

## Chaos and the Leading of Providence

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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In the Gospels we read about a windstorm that came up on the Sea of Galilee and threatened the Lord's disciples in their ship. It is important in the story that it says the Lord "fell asleep" and then the storm came up, clearly meaning that the disciples thought He had *forgotten about them*, and that this was the cause of their troubles. This is confirmed when, after He had calmed the wind and waves, He said simply, "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:22-25).

In our world we, too, face many situations in which we are inclined to look around and wonder to ourselves whether the Lord might not have fallen asleep on the job. Of course it sounds crude to say it that way and we might not even think of it in those terms, but when we go through states of real doubt or temptation this is what it comes down to: somehow it seems as if the Lord either doesn't know or doesn't care about us, or that He has just created everything and then gone away somewhere, allowing life to unfold as it will without any particular order or direction. In fact, very often a lot of things seem totally **out** of order and out of control.

This is the situation referred to in the *Arcana* where it says, "Before anything is reduced to order it is very common for everything to be reduced first of all to a state of *confusion resembling chaos* so that things that are not compatible may be separated from one another. And once these have been separated the Lord arranges them into order" (AC 842:3). The examples given there about storms in the atmosphere and blood circulating through the heart help us to see the point. Another passage in *Divine Providence* illustrates the idea with the process of leavening or fermentation in which there can be a murky or confused mass of activity, with much bubbling and foam, leading however in the end to a beautiful goodness and clarity in the finished product.

If you can imagine yourself in a huge vat of fermenting juice, or better yet, if you can picture the fermentation process and imagine it taking place in your mind, with your thoughts churning and your feelings in turmoil, you can get some idea of how confusing it is while you're going through it. Then again, if you can relate to the process as a vintner or a brewmaster, knowing that it all works according to specific laws, with various end products according to the actual elements and conditions involved, you may be able to appreciate the high degree of order and purpose that is involved, and how the Lord directs the process every step of the way.

In our third lesson today the point was made that "the Lord's providence is in the least particulars of all things, *but not according to such an order as a person proposes to himself*, because [in His case] things to come are both foreseen and provided" (AC 6486). The example is there given of a builder gathering materials of every kind in heaps awaiting construction. To the casual observer there is no particular order about these heaps, but in fact the arrangement has a lot to do with the building process, and the whole work is done according to a very specific plan with a very definite end in view.

The architect in this analogy is the Lord. The builder and his workers are the principles and practices of the individual whose character the Lord would improve, and the building materials are all the events and circumstances of his life. With this in mind, imagine the builders – the bricklayers and the carpenters and the plumbers and the laborers – all deciding *for themselves* what to do on a particular site *without looking at the plan* or talking to the architect! Not only

would there be confusion on the site, in the end there would be total confusion within the trades and the building itself would be a monstrosity. So in our lives, we need to recognize that only the Lord has the wisdom, the perspective and the judgment, not to mention the love, to pull all the pieces together and make something worthwhile out of them. And indeed, “the Lord’s providence IS in the least particulars of all things, *but not according to such an order as a person proposes to himself.*” Why? – because we from our earth-bound, self-centered points of view could never foresee the sorts of problems we will have to face and so we could never provide *for ourselves* the things we need to deal with them.

There is in science today a special field known as “chaotic dynamics,” or the study of apparent chaos. It is a very complex field involving mathematics most of us couldn’t even begin to understand. But the interesting thing that most of us can understand about it is that in that study events and processes of the natural world that seem random or chaotic are shown actually to involve such marvelous rhythms of order that the equations used to analyze them on computers reveal beautiful pictures full of regular patterns called fractals all but suggesting a Divine plan.

It is sometimes possible to get a similar impression from watching insects, like ants swarming around a hill or some food. At first the activity seems to be utterly chaotic, but when you watch carefully or for a long time you can see clear patterns reflecting definite purpose. And if you really study ants you cannot fail to be impressed with their incredible organization.

Now, going up to the other extreme, if we look at pictures of the earth from outer space we can also see most beautiful weather patterns among other things that confirm the orderly interrelationship of all parts of the planet – so much so that one scientist some years ago proposed the theory that the earth itself is a giant organism changing and adapting to meet its own needs. (Still, if we find ourselves in the midst of a storm it is hard to maintain that higher perspective.)

So it is, the whole earth and everything in it being representative of spiritual states in our lives, that we often experience feelings of chaos and confusion about our relationships with others and even with the Lord. And if we don’t have the skill or the tools or take the time to look more carefully – from the Lord’s perspective – we may lose faith in the underlying order that does, both in the long run and in the details, give it all meaning and make it worthwhile. One of the tools and a vital part of the perspective we need in this process is the knowledge of eternal life.

For example, in education or family life it’s not unusual for children to argue, complain, throw a tantrum or otherwise act out, sometimes in a most embarrassing public way. At times like this it can be really important to hold onto the principles of heavenly instruction, recognizing that there are always *reasons* for such behavior, that getting angry about it *doesn’t* help, and most of all that when we respond *with love* and with *appropriate, patient, sympathetic* discipline we can with the Lord’s help literally turn the kids around – maybe not right away (that’s part of the challenge!) but in time and for their eternal benefit.

Similarly in our own lives a commitment to some work or ideals or principles that once seemed to offer enormous fulfillment may at some point become utterly confusing to us and make us wonder whether we have made some huge mistake. But if we can remember how limited our perspective really is and how perfectly the Lord foresees and provides for our *eternal* lives we may be able to get through that crisis with the hope of much better things to come.

