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# In Spite of Everything

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Susan Gregory Thomas, *In Spite of Everything: A Memoir* (Random House, 2011, 208 pages).

"The human family, disunited by sin, is reconstituted in its unity by the redemptive power of the death and Resurrection of Christ. Christian marriage, by participating in the salvific efficacy of this event, constitutes the natural setting in which the human person is introduced into the great family of the Church. The commandment to grow and multiply, given to man and woman in the beginning, in this way reaches its whole truth and full realization. The Church thus finds in the family, born from the sacrament, the cradle and the setting in which she can enter the human generations, and where these in their turn can enter the Church" (*Familiaris Consortio* 15).

The Church's vision for the family brings with it a serious mission. In the contemporary culture, an epidemic of divorce has cast a dark shadow on this mission and threatens the upbringing of children capable of entering into and fostering loving relationships that will bear fruit in the life of the Church and society.

Susan Gregory Thomas's memoir, *In Spite of Everything*, is both the personal account of the life of a child of divorce in contemporary America as well as an analysis of her generation X's collective experience as the children of failed marriages and negligent parenting during this same cultural period. Written from a personal lens steeped in American pop culture with a sometimes caustic humor and self-deprecating tone, *In Spite of Everything* offers some nevertheless important and insightful windows into the increasingly more common task facing children today: making sense of their own identity and call to love in light of a broken origin.

Thomas speaks of her upbringing in the height of the well-known "latch-key kid" era. The result, she claims, is a generation of adult children whose dominant childhood experiences are those of alienation, fear, and isolation, having been left largely to parent themselves. Thomas attributes her generation's wild devotion to *Star Wars*, as well as much of 1980s pop music, to a deep sense of identification with being alone in the world. She cites studies that lend credence to the notion that her generation's attitudes toward marriage, family, and parenting have been largely shaped by the root experience of abandonment. Her observations - often set against the stereotypes of the preceding "Baby Boomer" generation - raise important points about the effect of divorce and parental attentiveness (or lack thereof) on children, and the difficulty that arises when one seeks life-giving adult relationships, requiring the ability to donate oneself in love and trust, while the foundation of love has not been adequately established by one's family of origin.

This analysis is woven throughout Thomas's own story. She has suffered the wounds of divorce and emotional abuse and neglect of an alcoholic, Jekyll-and-Hyde-like father (whose infidelity and drinking

led to the collapse of two subsequent marriages). She is left deeply wounded by his abandonment at the tender age of twelve, a particularly delicate age for girls, and draws poignantly on the image of the Greek maiden left alone in the field to describe the loss of her virginity the following year to a much-older family friend whose intentions she mistook for big-brotherly affection until she found herself, overwhelmed, unable to escape his advances. Thus begins her teenage downward spiral. As Thomas narrates the journey through her adolescent, college, and young-adult years into her marriage, it becomes clear that the unwieldy task of making sense of herself and her world has been left solely to this young woman and the cues she can glean from the culture around her, and her wounds are many.

For Thomas, facing the world alone brings deep, existential distress. This is a recurring theme in the book: experiences of "alone" versus "*not* alone" in the world. Having been failed by her family in receiving a sense of being *with*, some relief comes for Thomas in finding her future spouse, in his calm and confidence, his intact family background, and his enduring presence with her. Hence the pain the reader experiences through her eyes when, *in spite of everything*, she finds herself unable to sustain their subsequent marriage only eight years in. Having to explain to her two young daughters why she is unable to shield them from the very thing she most wanted to avoid, knowing its pain so deeply herself, is perhaps the most painful aspect for Thomas. She attributes her marriage's failure to a misplaced search for the protection and safety she sought in a father, having never recovered the sense of security necessary for the true unfolding of her "self" during her formative years, thus making trust and vulnerability in courtship virtually impossible. Essentially, Thomas believes that she was looking for a father in a husband. To this I would add: Thomas' described personal weaknesses, evidences of the impact of divorce, coupled with the failure of society's presentation of marriage to act as a "safety net" when the family failed at its task of personal formation, are to blame. Thomas was twice failed: once by her family and a second time by society at large. A deeper cultural corrective is needed if the epidemic of divorce is to be healed.

