

Hypocrites in the Church

by Sebastian R Fama

As a child I looked for any excuse I could find to get out of doing some of the things that were expected of me. Almost any excuse would do. "Other kids don't have to do it" was one of my favorites. And, of course, there were many others. As I got older my human nature did not change. However, my excuses got more sophisticated. I learned that with a little creativity you can pretty much justify anything. However, once I got serious about my relationship with God, things begin to change. The old excuses just did not work anymore.

One of the excuses people give for leaving or rejecting the Church is that there are hypocrites in it. And of course, that is true, there are some hypocrites among us. But none of this should be a surprise as Jesus predicted that such would be the case:

Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord" shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers" (Matthew 7:21-23).

Admittedly, not everyone who leaves the Church because of the hypocrites is looking for an excuse. Some are genuinely hurt and confused. They do not realize that hypocrisy is a weapon Satan uses to attack the Church and thus them. They feel compelled to leave and so they do. But we should not view hypocrisy any differently than we do other serious sins. No one abandons his Church because the guy in the next pew robbed a bank. And that is because we realize, at least in this case, that an individual is responsible for his crime and not his church.

Let us look at this another way. Imagine you are out of shape and a bit overweight. You realize you need to exercise and reduce your fat and sugar intake. However, due to human nature you decide to do this with other like-minded people. The mutual support will help everyone stick to the plan. You approach some of your neighbors and some enthusiastically agree to join you. Others want no part of it because they prefer to enjoy their lives without any thought of the future.

And so, with great hopes you begin your new adventure. The new system, is simple but it is not without its challenges. And that is because eating the unhealthy foods was enjoyable. No one forgot how good it was to eat a hot fudge sundae or a giant piece of cheesecake after a pasta dinner. And sitting on a couch watching videos is so much more fun than sweating and exercising. But despite this, everyone in the group seemed positive and the new enterprise got off to a good start. As time went on, you began to see some positive changes. You noticed that you were losing weight and starting to feel better. You also noticed that some of the others were doing well.

As time went on, it was discovered that some of the people in your group had been cheating. One lady was caught raiding a secret stash of chocolate. A man was found gorging himself on cheesecake. The most disturbing violation was the discovery that one of the men who helped you organize the group was secretly eating a pound of bacon and a dozen jelly donuts for breakfast every morning. Worse yet, he had not been seen at the gym in months. The diet hypocrites began to put on weight. When the non-group members saw this, some of them assumed the new diet and exercise program was a waste of time. Others who had been struggling with the program used this as an excuse to cheat, or in some cases, to quit the group altogether.

Would it make any sense for people to claim that the new diet and exercise program had been discredited? Of course not. Those who gained weight were no longer participating and thus only discredited themselves. What speaks to the credibility of the diet and exercise program are the results attained by those who were actually on it. Likewise, what speaks to the credibility of Christianity are the results attained by those who actually practice it.

Sin, just like the unhealthy food, is enjoyable. And so, we struggle. Some just give up and embrace sin while pretending to be believers. These are the hypocrites. Others seek God for help. Consequently, they overcome sin

and they produce much good fruit. To the honest seeker this constitutes a compelling reason to embrace the faith. To the person looking for an excuse to abandon or reject the faith, all that matters is the hypocrite.

But why would anyone even want to be a hypocrite? Why not just leave the Church and embrace some other life style? I think there are a couple of reasons for this. I think for some, it never was a part of their plan. As life went on, they just succumbed to temptation and, for the most part, kept it secret.

Others have never been committed to the Church. They purposely infiltrate her with the purpose of discrediting her. They know they cannot change the Church's teachings, so they try to tarnish her image. The Bible refers to people in this second category as "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15).

Because we are all fallen creatures, we all sin to some degree. As the saying goes, nobody is perfect. Some will object to being classified as fallen creatures. But if you are not perfect it means there is something wrong with you. A true follower of Christ admits that he is a sinner and seeks the help of his God in putting to death the sin that is in him. He may struggle and fall but He always gets up and reaches for the hand of God. These are not hypocrites. A hypocrite is one who embraces his sin privately but portrays himself publicly as a faithful Christian.

The Church is not a society of perfect people. It is an organization that was created to help imperfect people. It can be likened to a spiritual hospital. And like any hospital you have minor cases and major cases. You also have some patients who accept and some who refuse treatment. But the bottom line is that we all need the treatment. Is your local church full of hypocrites or maybe even run by hypocrites? Find another church if you must. But do not leave Jesus because of Judas.

While our little story concerning the diet is useful in illustrating the situation in the Church, we must admit that it is not a perfect analogy. With the diet, avoiding the unhealthy foods was a matter of one's own will power. In Christianity, avoiding sin is accomplished through the power of God's grace. He does it all. We just open our hearts to Him. In Hebrews 12:15 we read: "See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God."

Those who isolate themselves from the Church have a much harder time getting to heaven. It is not that it is impossible, it is just harder. A wise priest once told me that "all human relationships are about one thing; getting each other to heaven." And despite the hypocrites, the Church does the best job of equipping us for that.

It is one thing to reject Christianity based on a misunderstanding. Such individuals may not be culpable. But it is quite another thing for someone to use the bad behavior of another person as an excuse to abandon or reject the faith. An excuse is not a reason. An excuse is something we use consciously or unconsciously to justify a bad decision or behavior. And just what is in the heart of a man who uses excuses? Keep in mind that we are judged by what is in our hearts. The apostle Paul tells us as much:

Therefore, do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Being honest with ourselves and God is always the best policy. Reality will always be reality even if we deny it. Remember that the Church was established to continue Jesus' mission to save sinners. Despite any problems she may have, she continues in her mission. To quote St. Thomas Becket: "Remember then how our fathers worked out their salvation; remember the sufferings through which the Church has grown, and the storms the ship of Peter has weathered because it has Christ on board."

So, despite the presence of hypocrites, the Church still has Christ as its head. And as such she remains a sure guide.