

CHAPTER 6

Mother Arsenius and the Eye of Providence

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Introduction

Agnes Morrogh-Bernard, better known in Co Mayo as Mother Arsenius, joined the Irish Sisters of Charity in Dublin in 1863. There she worked in various houses of the congregation before coming to Mayo in 1877, first to Ballaghaderreen and then to Foxford in 1891. She had imbibed deeply the spirit of her foundress who was totally dedicated to the service of the poor and who trusted in divine providence to sustain this work. While in Ballaghaderreen Arsenius did much to alleviate poverty in the area and raise the spirits of the local community by providing various opportunities for employment, education and spiritual renewal. Here she found ready allies in the local bishop and one of his curates, Fr Denis O'Hara, the great Land League priest. Denis witnessed the zeal with which Arsenius tackled the problems of the area and, so, when he was sent to Kiltimagh as PP, he asked her to establish a foundation in his new parish. Permission was given by her Superior General and the bishop but when it came to the final negotiations his own brother, Roger O'Hara, intervened and said Denis was doing a fine job without the help of any nuns. Thus that plan was abandoned.

The plans for Foxford

Although the plan for Kiltimagh did not materialise in 1889 the effort was not without its fruit. Mrs Deane, cousin of John Dillon and outstanding benefactor of the sisters in Ballaghaderreen, heard of the failed plan and then persuaded Arsenius to avail of the permission for another foundation to open a house in Foxford. At first, the Superior General, Scholastica Margison, said that it would not be possible due to lack of finances. Mrs Deane met her and said that the Order appeared to have sufficient money to pro-

vide 'splendid tessellated pavements in your halls in St Vincent's, yet you cannot afford to send sisters to that God forsaken district of Foxford'.¹ However, Mrs Deane herself volunteered to pay the interest on any loan which the sisters might take out in order to establish the convent. The Superior General, haunted by the needs of Foxford, eventually appointed Arsenius to negotiate the matter with the bishop. Arsenius asked him to help her secure 'a house in the town suitable for a lady in reduced circumstances with a large family'. The help of the local sergeant, a Protestant, was enlisted and he recommended a house which had belonged to the local parson. A friend of the bishop bought the house in his own name for which the sisters paid £475. The house itself was in a very dilapidated condition but this was not to deter Arsenius or her volunteers. The first two sisters left Ballaghaderreen on 6 April, 1891 and took up residence in the partly renovated house. The conditions were so bad that they spent the first nights sleeping on the floor in an upstairs room, which they named 'Providence'.

While in Ballaghaderreen, Arsenius had entertained the idea of establishing a woollen industry to give employment to the people of the area. Small looms and two operators had been procured. Although the move to Foxford had taken place before that plan could be brought to fruition, the idea of a woollen industry still remained an ambition. The extent of the destitution in the Foxford area, the availability of wool locally, the presence of a river and old mill, fuelled her energies for such a project. The next stage was to seek more professional advice. Eventually she was recommended to contact Mr Smith of the Caledon Mills in Co Tyrone. She wrote to him and asked him to come to Foxford to discuss her proposal. His reply commenced, 'Madam, are you aware that you have written to a Protestant and a Freemason?' He came to see her on 6 June, 1891, for discussions and at first scoffed at her ambitious plan, reminding her that accomplished businessmen had failed in this kind of work. In her own account of the exchange, Arsenius says, 'I, knowing it was God's work and under the Eye of Providence, persisted, "I am deeply grateful for your kind advice and for being so honest but I may as well tell you that we will go on without you. Providence will provide".² At this, Mr Smith took off his hat and said, 'I place myself and my experience at your disposal ...' By August work was in progress, buildings

were being prepared, second-hand machinery bought, and two operators had been sent to Caledon for proper training on the looms. Arsenius herself went along for a few weeks to familiarise herself with the industry. (While visiting Caledon she lodged with the St Louis Sisters in Monaghan, thus making a connection which was later to help her friend, Fr Denis O'Hara, to convince the community to establish a convent in Kiltimagh.) The work continued through the following year under the supervision of Mr Sherry, a young manager, who was sent to Foxford by Charles Smith of Caledon.

