

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Providence of God

Once God had created the Universe, He did not withdraw His interest and governance but continues to bestow His Divine Providence. In the Book of Genesis, God appears to have completed the work of Creation before “*resting*” on the seventh day.<sup>1</sup> However, this should certainly not be understood as though God had become inactive or unconcerned because that would be considered blasphemy. In the Old and New Testaments the fundamental Doctrine concerning God’s Providence is widely proclaimed and it embraces all things,<sup>2</sup> being revealed in many forms but remaining inscrutable and incomprehensible to the human mind.

Parallel to Holy Scripture, all the ecclesiastic Scholars and Holy Fathers of the Church proclaimed not only the Truth concerning the Divine Providence of God, but also explained and formulated it in its fullness. They were the first to distinguish between Providence that concerns inanimate and irrational creation and that which extends to all humanity, especially those who fear and seek the Lord. The Providence of God, according to the Orthodox Christian Faith, is the Work of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, for the Will of the Trinity is one. In

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<sup>1</sup> Gen.2:2.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dositheus of Jerusalem, *Confession*, ch. 5, p. 30. Ibid, *Decree V*, in Link, *Apostolic Faith Today*, p. 56. Mitsopoulos, *Themata*, pp. 64-65.

the New Testament the Son is proclaimed as having everything under His Authority while the Father appears to nurture all Creation, knowing every need and the Holy Spirit distributes various Gifts as He wills.

## 1. Definition of Divine Providence

The Doctrine of Divine Providence is that it is related directly to the Creation because it is the continuation of the same Divine Act. Divine Providence began with the Creation so the expression: “*God is the Creator and the Provider*” is correct as it expresses the reliable and continuing care of God for everything that exists outside of Him but which were created by Him.<sup>3</sup>

Nemesios of Edessa defines the Providence of God as “*God’s care for all things and as the Will of God for all.*”<sup>4</sup> This definition was also adopted by St John of Damascus<sup>5</sup> whereas Theodoretos of Cyrus characterized it as God being “... *not only the Creator of all but the Guardian and the Rector and Governor of all.*”<sup>6</sup>

The term “*providence*” is found twice in the New Testament although not signifying the Providence and care of God for the world, but the care of man concerning his

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<sup>3</sup> Plato of Moscow, *Orthodox Teaching*, pp. 46-48. Damalas, *Catechesis*, p. 27. Frangopoulos, *Christian Faith*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>4</sup> Nemesios of Edessa, *Concerning Providence*, in Migne, *P.G.*, 50, 792-793.

<sup>5</sup> St. John of Damascus, *Exposition. About providence*, II, 33, in Migne, *P.G.*, 94, 964.

<sup>6</sup> Theodoretus of Cyrus *About providence*, X, in Migne, *P.G.*, 83, 484.

own body, as well as the concern of a governor who cares for the administration of his land.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Teachings of Holy Scripture

In the Old Testament God is depicted as “*resting*” on the seventh day from all His Works<sup>8</sup> but we must not understand this as being that God had stopped working. Instead it means that He had stopped forming new creatures. The order of Creation had been solidly established whereas the chaos, which appeared on the first day, was controlled.<sup>9</sup>

The words of Christ in the New Testament: “*My Father has been working until now, and I have been working...*”<sup>10</sup> refer to the Providence of God. St John Chrysostom interpreted the abovementioned verse by explaining the manner of God’s resting from all His Works: “*He provides and upholds all that He made. Seeing the sun rising and the moon shining and the lakes and the springs of water and the rivers and the rain and the way of nature, that which is in the seeds, in our bodies and in the irrational beings, and everything else that He created, teach the continuous Work of the Father. ‘... He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends*

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 24:2 and Rom. 13:14.

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 2:2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Clement the Alexandrian, *Stromata*, VI, 16, in **B**, v.8, p. 232. St. Augustine, *De Genesis ad litteram*, IV, c. XII, in migne, *P.L.*, 34, 304.

<sup>10</sup> John 5:17.

