

Abnegation as Key to Providence: Six Spiritual Theologians on Providence

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If a contest were held for the most difficult doctrine, I suppose it would be a toss-up between Trinity, Incarnation, and transubstantiation. But if the contest were over the most awkward doctrine, I predict that providence would take the prize. We believe it; we want to believe it; we find it difficult to believe it. In the continuing friction between Christian faith and a modern worldview, the rivalry seems sharpest between providence and modernity's footings in secularity (no divine reality), autonomy (no divine interference), and chance (no divine steering).

Several reactions might follow. One might ignore the issue; one might house the viewpoints in two heterogeneous spheres; one could believe the one but live under the regulation of the other; perhaps one would call in philosophy to conduct a workaround by metaphysics, or linguistic analysis of determinism and freedom. I do not propose to follow any of these paths, but to rather turn to a different resource, namely, consult some classic Catholic spiritual writers to examine how they treat the doctrine of providence. They believed it; they wanted to believe it; they found less difficulty in believing it than we do. In fact, they seem to find joy in the doctrine of providence. My suspicion as to why this is so is because they place the difficulty of believing providence in the heart, and not in the head, and so attunement to providence is less an intellectual struggle and more an interior accomplishment. They gazed fixedly at what God wants for the soul. Most of the actions taken by a parent might be misunderstood by the child if the child does not know the actions were designed to encourage and support coming to maturity.

Most of the actions taken by God might be misunderstood by the soul if the soul does not believe these graces were designed to bring about deification. Providence is the execution of God's design for the perfection of a human being as a mystical liturgist living in union with him.

I have recently been researching a cast of characters I have been calling "theologians of liturgical abnegation," for whom providence is undergirded by an act of liturgical abnegation.¹ Although all speak of providence, six of these authors have given significant attention to the doctrine of providence, either in a separate monograph or in large portions of their corpus, and for an understanding of providence I propose to listen to these spiritual writers instead of to the philosophers. Providence is being "abyssed" in love (de Sales), and it requires particular and personal faith (Grou), which means we do not choose our own crosses (Fénelon), but instead make trustful surrender (Saint-Jure and de la Colombière) because we prefer God's will to our own (de Caussade).

Francis de Sales—Being Abyssed in Love

"It is our duty to adore this amiable Providence, by casting ourselves into its arms."² We cannot worship God as God without acknowledging his providence. The obligation to daily liturgize God with adoration, glory, and thanksgiving requires delight in his daily providence, but such acknowledgment is not primarily a rational act, it is an act of liturgical abnegation that consists of casting ourselves into God's arms in a way that will contribute to his greater glory. Even sorrow, trial, and tempest can contribute to God's glory. "I am expecting a great tempest to burst over me, but I await it joyously; and looking to the Providence of God, I hope that this will conduce to His greater glory, and the more perfect repose of my soul."³ Providence operates differently in each life because God desires a different measure of

¹ I call them "theologians of abnegation" because they take Jesus seriously when he made abnegation a condition for following him. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8; Matt 16; Luke 9). These theologians investigate the spiritual meaning of self-denial, that is, denying self-will and self-love. I group them as a third resource after the Fathers of the Church, and after the Scholastics and mystics of the medieval era. They wrote between 1500 and 1900 (from John Avila to Francis Libermann). On the one hand, they are well known, but on the other hand, they are ignored.

² Francis de Sales, quoted by Jean-Joseph Huguet in *Consoling Thoughts of de Sales* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1877), 114.

³ Francis de Sales, quoted by Jane de Chantal in *I. The Mystical Explanation of the Canticle of Canticles by St. Francis de Sales; II. The Depositions of St. Jane Frances de Chantal*

glory from each life. If we are confused about providence's work in a life, it is because we are ignorant of the glory to which each life will contribute. Our life-liturgies will not be the same, but they will each delight God, who is their source. "Every one will see and love him, according to the particular measure of glory which the divine Providence has prepared for him. We shall all equally have the fulness of divine love, but still the fulnesses will be unequal in perfection."⁴ We place everything under providence's liturgical millstone so that everything that happens to us can be used as grist for his glory. "We ought to listen meekly to everything, and then lay it before God, taking counsel with those who are our coadjutors in the work; after which the right thing is to do what seems for the best, with a holy confidence that God's Providence will turn all things to His Own Glory."⁵ This can be understood only by the liturgical soul who finds greater delight in the glory of God than in herself. Such a soul is pleased with a providence that works everywhere, in even the most mundane and trivial events.

At one end, de Sales can speak about the smallest opportunities for abnegation: "take patiently the petty annoyances, the trifling discomforts, the unimportant losses which come upon all of us daily; for by means of these little matters, loving and freely accepted, you will give Him your whole heart, and win His."⁶ At the other end, he can speak about larger opportunities for abnegation. Regarding the death of his own sister at age fourteen he confesses, "I will always take the side of Divine Providence; it does every thing well, and disposes of all things for the best . . . He takes every thing in its season."⁷ This should never be pleasure in being hurt, he insists, because "painful things cannot indeed be loved when considered in themselves."⁸ Rather he asks us to view painful things in their source and for their purpose. If a person saw "some crooked wood in a carpenter's shop, he would be amazed to be told that it was intended for the making of some beautiful masterpiece. 'If that is as you say,' he would exclaim, 'think how many times the plane must pass over it before it can be fit for such a work!' Well, generally speaking, divine Providence in the same way makes

in the Cause of the Canonisation of St. Francis de Sales in Library of St. Francis de Sales (London: Burns & Oates, 1908), 115.

⁴ Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God* (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder, 2011), 326.

⁵ Francis de Sales, *A Selection from The Spiritual Letters of S. Francis de Sales*, ed. H. L. Lear (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1876), 195.

⁶ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 2002), 167.

⁷ De Sales, quoted by Huguet, *Consoling Thoughts of de Sales*, 284.