The wheels start turning

Money was urgently needed and the Mother General was among the first to come to the rescue with a loan of £1,000. It was welcome but far from enough for the scale of the project. Another source of assistance was beginning to open up for Arsenius. The Congested Districts Board was just established with a view to the alleviation of rural poverty. She set out for Dublin and made the acquaintance of Mr Charles Kennedy, a member of the Board, Horace Plunkett, the great advocate of rural development, and Fr Tom Finlay, SJ, an expert on agricultural co-operation on the continent. All of them shared something of her vision and gladly supported her plans.³ On this same visit, although hardly any wool had yet been produced in Foxford, she canvassed orders in Dublin from Clerys and other stores.

The mill was officially opened on 25 April, 1892, just one year after the arrival of the sisters in Foxford. It had twenty employees. By May substantial orders for blankets were beginning to arrive. Towards the end of the year the fruit of her meeting in Dublin was evident as the Congested Districts Board came up with a loan of £7,000 for Foxford. As the community had no security to offer for the loan, the Mother General consented to give a mortgage on their Milltown property.

However, fresh obstacles were to be put in their way. The landlord, Lord Clanmorris, would not co-operate in making a small piece of land available for a school and another local notable, Mr Standish O'Grady, objected to the erection of a small weir on the Moy as attempts were being made to create a millrace on the river.⁴ The latter objection was a very serious threat to the survival of the

mill. Without a proper millrace the water supply could not be regulated and so the mill would have had to close. Arsenius was in dread of the outcome but the people of the town and others further afield protested so loudly that to have interfered with the weir would have caused violent action to be taken. Not only was the original arrangement left in place but a more significant alteration was carried out so that a proper millrace was put in place. This final work was executed amidst many minor misadventures, such as a loss of the plans and the unavailability of an engineer to supervise its building. A novena was offered that there might be a speedy resolution and, on the day it was completed, a man arrived in Foxford, a cousin of one of the CDB officials dealing with the mill, plans in hand and very soon the work was under way. His arrival was seen as the answer to prayer. As the work began the sisters prayed for three favours: First, that the weather might be fine; second, that no accident might happen; third, that the money might be forthcoming to pay for it. All three were granted – just. In the course of the blasting of the rock in the river-bed, large explosive charges were used. One day a fragment of rock, weighing twelve pounds, hurled through the roof of the Infant School, during class, and missed one of the sisters who seconds earlier had been sitting where the rock landed.

Arsenius was a keen business woman and realised the benefit and necessity of good advertising. To this end she organised an Industrial Exhibition at Foxford in September 1895, hoping that it would bring advantage to the factory and its products throughout the country. It lasted for three days and its opening was attended by people of different creeds, class and politics. The Conservative Lord Chancellor and the Parnellite Lord Mayor of Dublin attended, as did the Conservative Horace Plunkett, MP, the local nationalist John Dillon. All shared the one platform. The vision and achievements of Arsenius seemed to draw a united front of admiration and support from people whose politics or religion were not the same. There were over 2,000 entries for the various competitions and the exhibitors came from as far away as Dublin and Valentia. As well as the woollens, hosiery and fabrics made in the factory, there was a comprehensive display of agricultural produce, all of which was to act as an incentive and reward for the local producers to raise their own standards in farm production. It

was widely acclaimed in the local and national press as an outstanding success.⁵ The outcome of the Exhibition was indeed greater publicity for the work being done in Foxford and more immediately the establishment of a Foxford Industrial Fund by Lady Arran which very quickly netted £1,000 as a contribution to alleviating the heavy interest which was still being paid on the accumulated loans.