Whatever it is, the apparent chaos and confusion of the short term can turn into the blessing of eternal life if we have faith. And what IS life in this world but a drop in the ocean compared to eternal life?

Then again, even in the spiritual world after death for those who are a mixture of good and evil we read that there are states of real agitation - like fermentation - by means of which, as we read in Divine Providence, "discordant things are separated and concordant things are united, and purity and clearness are the result" (DP 25). The fact that there has to be this period of confusion for the individual does not mean the process is out of control; rather it is part of the process just as the acknowledgment of helplessness is part of the process of realizing we *need* help and can get it from the Lord.

Another example of confusion in our lives – like the storm that bore down on the disciples in the sea – is the feeling we have when the natural affections, described in the Writings as various lusts arising from the loves of self and the world, appear to overwhelm us (“lusts” in this case not only meaning sexual interests but *all* the natural cravings that we share with animals). The problem isn’t so much that we have these natural cravings but that they seem to be out of control in relation to the higher principles *that we also know and feel* within ourselves. And because we feel both the good and the evil, that is, the higher and the lower passions as if they were our own, we feel torn apart, really threatened as to our true identity.

In this case, like the disciples remembering the Lord, we need to remember His teaching that the feelings we experience all come from the spiritual world: they are not *ours* unless we *accept* them as our own, affirming them and acting according to them. One way of enlisting the Lord's aid and overcoming in such temptations therefore is to acknowledge their true origin, pray for help and simply refuse to act on the baser instincts, choosing instead to serve the neighbor or the kingdom of heaven. It’s not as easy as it sounds; the feeling of self-life is very strong and we are likely to fight a long time in the temptation before we really turn to the Lord. But when we do He will immediately calm the storm and we will see that the purpose of the pain and confusion was that the things within us might be “disposed into order.”

Remember the story about the tower of Babel and the confusion of languages among the builders? This is another representation of the chaos in our lives, but in that case the subject is our *thinking*, not so much our cravings or affections. That the people couldn’t understand one another’s speech represents our own failure to accept one another’s thoughts, concepts or ideas – mainly because we all tend to be so worldly and self-centered. This intellectual confusion naturally arises from all sorts of fallacies and misunderstandings we accept based on sense impressions and self loves not rightly subordinated to the wisdom of heaven. And again, the problem isn’t so much that our sense impressions are wrong (though they may be) but that we are not willing to recognize their limitations, or view them from a higher perspective. Therefore we have so many wrong or merely partial ideas – like the little windows revealing only parts of the picture in the children’s talk: these ideas can be confusing and bewildering when viewed individually, but if they help us to recognize our need for overall enlightenment by the Lord they can serve a vital purpose, which is why He allows it – and in the tower story why He was said to have *caused* this confusion – to occur.

In the book of *Acts* in the New Testament there is a wonderful story of how the Lord reversed

this confusion of tongues – not by taking away the distinctions of the individual languages, which in that context represent the intellectual variety of heaven, but by causing each person in a large international crowd to hear the message of the Holy Spirit in his own language. This is now called the miracle of Pentecost and it is the origin of the charismatic practice of “speaking in tongues.” (The modern form of this phenomenon, incidentally, does not involve the understanding at all, but in the beginning this was the whole point.) So the people were united in spirit despite their different backgrounds and opinions as they all came together to hear and understand the Word, each as if in his own language.

There’s a lot of revelation between *Genesis* and the book of *Acts*, and we need a lot of education before we get to it, but it’s good to know that there can be a day of Pentecost for us, too, after all the confusion. For the truth is that in heaven we will not be limited by the words of language, we will freely speak in the language of *ideas*, and these ideas will be clear and harmonious because from the Lord.

Now, in conclusion, it seems only right to say something about the confusion we may be feeling as a congregation facing many changes in the near future. First of all, remember there is a plan: not a five-year plan or a ten year plan but *an eternal plan* that the Lord accommodates to each changing circumstance moment by moment according to our need. This is not something that we are in any way able to “propose to ourselves,” but it is provided for us based on what the Lord foresees. Our job is not to “second-guess” or try to improve His plan but simply to co-operate with the laws of real religion: to do justly, to love mercy and to humble ourselves to walk with Him. It includes both personal and corporate devotion, study, discipline, good communication, mutual love, prayerful consideration of others, and a lot of trust.

There is also an appearance of prudence. But the Writings say that human prudence apart from the Lord is nothing! We certainly should try to understand our circumstances – our needs, our potential for real human uses and the available means at our disposal – but if we limit ourselves to what we can see at any given moment, or take our eyes off the Lord we will not allow Him to do His work among us. Rather we must stay focused on His Word and give Him the opportunity to provide for us, that is, to surprise and delight us with His infinitely better judgment and much more meaningful love.

It is necessary, we read, that the Lord’s work among us be done essentially in secret. Otherwise we would react and rebel in every instance, feeling that we weren’t in freedom and that our own identities would be lost. But let us never deny that His work is going on! And let us pray that we may be disposed by all means to accept it – for our own sakes as individuals and for the sake of the church, that it may be the kingdom of the Lord on earth.

Amen.

Lessons:     *Daniel* 6: selections from vv. 1-23  
                  Children’s talk on Daniel in the Lion’s Den

*Luke* 8:22-25  
*Arcana Caelestia* 6486-87