⁸ De Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, 292.

beautiful masterpieces out of these twisted and perverted intentions.”⁹ The divine carpenter is preparing a soul for beatitude. Think how many times the blade embedded in the plane of the Cross must pass over a life before that life is fit to glorify God.

All God’s works are ordained to the salvation of men and angels, de Sales writes, but in the Incarnation we see the special beatitude for human nature that providence has planned. “Having selected for this happiness the sacred humanity of our Saviour, . . . he chose to create men and angels to accompany his Son, participate in his graces and glory, adore and praise him for ever.”¹⁰ The hypostatic union, the Cross, the resurrection, and Christ’s pneumatic life overflow to us. Liturgical abnegation trusts providence because it trusts Jesus. “You wish further to know what foundation our confidence ought to have. It must be grounded on the infinite goodness of God and on the merits of the Death and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, with this condition on our part, that we should preserve and recognise in ourselves an entire and firm resolution to belong wholly to God, and to abandon ourselves in all things and without any reserve to His Providence.”¹¹ The path of providence is the kenotic pathway of the Incarnation. “He quitted Himself, emptied Himself laid aside His glory and grandeur, descended from the throne of His incomprehensible majesty, and, so to speak, annihilated Himself, in order to arrive at our humanity, to replenish us with His divinity, to overwhelm us with His goodness, to elevate us to His dignity, and to bestow on us the divine existence of children of God.”¹² So let providence conduct us where it will: our heart is united to Jesus’s sacred heart. “O my God, what a consolation I find in the assurance that my heart will be eternally abyssed in the love of the Heart of Jesus! Let Providence conduct us whithersoever it pleases: what matter?—We shall arrive safely in the harbour.”¹³

De Sales is especially attentive to the fact that submission to providence combines two antinomic elements: we cooperate, and we wait. “Do what you can, and the rest leave to God, who will do it sooner or later, according to the disposition of his divine providence.”¹⁴ Do all that is within your power, but do not become anxious. Obey the commandments of God, but be patient for the gardener to bring forth fruit. He describes God’s providence and our cooperation as two strings on a lute, one treble and one bass. The

⁹ Francis de Sales, *The Spiritual Conferences* (London: Burns & Oates, 1909), 328–29.

¹⁰ De Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, 83.

¹¹ De Sales, *Spiritual Conferences*, 27.

¹² De Sales, quoted by Huguet, *Consoling Thoughts of de Sales*, 52–53.

¹³ De Sales, quoted by Huguet, *Consoling Thoughts of de Sales*, 330.

¹⁴ Francis de Sales, *Letters to Persons in the World* (London: Burns & Oates, 1894), 77.

two are opposed in one way, yet the lute can be agreeable when they are in perfect tune. "In our spiritual lute there are two things equally opposed, and yet equally necessary to be brought into harmony; to be very careful about perfecting ourselves, and yet to have no care at all about our perfection."¹⁵ Providence rules over both our passivity and our activity. Leave all things entirely to God—even as we do all that is within our power. "We must therefore leave the care of ourselves to the mercy of divine Providence, and yet at the same time do simply and cheerfully all that is in our power to amend and perfect ourselves."¹⁶ We are God's property: why should we refrain from obedience? "For we are no longer our own, but the property of Him, who, to make us His, was pleased, in so loving a manner, to become entirely ours. Providence defers its assistance only to excite our confidence."¹⁷

The beatitude to which God leads is a secret happiness, unknown to the world, because the world operates by different satisfactions. "O, my child, how often the world calls good what is evil, and still oftener evil what is good."¹⁸ The path may appear mysterious, but not the *telos*. God will hear us, not according to our thoughts, but according to his own.

Have a little patience, and you will see that all will go well. . . . He postpones the hour of the accomplishment of your holy desires only to make you find it happier; for the loving heart of Our Redeemer arranges and adjusts the events of this world to the greater good of those who unreservedly devote themselves to His love. It will come then, the happy hour you desire, the day which Providence has named in the secrets of its mercy.¹⁹

De Sales can speak of being "a victim of providence," of being "abyssed in love," of "an entire abandonment" because

God has chosen you for the object of his delights. What He wishes to do with you is good, and He will draw His glory from all. God makes use of what men call imprudence to conduct us to His ends, and to prove the purity of our love. He who abandons himself unreservedly to God on the most trying occasions, gives the highest testimony that a creature can give of a sincere love. To act in this manner, is to

¹⁵ De Sales, *Spiritual Conferences*, 50.

¹⁶ De Sales, *Spiritual Conferences*, 51.

¹⁷ De Sales, quoted by Huguet, *Consoling Thoughts of de Sales*, 97–98.

¹⁸ De Sales, *Letters to Persons in the World*, 109.

¹⁹ De Sales, quoted by Huguet, *Consoling Thoughts of de Sales*, 129.

become, in Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God. Far from compassionating, I envy you. Peace of heart and resignation change torments into delights.²⁰

Jean Grou—Particular and Personal Faith in Providence

Believing by mind is one thing, but believing by subjection is another, and Grou is concerned with the special act of belief made in the providential goodness of God, which requires more than conviction about a general theory; it requires a particular faith he wants to describe. When Paul says the just shall live by faith, he “is not speaking here of our dogmatic faith, but of that which is purely personal, and which specially concerns God’s Providence over the souls He leads.”²¹ General and abstract faith in a deity comes easily because we do not have to invest ourselves in it, but a particular and personal faith in providence comes by a more costly manner. “This faith, which is the very life of the just, is not the faith that is common to all Christians, by which they believe the doctrines which God has revealed to His Church; but it is an especial and personal faith, which has for its object the supernatural providence of God for those souls who have abandoned themselves to Him without reserve, and whom He Himself will guide.”²² The end to which we are being guided—our salvation—is known well enough; the path we are being taken along—the providential path—is concealed from all others, and very often from ourselves. “He desires the salvation of all. If in this respect His Providence is hidden from us, it is none the less effectual: and someday we shall see with surprise that those who are lost were granted more light and more grace than were necessary to save them.”²³

Grou identifies a *natural providence*, manifested “in all events of life; in the casualties which influence our individual interests; in the vicissitudes of sickness, health, riches, poverty, prosperity, and adversity, in which daily occurrences we should adore God by receiving from his hand and profitably employing both the blessings and tribulations he dispenses.”²⁴ And he identifies a *supernatural providence*, designed to establish the free dominion of God over our will. “The empire of supernatural Providence is even

²⁰ De Sales, quoted by Huguet, *Consoling Thoughts of de Sales*, 107.