Other developments

Apart from the work being done in the woollen mills, Arsenius was also encouraging the development of agriculture in the area, and the general improvement of living standards. In fact, she had been put in charge of most of the work being carried out by the Congested Districts Board within a five mile radius of Foxford. She encouraged the introduction of new breeds of poultry, the cultivation of new vegetables, new varieties of grasses, the proper spraying of potatoes, better housekeeping and the removal of manure heaps from the immediate environs of the house. The task was not always an easy one as old ways were often preferred by the cottiers. However, they were encouraged by prizes and awards offered for various improvements carried out on their holdings. When the second Exhibition was held in 1896, it was confined to people from the Foxford area and the number of entries was in excess of 1,600. The displays and the prizes served again as an important encouragement to local initiative and the spirit of competition was a significant fillip for ongoing developments. There were four Exhibitions in all at Foxford, the last being as well supported as the first with an equally impressive gathering of public figures. The Show of 1898 was to be the last, not because enthusiasm was lacking but because it was felt that its purpose had been achieved in raising the standards of farming, housekeeping and craftwork in the area. People at last had a sense of pride in their work, their spirits had been lifted. It was now up to them to follow the headlines they had been given.

As the conditions of the local farmers began to improve, the attention of the sisters was directed more to the mill and its development. By 1907 it had 130 employees. However, the beginning of that year, on 23 January, a serious fire in the mill threatened the livelihood of all of these. Fortunately, the fire broke out in the only

stone building on the site and so it was more easily contained. As the fire raged and the people of the town were in panic trying to extinguish it, Arsenius calmed them by saying that it was 'Providence's match-box'. In a very short time the damage was repaired and by 1915 the number employed had increased to 150.

War and rumours of war

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, far from threatening Foxford, was another chapter in its success. At that time stores of blankets were beginning to accumulate but no ready markets were being found. Within a month of the war breaking out, orders for thousands of blankets were being placed by the War Office. The stocks were cleared and the employees worked long hours to fill the major orders coming to the factory. In 1916, Arsenius beat the restrictions on the purchase of wool and had large quantities in stock before they came into force. Similarly with coal supplies, as restrictions were introduced on its purchase, the Foxford manager had bought in large quantities in advance, so that the turbines continued to turn and no jobs were lost in the course of the war. In fact the workers were, at this time, in receipt of bonuses and congregational loans were being paid off by the convent. Inevitably the sisters interpreted all of this as 'a kind and loving providence putting forth his strong protecting arm'.

From that time on the mill went from strength to strength and at its peak it employed over 200 workers. As well as providing work it sustained a vibrant social life in the area, supporting sporting activities, music and the arts. By the time Arsenius retired from management of the factory and superiorship of the community in 1925, a new staff was adequately equipped to continue where she was leaving off. The survival and growth of the industry for many years afterwards are adequate testimony to that fact.

Spiritual renewal

If the sisters made their mark on the material prosperity of the Foxford area, they also effected a spiritual renewal not only in Foxford but in the Diocese of Achonry as a whole. As mentioned earlier, it was through the influence of Arsenius that the sisters of St Louis established their Convent in Kiltimagh. When the Sisters

of Mercy were having difficulties finding a suitable superior for their convent at Swinford, in the early 1890s, it was Arsenius who helped to resolve the crisis and introduced Mother Evangelist McCarthy to the community. It was on the basis of this community's strength that two new foundations of Mercy Sisters were established at Collooney and Ballymote, two towns which had been the object of Arsenius's concern years earlier. She was also responsible for the introduction of the Franciscan Brothers to Foxford in 1925.

When the sisters went to Foxford, morale among the people and their priests was low. The parish church was badly maintained. There was no weekday Mass; there was no sign of the devotional renewal taking place elsewhere in the country; and for the first two years of the Sisters' time in the town there was no homily given on Sunday. It was only after two years persuasion by Mother Arsenius that the Parish Priest eventually gave a homily on Good Friday.

