

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – November 11, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 900 words

Christ’s praising of the poor widow need not be understood by us to be a slight against the rich people who were giving large sums to the temple treasury; he was not criticizing them for their offering. But he did praise her because of the particular trust with which she gave all. It is a trust to which we, also, are called. And to have this level of trust requires us to understand more fully how God’s providence works. We see that providence at play also in the first reading, with the widow of Zarephath, who gave everything and was given all she needed in return.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has a very fine – and concise – section on divine providence, and I strongly encourage all to read it in a reflective manner; paragraphs 302-314. Internalizing the Church’s teaching in this area is the first important step in developing that childlike trust that makes it possible for us to give generously and to want for nothing in all areas of our lives. For there is a certain hierarchy to be observed, and when we do act within that divinely-established order, then God does not fail to take care of all of our needs.

The *Catechism* first defines what divine providence is: It is “the dispositions by which God guides his creation [to] perfection”.¹ In other words – and this is evident for all to see –, the universe has not yet reached its final state. But God did not just set everything in motion at the beginning and then step back and watch; no, he is always intimately involved in the course of creation, guiding it to its end. He does this with sovereign power, comprehending the whole and each individual part at all times – and that includes the free actions of us, his creatures.²

This is a rather astonishing thing to meditate on: my free actions do not thwart God’s purpose! He is always greater than them. What may seem to me like something I just “cooked up” or perhaps did through weakness, God already foreknew and permitted within his plan.³ So not even our worst moral choices need be permanently fatal, for God also disposes his mercy as part of his providence. There is no “need” for him to withhold forgiveness from us, since he can always fulfill his purposes in spite of whatever we might do. Nothing is beyond his mercy.

In this fact we behold the reality of God’s sovereign power, about which the *Catechism* quotes from scripture: “Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases”, the psalmist says;⁴ and Proverbs teaches that “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established”.⁵ “Therefore”, Jesus says, “do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’... Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”⁶

And therein we see the divinely-appointed order: put God first – the God who can in no way be outdone in generosity, who could never err in his designs, and whose power can never be limited by us, his creatures – and he will surely give us all we need. Thus Christ praised the poor widow who gave all, for she put God and the needs of his temple first in her life. Thus also the poor widow of the first reading, who had only enough provision for one more day’s eating, yet had enough to eat for a whole year after she trusted and put the needs of God’s prophet first.

But these two poor widows show us not only how God’s providence works in the lives of those who trust in him and put him first; they also show us how we – how they – are a part of the Lord’s providential care. For they were responding to real needs. When we give of ourselves in a

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 302.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, no 302.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, no 311.

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 303, quoting Psalm 115:3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 303, quoting Proverbs 19:21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 305, quoting Matthew 6:31-33.

way that honors God, we become “secondary causes” in his master plan.⁷ Consider those times you may have prayed for something, and the answer came not through some direct insight, but through another person – who perhaps was unaware that he or she was answering a prayer!

The task for us, then, is to grow in our trust of the Lord, desirous of cooperating in his great plan. We do this by putting him first: first of all, by daily living in a state of grace – and, if we should ever fall out of that state, by going to confession and getting right with God again as soon as possible; by dedicating each day to him; by praying that his plans be fulfilled; by stepping out in generous faith and giving in a way that demonstrates trust. Again: “Seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all will be given to you besides”, Christ teaches.

Nothing I do could ever thwart the Lord’s sovereign plan!⁸ What a consolation that is! In fact, if I do what I do for the right reasons, putting God first with good faith and with generous trust, I can only help his plan – and I will lack for nothing besides! How wonderful his divine providence is: may we not only benefit from it, but may we always be a part of it. Amen.

⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, nos. 306-308.

⁸ Many will wonder how the reality evil is accounted for in this understanding. Does this mean that God wills evil to happen – that he has planned it? Would not it be a blasphemy to suggest that? It surely would. And the *Catechism* explains how the reality and mystery of evil fits into divine providence also. See nos. 309-314.