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St Matthias Merit Scholarship Essay Contest Submission

October 1, 2024

Faith Amidst Uncertainty: Parenthood as a “Yes” to God’s Earth

Essay Question: What comfort is there in hoping and laboring for the best outcome of one's children when one can choose an easier lifestyle by avoiding them? In answering the question, include Proverbs 16: 2-3 and limit your essay to 750 words.

When my wife was pregnant with our first child, I read a series of writings by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who resisted the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1920s-30s. In a letter he wrote to his fiancée while imprisoned, he described their engagement as an act of faith in an increasingly dark world. He criticized the temptation among Christians to treat faith as an escape from the world, and instead framed their engagement as a sign of faith in God while remaining *in* the world. He described marriage as “a token of confidence in the future. That requires faith.” This faith endures despite the hardships of the world. He elaborated, “Our marriage shall be a yes to God’s earth; it shall strengthen our courage to act and accomplish something on the earth.”¹ For Bonhoeffer, marriage is not only a means of sanctification, but also a commitment to work with God in the world— to labor in faith against hopelessness.

When I first read this, I was faced with all the uncertainties of my impending parenthood— not knowing what makes a good parent; my financial insecurity and unclear career path; the immense weight of the responsibility for raising a child— to say nothing of the impact that a constantly shifting social and political atmosphere has upon a child. Some part of me understood the escapist impulse that Bonhoeffer condemned. How he described marriage, however— as a “token of confidence in the future”— rang true to my experience, and I applied this understanding to parenthood. Bonhoeffer’s “yes to God’s earth” reminds me of another “yes” with regard to childbearing: that of the Theotokos at the Annunciation.

The uncertainty of parenthood lays at the foundation of the Gospel story. The response of Mary to the archangel’s announcement that she would bear the Son of God is the truest utterance of Bonhoeffer’s “yes”: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”² In assenting to the will of God, she inaugurated the salvation of the world. Her “yes” to God was also a “yes” for the world. It was not the last time she would say “yes” to God. This trust in God is the defining feature of the Theotokos’s character. Jesus described his Mother as someone who “hears the word of God and keeps it,” and elsewhere as one who “does the will of my Father.”³ Importantly, this “yes” to the will of God *in* the world is one that finds its culmination in Christ’s own words in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion: “not my will, but

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Kelly and Nelson (Harper San Francisco, 1990) 512.

² Luke 1:38

³ Luke 11:28; Matthew 12:48

thine, be done.”⁴ This prayer, said by Christ and echoing the words of the Theotokos, is one that parents must say repeatedly throughout a child’s life—especially in the midst of uncertainty or hardship.

My daughter is now seven years old, and I am not any more certain about parenting. What school should she go to? Should we homeschool? How much screen time should she be allowed? Despite these ambiguities, I have not forgotten Bonhoeffer’s and the Theotokos’s answer to uncertainty: yes to the will of God. The specifics of this vary depending on the season or situation, but I pray that the posture of my heart remains the same: one that embraces uncertainty in faith in God. Therefore, I will give my best to my child; trusting that when the time comes, she too can answer God like the Child of the Theotokos: “not my will, but thine, be done.”

All of this stands in stark contrast to any impulse that may prompt me to retreat from the hardships of my role as parent. The words of the Theotokos are rooted in the truth spoken by Proverbs 16:1-3, “The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit. Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.” While I do what I think is the best for my child and the world, based on my limited understanding, the fact remains that it is God who works in the lives of children and judges based on the heart. As attested in the Proverb, if I commit my work to the Lord, and like the Theotokos, offer a “yes” to the will of God, Christ will establish it to accomplish his will: the good and salvation of the world.

⁴ Luke 22:42