

ST. AUGUSTINE ON PROVIDENCE

By

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Abstract

One of the first questions that naturally cross our minds is, what does Augustine mean by Providence? Thi work does not immediately rush to give an answer to this question, but rather looks at what Augustine wants us to understand about providence and its implications. For Augustine, Providence is a divine attribute. That is why he often speaks of it with an adjective to describe it: “divine providence”, “God’s providence”, “providence of the Creator”, and also he speaks of “the most provident God”. In all of this Augustine wants us to understand that it is God who acts. When we talk of divine Providence we must understand God in action in relation to creation and in relation His creatures endowed with will and intelligence. This paper has drawn conclusions from a vast range of Augustine’s works to show hie perspective on God’s providence. This work is hoped would contribute in arousing some interest in reading Augustine’s works personally and, thus, grow in the Augustinian theology from a firsthand experience of his works.

Keywords: Augustine, Providence, Hippo, Divine, Evil, Good

Introduction

Augustine wrote a number of works, which treat the theme of divine providence either directly or as a consequence of some other arguments, which border around it. Towards the end of the year 386, when he converted to Christianity, St. Augustine abandoned all his worldly ambitions: he gave up his career as speaker to the Emperor. He left his residence in Milan and took up residence in a small town not far off, Casiciacum. He went into a sort of retreat and began to prepare himself to receive the sacrament of baptism. During this time he began to compose some of his philosophical dialogues. Augustine tells us:

When, therefore, I had left behind both the things that I had attained among this world’s desires and those that I wanted to attain, and had brought myself to the peace of the Christian life, the first thing that I wrote,
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while I was still unbaptized, was the “Answer to the Academics” or “On the Academics”.⁴³

This was the beginning of the composition of his philosophical dialogues. In the month of November of the year 386 Augustine also composed his dialogue *On Order (De ordine)*.⁴⁴ Augustine would generally allow his disciples and companions, Licentius, Trigetius, and Alypius to take part in the discussions, as well as his mother Monica. The *On Order (De ordine)* is one of Augustine’s works that most treat the theme of providence. In this work, Augustine treats the question whether the ordering of divine providence includes all things good and evil. This work treats, to a great extent, the presence of evil in the established divine order in the whole of created reality. We should mention here that the question of providence is present in various ways in the other dialogues he wrote in this period of his life. Apart from the Dialogues in general and the *On order* in particular, we must also mention the *City of God*, which treats divine providence, which orders everything in human history and in human affairs. Augustine also tells us that he wrote a small book (a homily, in fact) *On Providence*. In his Epistle 231 addressed to a certain Darius, who had asked Augustine for some books and who sent Augustine both medicine for his ill health and some money to sustain his library, we read the following:

I also sent other books for which you did no task, so that I have done more than you asked for: “Faith in the Things Not Seen”, “Patience”, “Continenence”, “Providence” and one large book “Faith, Hope and Charity”.⁴⁵

Therefore, Augustine wrote a specific work or homily entitled “*On Providence*”. This homily was addressed to Christians who are scandalized by the presence of evil in the world and tries to give an answer to them from biblical evidence. Relatively recently, among other previously unknown or unedited works of St. Augustine, a homily given by Augustine “*On Providence*” was brought to light by François Dolbeau, who traced this work to a 12th century codex in the State Library in Mantua, Italy, and asserts that it is an authentic Augustinian work.

43 *Retr.* 1,1.

44 *Ibid.*, 1,3,1, “During the same period, while the books on the Academics were being written, I wrote two other books on order.”

45 *Ep.* 231,7.

Eugippius collected about forty lines of this homily in his 6th florilegium, but this homily was never received as part of the authentic Augustinian works before it was rediscovered by Dolbeau. The date of this homily is not known but Dolbeau believes, from internal evidence and affinity with other Augustinian work, that it could have been preached between the years 408 and 412.⁴⁶

This homily wants to address the objections of those who deny God's providence and especially refuse biblical testimonies of God's providence by claiming that God does not care for the world He created nor is He interested in the affairs of man. Augustine disproves these objections with recourse to non-biblical arguments that demonstrate God's providence (argument from the order in nature or in the composition of the body). Augustine went on to say that the apparent disorder in the world is an order that surpasses our understanding. Divine justice is present even though we see both good and evil shared among the righteous and the wicked in this world. However, the most sublime of all proofs of God's care and providence for the affairs of man is the event of the Incarnation of Christ, which shows, not only that God cares, but also shows to what point God's interest for man could go.