The book's thematic juxtaposition of being "alone" and "*not* alone" - "alone" bringing with it deep-seated fear and "nihilistic dread" - reveals in a profound way the need of every human person to be born into a context of love, a stable home in which Love can be revealed and received as *the very meaning of one's being*. There is an interesting dance with the idea of an encounter with God through *lectio divina* ("holy reading") that surfaces in Thomas's telling, a theme that clearly adds depth to the question of being alone in the world. But it ends up reflecting another sickness of the contemporary culture: the inability to bring personal experience into dialogue with the larger whole. Her commentary on her peers' attitudes toward religion betrays her embrace of similar presuppositions: that religion must be relegated to the sphere of "personal experience," that religious traditions can and should be evaluated on the basis of "personal connection," that one can craft whatever self-referential spiritual framework one might find beneficial in a certain time and circumstance without regard to tradition or objective truth. These implicit biases prevent her experiences from speaking more powerfully, and shedding light on the meaning of marriage as having a divine Source and destiny.

The strength of the book is that the author reveals throughout a deep sense of the necessity of the family's establishing a safe and loving context in which children learn that they are *not alone*, and demonstrates just how damaging the decision of her parents' generation to embrace marital dissolution without regard to its impact on their children has been. She is resolved never to present divorce as even a relative good - she is quite clear that, for her and her peers, divorce was an event catastrophic to the heart and psyche.

Though a deeper cultural corrective is needed, one that critiques from the roots the contemporary presentation of marriage and its underlying assumptions about love, freedom, suffering, self-giving,

and the human person, and the role of these in bringing about the cultural epidemic of divorce, Thomas's insight into her experience as an adult child of divorce struggling to forge a loving and stable home is helpful, one that might speak to others in a similar situation, and that also helps to show how the epidemic perpetuates itself. Thomas explores the nature of marriage, but her questioning of the roles of men and women, the relationship between spouses, and the role of the home in the identity of the family, though significant for Thomas herself, do little more than ripple the surface of the typical secular-feminist ideology which she has embraced, seeing marriage as a partnership on which spouses must retain even footing and which is sustained by the mutual agreement of the parties until one or both decide otherwise.

Nevertheless, the questions she raises do highlight a certain openness within the culture to receive the life-giving perspective of the Theology of the Body, revealing the areas of weakness that the cultural mindset bears when put to the test of life in the family. Thomas seems to desire a deeper sense of masculinity and femininity, a sense of unity and deep personal identity that comes from being wedded as "husband and wife" rather than simply "partners," and the freedom to be indissolubly bound to a role with an objective and transcendent meaning. In the end, Thomas shies away from any wholesale embrace of any conclusion on the nature of marriage, simply leaving the reader with an epilogue in which we meet a new lover and discover that Thomas is expecting his child.

Reading *In Spite of Everything* was difficult on a human level. Entering into this woman's story, I felt deeply the pains she described in a very raw and personal manner, and empathized with her as she articulated a deep desire for union, for stability, and for a good and solid grounding for her daughters. The reader is taken on a journey through coming-of-age, marriage, parenthood, and divorce filled with psychological turmoil that I found difficult and heart-rending to read. Potential readers should also beware: in addition to ample pop-cultural references, profanity surfaces throughout, as does the occasional use of the Lord's name in vain.

Though I would not necessarily recommend Thomas's memoir to a broad theological, philosophical and academic audience - its subject matter is narrow and tone casual - I would propose it as a potentially interesting and helpful work for those more specifically interested in the unique experiences of children of divorce, as well as those interested in a close critique of the contemporary culture and/or in the analysis of recent American popular culture and the attitudes of the Baby Boomer generation and/or Generation X.

