theology of divine providence. To do this he refers to Newman's own personal life history as outlined in the *Apologia* where Newman shows his deepening experience of providence during the years when he was having the most agonizing doubts about Anglicanism. Such a deepening experience took place in the midst

of his efforts to be "intellectually consistent," to find a "logical" form for his religious commitments. Such a sense of providence was consistent with "dreadful misgivings" that he might be under a delusion—others had been deluded; why not himself? "Holiness rather than peace" had been one of his mottos from youth. A sense of individual providence was not incompatible, then, with intellectual restlessness. There was a self-correcting power of the mind that would accompany a commitment to virtue and truth.

For is it not one's duty, instead of beginning with criticism, to throw oneself generously into that form of religion that is providentially put before one? . . . I have always contended that obedience even to an erring conscience was the way to gain divine light . . . and that anything might become a divine method of Truth; that to the pure all things are pure, and have a self-correcting virtue and a power of generating.

Newman's trust in providence, then, did not discourage, but rather encouraged, the kind of intellectual questioning that the drive for authenticity requires.

A lively discussion followed the paper and the response. Much of it concerned speculation on how Newman's sense of providence encompassed doctrinal and disciplinary development in the church. The question was raised: Was such development always "organic," a logical progression from previous positions? Or was it at times, as at Nicea, "episodic," something apparently qualitatively different from what went on before? How does divine providence "override" the human mistakes and errors in the church's leaders? Attempts were made to link Newman's fundamental theological principles to situations in the church today.

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