In this article we want to bring out some aspects of Augustine's conception of providence and the consequences providence has on our life and on the world.

Saint Augustine on divine Providence

When we speak of the question of providence in St. Augustine we have to know that it is not merely a matter of academic discussion which could be explained by logic. If we believe in providence, then it touches on the very core of human life and experience. When St. Augustine addresses this question in his dialogues or polemical works (addressed to non-believers or to a wider audience) he often seeks the path of rational arguments, knowing that it is a common ground he has with those who do not share his faith or who do not believe at all in God. But when he faces the question in his homilies (addressed to believers) one sees Augustine speak more directly from the heart and with passion because he knows it is an essentially existential question. Augustine reflected on this problem over and over again.

⁴⁶ For the manuscript tradition and the transmission of this homily we refer the reader to: DOLBEAU, F., "*Sermon inédit sur la Providence*", Rev.Ét.Aug. 41 (1995), pp. 268-270.

One of the first questions that naturally cross our minds is, what does Augustine mean by Providence? However, we should not immediately rush to give an answer to this question. We should first of all look at what Augustine wants us to understand about providence and its implications. Thereafter, his definition or description of providence will become clearer.

The first thing we want to say is that, for Augustine, Providence is a divine attribute. That is why he often speaks of it with an adjective to describe it: “divine providence”, “God’s providence”, “providence of the Creator”, and also he speaks of “the most provident God”. In all of this Augustine wants us to understand that it is God who acts. When we talk of divine Providence we must understand God in action in relation to creation and in relation His creatures endowed with will and intelligence.

For this reason, in his *Revisions (Retractationes)* Augustine regrets that he often used the word “fortune” in the first works he wrote, i.e., in his dialogues.⁴⁷ In fact, in his first dialogues, the discourse on fortune was insistent (fortune and life; fortune and freedom; fortune and man; fortune and the philosopher; fortune and the sage; fortune and vocation). Given Augustine’s later displeasure for the use of this term, we can perceive more clearly that for Augustine, Providence has nothing to do with what we understand by the words “chance”, “destiny”, “fate” or “luck”.⁴⁸ These latter concepts are understood as events or circumstances which happen either without any specific design and, thus, is something casual, or are understood as the result of a number of factors which combine to produce certain effects (for example, the alignment of heavenly bodies – object of the pseudoscience of astrology – or the interference of certain spirits or demons which the pagans believe to control some aspects of human life, most especially the goddess “Fortuna”, who assigns the lots of men⁴⁹). St. Augustine affirms:

47 Ibid, 1,3,2.

48 At the time of Augustine the Epicurean belief was still strong and it held creation to be the work of chance and not out of any particular design. This kind of reasoning is very much alive again today in our world among scientists and pseudo-scientists. Regarding the belief in providence, the Epicureans claim that human events do not enter into the interest of the gods (*De civ. Dei*, 18,41,2). Augustine argued that the universe is a created and an ordered entity and not a product of chance. God is interested in the affairs of man and cares for him.

49 Cf., *De civ. Dei*, 5,9,3-4.10; 10,16-17.

But in these same three books of mine [Against the Academics] I regret that I called upon fortune so frequently, even though by this designation I did not intend some goddess or other to be understood but rather the fortuitous outcome of affairs in terms of advantages or disadvantages either of the body or apart from it. And so there are words that nothing religious prohibits using – *forte*, *forsan*, *forsitan*, *fortasse*, *fortuitu* – although each one of them must be placed within the context of divine providence.⁵⁰

We should take into consideration that Augustine does not only chide the belief in “chance” or “luck” (*fors*, *fortuna*), i.e., where one holds that things happen without any design, but he also objects to any form of fatalism or destiny (*fatum*), if one were to hold that everything has been decreed and ordained to happen in a certain manner and that nothing can be done about it or that everything has been prefixed and nothing can be done to change it. This is one of the reasons why Augustine often condemns the consultation of horoscopes or mediums that claim to tell one’s future. Augustine holds that these fortunetellers work through deceit by taking advantage of the naivete of the gullible or that the results of such consultations come from the inspiration of diabolic spirits. Such a disposition does not take into account the fact that God shows His care for creation and is interested in man’s activities and actions.