²¹ Jean Grou, *The Hidden Life of the Soul* (London: Rivingtons, 1871), 149.

²² Jean Grou, *Manual for Interior Souls* (London: S. Anselm’s Society, 1890), 133–34.

²³ Jean Grou, *The School of Jesus Christ* (London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne, 1932), 77–78.

²⁴ Jean Grou, *The Interior of Jesus and Mary*, vol. 1 (New York: Benziger, 1893), 372–73.

more absolute and unlimited. God desires to establish in our hearts a free dominion, founded on the voluntary and irrevocable consecration of our will; he desires that we should live in perpetual subjection to grace.”²⁵ Jesus is our model for adoring God in spirit and truth by detaching (abnegating) our affections from transitory things, and although few Christians will be called to imitate the external circumstances of the life of Christ, “all—noble and obscure, ignorant and learned, rich and poor, master and servant—are called to imitate the interior of Jesus Christ, and to all is the facility of doing so imparted.”²⁶

The Cross is the beacon to follow; otherwise we perform the ludicrous attempt of conforming God’s providence to our designs, instead of conforming our designs to his providence. Do we expect God to be always “accommodating His Providence to our cupidity and scheming”?²⁷ This absurd idea arises from self-love, “which persuades us that our interests are safe only so long as we have them in our own hands.”²⁸ Prayer would not be Christian if we were to pray God to deliver us from temporal and spiritual troubles because we dislike enduring them. Such prayer would not be Christian, “but opposed to the designs of Providence for me, and to the Gospel which bids me bear my cross daily if I wish to follow Jesus Christ.”²⁹ If the soul

forms the most trivial plan from an impulse of self-will; if she takes the least step without consulting God; if she rebels against the natural course of events; if, under any pretext whatever, she refuses obedience to those who have authority over her she breaks the chain of Providence, she wanders from the path of submission, she cease to conform to the order of God’s will.³⁰

The key to understanding providence is the will—its refashioning in submission to the greater wisdom and grander design of God. Belief in providence is assent to God as God; to God being God, and acting like God over us. It is an act of theology made with the heart, not the mind alone. It is why faith in divine providence is crucial to liturgical abnegation. External circumstances might appear trifling in themselves, and might appear trifling

²⁵ Grou, *Interior of Jesus and Mary*, 1:372–73.

²⁶ Grou, *Interior of Jesus and Mary*, vol. 2 (Dublin: James Duffy, 1847), 104.

²⁷ Grou, *School of Jesus Christ*, 260.

²⁸ Jean Grou, *The Spiritual Maxims of Pere Grou* (London: J. T. Hayes, 1874), 109.

²⁹ Grou, *School of Jesus Christ*, 273–74.

³⁰ Grou, *Interior of Jesus and Mary*, 1:65.

to our plans, but liturgical providence directs souls and events according to grace, which is why “we leave it to Him to deal with us, as He judges best. It is not for us to sanctify ourselves, we understand nothing about it; it is God Who sanctifies us; we have but to second Him, and not to trouble His operations.”³¹ We honor God by letting God direct us, rather than trying to direct God ourselves. In our daily examen we should be on the lookout for the temptation to do otherwise. Being clothed by God’s prudence, the soul no longer occupies herself with her past or her future, but only with what God wants in the present moment. “She forms no more projects of any kind, but she allows herself to be directed in all things, from one moment to another, within by the Spirit of God, and without by Divine Providence.”³²

If God directs a soul, then that soul should abnegate all pursuits that are interrupted by caprice, “whose only end is to pass time agreeably, to amass riches, to attain dignities, to acquire reputation, or to satisfy vain curiosity; . . . [these] do not enter into the order of Providence, and are neither worthy of a Christian nor meritorious of heaven.”³³ Instead the soul should watch. And wait. “We must allow ourselves, so to speak, to be drawn by the thread of Divine Providence, and submit to every event as it happens: and as to what regards our innermost soul, we must remain quiet.”³⁴ Lay down no rules for God. Do not confine him to your codes. Prescribe no particular means of relief. Do not tempt God. Do not “pray for favors which do not enter into the designs of Providence and are not to be expected; this, strictly speaking, is to tempt God.”³⁵

Providence demands from us not so much an intellectual admission as a virtuous practice. “Let us embrace the trifling opportunities of practicing virtue with which Providence strews our daily path.”³⁶ It is less a speculative science than a practical one; less an intellectual conclusion and more a quotidian exercise. The greater disaster will ensue if we lose persistence, for there may come a moment when God ceases pursuit. “Sometimes He pursues a soul for whole years before He wearies, especially if the sacrifice is great, and the soul feels strong repugnance for it. But the moment when His pursuit ceases is known to Himself alone. Then such a soul drops out of the order of supernatural Providence; it will probably never re-enter it, and its eternal

³¹ Jean Grou, *Meditations Upon the Love of God* (London: T. Baker, 1905), 155.

³² Grou, *Manual for Interior Souls*, 315–16.

³³ Grou, *Interior of Jesus and Mary*, 1:140.

³⁴ Grou, *Manual for Interior Souls*, 216–17.

³⁵ Grou, *Interior of Jesus and Mary*, 1:159.