*rain on the just and on the unjust.*<sup>11</sup> And again: *'If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you'*<sup>12</sup> and speaking of *'the birds of the air,'*<sup>13</sup> even *them the Heavenly Father feeds.*<sup>14</sup>

St Gregory of Nazianzos explaining the term “*until now*” adds that this “...*indicates the economia* [special dispensation] *and the Providence of God.*”<sup>15</sup>

St Augustine differentiates between the Work of God’s Providence that continues unabated ‘...*until now*’ and those Works that ceased on the seventh day. He also opposes all who believe that God stopped working after He created the world as it is evident that God continues His Work not only in Heaven but also on earth since “...*the Father Who dwells in...*” the Son “...*does the Works...*” that the Son is doing.<sup>16</sup> He also refers to St Paul who stated in his First Epistle to the Corinthians that “...*God gives it a body as He pleases and to each seed its own body.*”<sup>17</sup>

God’s Providence is proclaimed in the Old Testament and especially in the Book of Psalms. God

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Matth. 5:45.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Matth. 6:30.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Matth. 6:26.

<sup>14</sup> St. John, Chrysostom, *Homily* 38, § 2, in Migne, *P.G.*, 59, 214.

<sup>15</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Homily* 30, § 11, in Migne, *P.G.*, 36, 117.

<sup>16</sup> John 14:10-11, 24; 10:37-38; 5:19-20.

<sup>17</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinth. 15:38. St. Augustine, *De Genesis ad litteram*, V, c. 20, in Migne, *P.L.*, 34, 335.

“...dwells on high...” and beholds “...the things that are in the Heavens and in the earth...” He “...raises the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the ash heap...” and “...grants the barren woman a home, like a joyful mother of children.”<sup>18</sup> In other cases God appears to have His Eyes “...on the Righteous, and His Ears ... open to their cry. The Face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. The Righteous cry out and the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart and saves such as have a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the Righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. He guards all his bones; not one of them is broken. Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the Righteous shall be condemned. The Lord redeems the souls of His servants, and none of those who trust in Him shall be condemned.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, every Righteous should cast his “...burden on the Lord...” for He “...shall sustain...” and “...never permit the Righteous to be moved.”<sup>20</sup>

The Providence of God is revealed in the prayers of the Righteous when they were in distress as, for example, Judith who saved the Israelites from the invading army by beseeching God Almighty to hear her prayer<sup>21</sup> as well as Mardocheus and Esther who “..besought the Lord...” when Aman wished to “...destroy the Jews.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Psalm 113(114):5-9.

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 34(35):15-22.

<sup>20</sup> Psalm 55(36):22.

<sup>21</sup> Judith 9:1-14.

<sup>22</sup> Esther 4:17.

The Providence of God is mentioned many times in the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon wherein God is proclaimed to be “...*the Lord over all..*”<sup>23</sup> Who “...*cares for all...*”<sup>24</sup> “...*for the Spirit of the Lord fills the world: and that which contains all things has knowledge of the Voice.*”<sup>25</sup> God’s Wisdom “...*is more moving than any motion: She passes and goes through all things...*”<sup>26</sup> “...*for in Her is an understanding Spirit, Holy, one only, manifold, subtle, lively, clear, undefiled, plain, not subject to hurt, loving the thing that is good, quick, which cannot be letted, ready to do good, kind to man, steadfast, sure, free from care, having all power, overseeing all things, and going through all understanding.*”<sup>27</sup> The Wisdom of God “...*reaches from one end to another mightily; and sweetly does She order all things.*”<sup>28</sup> The Providence of God governs all things and makes “...*a way in the sea, and a safe path in the waves...*” showing that He can save a man “...*from all danger.*”<sup>29</sup>

In the New Testament the Son of God appears to uphold “...*all things by the Word of His Power...*”<sup>30</sup> and that “...*all things were created through Him and for Him. ...for it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to*

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<sup>23</sup> Wisdom 6:7.

<sup>24</sup> Wisdom 12:13.

<sup>25</sup> Wisdom 1:7.

<sup>26</sup> Wisdom 7:24.

<sup>27</sup> Wisdom 7:22-23.

<sup>28</sup> Wisdom 8:1.

<sup>29</sup> Wisdom 14:3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Heb. 1:3.

*Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in Heaven, having made peace through the Blood of His Cross.*<sup>31</sup> God appears to be the One in Whom “...we live and move and have our being...”<sup>32</sup> and that we should cast all our “...care upon Him, for He cares...” for us.<sup>33</sup> The Divine Providence of God includes the care of “...birds of the air...” “...the lilies...” and “...the grass of the field...” and even much more for men<sup>34</sup> whose “...very hairs...” of their heads “...are all numbered.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus in the Old and New Testament the Providence of God touches even the simplest matters of man’s life and nothing exists without Divine Providence or merely by accident. For example when the Lord took away sleep from King Artaxerxes he discovered written records of how he helped Mardocheaus.<sup>36</sup> When Achaab the King of Israel was killed instead of Josaphat the King of Judah, it was due to the Providence of God Who had “...put a false spirit in the mouth of all...” the Prophets.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, when St Paul’s “...sister’s son heard of the ambush..” against his uncle “..and entered the barracks and told Paul...”<sup>38</sup> it was considered Divine Providence as when St Paul was shipwrecked on Malta.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Col. 1:16, 19-20.