Gradually, they effected a wonderful renewal of faith and devotion in the area. One of their first tasks, as earlier in Ballaghaderreen, was to begin catechism lessons for the children in their makeshift schools. For the adults they established sodalities and the Children of Mary, taking charge of these in the neighbouring parishes as well. They were responsible for starting the First Friday devotions and Corpus Christi processions in the parish. The first ever retreat for workers in Ireland was conducted in Foxford, during the Easter of 1913, by Fr Willie Doyle SJ. The Pioneer Total Abstinence Association was introduced by the sisters in 1914. A year later, Arsenius observed the Quarant 'Ore in Foxford, which was the first time this particular devotion took place in the Diocese of Achonry. What began in Foxford soon became a model for other parishes to imitate.

One of Arsenius' final projects as Superior in Foxford was the building of a proper convent chapel. Although she always wanted a worthy chapel for the convent, she was even more anxious that the needs of her poor be taken care of before such a building be undertaken. It was only when she was sufficiently secure financially that she undertook its building. It was designed by R.M. Butler, the foundation stone laid in March 1923 and it was consecrated in September 1926. Its rose window has the Eye of

Providence as its centrepiece, which was the trademark of the Foxford Mills from their inception, chosen by Arsenius to be at once a religious symbol and yet sufficiently subtle not to offend any who did not share her own faith or her remarkable trust in divine providence.

Arsenius retired shortly after the opening of the new chapel, already showing the burden of her years. Her final illness came in December 1931 but she survived until the following April. She died almost forty-one years to the day after her arrival in Foxford. She was predeceased ten days earlier by another founding member of the community, Sr Theckla, who was in her ninety-eighth year. Thus in a matter of ten days the foundation stones of the Foxford community were laid to rest.

Trials and tribulations of life

When Arsenius first came to Ballaghaderreen she got a warm welcome and wholehearted support from the bishop, Dr McCormack, priests and parishioners. Her relations with Dr Lyster, who succeeded McCormack, and the clergy in Foxford were not always as smooth. Often minor incidents, which she records, point to a certain tension in her relationship with them, which she found impossible to understand. Perhaps her determination and success, where they had failed for so long, generated a certain jealousy. The sisters were regularly deprived of a daily Mass; their efforts in the upkeep of the parish church were regularly rebuffed; they were not allowed to take due care of their own plot in the local cemetery and on several occasions both the Parish Priest and the bishop snubbed notable visitors, or important celebrations at the convent and its factory. At the same time, demands were made on them to meet the needs and whims of the clergy. On one occasion, a newly appointed curate demanded that the convent provide accommodation for him. He was given one of the houses which was used as a residence for the teachers. As if this were not sufficient, he then demanded that they provide a stable for his horse, which they also did. Much of these difficulties were patiently endured by the sisters and they never showed any signs, to their parishioners or workers, of the pain they felt at being so badly treated.

However, Arsenius was not one to be rebuffed when important

matters were at stake and any opposition from the clergy was dealt with firmly. There is one incident, from her career in Foxford, which illustrates her commitment to the poor and her fearlessness in dealing with ecclesiastical authority. The incident occurred around the time of the 1892 General Election and, so, shortly after the Parnell split. The factory had on its staff people on both sides of the political divide, but this was not an issue for the sisters. That summer, while the parish clergy were on their annual retreat, the sisters and their staff carried out what had become an annual cleaning of the church. On their return from retreat the priests called to the convent. Arsenius recalls in her memoirs, many years later, the sequence of events:

Naturally we might have expected their visit to thank us for the work we had done and they did thank us and were very pleased ... but then my astonishment was great when the PP informed me that he had spoken to the bishop and come back with authority to ask me to dismiss from our employment our carpenter, Mary Henehan, our work teacher in the school and four girls, all notorious Parnellites. These had joined in a demonstration in the street and behaved rudely to the PP, booing and hooting as they passed. They were in the wrong, I could not excuse them on that point, but neither could I dismiss them. I saw at once the drift of the thing, our mill was to be made a party machine ... and I felt bound to make a firm stand and I refused emphatically to agree to their demand. 'We Sisters of Charity have no politics. When I entered religion my people were all Conservatives. Now I do not care what they are ... I came here to help the poor, non-sectarian, non-political. So long as they require my help, they shall have it, and I will submit to no interference. We are not Sisters of Mercy under local authority. I am under that of my Superior General and recognise no other. If we are not allowed to do the work we came for, then we go – we have been sought for other places and are sure of a welcome elsewhere. I am ready to close down the mill, to leave on short notice and leave you the care of your own poor, the responsibility is with you'. The priests went away dissatisfied. The week passed somehow ... On Saturday the CC called to tell me that our school was to be placed under

