

THE ORDER OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Adapted from *Great Laws of the Divine Providence*
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What is meant by the term *Divine Providence* as it is used in the Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church?

Divine Providence is the government of the Lord's Divine love and Divine wisdom (*Divine Providence* 2, 331). This word *government*, and the idea that there are established laws associated with that government, makes the definition of providence in the Heavenly Doctrines new and different. For providence is not just the Lord providing for and guiding us. It is the Lord doing these things *through* laws of Divine order which He Himself has established. Providence is the operation of the Lord's Divine love, working through forms of wisdom, to create, preserve, maintain, protect, and guide all things of creation (*Divine Providence* 337). Everything of providence looks to what is good and true and eternal. Providence is tender, gentle, patient, and merciful; it brings us only what is from Divine love—states of happiness, delight, joy, and peace.

The most universal purpose of the Divine providence is that there should be a heaven formed from the human race (*Canons* 5-7), a heaven where the Lord can give us every possible happiness and delight. Providence strives to lead us all to shun evils as sins, because only in this way can the Lord's ultimate goal be fulfilled. Only the Lord can see the whole of creation together, only He can see the use that each part of creation contributes to the whole. And only He can see this, not just at one moment, but in the past, present, and future. So providence is the Lord's and not ours.

Our purpose in learning about Divine providence is so that we may more fully cooperate with the Lord in fulfilling that use for which we were created. Just as surely as we need an understanding of the natural laws of creation in order to properly care for our body—to protect it, nourish it, and provide for its comforts and pleasures—so we also need an understanding of the spiritual laws of providence in order to provide and care for the growth of our spirit. And understanding the various operations of providence is, after all, understanding the nature and qualities of the God we seek to love. We read in the Writings that those “who are in the stream of providence are all the time carried along toward everything that is happy...and that those are in the stream of providence who put their trust in the Divine and attribute all things to Him.... Be it known also that in so far as any one is in the stream of providence, so far he is in a state of peace.” (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8478:4)

The first law of Divine Providence is “that man should act from freedom in accordance with reason” (*Divine Providence* 71). The Lord wills that all people should be in freedom, both spiritual freedom, which is the ability to *think and will* whatever they please, and natural freedom, which is the ability to *speak and do* whatever they please. The Lord has given human beings two special abilities, one to reason and think, which is rationality, and one to will and do, which is liberty or freedom. And the first law of providence—that people are to act from

freedom in accordance with reason—is essentially the fundamental law of regeneration: that people are to do good according to the instruction of truth.

The second law of Divine Providence states “that man should, as if from himself, put away evils as sins in the external man.... The Lord is able, in this way and in no other, to put away evils in the internal man, and simultaneously in the external” (*Divine Providence* 100). We cannot reform and reorder the things of our natural mind; only the Lord can do this. But the Lord can only do it when we are *willing* that He should do it. And we must express our willingness in *effort*, not just in thought, but also in deed.

The third law of providence states “that man should not be compelled by external means to think and will, and thus to believe and love, the things of religion, but should guide himself, and sometimes compel himself” (*Divine Providence* 129). We must *feel* that our life is our own, if we are to feel responsible for what happens to that life. We must know and feel that our efforts, our strivings, our compelling ourselves, are absolutely necessary to the formation of heavenly love and wisdom with us. And the wonderful thing is that we can feel life to be our own, and act as if it were our own, and yet acknowledge that the power from which we act is not ours, but the Lord’s. The Lord provides all the power, all the good means, and all the heavenly results. We are free partakers of these according to our own efforts and desires to receive and use them. We are even free to reject them altogether.

The fourth law of providence describes how the work of reformation and regeneration may be accomplished. It states “man should be led and taught by the Lord from heaven by means of the Word and by means of doctrine and preaching from the Word...” (*Divine Providence* 154). The knowledge of what is right and wrong, good and evil, in spiritual, moral, or even civil concerns, can only be learned from the Word. And this is why the Word, in one form or another—spoken or written—has always existed with mankind. It is why the Word alone can be the sole authority for the church, in heaven and on earth.

The fifth major law of providence states “that nothing of the operation of the Divine providence should be evident to man’s perceptions or senses, but that he should, nevertheless, know about it and acknowledge it” (*Divine Providence* 175). If we were able to see providence openly, acting and directing the various things of our life, our whole sense of freedom and responsibility for forming judgments and conclusions would be destroyed. And this would destroy the qualities that make us human. Providence cannot act openly, but only secretly.

Even though providence can only act secretly, we can still know and acknowledge what providence is, what its purpose is, and how it operates. Even though we cannot see the effects of providence as it is working, we can intelligently acknowledge its existence. In the same way, we acknowledge that all *power* to think and will comes from the Lord, all the *means* for thinking and willing come from the Lord, and all the *good results* of thinking and willing come from the Lord.