³⁶ Grou, *Interior of Jesus and Mary*, 2:66.

salvation is at stake.”³⁷ We should always beg that any temporal matter will be for our soul’s good, whatever it may be. God wants good for us, more than we do for ourselves. “God is more interested in us than we are ourselves; He watches over us with infinitely more care than we could possibly employ; our prevision is very limited, not to say blind, in comparison with His.”³⁸ Abandon your own schemes for God’s honor, and let him use you for his honor. We may “be persuaded that, whatever be the issue, his glory will result from it.”³⁹ God’s desire is fixed on two things. “What is it that God desires only, next to His own glory? Our happiness. In the arrangements of Providence with regards to us, His end is to conciliate these two things, and to make them always move on together in the front rank . . . In wishing what He wishes, we wish for our own happiness.”⁴⁰

God’s infinite holiness consists of an infinite love of himself. His glory cannot increase, since it is perfect in its Trinitarian fullness, but external acts can be added. We could add to God’s external cosmic glory (not his internal divine glory) by being “fully convinced that He arranges and orders all things for our good: whether they be commands which curb our passions inconveniently, or duties painful of fulfilment, or sorrows and troubles sent by Him, or secret providences, whereby He disconcerts our plans, crosses our designs, and overthrows our undertakings. If we believed these things, how much God would be glorified by our confidence.”⁴¹

Grou unpacks this in a lengthy passage, with which we will end. Man is dependent upon God in three orders. First, the natural order of providence. “If my love for God is sincere, I shall approve of all His dealings with me; I shall acquiesce in them willingly; I shall conform to them; I shall take care not to complain of them, nor to murmur at them, nor to try vainly to rid myself of them. This goes a long way; and it is a great and continual exercise of love, especially for those Christians who are engaged in worldly affairs.”⁴² Second, the spiritual order of providence. “The love of God has a wide field here, and produces marvelous effects. It teaches me in all that concerns my sanctification to consider all that concerns the glory of God.”⁴³ Since it concerns the glorification of God and the sanctification of man (the

³⁷ Grou, *Spiritual Maxims*, 120–21.

³⁸ Grou, *School of Jesus Christ*, 342.

³⁹ Grou, *Interior of Jesus and Mary* 1:148.

⁴⁰ Jean Grou, *The Christian Sanctified by the Lord’s Prayer* (New York: Thomas Whitaker, 1885), 77–78.

⁴¹ Grou, *Spiritual Maxims*, 112.

⁴² Grou, *Meditations*, 134.

⁴³ Grou, *Meditations*, 136.

twin purposes of liturgy), we can labor faithfully under his designs. "Being infinitely wise and good, He can and will make up by Himself for all those means of which He thinks fit to deprive me; and that He will make up for them infallibly, if I trust in Him, and if I let Him do as He will . . . In a word, the effect of love is to sanctify me and to make me happy, in keeping me quiet, strong, unchangeable, under God's leading."⁴⁴ And third, the supernatural order of providence. These are the external means of grace, internal blessings, temptations with which we struggle, spiritual crosses, consolations from God, and all those vicissitudes which compose the spiritual life. It requires perseverance to the end. "If I love God; if I am certain of it; can I not equally assure myself of His love for me? . . . And then love does not allow me to feel any trouble or uncertainty for the future; it forbids all vain and dangerous curiosity; it bids me rest in firm and humble confidence. It even inspires me with a generous self-abandonment."⁴⁵ This is resting trustfully in the designs of providence for our salvation.

Francois Fénelon—Do Not Choose Your Own Crosses

Divine love enters the soul in proportion as self-love disappears. To die *to* the world, self-love must die *in* the soul. Thus is the Cross the forerunner of union with God, which is the aim of his providence. It is contradictory to make an effort to stop making an effort. "The crosses which originate with ourselves, are not near as efficient in eradicating self-love as those which come in the daily allotments of God."⁴⁶ We must be given crosses in order to stop our self-flattery; our eyes must be redirected from our self-will in order to see God's will. The productivity of crosses eludes us because our range of vision is too limited. We see only what concerns us alone, what concerns the moment, what concerns our longings, and this is not enough of a horizon in which to place any given event to make it intelligible.

Every event is like a particular character that is too large for our narrow organs, and which signifies nothing of itself and separate from the rest. When, at the consummation of ages, we shall see in God—that is, in the true point and centre of perspective—the total of human events, from the first to the last day of the universe, together with their proportions with regard to the designs of God, we shall cry

⁴⁴ Grou, *Meditations*, 136.

⁴⁵ Grou, *Meditations*, 137.

⁴⁶ François Fénelon, *Spiritual Progress* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1853), 53.

out, "Lord, Thou alone art Just and wise!" We cannot rightly judge of the works of men but by examining the whole.⁴⁷

This interior supervision, as Fénelon calls it, is initially uncomfortable because it tends to raze us to the foundation of our souls. We are willing to be silent and recollected, "like a man passively trusting himself to the current of a river; but we dare not yet risk listening to the interior voice, calling us to the sacrifices which God is preparing."⁴⁸ Walking the paths of providence means letting God work, and abnegating our own self-powered autonomy. "Real trust, having no selfish path and no aim at self-pleasing, is sure to go straight on as God pleases. The straight way lies in renouncing self, so that God may be all, and we ourselves nothing."⁴⁹ Whoever seeks God's will finds it everywhere, and in everything, and constantly, so he therefore goes willingly wherever providence leads him with no resistance

to that jealous love, which searches inexorably into the most secret recesses of the soul for the smallest trace of self, for the slightest intimations of an affection of which itself is not the author. . . . [True progress] is simply willing nothing and everything, without reservation and without choice, cheerfully performing each day's journey as Providence appoints it for us; seeking nothing, refusing nothing; finding everything in the present moment, and suffering God, who does everything, to do his pleasure in and by us, without the slightest resistance. O how happy is he who has attained to this state! and how full of good things is his soul, when it appears emptied of everything!⁵⁰

Sometimes we invent strenuous crosses that are more extreme than the ones God actually asks of us. About such, Fénelon writes: "The heavier your crosses are[,] the more careful you should be not to add to them. And you do add to them either by making vain efforts against Providence from without, or by other no less vain struggles within. You must be motionless beneath the Cross, keep it as long as God gives it, without trying to move it impatiently."⁵¹ Other times we invent crosses so adapted to our

⁴⁷ François Fénelon, *The Existence of God: Deduced from the Knowledge of Nature, and More Particularly from that of Man* (London: John Murray, 1769), 46.