<sup>32</sup> Acts 17:28.

<sup>33</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:7.

<sup>34</sup> Matth. 5:26-34.

<sup>35</sup> Matth. 10:30.

<sup>36</sup> Esther 6:1-2

<sup>37</sup> 1 Samuel (1 Kings) 22:29-35, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Acts 23:16.

<sup>39</sup> Acts 27:1-28:10.

It is understood from the actual words of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ that the Providence of God is multifaceted and varied according to the nature of those who receive it. Divine Providence includes all things although not always distributed in the same manner and to the same degree. For, if God bestows the lilies of the field with such beauty, how much more does He bestow upon mankind? And if He feeds the birds and all the animals, how much more does He provide for mankind? The Lord spoke of man alone concerning His Heavenly Kingdom. As the sun shines on good and evil alike or the rain falls on the just as well as the unjust, God assures us that “...*for the Elect’s sake those days will be shortened...*”<sup>40</sup> and that only the Righteous will inherit His Kingdom because those “...*who dwell in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty...*” and they are guaranteed that “...*He shall give His Angels charge over them, to keep them in all their ways.*”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the separation of Divine Providence into “*general Providence*” that includes all Creation and “*special Providence*” that includes the rational creatures, especially the Righteous and Elect who fear God, is based upon the Words of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and upon Holy Scripture. It is obvious, therefore, that God has a different relationship with His rational beings to that of the irrational world. Furthermore, the Providence that God has for His Elect people differs from those who do not know Him and who worship idols instead of our Creator.

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<sup>40</sup> Matth. 24:22.

<sup>41</sup> Psalm 91(92):1, 11.

### 3. The Teachings of the Holy Fathers

Not only do the Holy Fathers speak of the Providence of God but so did the first ecclesiastical scholars.

The “*Shepherd of Hermas*” proclaims that “...*the Name of the Son of God is great and incomprehensible, and sustains the whole world.*”<sup>42</sup>

Athenagoras found it to be a necessary conclusion for those who “...*accept God as the Creator of this world...*” by assigning “...*the Guardianship and Providence of the world to God’s Wisdom and Justice...*” if they wished to keep their principles. They should not think that “...*neither those on earth nor in Heaven are without Guardian or without Provider...*” but must realise that “...*all visible and invisible, small and large, ... have the Creator’s attention.*”<sup>43</sup>

St Justin the Philosopher and Martyr relied upon the Prophecies as solid proof of God’s Providence and completely excluded the existence of fate. Through the Prophecies God was revealed as Foreknowing and Pre-commanding the things to come. His Will for humanity’s Salvation, fulfilled in due time, was revealed through the Holy Prophets.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas*, Parable 9, § 5, in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 274.

<sup>43</sup> Athenagoras, *About resurrection*, 18, in **B**, v.4, p. 325.

<sup>44</sup> St. Justin, the philosopher and martyr, *1 Apology*, 43 and 44, in **B**, v. 3, p. 183-184; *Ibid*, *Dialogue*, 7, in **B**, v. 3, p. 215.

Theophilus of Antioch, giving the etymology of the word «Θεός» (“God”), noted that “..*God originates from the word ‘θέειν,’ which means ‘to run’ and ‘to move’ and ‘to act’ and ‘to feed’ and ‘to provide’ and ‘to govern’ and ‘to give life to all.’*”<sup>45</sup>

St Irenaeus proclaims that God is the Providence of all things. He believed that all rational beings must know their Provider and Governor.<sup>46</sup> Interpreting the Holy Gospel according to St Matthew 6:25-34 and 10:29-30, he taught that “...*God has provided for each man separately; for each has a different size head - one smaller and another larger, one having more hair than others - and the number of their hairs differing between each individual, and yet God has counted each one of their hairs.*” Referring to the two sparrows that “... *are sold for a copper coin...*” and “...*not one of them falls to the ground...*” unless the Father Wills it, he exalts Divine Providence for all things.<sup>47</sup>

