

CATECHESIS ON DISCERNMENT

POPE FRANCIS

General Audiences

31 August 2022 - 21 December 2022

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English translations drawn from www.vatican.va

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We produce this in time for the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality, 23-27 February 2023.

CATECHESIS ON DISCERNMENT: 1. What does it mean to discern?

Wednesday, 31 August 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good day!

Today we begin a new series of catecheses: we have finished the catechesis on old age, now we begin a new series dealing with discernment. Discernment is an important act that concerns everyone, because decisions are an essential part of life. Discerning decisions. One chooses food, clothing, a course of study, a job, a relationship. In all of these, a life project is realised, and even our relationship with God is concretized.

In the Gospel, *Jesus speaks of discernment with images taken from ordinary life*; for example, he describes the fishers who select the good fish and discard the bad ones; or the merchant who knows how to identify, among many pearls, the one of greatest value. Or he who, ploughing a field, comes across something that turns out to be a treasure (cf. Mt 13:44-48).

In the light of these examples, discernment presents itself as an exercise of *intelligence*, and also of *skill* and also of *will*, to seize the opportune moment: these are the conditions for making a good choice. It takes intelligence, skill, and also will to make a good choice. And there is also a price required for discernment to become effective. To perform his trade to the best of his ability, the fisherman reckons with hard work, long nights spent at sea, and then the fact of discarding some of the catch, accepting a loss of profit for the sake of those for whom it is intended. The pearl merchant does not hesitate to spend everything to buy that pearl;

and so does the person who has stumbled upon a treasure. [These are] unexpected, unplanned situations, where it is crucial to recognise the importance and urgency of a decision to be made.

Everyone has to make decisions; there is no one to make them for us. At a certain point, adults can freely ask for advice, reflect, but the decision is our own. We can't say, 'I lost this, because my husband decided, my wife decided, my brother decided'. No. You have to decide, each of us has to decide, and for this reason, it is important to know how to discern. In order to decide well, it is necessary to know how to discern.

The Gospel suggests another important aspect of discernment: it *involves the emotions*. The one who has found the treasure feels no difficulty in selling everything, so great is his joy (cf. Mt 13:44). The term used by the evangelist Matthew indicates a very special joy, which no human reality can give; and indeed it recurs in very few other passages of the Gospel, all of which refer to the encounter with God. It is the joy of the wise men when, after a long and arduous journey, they see the star again (cf. Mt 2:10); the joy, it is the joy of the women who return from the empty tomb after hearing the angel's announcement of the resurrection (cf. Mt 28:8). It is the joy of those who have found the Lord. Making a *good* decision, a right decision, always leads you to that final joy; perhaps along the way you have to suffer a bit of uncertainty, thinking, seeking, but in the end the right decision blesses you with joy.

In the *final judgement* God will exercise discernment – the great discernment – with regard to us. The images of the farmer, the fisherman, and the merchant are examples of what happens in the Kingdom of Heaven, a Kingdom that manifests itself in the ordinary actions of life, which require us to take a stand. This is why it is so important to be able to discern: great choices can arise from circumstances that at first sight seem secondary, but turn out to be decisive. For example, let us think of Andrew and John's first encounter with Jesus, an encounter that stems from a simple question: "Rabbi, where do you live?" – "Come and see", says Jesus (cf. Jn 1:38-39). A very brief exchange, but it is the beginning

of a change that, step by step, will mark their whole life. Years later, the Evangelist will continue to remember that encounter that changed him forever, and he will even remember the time: 'It was about four o'clock in the afternoon' (v. 39). It is the hour when time and the eternal met in his life. And in a good decision, correct, there is an encounter between God's will and our will; there is an encounter between the present path and the eternal. Making the right decision, after a path of discernment, is to make this encounter: time with eternity.

So: knowledge, experience, emotion, will. These are some of the indispensable elements of discernment. In the course of these catecheses we will see others, equally important.

Discernment — as I've said — involves *hard work*. According to the Bible, we do not find set before us, pre-packaged, the life we are to live. No! We have to decide it all the time, according to the reality that comes. God invites us to evaluate and choose: He created us free and wants us to exercise our freedom. Therefore, discerning is *demanding*.

We have often had this experience: choosing something that seemed good to us and yet was not. Or knowing what our true good was and not choosing it. Human beings, unlike animals, can be wrong, can be unwilling to choose correctly. And the Bible shows this from its very first pages. God gives man a precise instruction: if you want to live, if you want to enjoy life, remember that you are a creature, that you are not the criterion of good and evil, and that the choices you make will have a consequence, for you, for others and for the world (cf. Gen 2:16-17); you can make the earth a magnificent garden or you can make it a desert of death. A fundamental teaching: it is no coincidence that this is the first dialogue between God and man. The dialogue is: the Lord gives the mission, you have to do this and that; and with every step that people take, they have to discern which decision to make. Discernment is that reflection of the mind, of the heart, that we have to do before making a decision.

Discernment is demanding but indispensable for living. It requires that I know myself, that I know what is good for me here and now.

Above all, it requires a filial relationship with God. God is Father and He does not leave us alone, He is always willing to advise us, to encourage us, to welcome us. But He never imposes His will. Why? Because He wants to be loved and not feared. And also, God wants children, not slaves: free children. And love can only be lived in freedom. To learn to live, one must learn to love, and for this it is necessary to discern: what can I do now, faced with this alternative? Let it be a sign of greater love, of greater maturity in love. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to guide us! Let us invoke Him every day, especially when we have choices to make. Thank you.

