

27. June 2020

"The self-deception" Part 1

During the next few days, we will treat a very important subject, which could be of great benefit to our way of following Christ: self-deception. We will take as a basis a text written by Father Paulus Sladek OSA. This will be useful in many ways, but first of all it will help us to know ourselves better, which is essential for an authentic spiritual life. On the other hand, the text will also give us guidelines for a more accurate discernment of spirits, so that we can help people who are living in self-deception, be it total or partial.

It is certainly a rather complex task, and we should not be too optimistic, believing that we will always reach the goal. But we can pray that people will wake up from their self-deception.

Let us listen, then, to Father Sladek:

"Man's widespread blindness to his own heart, which the Lord criticized in the Pharisees, is rooted in the 'self-deception' in which so many live. Self-deception necessarily results from the inclination to evil that we have as a consequence of original sin. The tendency to self-deception is the most dangerous fact, a product of the weakening of the understanding and the will. It is regrettable that, until now, theology has not specifically mentioned the inclination to self-deception as one of the consequences of original sin, even though the story of the first fall in Sacred Scripture already points to it quite clearly (cf. Gen 3). The words with which Jesus prepares his disciples for martyrdom show us the alarming degree of self-deception that can be reached, infiltrating even religious fervor: "The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God." (Jn 16,2).

Sin and self-deception are necessarily linked. Sin, seen from a psychological perspective, constitutes man's autonomous attempt to attain happiness, perfection and freedom, and with it the love and power that his heart longs for -a desire that has been infused in him by God-, relying solely on his own strength. Self-deception, on the other hand, is the attempt to create for himself a conscience free of guilt and sin, thus making himself equal to God. The faults and sins that man actually has, he puts aside through self-deception; that is, by lying to himself.

With self-deception man abuses his ability to forget things of little importance, displacing them from his consciousness. Man tries to repress what is unpleasant for him, and there is nothing more unpleasant for pride and self-love than guilt. Therefore, the greater a person's pride and self-love is, the more he will strive to create a pure conscience for himself, even if he does not do so consciously. Thus, he will build a false conviction of his own goodness, a self-esteem on unrealistic values. Even if the self-deception is not conscious, it is desired. The term itself confirms this. Just as the word 'self-help' indicates that a person uses all his strength to get out of a difficulty, the word 'self-deception' means that a man uses and wants to use all his strength to deceive himself, avoiding seeing the reality of his being.

Self-deception is an illusory thought. "Desire is the father of thought." Since we like to see ourselves in our goodness and without defects, we unconsciously influence our thoughts, so that we no longer see how we really are but see ourselves as we would like to be. The greatest danger of this behavior lies in the fact that the intention and exercise of self-deception are scrupulously hidden from the person's consciousness, and displaced into the unconscious. Thus, the person does not realize that he does not know the truth about the state of his heart, and in no way wants to know it. Since self-deception is based on the free will, even if unconscious, man is responsible for the blindness in which he lives. Therefore, Jesus' strong rebuke of the Pharisees is totally justified, also from the perspective of the 'psychology of the depths'.

Self-deception is as widespread as pride, self-love and the inclination to evil. In fact, it is practiced from childhood, approximately from the fourth year of life, which is when the child begins to commit the first conscious sins. We know the unlimited openness and sincerity of young children, before the age of four. The child says: "Francis does not want to behave well." Later, instead, he will say: "Francis cannot behave well". In this way, he does not assume responsibility for his bad inclinations. With the passing of the years, this attitude leads to the conviction that "I want to do good, but I am incapable". This is one of the slogans of self-deception in adults. He believes he is irresistibly subject to his inclinations and passions, and he lies to himself saying, "It's not my fault. It was stronger than me." Thus, one denies the bad intention, looks for excuses, blames others, does not speak clearly, does not carry out a sincere self-criticism, does not assume responsibility for one's own actions...

In this way, a habitual behavior is constructed in front of certain situations, which is automatically and unconsciously executed in the soul. Since man practices self-deception motivated by selfish interest, he unconsciously develops a strong rejection of everything that brings to light the lie in which he lives. Pride experiences its own guilt as an unjust humiliation, against which it passionately resists. As a consequence of this resistance, it is common to be reluctant to make a detailed examination of conscience and to confess sins sincerely. Today people give in too easily to this unwillingness."