
"WHO'S AFRAID OF FATHER CHRISTMAS?"

by

Maria Rosa Dominici

"You are in a meadow in the mountains. In front of you there is one mountain higher than all the others from whose peak emanates a strange and intense light. You already intended climbing to the top of this mountain, but now that you see this strange light you become quite curious. It makes you want to start out straight away".

Having established the setting, I waited in silence for Sonia to begin, which she always did with great difficulty: "I can see the mountain top but I cannot imagine myself climbing it. It is a summit for experienced mountaineers only. Everything is strange and gives me the feeling that I shouldn't be here. I raise my arm to protect myself from the wind".

(I intervened: "Someone arrives and organizes a climbing party roped together to scale the summit"). "The rope offers me no security because it keeps moving, and without trees I don't feel protected. The leader of the party looks like a priest. He is on my left, all dressed in black, including his hat. He is very elegant, though I can't say what his rank is in the church hierarchy. I think he has a red or violet sash. I am with other children; I am a child

as well. I see a corpse in my place. The priest accompanies me (she cried softly), I am a skeleton. I have no idea why I see such a horrible scene. I see myself from behind whilst I am climbing. I am actually a skeleton. It is as though we were about to enter a grotto, into something macabre. The sky is dark and threatening. I have a great desire to turn back, as though there were some enormous threat in front of me; (her whole body trembled)". I asked her: "Why do you tremble?" "Out of fear. It was as though I had found myself in front of something quite unknown, something terribly hurtful and frightening".

Later Sonia began to unravel the meaning of her fantasy. "I tried to understand what the priest was. When I was in second grade at school, the priest came in one day; he was very friendly (long silence, full of deep pain). It is difficult for me to talk about it. He ended up asking us if we knew who Father Christmas was. My companions began to say that Father Christmas was their parents. Alone and in a low voice I replied that this was not true. However, all the others said the same thing and I hadn't the strength to insist on my version. For me it was an upsetting and dramatic

incident which isolated me from the others. The year before it had been really good fun. Father Christmas came in the early evening and I was quite frightened and hid behind my father's legs for protection. My parents had let us go on believing he was real; so when I discovered that it wasn't true - that it was only the gardener - the bottom fell out of my world. I felt deceived and excluded from the reality of adults and began to feel an enormous distrust for them. The discovery that my world no longer had any value, that it no longer existed - I felt myself crushed by the others - was a real defeat (I thought about my Father Christmas - exactly the same thing happened to me). All the more so because there were two adults, the priest and my school teacher, who brutally forced a different reality on me whilst the adults of my family had given me one which no longer had any value. This was the drama: two different adult worlds. So I stopped communicating with the adults of my family and slowly became introverted. There was no longer a reason to communicate with them. Having to grow up was such a constant battle with myself, and I couldn't turn to my parents. The strength to do it I had to find in myself. It was a terrible way to grow up".

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Remembering the episode, it occurred to me that the same thing had happened to me, yet I continued the Father Christmas myth with my daughter Cristiana, and when she inevitably came home from school worried over what she had discovered, I tried to say to her those things that I myself would have wanted to hear. I told her that it was true what the teacher had told her but that it was also true what we had told her. Parents and teachers had to help her grow up, and growing up requires learning to accept changes in reality. Her teacher had shown her a more everyday reality. However, fantasy and imagination are also a part of the growing up process, and if you believe in something strongly enough, it can also seem to be real.

Now it is Cristiana's turn to help us prepare the stockings and the gifts that Father Christmas will bring down the chimney for her and her little brother. For Cristiana it is as good as if he were real. For her little brother, he is real.

(English translation by C.F. Russell)