⁴⁸ Fénelon, *Spiritual Progress: Deduced from the Knowledge of Nature, and More Particularly from that of Man* (London: John Murray, 1769), 61.

⁴⁹ François Fénelon, *Letters to Men* (London: Rivingtons, 1877), 107.

⁵⁰ Fénelon, *Spiritual Progress*, 36.

⁵¹ François Fénelon, *Letters to Women* (London: Longmans and Green, 1900), 225–26.

intentions that they are insufficient to cure. In our anxiety, we are tempted to foresee God's plan and supplement his providence with ours. "The crosses which we make for ourselves by over-anxiety as to the future are not Heaven-sent crosses. We tempt God by our false wisdom, seeking to forestall His arrangements, and struggling to supplement His Providence by our own provisions."⁵² What, then, are we to do? Let God choose the crosses for us because he knows which will accomplish the goal of overcoming self-love, and when. There is a "providence for crosses,"⁵³ as there is for everything; they are "a part of our daily bread,"⁵⁴ and God will never suffer them to fail. But we should not anticipate them, in the event that we seek one which God does not want to give us. "How fortunate you are, to carry the cross which God gives you with his own hands in the working out of his providence!"⁵⁵

This leads to a central claim by Fénelon and the tradition of abnegation: "We are bound to seek our sanctification in that state where providence has placed us."⁵⁶ When our hearts are given entirely to God, our acceptance of him depends "simply upon our being in that state in which God in His providence requires us to be."⁵⁷ Too often we build a fanciful spiritual castle in the air, excusing ourselves from a present resignation by claiming to wait for a better place, a better time, a more significant opportunity. We excuse ourselves from self-denial by saying that the abnegation is too small, or in the wrong place, or at the wrong time. To such excuses, Fénelon replies: "As far as I recollect, I said in the first place that we must sanctify our lives in that station of life in which Providence has seen fit to place us and not merely busy ourselves with plans for our future improvement, and in the second, that we should take care to be faithful to God even in little things."⁵⁸ No place is off limits for resignation to providence. No place disqualifies as a spiritual place. "If you persist in serving Him in one place or one way rather than another, you are serving Him according to your will, not His."⁵⁹ It does not matter if it is a place of labor or relaxation, community or solitude, obligatory or voluntary, profitable or unprofitable in the eyes of the world.

⁵² Fénelon, *Letters to Women*, 62–63.

⁵³ François Fénelon, *Christian Perfection* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), 21.

⁵⁴ Fénelon, *Spiritual Progress*, 29.

⁵⁵ Fénelon, *Spiritual Letters of Francois De Salignac De La Mothe-Fénelon* (Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY: Idlewild, 1945), 30–31.

⁵⁶ Fénelon, *Letters to Women*, 49.

⁵⁷ François Fénelon, *Maxims of the Saints*, ccel.org/ccel/fenelon/maxims/maxims.htm, "Article Twenty-Sixth."

⁵⁸ François Fénelon, *Letters of Love and Counsel*, ed. John McEwen (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1964), 199.

⁵⁹ Fénelon, *Letters to Women*, 299–300.

“Try always to have this simple will—this will so imbued with God’s Will, wherever His Providence may lead you. Seek Him during the hours which seem so empty, and they will become full to you through His Grace. Even the most unprofitable amusements will become a kind of good works, if you enter into them . . . in conformity with the ordering of God’s Providence.”⁶⁰

This is a different description of the way of the Cross than we usually imagine. Resignation to providence is easier neither at one time rather than another nor in one place rather than another. Do not ask about tomorrow; tomorrow will take thought for itself. “Do let yourself be the child of Providence . . . Do not seek to penetrate the future . . . Confine yourself to the needs of today; God will each day give you the requisite help for those.”⁶¹ Receive God’s providence day by day, like Israel received manna day by day. “We, like Jesus Christ, are fed by His Father’s Will, which Providence conveys to us in each present moment. This heavenly bread is like manna, it cannot be stored up; the anxious, mistrustful man who stored up for the morrow beheld it grow corrupt.”⁶² Though the Israelites did not have a map in the desert, God did; though the Israelites did not know how many more years they would remain in the desert, God did. Providence reigns over time as well as the events that occur in it, and so “we only need for the right use of time to give a straightforward diligent heed to the ordering of God’s Providence. As all such duties are the result of His plans, we have but to accept them dutifully, submitting our own tempers, fancies, inclinations, our self-will, our fastidiousness or restless anxiety, our hurry, in short all our own natural impulses to do what we like how we like.”⁶³

This is why patience is crucial for accepting providential guidance. God is Lord of time, and as such, he is Lord of each life that winds through the temporal desert to arrive at the eternal Canaan. “Time bears a very different aspect at different seasons of one’s life, but there is one maxim which applies equally to all seasons, namely, that none should go by uselessly,—that all time forms part of the order, a link of the chain of God’s Providence as regards our salvation. . . . The important thing is to know how He would have us use it.”⁶⁴ The world will not understand what is happening. It sees difficulties, but not crosses; it sees chance, but not providence; it sees weakness, but not power; it seeks to operate according to its own plan, and not God’s (which is what providence is). “Alas! how many souls there are full of self, and desirous

⁶⁰ Fénelon, *Letters to Women*, 251.

⁶¹ Fénelon, *Letters to Men*, 108.