'Interdict'!!! if the delinquents did not make a full apology. I repeated what I had said a week ago and added that I considered my community was being badly treated. Our schools and grounds were private property and I would allow no action to be taken there that savoured of politics. I conceded the point that these employees of ours had been rude to their priest, and that a public apology was due and that I undertook should be made. That evening I sent for these parties and I explained my views ... I told them I would go with them next day and before the congregation after last Mass I would speak for them. It was a vital moment, the life or death of our work in Foxford depended on it. I insisted that the two priests should come to the church door, and there I made my first and last public speech, and read the apology I had written out for them. The culprits were forgiven with the exception of Mary Henehan. The parish priest said that the bishop reserved her case ... A month later [the bishop] came over and spent hours here, and the subject was again threshed out. 'God arose and scattered his enemies' and our little barque once again weathered a violent storm, which had threatened to submerge our work, and leave the banks of the Moy as destitute as they had formerly been.⁶

The relationship between the bishop and Arsenius seems to have remained strained for the rest of his life. On one occasion he visited the convent to inspect the mill's accounts. She regarded this as somewhat *ultra vires*. The next time the accounts were audited she sent a sister over to his residence with an abstract of the accounts, sufficiently complex to prevent enlightenment and with strict orders to the bearer that she have them home with her that evening. When Dr Lyster died, in 1911, he endowed each convent in the diocese, including two other foundations of the Irish Sisters of Charity, but omitted Foxford.

Trust in providence

As the story of Mother Arsenius unfolds it becomes obvious that all her undertakings were the result of prayerful reflection and intercession and the outcome was always integrated positively into the whole scheme in which she was involved. Her work often

seemed to defy the normal laws of economics and sound investment.⁷ Yet, her utter trust in divine providence gave her the courage to forge ahead in spite of obstacles or opposition. Whatever she needed, whether premises, finance, materials, expertise, personnel or markets, always seemed to come her way and her plans materialised to the advantage of those whom she felt called to serve. It cannot be said that she was ever possessive of her projects because in each situation in which she worked she was always ready to move on and respond to other needs elsewhere. While in Ballagherreen she was ready to volunteer for Kiltimagh. When this plan fell through she was ready to go to Foxford and no sooner was it established than she was ready to go to Belfast to found a new community there.

What then of providence?

Among women religious, this outstanding trust in providence would not seem to be unusual. A simple indicator illustrates the point. There are at least thirty-four congregations of religious women with the word *providence* in their title as against two groups of male religious.⁸ Despite the prominence given to providence in the life of the church, the theme has received relatively little theological attention, especially from Catholic authors. However, recently, a number of women religious in the United States have been attending to this omission with the result that the Catholic Theological Society of America devoted its annual convention to this topic in 1989. With the help of this and other recent literature some attempt will be made to present an overview of a theology of providence and to assess the work of Mother Arsenius in its light.

At its simplest, providence is a doctrine which asserts that the same God who created the universe continues to govern its affairs, constantly renewing and sustaining it with a loving presence. It points to a definite movement in creation towards the realisation of its potentialities. Providence is also the ground for our own participation in history and the ongoing work of creation. But here, of course, lies another aspect of providence, its ambiguity, the obvious presence of so much that is evil and destructive in the world, so great in fact as to make any facile claim to the goodness of reality or being almost untenable. The same events can

often be interpreted, on the one hand as evidence of the goodness of God, and on the other as punishment or just evil. The Exodus event could be interpreted by the people of Israel as an instance of God's providential care of them and by the Egyptians as evil and destructive of their people. Belief in providence often has to be held in the face of facts which appear to contradict it. It can be said that providence is an aspect of our faith and of our hope which can be shown to be a reasonable stance towards life in the world.

