

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 3 Theme: **Faith and Doubt**

Title: **The Engineering Nun and the God of the Vending Machine** Author: **William Kopcha**

When a friend called and asked me to write an article on the roles of faith and doubt in life (and specifically, in my life), I thought it would be a cake-walk. The path of life is obscure; in the words of my father, “The only certainties are death and taxes.” We’re supposed to have faith anyway. We don’t. Done.

Then I sat down to write. Funny, but it turns out that the more I thought about it, the less straightforward the issue seemed. Faith, doubt, and obscurity are obviously interconnected. I, of all people, should know about that. After all, I have been teetering precariously on the precipice dividing the youthful bliss of college and what the middle-aged take some sick glee in referring to as “the real world,” for two years in the academic purgatory known as “grad school.” And let’s face it – for a large segment of the population, it is assumed that you will go to college. You may have had friends that didn’t continue on to higher education, friends that your parents talk about in hushed whispers to your other friends’ parents on the phone like they have some terrible disease, but for the most part (and doubly for suburbia), you were funneled into this from your first day of kindergarten. And when all you’ve spent your whole life in school, having every imaginable option of how to spend your time can be both exciting and, if we’re honest with ourselves, intimidating.

Naturally, I sought some guidance on how to tackle this situation from a source that I trusted like no other on this planet, the Church. I had the good fortune to find myself spending my last semester of my senior year in Greece, which aside from being amazing was part “last hurrah,” part denial of the future, and part existential nirvana. I visited the Twelve Apostles Monastery in the city of Karditsa on the recommendation of a friend who had been there on a Real Break trip with the OCF. While there, I began to talk about my future with an American nun. This nun, it turns out, had received tonsure after retiring from her career as an electronics engineer in basically the same field as a professor that I had been working for back home. We talked about how the field was blossoming, hurdles that people are spending a lot of time and money to try and overcome, job security, etc. Taking this as a sign from God, I immediately contacted this professor and begged him to take me on as a grad student in our university’s PhD program the following fall.

Fast forward two years, and I am cutting my PhD program short, leaving with a Master’s Degree, and looking into jobs that have nothing to do with electronics engineering, ranging from pharmaceutical research to teaching high school science to teaching English as a foreign language.

So what happened?

Was God wrong? Not likely. Was I immature to be looking for a divine revelation? Probably, but to counter a question with a question, if we indeed have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, is there any part of our life that is not, in some way or another, an act of divine intervention? Even

the sin of the Wise Thief landed him, in the end, in the ultimate position to profess his repentance. Was I really “meant” to be here all this time? Well, who knows, and ultimately – who cares? The experience of my past two years has forced me to face a lot of things, including a severe, prolonged illness in the family, a boss that seemed at times downright emotionally unstable, strained relationships with friends, the imperfections and humanity of previously untouchable role models, and little things like being conscious on a daily basis of being older than and at a very different station in life from those with whom I interacted most on a daily basis. It all sounds very bleak, and at times, frankly, it felt bleak. And that led to doubt. Sometimes, it led to a lot of doubt. Doubt in the goodness of God, mainly, doubt about His providence that spilled over into other areas of faith and life, doubt that anyone or anything had “led” me to my current situation and had ever been or ever would be leading me anywhere.

But, oddly enough, and with an uncanny timing possible only for One who is Eternal, something always happened to reveal the roots of my doubt for the aberrations that they were: the hand of a friend I thought had wronged me and was unwilling to forgive stretched out with far more self-denial and courage than I ever thought possible. This act revealed my egotism as a source of division and thereby for doubt in the love of God. The compassionate words and sudden openness of a boss who had seemed at best apathetic and in reality had been keeping a close eye on my well-being and development revealed my lack of trust in and openness with others as a source of isolation and thereby for doubt in the power of God to overcome the petty barriers that we as humans set up through our misconceptions. A joke cracked by a family member revealed how foolish worrying about any of this really was, and how I was too wrapped up in myself to recognize God’s efforts to relieve these problems.

“Meant to be” or not, and, what is more, the path that I expected or prayed for when I met that nun in Greece or not, I certainly learned a lot of things that were very, very needful. It seems that the roots of each source of doubt in my life were my own sins, and that each descent into the gloomy depths of doubt ended in the manifestation of one of these sins so that they, along with the doubt they caused, were peeled back layer by layer to yield a core of a stronger, more mature faith that did not depend so heavily on the ebbs and flows of fortune or relate to the “vending machine” model of God that we criticize so heavily in our university’s OCF – insert faith, receive temporal benefits. To go a step further, it is also apparent that the strengthening of faith would not have been possible for me without the introduction of doubt. This is a concept that we are sometimes bombarded with in the academic sense, where we are encouraged to question so that we read more concerning church doctrine or the like. While this is also certainly healthy and beneficial, the paradigm in operation here seemed to be a more experiential rather than cerebral linking of doubt and faith, making them in a very real sense two sides of the same coin rather than opposing forces struggling for dominance.

With the same uncanny timing, just as this had all become apparent, a saintly elderly woman in our local parish decided to let me in on her life story during coffee hour one day. She was extremely faithful, always optimistic and kind, outspoken, and generally the kind of person that every parish wishes they had more of; I was therefore very surprised when she told me that after having been a faithful Baptist missionary in Africa for many years, she spent a period of 30 years as a disillusioned Deist bordering on atheism before coming to Orthodoxy. Every hero endures a nadir, but unlike the examples you find in lit class, she had this to say of the other side of the

valley: “It never changes – you get up, you fall down, you get up again, and you hope you remember a little something each time. I’m still learning.” She’s 93. Disheartening? A little, but more hopeful in that we are never truly forgotten, and that is something to inspire faith that endures the ups and downs of life, no matter how deep they may be. Whatever else the case may be, it seems that we’ve all got our work cut out for us.

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Discussion Questions:

Have you ever had a period of doubt? What was it like? Did you overcome it?

Can you think of a time when something you were sure was “meant to be” fell apart?

Who do you turn to for advice and guidance when you are trying to discern God’s will?

How does our culture respond to the idea of an all-loving God that is personally involved in each person’s life?