⁶² Fénelon, *Letters to Men*, 219.

⁶³ Fénelon, *Letters to Women*, 247.

⁶⁴ Fénelon, *Letters to Women*, 245–46.

of doing good and serving God, but in such a way as to suit themselves; who desire to impose rules upon God as to His manner of drawing them to Himself.”⁶⁵ Such souls offer resistance, even though they seem full of zeal and fervor. They hold themselves aloof from God by continually seeking self, even in their acts of goodness. Then even spiritual abundance becomes an obstacle. But the soul relaxed in providence

has a will which is not strained in anything. It accepts freely all that God gives it of sorrow. It wants it. It loves it. It embraces it. It would not want to leave it even if it only cost a single wish to do so, because this wish would be a selfish desire, and contrary to its abandon to Providence, which it wants never to anticipate in anything. If anything is capable of enlarging and freeing the heart, it is this abandon.⁶⁶

Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure and Claude de la Colombière— Trustful Surrender⁶⁷

Blind faith can be compared to blind surrender. The former is given to the revelation by God; the latter is given to the authority of God. We speak frequently of the former; the latter concerns providence. “There are in the spiritual life two excellent kinds of blindness, which we must practice with great care. The first concerns all that God has said: and this refers to faith. The second, which depends on the first, regards all that God does: and this is His providence. By these sorts of blindness we receive all that God says and does, without examination, without murmur, without desiring to dive into His councils, but with profound respect.”⁶⁸ There is a parallel between what God says and what God does, but a difference is also noticeable. When God *speaks*, it is true for all: his revelation describes the conditions for salvation for every person. But when God *acts*, he acts both in general and in particular. The providence of God governs the world in general, but there is a personal providence that governs each one of us in particular. Accepting

⁶⁵ Fénelon, *Spiritual Progress*, 77.

⁶⁶ Fénelon, *Christian Perfection*, 98

⁶⁷ An extract was taken from Saint-Jure’s work *The Knowledge and Love of Our Lord Jesus Christ* and combined with an extract from the writings of Claude de la Colombière, to be published as *Trustful Surrender to Divine Providence*. I quote sometimes from other works by Saint-Jure, and sometimes from this combined work.

⁶⁸ Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure, *The Spiritual Man; or, The Spiritual Life Reduced to its First Principles* (London: Burns & Oates, 1878), 275–76.

that personal, particular, individual providence places an existential challenge before each one. "We must believe this firmly, for God alone presides in all that happens to us, physically or mentally, as regards honor, wealth and everything else. He governs the universe, conducts the changes in states, empires and families, with goodness, love and wisdom, permitting nothing to happen that can injure us, and doing all for His own glory and our good."⁶⁹

We could combine the idea of God's glory and man's good under the term "deification." This is the general purpose for which God created, namely, so that his infinite goodness could make rational creatures into "sharers in His divinity as far as they are capable."⁷⁰ God's benevolent providence works toward this purpose with crafted particularity. "A glove is not more fitted to a hand or a sword to a scabbard than what He does and ordains in us and for us is suited to our strength and capabilities, so that everything may serve to our advantage and perfection if we but cooperate with the designs of His providence."⁷¹

This second kind of providence, the one which is exercised personally, must be evaluated by individual cases. There is no sharing, or making of comparisons. God treats each person as an individual case.

Be careful to take your own road, and not that of another: your own road will lead you to salvation; another's would lead you to a precipice. The path of your neighbor is good for him, but it would be bad for you: for him it is a road to virtue and sanctity; for you it would be a road to vice and imperfection. Let each, then, . . . make a good use of everything God sends him, for all things are sent for his salvation.⁷²

To do this, two things are necessary. First, we ought not desire to choose our own means of salvation, since we are ignorant and feeble, but rather "leave to the Divine Providence, who is infinitely good, wise and powerful, the liberty to choose them for us."⁷³ Second, "Man ought to give himself wholly to God in the way He has destined."⁷⁴ There is only one salvation designed for mankind; there is only one way, one truth, one life, and he

⁶⁹ Saint-Jure, *Spiritual Man*, 275.

⁷⁰ Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure, in Saint-Jure and Claude de la Colombière, *Trustful Surrender to Divine Providence* (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1983), 13.

⁷¹ Saint-Jure, *Trustful Surrender*, 13–14.

⁷² Saint-Jure, *Spiritual Man*, 353.

⁷³ Saint-Jure, *Spiritual Man*, 353. I see that Saint-Jure has referred to "Divine Providence" as a personal, acting agent—perhaps akin to Wisdom being hypostasized.

⁷⁴ Saint-Jure, *Spiritual Man*, 353.

who has the words of eternal life leads us to that beatific end. But he will act in each life as necessary. This is why providence must be added to soteriology, and why abnegation is a necessary theological science. "The man who entrusts himself to Providence, lets God be the pilot of his bark, floats tranquilly on the ocean of life in the midst of storm and tempest, while those who try to guide themselves are in continual unrest, and their only pilot being their own inconstant will, they are tossed about by sea and wind until they end in shipwreck."⁷⁵ Faith and trust are sisters. Faith believes what God says, and trust surrenders to God's providence, leaving him in complete power to order our lives. Such an attitude depends upon humility, of course.

We can make this trustful act of abandonment insofar as we believe God knows what he is doing. The *Creator* knows how to redeem, and the *Redeemer* knows his creation inside and out.

