



Watching a construction site can be quite engrossing. There are dozens of people using amazing tools and machines each working on a different portion of the site. At times the workers can seem oblivious to one another, as if the site were a chaotic jungle of random jobs. Over time though, the coordination of these individual efforts becomes apparent, as one worker's efforts prepare the way for that of another, whose work links up with a third. The haphazard collection of tasks becomes an ordered structure with a clear design and purpose. Of course, this emergence of order is no happy accident. Much time and effort went into planning the project, laying out every detail in blueprints. Further, someone was responsible for understanding those blueprints and ensuring that the many workers stayed on task and contributed to the greater order of the building as a whole, namely the foreman.

The foreman is a helpful analogy for understanding God's providence. Of course the analogy limps in places, but it will be helpful to clarify what truths about God it illustrates and those that it cannot. Divine providence refers to God's preexisting knowledge of every aspect of creation, somewhat like the foreman's knowledge of the blueprints. Just as the foreman knows about and is responsible for the whole building, not in an abstract way but down to very precise details, God's providence is over the entirety of creation, covering all places and times, but is not abstract. St. Thomas insists that God's providence covers every detail of every created thing, without exception: "But the causality of God, Who is the first agent, extends to all being, not only as to constituent principles of species, but also as to the individualizing principles; not only of things incorruptible, but also of things corruptible. Hence all things that exist in whatsoever

manner are necessarily directed by God towards some end."¹

Further, the foreman knows the goal behind every task in the construction of the building. He knows that the space must be dug for the foundation so that the foundation can be laid to properly hold the supporting structure which will give strength to all of the internal floors and walls and so forth. God's providence also extends to goals and ends. God knows the proper end of every part of creation, for he made each of them, and directs each of them to that

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end. Furthermore he orders all of these lesser ends, one

to another, for the greater glory of the whole of creation and, ultimately, to the last and greatest end, God Himself.

As marvelous as the blueprint or plan may be, it is not meant simply to be thought about by the foreman, but to be instantiated as a real building. This distinction between the plan as conceived and the execution of the plan is, for St. Thomas, the distinction between two aspects of God's providential ordering, providence, properly speaking, and government:

Two things belong to providence—namely, the type [idea] of the order of things foreordained towards an end; and the execution of this order, which is called government. As regards the first of these, God has immediate providence over everything, because He has in His intellect the types [ideas] of everything, even the smallest; ... As to the second, there are certain intermediaries of God's providence; for He governs things inferior by superior, not on account of any defect in His power, but by reason of the abundance of His goodness; so that the dignity of causality is imparted even to creatures.²

Just as the foreman assigns laborers to particular tasks on the construction site, even though they may not understand the whole of the project,

God deigns to give creatures a role in the government of His creation to bring to fruition some part of His larger plan.

Here, though, is one place where the weakness of the analogy arises. Even though the foreman may know how to work every machine and fulfill every task needed, he cannot build the building himself but needs the help of the laborers. Further, because of the trust he places in his laborers and their own limitations, part of his responsibility is to react to problems that arise in completing each task and adjust the work prudently to best approximate the original plan.

God does not rely on creatures to execute His providential order because of any weakness on His part. Rather He invites them to cooperate with His providence because of the abundance of His goodness. He desires to impart the dignity of causality, of having a true role in the greater order of nature, to His creatures. God's primary causality reaches down to every aspect of creation, but He chooses to work through the secondary causality of created instruments. Further, God is not reactive like the foreman. God is never surprised or caught off guard by the limitations of His creatures. Even their imperfection does not escape His knowledge. Because the flow of time is a property of creation itself, God is not subject to our moment by moment experience, but has full knowledge of every moment, past, present and future, in one eternal now.³ His providential knowledge of what is, for us, the future is certain because, to Him, it is actually present.

Note that these two claims, the true causality of creatures in the created order and God's certain and unchanging foreknowledge, may seem to be in contradiction. It can seem like things like randomness and human freedom contradict this complete, certain knowledge of God. We will look closer at these issues but, following St. Thomas, we can affirm there is chance and there is free will even though God's providential knowledge and His governance of creation are exhaustive.⁴

In sum, divine providence is simply the extension of God's intimate knowledge of each created thing to the totality of creation, without sacrificing any of its depth. This providence is both comprehensive and extremely particular. God was not



in any way constrained in what He could have created and so His choice of this particular order was made freely, a choice made purely from His divine wisdom and love. Thus, when we catch a glimpse of the beauty of the order of creation, in nature or in human activity, we can take delight in the fact that we are catching a glimpse of God's providence. Even when that order escapes us and the tragedy of evil stares us in the face, we can take some comfort in the knowledge that nothing escapes God's wise and loving providence and that all things are ordered to the good, to God himself. **T&E**

¹ *Summa theologiæ*, I.22.2.

² *Summa theologiæ*, I.22.3.

³ *Summa theologiæ*, I.14.13.

⁴ To learn more, read our articles on *Randomness, Chance, and the Providence of God* (#10), *Providence and Freedom* (#11) and *Divine Providence and the Mystery of Evil* (#12).

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