Again, for Augustine, to speak of divine providence is to speak of order, i.e., of a rational or intelligent design displayed both in the act of bringing the world into being by virtue of creation and in the sustenance of all created reality. This order or rational design exists even when we are not able to understand or investigate it:

But, perhaps what is commonly called fortune is itself governed by a certain hidden order. What we call a matter of chance may be only something whose why and wherefore are concealed. Perhaps nothing fitting or unfitting happens in a part which is not suited to the whole ... for, if divine providence reaches even unto us – and, believe me, this is not to be doubted – it is opportune for you to be treated just as you are being treated.”⁵¹

50 *Retr.* 1.,1,2.

51 *Contr. Acad.* 1,1,1.

In the above cited passage Augustine was addressing Romanianus (most probably the same person who sponsored his high school studies in Carthage many years back) to whom he addressed this work. Given that Augustine never believed anymore in fortune, he prays that God would intervene in the vicissitudes of Romanianus' life and convert him to the divinely inspired "philosophy", which is ever so remote from the intellect of the profane. This divinely inspired "philosophy" is Christianity, to which Augustine had been recently converted. Therefore, Augustine neither entrusts himself nor Romanianus to fortune, but to the hands of God - to divine providence.

The Stoics believed that the universe is an ordered whole. However, they believed that the reason or sense of order in the universe is immanent in creation itself. Augustine does not buy this view. He insists that the order in creation is not found in the "*ordo naturae*", i.e., in creation itself but in the "*ordo Dei*", i.e., on the reason and order assigned by a personal God, outside of creation itself, but who is, at the same time, interested in the affairs of mankind and of the world.⁵² This means that providence (in this case, displayed as order in the universe regulated by reason) is transcendent and is not immanent in creation in the sense that creation does not hold the reason and explanation for its own being and actions, but refers to a superior or ultimate reason outside transcendent; from which it receives its own reason and sense of being.

Plato in his *Timeus* (30; 44) is considered to have elaborated upon the doctrine of a divine providence, which governs the life of the world. The Greco-Roman philosophical schools all inherited this patrimony, with the exception of the Epicureans (as we have seen earlier). Plotinus, in the *Enneads*, treated the question of providence.⁵³ The Neoplatonic philosophical thought was the closest to Christian teachings among the ancient philosophical schools. However, it should be said that Providence, for Augustine, is not also like what Plotinus taught. Plotinus never arrived at the thought of considering the three hypostases (the One, the Nous and the Anima Mundi) persons. Thus, providence, for him, was never from a personal being. It was mechanical and a necessary "emanation" - never the act of a personal divine will since, for him (like the predominant ancient Greek thought), the world was not created, it is not a

52 Cicero's *De natura deorum* 11,27,57 gives us a window into the Stoic belief.

53 Cf., PLOTINUS, *Enneads* 3,2-3 on Providence.

product of the deliberate purpose of a creator, but has always existed, even though different in nature and far below on the hierarchical scale with the three primary hypostases. The personal care and attention which each and every person and which each and every creature receives from God is a unique aspect of the Christian belief of God's providence, which Augustine wants to make his readers understand. God's providence is that secret majestic action of divine judgment, not necessarily in the sense of emanating a sentence, but in the sense of exercising His will (*secretissimum majestatis arbitrium*).

God's providence does not cancel His justice and retribution. The Stoics, though they believed in an immanent providence, they thought of it only in the "good" and "positive" sense of the word. For Christians, divine providence is displayed even in punishment as well as in reward.