John Macquarrie in his book, *Principles of Christian Theology*, writes:

Belief in providence, like belief in creation itself, is founded existentially. It is through happenings that increase and strengthen our being – that do so not because of our own efforts primarily, but sometimes even in spite of our own efforts – that we come to believe in providence; and we do so because in these happenings we have become aware of the presence of Being, acting on us and in us, and giving itself to us. Historically, it has been through classic happenings of this kind, such as Israel's exodus from Egypt and the cross of Christ, that communities of faith have come to believe in God's providential dealing. In the case of most individuals, they have probably learned the doctrine first in the community of faith and then confirmed it in their own experience. This existential or personal basis of the belief in providence prevents us from regarding it as mere mechanical process.⁹

Macquarrie goes on to show how the biblical view of providence is developed through the course of Israel's history. One can see in the Old Testament story of Joseph, who was maltreated and sold by his brothers, a case of God's providential care, not just for Joseph but for the community as a whole. In such an instance the personal interpretation had to be checked against the community experience lest it become a merely subjective, individualistic assertion of divine favour. In the scriptures there is a movement from any individualistic interpretation of God's favour to a community recognition of the God of the Covenant who is constantly renewing and guiding people to their destiny amidst the events of history. This community awareness is eventually pushed beyond the realm of human history to include all of creation which is viewed as good and part of God's providential rule. Even in the face of much that might seem to contradict that belief, there is the

underlying confidence, expressed by Paul, that 'in everything God works for good' (Rom 8:28). Belief in providence is not a matter of blind fatalism or an unambiguous acceptance that 'what will be, will be'. Rather, it attempts to make sense of events, to interpret them as they unfold in the context of one's faith experience and that of the whole community of faith. Thus some events can be seen to move with God's desire for the fuller being of creation and of all God's people. Other events reveal God's judgement and the awareness that they may not be in the direction of greater being. To know which is the case is the task of Christian discernment. Consequently, some events may invite our co-operation while others may require the prophetic word to be spoken or a prophetic stand to be taken.¹⁰

Divine providence and human engagement

These considerations take us on to look at two other aspects of providence. The first is that of the underlying hope which characterises trust in divine providence. Underlying any ability to accept the role of providence in life is the virtue of hope, a virtue not always as appreciated by Christians as it might be. Hope, according to Karl Rahner, is even more fundamental than faith and love. He defines hope as:

that *act* in which the uncontrollable is made present as that which sanctifies, blesses and constitutes salvation without losing its character as radically beyond our powers to control ... Hope alone is the *locus* of God as he who cannot be controlled or manipulated ...¹¹

Hope is directed to the future and is the basis for a Christian attitude to the world which is in fact always revolutionary, ever anxious to renew it according to its acceptance of God's promise of salvation. This attitude towards renewal is never one which accepts any human project as definitive, but as provisional and dispensable. Hope confronts the Christian with the choice of holding on to the past or the present as a possession or letting go on pilgrimage into an unforeseeable future which is understood to be embraced by God's promise of salvation.

The second corollary from our consideration of divine providence is that, far from making us passive, conservative or fatalistic, it calls us to responsible engagement in the world. It recognises that

God involves the agency of human beings in shaping the future through the exercise of their freedom and responsibility. In fact, this is such an important aspect of Catholic thought that it tends to stress this secondary causality more than it does divine providence. In this way it has safeguarded human autonomy on the one hand, and avoided the idea of random divine intervention on the other. The Catholic tradition did not deal with this issue explicitly but did so implicitly in its moral theology, in terms of the relationship between the natural and the eternal law. The position is summarised thus by Charles Curran:

Life in this world is ruled by natural law which is the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature. Through human reason reflecting on human nature, human beings can determine what they are to do and what God wants them to do. The understanding of natural law coheres with the understanding of providence as based on mediation and the fact that God works through secondary causes. Providence thus in theory does not alter or change human responsibility to discover and act in accord with natural law. The general tendency within the tradition denies that God could grant dispensations from or exceptions to the natural law because in so doing God would contradict God's self. Thus a belief in providence does not affect the requirements of human morality in this world, for providence in the Thomistic tradition works through the natural law.¹²

So, in fact, the traditional teaching on the natural law enables us to understand how we implicitly co-operate with the action of divine providence in the world. Thus the natural law itself, as a participation in the eternal law, requires the human person to act in the world as a responsible co-operator with the divine plan of salvation.