It is quite obvious that He who hath founded the earth by wisdom and hath established the heavens by understanding could not show less perfection in governing His works than in creating them. So, as He is careful to remind us, if his Providence continues to have care of all things, it is in measure and number and weight, it is with justice and mercy. Neither can any man say to Him, "Why dost thou so?" For if He assigns to His creatures the end that He wills, and chooses the means which seem good to Him to lead them to it, the end He assigns them must be good and wise, nor can He direct them towards their end other than by good and wise means.⁷⁶

Even in our natural life, experience teaches us that the fuller reason for an occurrence may come to light only later. There are all sorts of actions to which we entrust ourselves in the belief that the fullness of time will explain the present moment. Our supernatural life is an even larger case. "In our ignorance of what the future holds, how can we be so bold as to question what comes about by God's permission? Surely it is reasonable to think that our complaints are groundless and that instead of complaining we ought to be thanking Providence."⁷⁷ Imagine our confusion and embarrassment when we stand before God, are shown the reasons why he sent the crosses he did, and also remember our resistance. "When I see a Christian grief-stricken at the trials God sends him I say to myself: Here is a man who is grieved at his

⁷⁵ Claude de la Colombière, *Trustful Surrender*, 59–60.

⁷⁶ Saint-Jure, *Trustful Surrender*, 4–5.

⁷⁷ La Colombière, *Trustful Surrender*, 42.

own happiness. He is asking God to be delivered from something he ought to be thanking Him for.”⁷⁸ God knows his business. The designs of providence impose crosses now, but “we would rush forward to accept them with the utmost gratitude if we had a little faith and realized how much God loves us and has our interests at heart.”⁷⁹

Saint-Jure describes here three very personal acts. First, *an act of faith*, of great importance, because “we must firmly believe that God watches in a particular manner over all the passes in the universe.”⁸⁰ All that God does, he ordains (sin excepted, which he only permits). The act of faith follows meditation upon “the truth that God’s continual care extends not only to all things in general but to each particular thing, and especially to ourselves, our souls and bodies, and everything that concerns us.”⁸¹ Second, *an act of hope*. “After the act of faith in the Providence of God, we may say: I hope in Divine Providence, I have full confidence that God will watch over me with maternal solicitude, . . . I am certain that God will arrange all for His greater glory and my greater good. The Lord ruleth me, I shall want for nothing.”⁸² And third, *an act of charity* should be added. “Show your deep love and attachment for Divine Providence as a child shows for its mother by taking refuge in her arms.”⁸³

These acts—liturgical acts, we may call them—of faith, hope, and charity, give honor and glory to God if, and only if, they purify our faculties by annihilation, in turn. Dom Castaniza summarizes:

For, by the act of Faith all our knowledge is annihilated; by the act of Hope all thought of our worth is cast out by denying our own strength, and relying merely on God’s assistance; by the act of Charity all our wills and affections, which are not God, in God, and for God, are abandoned: so that by these three acts the whole man is drowned, suppressed, stifled; and consequently our enemy the Devil finds nothing at all to lay hold on, nor any way open for his entrance into our annihilated hearts.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ La Colombière, *Trustful Surrender*, 47–48.

⁷⁹ La Colombière, *Trustful Surrender*, 47–48.

⁸⁰ Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure, *Treatise on the Knowledge and Love of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, vol. 2 (New York: P. O’Shea, 1875), 492.

⁸¹ La Colombière, *Trustful Surrender*, 57–58.

⁸² Saint-Jure, *Treatise on the Knowledge and Love*, vol. 2, 524.

⁸³ La Colombière, *Trustful Surrender*, 57–58.

⁸⁴ Juan Castaniza, *The Spiritual Conflict and Conquest* (London: Burns & Oates, 1874), 395–96.

Accepting the ordering of providence liturgizes God because, when we willingly accept all things as being the ordering of providence, we “give God by our submission the honor due to Him, and at the same time attain without fail our greatest good.”⁸⁵ In this way, we can liturgize God not only during times of peace, but also during times of trial. In fact, the glory we give God by faithful resignation during our trial is even greater than the glory we could give him in any other way—a lesson learned from the Cross.

If Providence takes away what he has and strikes him down, and in the midst of his reverses he continues to express the same sentiments, returning the same thanks and obeying his Lord with the same promptness and submission as he did formerly, it is then that he proclaims the glory of God and the efficacy of His grace in the most convincing and striking manner.⁸⁶

God is a providence who rules all, and “by His operations, and those of His creatures, tends always to His ends, the glory of God and our salvation.”⁸⁷ God does whatever he judges useful for those twin purposes (of liturgy): the glorification of God and the sanctification of man. All other creatures, all other events of life, all other crosses, can be considered instruments by which he glorifies himself and saves his loved ones. “It is a great glory for Him to have a creature so attached to His Providence, so dependent on Him, full of such firm hope and peace of mind in the expectation of what He will send.”⁸⁸ There is only one proper reaction, and it is prayer: prayer to the Incarnate One with gratitude and for grace.

O good Jesus, who for love of me didst resign and submit thyself to thy Father’s will, to endure the excessive sufferings of thy passion and death! I beseech thee by the merit of thy resignation and submission to give me the grace to never resist God’s providence in my regard, but to yield to him entire authority over my body, my soul, and all that in time or eternity may belong to me.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Saint-Jure, *Trustful Surrender*, 26.

⁸⁶ La Colombière, *Trustful Surrender*, 49–50.

⁸⁷ Saint-Jure, *Spiritual Man*, 354.

⁸⁸ La Colombière, *Trustful Surrender*, 59.

