

Whatever happens: Ce qui arrive

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

There are times when the world, instead of being the solid stage on which we conduct our affairs, instead of enveloping us in its massive givenness, seems to totter at the cliff's edge. The news announces financial meltdown, the friend who seemed forever young dies, the best plans and provisions crumble. What does the future hold? Maybe, a monastic friend predicted half-seriously, we'll end up huddled around a fire, eating bear meat. Though we laugh this off, there's no denying the sense of precariousness that runs below our activities like an underground stream. Prayer is the best remedy; but as the apostle Paul says, we don't know how to pray as we ought.

For such times the spiritual classics are made. That musty old book of spiritual instruction we picked up at a tag sale, still bearing its bookplate from a convent library, has fresh news to give us. It says—and we seem to hear it for the first time—that it really is possible to live, in Christ, a life of loving conformity to God's will.

One such classic is *L'Abandon à la Providence divine* (*Abandonment to Divine Providence*, also known as *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*), long considered the masterpiece of the Jesuit spiritual director Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751), and a profound influence on the spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux, Charles de Foucauld, Evelyn Underhill, Richard Foster and a host of other modern spiritual masters.

The devotion to Providence that this book expresses was a pervasive theme of 17th- and 18th-century French spiritual writing, both Catholic and Calvinist. In the aftermath of religious wars, in the face of libertine and rationalist critiques of religion, the thought of giving oneself up wholly to God's design was deeply attractive. The genius of *L'Abandon* is to translate this thought into a practical "way" that beginners as well as advanced contemplatives can follow. It consists in fulfilling the ordinary duties of a Christian, accepting the labors and sufferings that each moment brings, and trusting that "whatever happens" (*ce qui arrive*) is the perfect

expression of God's will. The language of *L'Abandon* is simple, repetitive, elegiac: forget all schemes of self-improvement, let go of regrets for the past and anxieties for the future, receive every event as a revelation and a gift. "O bread of angels, celestial manna, pearl of great price, sacrament of the present moment . . ."

Last month, I had the idea of revisiting this work in the original French. I expected surprises, but wasn't prepared for this: the title on the cover of the 2005 critical edition reads *L'Abandon à la Providence divine, autrefois attribué à Jean-Pierre de Caussade*. I nearly fell off my chair: *formerly* attributed to Jean-Pierre de Caussade? The introduction by editor Dominique Salin makes a convincing case that the treatise was the work of an unknown writer indebted to Madame Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717), the mystic whose condemnation for quietism launched the great war between François Fénelon and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet.

And so I began *L'Abandon* realizing that the first thing to abandon was my image of the author as the gentle Jesuit priest who, while violent religious intrigues roiled the realm of Louis XIV and his successor, distilled the teachings of the great Carmelite and Salesian mystics into a sound message for ordinary Christian life. The historical Caussade was a dedicated doctor of souls, but his well-attested writings show little of the literary brilliance of *L'Abandon*. Let him now enjoy his abandonment to a blessed obscurity.

But what of the Pseudo-Caussade? Is *L'Abandon* after all a quietist text? The quietists were notorious for their self-immolating spirituality, indifference to salvation and disdain for petitionary prayer. Although *L'Abandon* explicitly condemns such radicalism, it presses the logic of Providence very far: *ce qui arrive* is God's will and God's good pleasure, whether it be a newborn child, a hurricane or a holocaust.

And there's the rub. While it is basic Christianity to believe that in Providence "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28), the way of abandonment goes a step beyond. It seems to solve the problem of evil by making God inscrutable. I have to admit that I'd rather see the devil's hand in natural catastrophes and the abuse of free will in moral crimes than read them all as God's express design. Yet I suspect some shallowness in my thinking; for the way of abandonment is not an exercise in rationalizing the misfortunes of others, but a prayerful response to the mystery of Providence. Try saying *ce qui arrive* to yourself in stressful times: you will feel both humbled and buoyed up. Taken in measured doses, *L'Abandon à la Providence divine* is an elixir of faith, hope and love. The questions that linger, the tensions that remain unresolved, find their answer only in the total pattern of redemption.