Augustine believed strongly in the presence of an intelligent and intelligible design; he believed that the immutable reason of God created the world or that God created the world with reason (*rationem sempiternam atque incommutabilem, qua fecit Deus mundum; providentia per quam Deus omnia creavit et regit*).⁵⁴ The Logos is this eternal Reason (*Ratio*) of God. John the Evangelist states the same thing in his Gospel, where he states: "Through Him all things were made" (Jn. 1, 3), i.e., through the Logos (*Verbum vel Ratio Dei*). St. Augustine loves to quote this verse of John and he takes delight in insisting that it is through the Person of His Word and Wisdom that God created the world. Therefore, there is design and reason in the created universe. This means that divine providence is exercised in the entire universe which it created and governs.⁵⁵

The eternal Reason of God (*sempiterna ratio Dei*) is the order with which God governs creation – ordering it according to His divine plan. According to Augustine everything that exists does so in virtue of the form which they have received. If their form is destroyed, then they cease to exist. God is the unchangeable Form due to which everything exists (by virtue of the fact that He is their Creator). God is, therefore, their providence in the sense that nothing exists or happens outside the eternal plan of God with which He governs the world and orders it for its good and conservation without letting it fall into chaos

54 Cf., *Retr.*, 1,32; *De mus.* 6,17,56; *Civ. Dei*, 1,28; 12,4.

55 Cf., *Civ. Dei*, 12,6; 15,27; 18,41; *Div. Quaest.*, q. 53; *De Gen. ad Litt.*, 5,22,43; *Serm. de prov. Dei*, 12.

or into non-being.⁵⁶ If there were no divine providence, there would be no creation, i.e., there would be complete nothingness. The Reason of God, which created the world and orders everything according to the divine plan is, in fact, what we term as the divine Providence.

When we talk of divine Providence God must be presupposed as the Author of creation. Creation was made according to God's reason and plan. Therefore, God orders, governs and guides creation according to His Providence for the good of creation. In his *Revisions*, Augustine tells us:

Anyone who doubts the existence of this divine Providence, for the sake of coherence, will also have to admit the irrationality of the creative action of God and recognize that God, both at the moment of creation and previously, did not know what He was doing because He would have been deprived of reason, which is the criterion of his work.⁵⁷

Thus, we cannot deny God's reason and providence; we cannot doubt the divine rationality in creation. Divine Providence, as demonstrated in the event of creation and in the sustenance of the created order.

What then is Providence for Augustine?

From the foregoing discussion, one of the ways in which divine Providence can be viewed is that it is the condition for the presence of order in the universe. Therefore, one may ask, is the universe governed by specific laws given by the Creator or do things happen as a result of chance or, happen outside the prearranged order of God? St. Augustine asked himself this question, which inevitably arises when one begins to take note of the lived existential experience of evil. The presence of evil appears to be diffused in human activity and experience. The problem of evil seems to admit of only two hypotheses from Augustine's explanation: (i) either God does not extend His providential action to human activities because He is unable or because He is not interested; or (ii) every evil depends on God's will.

Augustine's articulation of the problem above reflects the classical question of the problem of evil as posed by philosophers and agnostics even up to our day

56 Cf., *De lib. arb.*, 2,17,45.

57 Cf., *Retract.* 1,3,2.

and which can be formulated still in many ways: i) either God does not exist; or, ii) creation is the product of two eternal principles – one good (who created the good in the world) and the other evil (who created the evil in the world); or, iii) creation is the product of only one principle – God, who created both good evil and is, thus, responsible for the evil in the world; or, iv) God is good but is impotent in removing the evil in the world.

In Augustine's preliminary reflection above in his work "*On order*", he says that the second hypothesis (i.e., that every evil depends on God's will) is the more evil with respect to the first and that any reason that is not lacking a sense of piety towards God is constrained to accept the first option. In reality, Augustine knows that the first option does not represent a real option and that both are to be rejected. However, this cannot be justified by the incapacity or the lack of interest on God's part to put the reality of this world in order given that we notice also in the tiniest terrestrial bodies a rationality independent of mankind and is not plausible to be attributed to mere chance.⁵⁸ Therefore, Augustine also does not offer the first hypothesis as a real solution, but only as a working hypothesis in this case to further his arguments and, eventually, present a more acceptable doctrine. The question of the existence of evil and the presence of divine Providence are directly related. Augustine examines the question whether evil enters into order or not.