⁸⁹ Jean Baptiste Saint-Jure, *Union with our Lord Jesus Christ in His Principal Mysteries for All Seasons of the Year*, (New York: D. & J. Sadlier, 1876), 233.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade—Preferring God's Will to Ours

On his side, providence is God's will in motion; on our side, it is faith in motion. "We can never enjoy happiness or peace in this miserable world except in proportion as we blindly submit to the decrees of divine Providence. . . . Of how many anxieties, disappointments and forebodings should we not rid ourselves, if we could only act in this reasonable and Christian manner."⁹⁰ Providence is a line of grace extending from the hand of God to every moment, every act, every need, every blessing. It bridges between what God desires for us and our desire for happiness in him. God has made himself the principal of all the soul's operations, and providence is the center in which the soul reposes. When our lives are thus centered upon God, then "the abandonment to divine Providence which I practice and counsel others to adopt is not so heroic nor so difficult as you seem to imagine. It is the centre of a solid peace. . . . Oh! how well repaid we are for the small and miserable sacrifices we make for God!"⁹¹

Providence builds its walls of protection around grace and peace, and more will be gained by raising the heart to God than by any other spiritual practices. Providence is the active presence of God to which we submit. "Observe the most filial submission to the different arrangements of divine Providence about everything; you will gain more by doing so than by all the spiritual exercises that you perform to please yourself."⁹² We will receive pleasure when we give God pleasure; we will be pleased when we please God; and what finally pleases God is nothing short of our perfection, which "consists in conforming your will entirely to the will of God in all things; that is to say, that you must never will anything else but what God wills. Now, it is of faith that God wills everything that happens to us, except sin, because with the exception of sin nothing happens in this world but by the hidden dispensations of Providence."⁹³ Everyone is recompensed who accepts with good will the state in which providence places him, because abandonment to providence is a kiss exchanged between divine love and human love. "The whole art of abandonment is simply that of loving, and the divine action is nothing else than the action of divine love. How can it be that these two loves seeking each other should do otherwise than unite when they meet?"⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1921) 291.

⁹¹ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 120.

⁹² De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 299.

⁹³ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 165.

⁹⁴ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 86.

Alas, we do not understand. We are ignorant. We are blind. And so we interfere. Providence “is despised by pretended wisecracks who cannot appreciate this sweet and hearty submission to divine Providence.”⁹⁵ We substitute our intentions for God’s, we advance our desires instead of his, and we prefer our will over his. To be healed from this, faith must be attached to resignation. “I should be satisfied to do His holy will; because it would then be obvious that God did not wish for the sacrifice itself, but only that I should be willing to make it.”⁹⁶ The operation of divine providence is often unexpected. And, until we align our will with God’s, it is usually disagreeable. Why make the effort? Because God knows us better than we know ourselves. “How can we doubt that God understands our requirements better than we do ourselves and that His arrangements in our regard are most advantageous to us although we do not comprehend them? [We should] allow ourselves to be guided by that sweet Providence even though we cannot fathom the secret activities it employs, nor the particular ends it desires to attain.”⁹⁷ Ultimately, the reason to follow the divine providence step-by-step is because “God knows much better than we do ourselves what is most suitable for us, His poor creatures.”⁹⁸ “Oh! how blind we are when we desire anything other than what God wills! He alone knows the dangers that threaten us in the future, and the helps we shall require.”⁹⁹

De Caussade gives numerous examples of the self-planning that worldly wisdom substitutes for God’s providence. How we frustrate God! “He has to do with children who are often so blind that they do not see for what they are asking. Even in their prayers, that to them seem so sensible and just, they deceive themselves by desiring to arrange the future which belongs to God alone.”¹⁰⁰ Our self-love makes excuses for our actions, which we will never understand until our conversion is complete. “Nothing will console us more at the hour of death than our humble submission to the different arrangements of divine Providence in spite of the subtle imaginations of self-love often hidden under the most spiritual disguise and the most specious pretexts.”¹⁰¹ But in the meantime, someone is to be pitied “on account of your want of resignation to the arrangements of divine Providence. Is it not deplorable that a soul chosen by God, and which He had taken into

⁹⁵ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 64.

⁹⁶ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 165.

⁹⁷ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 112.

⁹⁸ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 120.

⁹⁹ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 117.

¹⁰⁰ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 289.

¹⁰¹ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 177.

His service and overwhelmed with graces, instead of being contented with Him, ardently sighs after the little helps it receives from fellow creatures?"¹⁰²

De Caussade compares our confidence in providence to the confidence a child has in the arms of his mother or father. "Throw yourself into the arms of God and remain there peacefully and without care, like a little child in the arms of a good and loving mother."¹⁰³ Where could it possibly be better to find ourselves? What could we do better than place the whole matter in God's care? "Could our future be more secure than in the all-powerful hands of that adorable Master, of that good and loving Father? who loves us more than we love ourselves? Where could we find a safer refuge than in the arms of divine Providence?"¹⁰⁴ Do we have need of our own lights and certainties, ideas, and reflections? Not when we are being carried in the arms of divine providence.¹⁰⁵ One experiences God's protection only if one abandons oneself to God with filial confidence, which is precisely what providence demands from us. Most important of all, this concerns our full, final, eternal life, and not just the temporal happinesses of a temporary world. Providence is the straight line traced by the hand of God: he knows whither he wants to take us. Therefore, "let us abandon ourselves without reserve to God and not interfere with His loving providence, but think only of keeping straight in the road that God has marked out for us from all eternity, and in which we find ourselves at the present moment."¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

I hope the metaphysicians continue their colloquies about providence and crack the nut of determinism and freedom, of divine predestination and human liberty. But while they go on (and on), I summarize this alternate vantage point of providence, one that looks through the spiritual abnegation caused by the liturgical act of submission to God. Providence does not concern a series of incidents of good luck; it concerns the interior spiritual life and the future eschatological being, both liturgical states. The supernatural design of providence is dedicated to bringing us closer to God: it is the execution of God's design for the perfection of a human being. The entire economy of abnegation is the process of bringing about a person's perfection. *Perfectus, perficere*, finishing, completing, accomplishing—providence is the

¹⁰² De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 278.

¹⁰³ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 285.

¹⁰⁴ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 166.

¹⁰⁵ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 75.

¹⁰⁶ De Caussade, *Abandonment*, 171.

operation performed in our lives to finish and complete and accomplish a Christian soul. Behind abnegation is providence; behind providence is God's will; behind God's will is love; resignation is required to believe that this love operates through purgation; this resignation is *from* ourselves *to* God—and this is an act of liturgy, which seeks God alone. A doctrine exists not only to be believed, but also to be obeyed: how do we *obey* the doctrine of providence? N.V.