

# Catholics and Hypocrites

Dr. Donald Demarco



I have encountered more people than I want to remember who have told me that they left the Church because they knew someone whose profession of Catholicism was "hypocritical." It is a flimsy excuse to leave the Church, but it may be that people of weak faith are on the look-out for the paltriest reason to justify their apostasy. "I used to be a Catholic," as someone once said, "until I realized that our pastor was more concerned about the collection plate than about living the Gospel." Or, said another, "I left the Church because I could see that many parishioners were just Sunday Catholics."

Apart from what may be the presence of spiritual anemia, there is more than a hint of pride in this attitude. It is like refusing to belong to any organization that has even one member who is less than exemplary. Such a stance, needless to say, would doom a person to solitude.

Few organizations go out of their way to recruit the imperfect. Service organizations do not court anti-social deviants, and police departments do not solicit membership from the lawless. The Catholic Church, however, does go after sinners, even on occasion, with unremitting dedication. So it is more than a bit puzzling that one would leave the Church because he discovered a sinner in her midst, even if the sin the person was committing is the highly unfashionable sin of hypocrisy. The Church is for sinners - even "hypocrites" - although she does remain resolutely opposed to sin itself.

Leaving the Church because one has discovered a hypocritical Catholic is very much like throwing good money out the window because you have come upon some of the counterfeit variety. When it comes to money, a person would not act so rashly, but for the very same reasons that should prevent a Catholic from throwing himself out of the Church.

There are four reasons why a person would not get rid of his money just because he found some that was fraudulent: 1) because he knows that not everything that looks like money is legal tender; 2) because he knows that while some money is bad, other money is good; 3) because he knows that there is a way of distinguishing one from the other; 4) because he knows that there is adequate availability of good money so that there is no cause for despair.

Now if one applies these four points to his Catholic faith he would agree that: 1) not all religious practices are equally Catholic; 2) some practices are truly Catholic while others are not; 3) there is an objective way of distinguishing between them (orthodoxy vs. heresy, fidelity vs. infidelity); 4) there is abundant literature to know what the Church teaches, and enough grace available by which one can live it.

We are often wiser about Mammon than about more important matters that concern our Catholic faith. The presence of a hypocrite in the Church should be about as alarming as the presence of a sick person in a hospital. It should hardly be a scandal that justifies one's departure, no more than a nurse would quit her hospital job because she discovered it housed invalids. It may be disappointing to run into a heretic at Mass, or an infidel at a Christmas party, but it need not be scandalous and cause us to flee the Church. We should trust the Church at least as much as we trust legal tender. Moreover, we should be more patient with counterfeit Catholics than we are with counterfeit money; after all, the former are reformable whereas the latter is not.

Abigail Van Buren, better known to her legion of avid readers as "Dear Abby", penned one of her more memorable responses for the benefit of a thirteen-year-old boy who did not "see any sense in going to church with a bunch of hypocrites." "As for the 'hypocrites' you see in church," she wrote, "what better place is there for them to be? A church is not a museum for saints. It's a hospital for sinners."

It is rather sobering, finally, to recall that roughly 92% of the original twelve apostles were stalwart enough not to be scandalized by the one in their midst who was misguided enough to betray their master.

*Dr. Donald Demarco is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of St. Jerome in Waterloo, Ontario. The above essay is an excerpt from his book *Character in a Time of Crisis* published by Central Bureau CCVA, 1997.*