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Cold War

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Notes Towards a Phenomenology of Hope

Some time in the 1960s, I remember watching a television documentary on nuclear weapons and the public health consequences in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The creation of a weapon of unprecedented power, by deconstructing one of the building blocks of life, and the long-term effects of that weapon on another such building block, the human gene, became the subject of an enduring fascination. Now I realize that I was intuitively homing in on something which served as a cipher for my own life, as a child of divorce. A divorce which split the atom of my existence straight down the middle, leaving me to cope with a lifetime of emotional fall-out.

This is not the place to rehearse the details of my parents' marriage and its collapse. Nor indeed of all the ramifications those things entailed for me, their only child. Suffice it to say that two damaged individuals, each with a history of dysfunction and tragedy in their own upbringing, came together for the wrong reasons, had a child, and then parted. It is a common story. What was perhaps not so common was the vehemence with which they fought each other through the divorce courts, with me as the pawn in their power-struggle. This occurred during the years when I was between three and seven years of age. I who, in their love letters (which I only recently read), they had called "our little angel" was now referred to - in the correspondence of their lawyers - as "the child." Later on I became "that bloody child" (my mother, at her worst) or "that poor confused child" (my father and stepmother, also not at their best). I dwell on these epithets only because they epitomized the state of being, the fractured ontology, with which I would have to struggle thereafter.

Once the ground zero of divorce and custody battle was concluded, the real war began. It was a cold war: a dirty war, a propaganda war, entailing guilt, espionage, betrayal, and constant drip-by-drip attrition. Neither parent could speak well of the other. It was a given that anything which pleased one parent, automatically displeased the other. And so they spoke ill of me, too, of course, when the unconscious desire took them to hurt the other and blacken their character, naturally enough projected onto the child who carried qualities of both. Much has been written about the crisis of identity that a child of divorce experiences, the lack of a secure ground on which to stand. When I think about the overriding atmosphere of my early life, it was one of fear and mistrust. Of constant tension. Of never being able to relax, lest a new threat, a new aggression against the core of my being, appear in the corner of my eye.

Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote that a child receives its first experience of God through its mother's smile. This is far from being a sentimental observation. The smile of the mother conveys and confers an existential security: the sense that another being, indeed the being on which you depend for sustenance and safety, takes delight in your mere existence. If that smile is missing, you seek it elsewhere. Of course, no human being can give you an enduring smile. It is one of the myriad consequences of the Fall that we are more concerned with knowledge than with love. This applies both to carnal knowledge

and psychological knowledge, which in our time is held to be a source of power in the personal sphere, similar to the power of economic theory in the public sphere. But eventually, knowledge that is not grounded in the divine contains the seeds of its own destruction. Usury may lead to a sub-prime catastrophe. Existential imposition - the objectification of another human being - invariably results in the collapse of trust. Because we are not God. We are petty Olympians with delusions of grandeur, trying to manipulate events and failing.

It has been noted that the children of divorce frequently have problems relating to a God who is grounded in an ecclesial community, and a Church that exercises authority. We are held to be incapable of accepting authority. This is only logical, given our formative experiences. And yet God's logic transcends human logic (or "worldly wisdom," as the Gospels have it). While children whose family background is relatively secure may experience a primary relationship with God as Father, my own first relationship with God was through the Son. As a young child, after nightmares about the darkness engulfing me, I would dream that a tiny, tiny white man was placed on my tongue. Then the fear would subside. I would be safe.

Looking back, I know that I was drawn to Christ as the presence of a love which healed and nurtured, by giving itself to me in the most personal and intimate way possible. It was inevitable that I would become a Catholic, and it was a deep-seated recognition of the Eucharistic Christ that drew me into the Church, and eventually into the Trinitarian experience which is both fruitful marriage and the life of faith.

Yet my first and primary experience of the divine smile had to be grounded in the divine tears. I met God in his most reduced, self-effacing moment: in his defeat and death. Only *there* could he harrow the hell in which I felt myself to be trapped and, seizing me by the wrist as in the icon of the Resurrection in the Hagia Sophia, draw me out to the light. He had hung next to me while I was on my own uncomprehending cross, and he had told me that today I would be with him in paradise, simply because I had named him for who he is. Named him by uttering my sinner's cry for mercy. No wonder I would later develop a devotion to the Polish Pope whose pontificate was infused by an endless meditation on divine mercy in the face of all the sufferings in our godless century.

When I came to have children of my own, I had only one thing to ask of God. That the terrible legacy of my parents and their parents, the sins of my poor fathers and mothers, should end with me. That none of it should be visited upon my children. This is how we make sense of our own sufferings: through his Passion and Resurrection Christ gives them meaning and dignity.

If we belong to Christ we are not, in the end, determined by divorce, or even by toxic marriages that are as bad as a divorce. We do not have to accept the descriptions other human beings try to impose on us. We can forgive them, for they know not what they do. Even less do they know what they say. The greatest anguish of a child from this background lies in the desire to be "heard" for themselves, rather than to have one's identity objectified and defined by others. The horrible suspicion that there is no one out there who will listen can give rise to the desire to annihilate that very identity, and ultimately one's whole existence. The voice of the contradictor whispers in our ear that we should never have been born. We have nothing to contribute. No one will ever take us seriously. To be the child of divorce is to be aborted, perpetually. Never to be allowed our place.

And yet, in Christ, we can actually *give* the love we should like to have received ourselves, most especially to those who are tempted to despair. We can be prophets of Hope. "Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over."

