

In Defense of Hypocrites

April 2002

The first problem one faces when one sets out to defend hypocrites is the perception by the reader that one is a hypocrite oneself. And if I am a hypocrite, why should you believe me? Answering this would give the whole thing away. So just imagine that I, like St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 11, am speaking like a fool. This frees me from any expectation that anyone is going to believe me—a very liberating sensation.

Well, now, that's out of the way.

Whenever anyone mentions hypocrisy, La Rochefoucauld's famous maxim comes to mind: "*Hypocrisie est un hommage que la vice rend à la vertu.*" "Hypocrisy is a tribute vice pays to virtue" it is usually rendered in English, although the word *hommage* suggests more in the way of honor paid to an acknowledged superior than "tribute" with its connotations of forced submission. The hypocrite, while choosing vice, recognizes that virtue is in fact better, if not for him, and assumes its appearance. When we characterize the hypocrite as dishonest, we must recognize what he is dishonest about: not about good and evil, but only about himself.

Teenagers are very sensitive to hypocrisy, especially in their parents, their teachers, and any other figures in authority. As one facing the teenage years a second time—this time as the father of a teenager—I am becoming very aware of this. No doubt this sensitivity comes from a perception that these persons in their lives are not, after all, perfect. Yet they continue to insist upon high standards of behavior from the young person. They tell you to keep your temper, and then lose theirs; they tell you to obey traffic laws and then get stopped for speeding; they profess a religion, but then don't live as if it made any difference. When I was a teenager, we were fond of pointing out anything of this kind that we could discover (and I couldn't discover much).

When a teenager or an adult discovers hypocrisy of this sort in another person, particularly one claiming authority, the first reaction is to reject the authority. If Dad says I shouldn't drive too fast, but he drives too fast, then he must be wrong about speeding, so I'll do it too. If they tell me not to drink, but then they get sloshed on a Saturday night, well, I guess I can do it too. The parents may be hypocrites in fact, and since the average teenager does not have the sophistication of a French noble of the age of Louis XIV, he does not realize that his parents at least recognize what is right, even if they prefer not to do it.

On the other hand, they may be fallible human beings who want to do what's right, but feel compelled to do otherwise. Cowardice or anxiety or the heat of emotion can overpower anyone and lead to choosing what we know to be wrong. We live in a constant state of moral tension between what we know to be right and what we actually find ourselves doing, and the confused standards of those who would exploit our precarious situation to increase their own wealth or power does not make the situation any more secure. A person who behaves contrary to his professed principles may merely be struggling—or he may be a hypocrite.

But does a principle's being expounded by a hypocrite make it false? Does virtue cease to be virtue because vice pays it tribute? If it did, then vice would have the power to nullify virtue merely by espousing it. Probably no one ever excoriated hypocrites more thoroughly than Jesus in the Gospels. The word occurs again and again, mostly applied to the scribes and Pharisees, the religious teachers of the day. But Jesus never taught that their hypocrisy nullified their teaching: "practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice" (Mt 23:3). His standard is higher: not only outward action, but also inward conversion. It is not enough merely to refrain from murder and adultery; anger and lust incur the same punishment. Hypocrisy can now ascend to new levels, since even someone who behaves with outward virtue can conceal a heart of vice. Paying tribute to virtue not only in word but in act, the hypocrite stores up vice for the day of final reckoning.

I can go on at great length about this kind of hypocrisy, and with good reason. I too am a hypocrite. This is not to say that I always do the right thing, but even when I do, it is only an outward act. I have made great progress over the years in being chaste in act and word; but I have only to see a woman and I desire to sleep with her. I try hard to be kind and patient in my outward deeds, but in my heart I often desire the death, not of my enemies—for I do not have the strength of character to make any—but of those who are merely inconvenient to me. To those whom I profess to love I am indifferent. I preach almsgiving and from time to time force myself to practice it, but in my heart I desire great riches. While I may seem to work hard to fulfill my responsibilities, in fact I wish that I had none and could indulge the sloth that is really at the core of my being. Worst of all, I stand in church and at prayer and profess to love God and put Him first in my life, when in fact I feel nothing toward God but abject fear. My faith is that of the demons, who, St. James tells us, "believe—and shudder" (Jas 2:19). My intellect, formed in the likeness of divine Reason, is bound inextricably to the truth that I cannot deny without doing violence to my own paltry reason; but my heart wishes that it were otherwise.

When the time comes for me to stand before the judgement-seat of God, when all the thoughts of the heart are laid bare, then my true nature will be made clear. I will hear the dreadful words, "Depart from me, you evildoer, for though you followed Me outwardly, your heart is far from Me." And I will have to admit that God's judgement is entirely just. No heart as attached as mine to the things of this world can have any share in the joys of heaven. The fire of God's eternal love is for a hypocrite like me only the eternal fire of Hell.

Of course, I know the answer to this problem. I have only to ask and the Holy Spirit can melt my stony heart and give me the desire for God I lack. He, indeed only He, can give me the love I lack. It is not something I can achieve on my own, but only if I ask for the transforming power of divine grace. And I have asked for it, at least with my lips. But did I really mean it? Was this not another act of hypocrisy? Not only do I desire evil, but I desire to desire it. If I were sincere, God could transform me.

But after all, I am a hypocrite.