Divine Providence and the problem of Evil

Augustine's "*On order*" tackles, among other questions, whether evil enters into order or not. Augustine defines order as that by which God guides everything He has created.⁵⁹ God does not desire evil, but order, which regulates everything. Augustine wants us to understand also that even the lives of the foolish are ordered, not because of the merits of the foolish themselves, but thanks to divine providence.⁶⁰

Gustave Bardy translates Augustine's words in the *Revisions* in relation to his work *On Order*: "...*utrum omnia bona et mala divinae providentiae ordo contineat*"⁶¹ as "...*whether all the good and the evil of divine providence are contained in order*".⁶² This

58 Cf. *De ord.* 1, 1, 2; cf. also, CATAPANO, G., "*Agostino - Tutti i dialoghi*" p. LXI.

59 Cf. *Ibid.* 1,10, 28; 2,1,2.

60 Cf. *Ibid.* 2,4,11.

61 *Retract.*, 1,3,1.

62 Cited in MADEC, G., "*Thématique augustinienne de la Providence*", p.

translation could be considered acceptable syntactically, but is unacceptable from Augustine's theology itself because it is clearly a Manichean position, that traces all the good and evil to a divine origin. In this case the above statement of Augustine would not doubt the origin of good and evil (which come from God's divine providence), but is concerned about whether they are contained in order or not. Augustine would never have sustained such a position! Therefore, the above translation can only justly be rendered in the following way, "...whether all the good and evil enter into the order of divine providence." In this case, Augustine was inquiring whether there is an order that regulates everything in the universe, both good and evil. Looking at the preliminary hypotheses drawn out by Augustine (in his *On order*), he does not agree that either of the solution is acceptable. What he says is that the second hypothesis is the most impious. Therefore, the translation of Bardy, though right from the syntactic viewpoint, is not acceptable from a Christian or an Augustinian point of view.

To think of evil as being outside the *ordo divinae providentiae* is to concentrate the whole of created reality in only a single aspect of our existential experience, or to reduce the whole of reality only to a little aspect of it, to worry about the experience of evil alone ignoring the good and the beautiful. Augustine uses the image of an artist's work to describe how we tend to view the problem of evil in the world:

If one were examining the details in an inlaid pavement, and if he were observing the little cubes one by one, he might think the artist had disposed them in a disordered manner. On this account he might think the uniformity of the little stones disarranged, just because he could not grasp the one integral form of beauty and examine it all at once. In like manner, he who is not able to grasp the harmonious order of the whole ends up fixing his attention on only what scandalizes his own sensibility and retains that there is a great ugliness in things... The chief cause of this error is that man knows not himself. Now for acquiring this knowledge, he needs a constant habit of withdrawing from things of the senses and of concentrating his thought within himself.⁶³

We should not understand Augustine wrongly. He distinguishes between good and evil in the practical sense because, if everything were to be considered good

63 *De ord.* 1,1,2-3.

or as entering into the good (in the manner of the Stoics), then justice would not be possible. Justice renders to each one that which he deserves.⁶⁴ Order demands justice so that evil can be punished and good be rewarded.

When we speak about “order”, we do not only intend to speak about the harmonious and effective running of a mechanism (in this sense, of creation). Order especially refers to the “*ordo Dei*”, i.e., of the unfathomable design or plan of God, which remain a mystery even though it has been revealed to us through the sacred Scriptures and which unfolds itself gradually in the course of time and history until the end of this world. It is this “*ordo Dei*” – the divine providence – which ensures that wrongs are justly punished and good actions rewarded. If it were not so, it will appear as if God does not intervene in the course of human events and actions. Augustine does not oppose man’s freewill because man is free in his actions (that is why he can be justly punished and justly rewarded for his actions), but God ensures that the evil caused by man’s wrong actions do not destroy the order and goodness imposed by God for the good of the whole of created reality. In fact, in his *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine talks about God’s providence in terms of goodness and justice. God has created in His goodness; in His goodness He rewards the just and in His justice He punishes the wicked.⁶⁵ According to God’s providence some faults are punished in the here and now while punishment for the others it is differed to a much later point in time or, even, to the end of time at the convocation of the universal judgment.⁶⁶ It is exactly such belief in God’s justice that provides Immanuel Kant the ultimate proof of God’s existence because, according to him, the accounts do not add up in this life where it appears that some evil go unpunished in this world and some good go unrewarded. For there to be absolute justice, there must exist an afterlife where everything is set aright. Therefore, God, the good and the just One, exists. Augustine, on his part, considers that a just retribution is the foundation of religion and morality.⁶⁷

