

Think about it! (20)

One of the ugliest words that tend to be applied to people who go to mass or who attend some church or other is the word "hypocrite". "They're all a load of hypocrites!", some say; and so, at one stroke, "believer" and "hypocrite", "religious person" and "hypocrite", etc., are established as synonyms. Is that fair?

What exactly is hypocrisy? According to the Dictionary of the Spanish language, it's "the pretence to qualities or feelings very different from those that a person in fact has or feels." The Dictionary tells us that the term in question comes from the Greek language; and if we go all the way back to ancient Greece, we shall discover that the word "hypocrite" was related to the masks that the actors used to put on in the justly famous Greek dramas. It's true that etymology (the study of the origin and development of words) has its dangers, and that what determines the meaning of any word is not the history of its origin or development, as fascinating as that may be, but rather how the word is used in a given context. But in this case it is interesting, to say the least, that with regard to the vocabulary of hypocrisy, from those masks in ancient Greece right up to the concept of hypocrisy today, we find the common thread of pretence – those actors of antiquity wearing the masks of the characters they had to pretend to be, and the Spanish Royal Academy's concise definition of hypocrisy as, in essence, "pretence..."

Somewhere in between the Greece of the great dramatists and the world of today we find the example, we could almost say, par excellence, of hypocrisy: the Pharisees of Jesus of Nazareth's day. It is the evangelist Matthew who includes in his Gospel Jesus's fierce speech in which he launches an attack on the religious leaders of his day: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!", an accusation which appears no fewer than eight times in the short space of seventeen verses (Matthew 23:13-29). Why did Jesus describe the teachers of the law and the Pharisees as "hypocrites"? Well, he himself tells us the reason: "for they do not practise what they preach" (Matthew 23:3). They pretended to be what they were not: pure and holy.

All of this leads us back to the use, maybe a bit too easy and ignorant, of the word "hypocrite" today. Are all those who are particularly religious, or who practise their religion, hypocrites, people who pretend to be what they're not? Not all of them, and probably not even most of them. In fact, would it not be more hypocritical for someone not to practise their religion, for someone to claim to belong to some religion or to some particular way of thinking and not to live in accordance with that religion or way of thinking?

And in the same way that there is a kind of inverted snobbery: for someone to feel superior to (other) snobs because they follow a different, non-conformist trend (which, by the way, seems a contradiction in terms), there is also a kind of inverted hypocrisy: when someone feels so much more sincere than "those hypocrites"! One of the clearest examples of this inverted hypocrisy is some of today's media, who enjoy unmasking someone else's supposed hypocrisy, whether it's the Church, or politicians who belong to the other side, or whoever, while, at the same time, they pretend that their main and almost sole concern is to inform the public, when the undeniable reality is that they themselves are companies whose own economic and political interests depend on the number of their readers, listeners, viewers, etc.

What about you? Are you, perhaps, a hypocrite? Do you pretend to be what you're not? Do you put on some sort of mask when you're with people who know you and who observe your life, in order to hide the real you? Is that "real you" very different from the public image that you so carefully present? If God exists, and I'm one of those who believe that he does, you can be sure of one thing: before his penetrating look there is nothing that any mask can do! The hypocrites are not always other people. What do you see in the mirror?

Andrew Birch
pastor@iglesiapalma.com