

30. August 2023

## On hypocrisy

Mt 23:27-32

*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; because you are like to whited sepulchres, which outwardly appear to men beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones, and of all filthiness. So you also outwardly indeed appear to men just; but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; that build the sepulchres of the prophets, and adorn the monuments of the just, and say: If we had been in the days of our Fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore you are witnesses against yourselves, that you are the sons of them that killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.*

It is clear that the Lord has a deep aversion to hypocrisy. Giving an image of oneself that does not correspond to reality and that one does not even strive to achieve creates an artificial situation. You deceive other people and you deceive yourself, because in time you will end up believing the false image in which you live.

Hypocrisy is particularly perverse when it concerns a religious person or, even worse, a religious authority. In fact, this is the case that Jesus points out in today's Gospel, when he speaks harshly to the leaders of the people. The Lord's words point out that these people are in fact spiritually dead, even if they hide their inner rottenness. Because of the gravity of their state, it could be said that the scribes and Pharisees had already lost the legitimacy to exercise their authority.

We might question how such a state is reached?

If we go back through the history of the Church, we will see that there were times when, for example, some of the clergy led a life that did not correspond at all to the dignity of their vocation. I do not mean that they committed certain sins and moral faults because of their weakness; I mean that they lived in a permanent state which contradicted the greatness of the mission received from God, and evaded the call to conversion.

How, then, can such a situation arise? We are not talking about "infiltrated priests", who would have penetrated the Church like wolves in disguise in order to destroy her; we are talking about those who decided to take up this vocation because they felt called by God.

It turns out that love can grow cold when it is not cultivated. Day by day, through his response, the priest has to deepen the relationship of love of God, who called him to a special closeness in this ministry. It is the same as in a good spousal relationship.

On the spiritual path, love is cultivated through prayer, meditation on the Word of God, inner conversion with sincere self-knowledge; through proper asceticism and the right way of dealing with people and the world... In the case of priests, the dignified celebration of the sacraments is added to this.

If love is not deepened, then the many temptations to which priests are exposed can more easily find access and darken their inner life.

In countries where the faith is still practised, priests enjoy special recognition among the population. They are often respected and trusted, and are accorded treatment similar to that which the religious authorities in Israel must have received in the time of Jesus. If one is not vigilant, this 'position of honour' - which in reality is due to the ministry it represents - can be taken personally, and so the recognition can become a trap.

Let us take a simple example to understand this. Let us imagine that a young priest takes over a parish that has not had its own parish priest for a long time. This priest brings with him the impulse of first love and the power of novelty. He easily wins hearts and everyone feels at ease around him. So they begin to admire him, and he is motivated by this admiration.

But, unfortunately, this young priest is not sufficiently trained on a spiritual level. That is why he does not realise that his vanity is being fed. Although at the beginning he still had a certain distance from the praise he received, as time went by he began to seek it. Thus, the approval of others becomes the measure for him; while the proclamation of the gospel, with all the challenge it implies, takes a back seat. His

preaching becomes more and more focused on what he knows people like to hear, while he carefully avoids those elements that might cause controversy, such as the call to conversion.

Since human praise and admiration seem to sustain his activity, he begins to neglect his prayer life. Busy with various tasks, he no longer regularly prays the breviary. Thus, he becomes accustomed to the neglect of prayer and finally gives it up almost completely. As a result, he lacks that renewal that is experienced through prayer, apart from the fact that, as a priest, he has committed himself to the recitation of the breviary.

Instead of deepening his relationship with God, he intensively cultivates human relationships. In the course of time, he does not keep the necessary distance from women either, and so his heart turns more and more towards people. But he neglects the most important love: love for God.

If this process of descent is not stopped, this priest will move more and more into a "double life" and fall into increasing hypocrisy.

What we have said here with regard to a priestly vocation, applies also on a general level. We can never neglect the spiritual path!

But the following clarification is worthwhile, especially for scrupulous souls: It is not hypocrisy if, for example, one feels cold in prayer; if one does not yet love as one should love; if, because of one's weakness, one falls short of what one had set out to do... We must not allow ourselves to be misled by this, because the inner emptiness that we sometimes suffer along the way is not necessarily a sign of hypocrisy. Nor is it hypocrisy if we try to be nice to a person, even though we don't like them and may find the situation a little strange.

Hypocrisy comes into play when we consciously disguise ourselves and make no effort to live according to the vocation God has given us; when we lead a double life; when we abuse our position to seek our own self-interest, while appearing as if we are exercising it properly, and so on.

May the Lord preserve us from becoming careless in our efforts to follow Him, lest we fall into self-deception and begin to lead a life that might even end in hypocrisy!