St Athanasios the Great of Alexandria, with regard to the Almightyness and Perfection of the Word of God, noted that “...*He has spread His Powers everywhere and has Enlightened those who are visible and those who are invisible, which He sustains to Himself, not leaving*

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<sup>45</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *I Autolytus*, § 4, in **B**, v.5, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Heresies*, book III, ch. 25, § 1, in Migne, *P.G.*, 7, 968. Cf. *Ibid*, in Hadjephraimides, p. 259-260.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, *Heresies*, book II, ch. 26, § 2, in Migne, *P.G.*, 7, 800. Cf. *Ibid*, in Hadjephraimides, p. 165.

*anything aside without His Power, but all and through all and for each and everyone gives Life and Protection.*<sup>48</sup>

St John Chrysostom, explaining God's Providence, gave the example of a river that divides itself into many tributaries and thus quenches the thirst of the land. He comes to the conclusion that no one remains without the benefit of God's Divine Providence.<sup>49</sup>

#### **4. Divine Providence is the Work of the Holy Trinity.**

Divine Providence is the combined Work of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. St Paul the Apostle proclaimed the Son to be the Creator of "...all things..." that "...were created through Him and for Him..." as He "...is before all things, and in Him all things consist..."<sup>50</sup> He is "...the brightness..." of the Father's "...Glory and the express image of His Person, and [upholds] all things by the Word of His Power."<sup>51</sup>

Clement the Alexandrian characterises the Son as being "...the Paternal Power."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> St. Athanasius the Great, *Against Greeks*, § 42, In Migne, *P.G.*, 25, 84.

<sup>49</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Psalm 46*, § 1, in Migne, *P.G.*, 55, 205. *Ibid*, *In Matthew Homily 28*, § 3, in Migne, *P.G.*, 57, 354.

<sup>50</sup> Col. 1:16-17.

<sup>51</sup> Heb. 1:3.

<sup>52</sup> Clement the Alexandrian, *Stromata*, VII, 2, in *B*, v.8, p. 247.

St Athanasios the Great of Alexandria proclaims that “...*the Almighty and Perfect Holy Word of God the Father upholds and sustains all things to Himself.*”<sup>53</sup>

St Gregory the Theologian of Nazianzos refers to the Word as “*Power...*” that “...*sustains the Creation and gives Power to all Creation.*”<sup>54</sup>

According to St Gregory of Nyssa, since the Will and Action of the Holy Trinity is singular, it is understandable that “...*all Providence, Guardianship and Supervision of all things...*” is therefore also singular.<sup>55</sup>

Holy Scripture states that the Son as well as the Father are working “*until now,*”<sup>56</sup> feeding the birds,<sup>57</sup> knowing all that we need<sup>58</sup> and giving good things to those who ask Him. Without the Father’s Will, not even a sparrow falls down upon the face of the earth,<sup>59</sup> while everything is Constructed and Regenerated by the Holy Spirit Who proceeds from the Father,<sup>60</sup> being the One

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<sup>53</sup> St. Athanasius the Great, *Against Greeks*, §§ 41 and 42, in Migne, *P.G.*, 25, 54.

<sup>54</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Homily 30*, § 20, in Migne, *P.G.*, 36, 129.

<sup>55</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *That there are not three gods*, in Migne, *P.G.*, 45, 128.

<sup>56</sup> John 5;17.

<sup>57</sup> Matth. 6:26.

<sup>58</sup> Matth. 6:32.

<sup>59</sup> Matth. 10:29.

<sup>60</sup> John 16:26.

Who divides and distributes the variety of Gifts “...to each one individually, as He Wills.”<sup>61</sup>

St Irenaeos proclaimed that the Father is the One Who, through the Son and the Holy Spirit, does everything and being the Head of all, governs everything.<sup>62</sup>

St Athanasios the Great of Alexandria declared that God the Father “...created everything through His Eternal Son...” and “... gave substance to the Creation...” so that it did “... not face the danger...” of falling “...into non-existence...” and “... being good, through His Word...” He “...governs and upholds...” the entire Cosmos.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinth. 12:4-11.

<sup>62</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Heresies*, book I, ch. 22, § 1, in Migne, *P.G.*, 7, 669. Cf. *Ibid*, in Hadjephraimides, pp. 154-155.

<sup>63</sup> St. Athanasius the Great, *Against Greeks*, § 41, in Migne, *P.G.*, 25, 84.