64 Cf. *Ibid.* 1, 6,15- 7,19.

65 Cf., *Gen. ad litt.* 8.

66 *Civ. Dei*, 1,8; *Serm. de prov. Dei*, 8.

67 *De ut. Cred.*,16,34, “*Si enim Dei providentia non praesidet rebus humanis, nihil est de religione satagendum.*”

The problem of evil is one that occupied Augustine's thoughts for a long time and which he tackled at one point or another in his life. We cannot look at this problem in any profound manner in this article because it is a vast theme of its own. The reality of evil often calls to doubt God's existence. St. Augustine says that it is common to find senseless persons who say in their hearts "*There is no God*" (cf., Ps. 13,1, in reference to those who do not believe in God's existence). But he also chides equally senseless persons who claim "*God does not see*" (cf., Ps. 93,7, in reference to those who let themselves be scandalised because they do not believe in divine providence or they claim that God is not interested in human affairs).⁶⁸ For Augustine the question of God's existence and that of God's providence are inseparable: if God exists, He necessarily intervenes in the affairs of mankind and of creation. Augustine's homily on divine providence tackled the objection which is often posed that, if God were really interested in mankind and in His creation, He would not allow the wicked to live (§1). However, in this homily Augustine did not set out to prove the existence of God's providence but to show the extension of His governing action to individuals.

St. Augustine's doctrine maintains that God's actions are mediated through the will of beings endowed with a rational will (e.g., man, angels or demons). God intervenes in creation, but He also intervenes through the cooperation of the freewill of rational beings, even of those which oppose Him. God's activities are not limited to wills alone, but reaches down to every created nature, even the lowest and most contemptible ones.⁶⁹

Divine providence must not be viewed only as a goodish or lax behavior on God's part, which does not permit any form of suffering or discomfort. If everything Divine providence, through what we may generally consider as unfavourable events, allows the exercise and purification of the just. Through such events God burns away pride in the just and purifies their faith according to His infinite design.⁷⁰ The apparent joys of the wicked are only false happiness; if and when the wicked suffers woes, it is only God's invitation to them to deplore their evil deeds. The sorrows of the good is a means which God employs to increase their rewards; their happiness is a consolation here in this worldly exile

68 Cf., *Ep.* 184A,3,6.

69 Cf., *Civ. Dei*, 8,17-18.

70 Cf., *ibid.*, 11,22; 12,4; *C. acad.*, 1,12.

as they await the joys that God has reserved for them in the world to come.⁷¹ It is the same divine providence that, in the present, orders favourable events and permits adversities.⁷² However, Augustine cautions, as always, that God distributes graces according to His pleasure and not according to our merits.⁷³

Divine Providence and salvation history

History plays an important part in the Augustinian theology. The general history of mankind is interesting, but it is in salvation history that God's specific interventions are seen at work in human affairs. Divine providence orders the course of time (*ordinare temporum cursum*).⁷⁴ In the homily on providence Augustine calls the event of the Incarnation of Christ, manifested in salvation history, the most eminent proof of God's providence for mankind; because it shows us to what extent God is willing to go to save us. It demonstrates not only God's interest, but especially His love for humanity. The salvation of mankind and the whole of creation, operated by God in Christ, shows God's care for creation by bringing back to the true being everything that had fallen. It is God's providence that brings good out of evil and sin.⁷⁵ Christ died because of evil, enduring the shame of the cross, so that good could prevail (§11). St. Augustine's theology of providence does not allow for discouragement. The one who believes in God's providence cannot submit to desperation because he is convinced that God, the Lord of history, whose providence works in and through the wills of mankind, ultimately leads all of creation to its finality, which is ultimately for its good.