Providence and prayer

Finally, it must be said that one's view of providence also conditions one's view of prayer. If one sees providence in terms of an interventionist God, then petitionary prayer will expect God to intervene in dramatic or abrupt ways to answer the prayer of individuals. However, this view of providence, as we saw above, cannot be sustained in a reasonable fashion, despite the fact that it

has much popular appeal. An equally unsatisfactory alternative is to say that God has created the universe and let it off according to its own impersonal laws. In such a scheme of things, petitionary prayer would have no effect on God because God does not change but the petitioner may be changed, becoming more open to the presence of the divine life in others and in the world itself. Both options have points in their favour yet neither of them is adequate to the notion of providence being outlined earlier. So a third option is needed, and this is one proposed by Jack A. Keller, basing himself on the thought of Langdon Gilkey. He suggests that God is one source of power in a world with a plurality of agents of power. In petitionary prayer, we, as agents of limited power, join with the divine power. Thus we seek to open ourselves to the divine power and to co-operate with it. Still, that divine power can appear to be thwarted by human freedom or other non-divine actualities.

In each moment God offers the best real possibilities for the achievement of value that can be built on the past. But God does not force the best on any creature. The divine power functions only as a persuasive lure, which can be ignored or rejected ... God cannot unilaterally direct the course of events, large and small, as one of the actors. To the degree that there is receptivity (conscious or unconscious) to the divine will, God's power – and our prayers that are consistent with God's will – are efficacious.¹³

Even though God's power may seem thwarted to some extent, this is not a reason for us to stop praying because God's love is inexhaustible, it endures for ever. From this perspective, providence means that God cares about creation and humanity, individually and collectively, and works constantly for our well-being, which takes us back to the Pauline confidence that 'in everything God works for good'. In this understanding of providence, prayer is part of our effort to align ourselves with the creative power of God's love, it is to be open to the kingdom which is coming into existence and expressing a readiness to participate in it. It acknowledges the sovereignty of God and the need of others, so that whatever is sought in petition is asked for in a spirit of openness and receptivity to the reign of God itself.¹⁴ Thus while some may claim that petitionary prayer is not to be the primary form of

Christian prayer, it is nonetheless appropriate as an expression of our willingness to be co-workers in furthering the reign of God. In the end we can still rest secure in the old adage: Work as if everything depended on you and pray as if everything depended on God. This conclusion still appears valid in the light of current thinking on divine providence.

Conclusion

The attitudes and activities of Arsenius can be seen to stand the test of a current theology of providence. She had a sense of the goodness of creation and drew out its gifts so that a fuller life could be offered to her people in a genuinely holistic way as she attended to the needs of body, mind and spirit. She was never defeated nor overwhelmed by the obstacles which came her way, whether the forces of nature or human obstinacy, poverty or war. There was nothing fatalistic in her attitude, rather with a deep sense of hope and confidence in the sustaining love of God, she forged ahead in the realisation of her plans to enrich the lives of the poor. Aware of the ambiguities of all human endeavours, she could discern what was positive and consistent with the ongoing work of creation and co-operate with it. Alternatively, when she encountered contradictions of goodness or truth she was able to take the prophetic stand and voice her objections, showing how it thwarted the divine plan for the fulness of life. Despite her indisputable gifts in establishing and managing the mill and other enterprises, she still had a healthy sense of her own dispensability and never clung jealously to any of them. Readiness to move and take on new works was a constant feature of her life, pointing to that deeper reliance on God than on her own talents. A deep sense of hope seemed to underpin her attitude to life and what it presented. All of her undertakings were enriched by prolonged periods of reflective prayer. Although she had recourse to novenas and other popular practices of the time, she could never be accused of attempting to manipulate God. Rather, her whole life was characterised by a remarkable openness to God as she trusted in God's love for the world and its people, knowing that in everything God works for good. She was without doubt a co-worker in advancing the reign of God in both prayer and action.