God's providence is demonstrated in God's care for humans both as individuals and as a society of persons, i.e., mankind in general: "*O omnipotent goodness, who takes care of each one of us as if there were the only one you have to take of, and of everyone as if each one!*"⁷⁶ St. Augustine looks back with gratitude to God for

71 Cf., *Serm. de prov. Dei*, 8.

72 Cf., *Civ. Dei*, 17,23.

73 Cf., *Ep.* 194; *Civ. Dei*, 2,29.

74 Cf., *Civ. Dei*, 10,15.

75 Cf., *Gen. c. Mani.*, 2,28,42.

76 *Conf.*, 3,11,19. Cf., anche, *De vera rel.*, 2,46; *De civ. Dei*, 3,1; 21,13.

having mysteriously guided him through the wanderings of his youth to the discovery of God in his search for the truth:

This much I believed, some times more strongly than other times. But I always believed both that You are and that You cared for us, although I was ignorant both as to what should be thought about Your substance and as to which way led, or led back, to You... I continued to reflect upon these things, and You were with me. I sighed, and You did hear me. I vacillated, and You guided me. I roamed the broad way of the world, and You didst not desert me.⁷⁷

Divine providence appears in a number of pages in Augustine's *Confessions* where he tells us of God acting in his life in wonderful and secret ways, in "the secret of Your [God's] providence" (*abdito secreto providentiae tuae; in abdito providentiae tuae*).⁷⁸

In the Serm. de prov. Dei Augustine exclaims

...but nowhere else does it appear how much You love mankind, how You made him and for whom You made him; and Life willed to die so that he who had lost his life would live; and Him through whom You will give the reward You made an example of the very same reward... From the very beginning of the human race until the future which has been foretold will come to pass through the Spirit of God, and hitherto the treacherous say – they utter blasphemy – that God does not care about human affairs (§12).

In this sermon Augustine tells us that only those who do not accept the divine character of the Scriptures refuse to believe in God's providence (§2). In fact, he wonders how these same set of people will be willing to accept the order and harmony in nature (which is created by God) and yet fail to acknowledge that God's providence is at work in human affairs. (§§. 7;10). Therefore, if one believes in Christ, he cannot adopt the ideas of the unbelievers (§9), but should rather work and pray that the latter arrive at the truth (§12).

77 Cf., *Conf.* 6,5,8.

78 Cf., *Conf.*, 4,4,7; 5,6,10; 5,6,11; 5,7,13; 7,21,27, etc.

Therefore, Augustine exhorts, "*Habet plane, habet; non dubitet pietas, etsi non comprehendit infirmitas*" – "*Reason clearly, reason; let piety not doubt even though weakness cannot understand*" (§10). For this he asks:

Why do we, therefore, judge so rashly the judgments of God and hasten to deny the order of the divine work we cannot see, yet praise the providence of the Creator in the leaves of trees and we think that it [providence] is not present in human affairs, nor much more we believe to hasten the unsearchable and hidden order of human affairs, whose immensity we cannot understand nor are we strong enough to observe?

God will surely punish the evil and repay the good.

Conclusion

St. Augustine makes us understand that providence is a divine attribute, which comes from God's personal will and desire: in His providence He created the world; in His providence He sustains it in being. Divine providence is made even clearer in salvation history, in which God realises the salvation of mankind. God's providence is also the order. The universe is created according to God's intelligent reason and wisdom. Therefore, it is intelligible in itself, even though its reason is not immanent, i.e., not found in itself, but in God. Order demands justice, which renders to each one what he deserves. Therefore, evil is justly punished and good is justly rewarded. But, most of all, Augustine wants us to understand providence as God's care for each and every one of his creatures.

It has not been easy for us to draw conclusions from a vast range of Augustine's works on to show what the holy doctor of Hippo actually understood and what he wants us to understand about God's providence. Our reader may have experienced some difficulties in following our presentation. We ask for your pardon. But, at the same time, we hope this may have contributed in arousing some interest in reading Augustine's works personally and, thus, grow in the Augustinian theology from a firsthand experience of his works.