When we look back at the life and work of Agnes Morrough-Bernard we see in them a reflection of many of our contemporary

social and theological concerns. She was committed to the poor; she was a feminist before her time, capable of meeting the men of church or state on equal terms, but also able to bring a uniquely feminine perspective to her projects; she was non-sectarian and ecumenical in her religious disposition and non-partisan in her politics; she was sensitive to the ecology of the area and used its natural resources for energy and industry, never putting more efficient machinery before the need to provide an extra job. She was a woman of vision and of action; a woman of prayer and practicality. Her unshakable trust in divine providence was no escape from the deployment of all her own human resources to effect the plans which she had for the alleviation of poverty and the enhancement of the lives of those whom she was called to serve. Although she may not have used the terminology, her motivation was the building up of the reign of God in a world afflicted by poverty and injustice. She brought hope to a destitute people not only for material improvement but also for a deeper communion with God in prayer and worship. Her life is an invitation to all concerned with survival and salvation in Mayo to look afresh at the possibilities latent in our present situation. Her achievements survive her and are still evident in every corner of Foxford. The mill, the schools, the interpretative centre, much of the housing in the village, the thriving brass band and, latterly, Hope House, all stand as a caution to any who may be tempted to give up the struggle for survival in Mayo. And in that struggle for survival, under the Eye of Providence, is found our salvation.

Notes

1. *The Memoirs of Mother Arsenius* (Dublin: Archives of the Irish Sisters of Charity)
2. *Ibid.*
3. cf Lyons, F.S.L., *Ireland Since the Famine*, Collins Fontana, 1973, 202-216
4. This particular controversy was discussed for months in the national and local papers of 1893, the cuttings from which were kept by the sisters in what was known in Foxford as *The Big Book*.
5. Gildea, D, *Mother Arsenius of Foxford*, Burns, Oates and Washbourne, London 1936, 132

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6. *The Memoirs of Mother Arsenius*. According to her letters to the bishop, the root cause of the problem seems to have been that the curate in the parish had tried to persuade one of the sisters in the primary school to use the children to pressure their parents, who were Parnellites, to change their political views. When this failed he wanted them dismissed. The problem with Mary Henehan seems to be rooted in a much earlier difference between her family, her father in particular, and the Parish Priest.
 7. Her efforts were not without critics at the time. See P. Murray, 'Novels, Nuns and the Revival of Irish Industries: The Rector of Westport and the Foxford Woollen Mill 1905-1907', in *Cathair na Mart: Journal of the Westport Historical Society*, 1988, 86-99
 8. Hofmann, K., 'Vorsehung' art. in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg, 1965 Vol X, 890-892
 9. First Edition, SCM Press Ltd, London, 1966, 220
 10. cf Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History*, Seabury Press, New York, 1776, esp. 263
 11. *Theological Investigations: Writings of 1965-7*, Vol X, trs David Bourke, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1973, 254-255
 12. 'Providence and Responsibility: the divine and the human in History from the Perspective of Moral Theology', in *The Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 44 /1988, 49. See also in the same issue A. Carr, "'Not a Sparrow Falls': Providence and Responsibility in History', 19-38
 13. 'On Providence and Prayer', in *The Christian Century*, Vol 104, No 32, (Nov 4, 1987), 968
 14. cf. Collins, R. F., "Lord Teach us to Pray" (Luke 11:1) A Reflection on the Prayer of Petition', in *Louvain Studies*, Vol X, No 4 (Fall 1985) 354-371 esp. 367; also Dorr, D., 'Prayer and Providence' in *his Spirituality and Justice*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1984, 236-255