Catechesis On Discernment: 2. An example: Ignatius of Loyola

Wednesday, 7 September 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We are continuing our reflection on discernment – during this time we will speak about spiritual discernment every Wednesday – and in doing so, referring to a specific witness can be helpful to us.

One of the most instructive examples is offered to us by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, with a decisive episode in his life. Ignatius was at home convalescing after injuring a leg in battle. To dispel the boredom, he asked for something to read. He loved tales of chivalry, but unfortunately, there were only the lives of the saints at home. Somewhat reluctantly, he adapted, but in the course of reading, he began to discover another world, a world that won him over and seemed to compete with that of knights. He was fascinated by the figures of Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, and felt the desire to imitate them. But the world of chivalry also continued to exert its fascination on him. Thus, he felt within himself this alternation of thoughts – those of chivalry and those of the saints – which seem to be on par with one another.

Ignatius, however, also began to perceive some differences. In his Autobiography – in the third person – he wrote: “When he thought of worldly things” – and of chivalrous things, of course – “it gave him great pleasure, but afterward he found himself dry

and sad. But when he thought of journeying to Jerusalem, and of living only on herbs and practising austerities, he found pleasure not only while thinking of them, but also when he had ceased" (Chapter 8); they left him a trace of joy.

In this experience we note two aspects, above all. The first is *time*: that is, the thoughts of the world are attractive at the beginning, but then they lose their lustre and leave emptiness and discontent; they leave you that way, empty. Thoughts of God, on the contrary, rouse first a certain resistance – "But I'm not going to read this boring thing about saints" – but when they are welcomed, they bring an unknown peace that lasts for a long time.

Here, then, is the other aspect: the *end point* of thoughts. At first the situation does not seem so clear. There is a development of discernment: for example, we understand what is good for us not in an abstract, general way, but in the journey of our life. In the rules for discernment, the fruit of this fundamental experience, Ignatius laid down an important premise, which helps to understand this process: "In the persons who go from mortal sin to mortal sin, the enemy is commonly used to propose to them apparent pleasures" – to reassure them that everything is fine – "making them imagine sensual delights and pleasures in order to hold them more and make them grow in their vices and sins. In these persons the good spirit uses the opposite method, pricking them and biting their consciences through the process of reason" (*Spiritual Exercises*, 314). But this will not do.

There is a history that precedes one who discerns, a history that it is indispensable to know, because discernment is not a sort of oracle or fatalism, or something from a laboratory, like casting one's lot on two possibilities. The great questions arise when we have already travelled a stretch of the road in life, and it is to that journey that we must return in order to understand what we are looking for. If in life we make a little progress, then: "But why am I walking in this direction, what am I looking for?", and that is where discernment takes place. When he found himself wounded in his father's house, Ignatius was not thinking of God at all, or of how to reform his own life, no. He had his first experience of God

by listening to his own heart, which presented him with a curious reversal: things that were attractive at first sight left him disillusioned, whereas in others, less dazzling, he perceived lasting peace. We too have this experience; very often we begin to think about something, and we stay there, and then we end up disappointed. Instead, when we carry out a work of charity, do something good and feel something of happiness, a good thought comes to us, and happiness comes to us, something of joy. It is an experience that is entirely our own. He, Ignatius, had his first experience of God by listening to his own heart, that showed him a curious reversal. This is what we must learn: to listen to our own heart, to know what is happening, what decision to make. To make a judgement on a situation, one must listen to one's own heart. We listen to the television, the radio, the mobile phone. We are experts at listening, but I ask you: do you know how to listen to your heart? Do you stop to ask: "But how is my heart? Is it satisfied, is it sad, is it searching for something?". In order to make good decisions, one must listen to one's own heart.

This is why Ignatius would go on to suggest reading the lives of the saints, because they show God's style in the lives of people who are not very different from us, in a narrative and comprehensible way; because saints were made of flesh and blood like us. Their actions speak to ours, and they help us understand their meaning.

In that famous episode of the two feelings that Ignatius had, one when he read about knights and the other when he read about the lives of saints, we can recognise another important aspect of discernment, which we already mentioned last time. There is an apparent *randomness* in life's events: everything seems to arise from a banal setback – there were no books about knights, only about the lives of saints, a setback that nonetheless held a possible turning point. Only after some time would Ignatius realize this, at which point he would devote all his attention to it. Listen carefully: God works through un-plannable events that happen by chance, but by chance this happened to me, and by chance I met this person, by chance I saw this film. It was not planned but God works through un-plannable events, and also through setbacks:

“But I was supposed to go for a walk and I had a problem with my foot, I can’t...”. Setback: what is God saying to you? What is life telling you there? We have also seen this in a passage from the Gospel of Matthew: a man ploughing a field accidentally comes across a buried treasure. A totally unexpected situation. But what is important is that he recognises it as the lucky break of his life and decides accordingly: he sells everything and buys that field (cf. 13:44). I will give you a piece of advice: beware of the unexpected. He who says: “But I wasn’t expecting this”. Is it life speaking to you, is it the Lord speaking to you, or is it the devil? Someone. But there is something to discern: how I react when faced with the unexpected. But I was quiet at home and “Boom!” – my mother-in-law arrives. And how do you react to your mother-in-law? Is it love or something else inside? And you must discern. I was working well in the office, and a companion comes along to tell me he needs money: how do you react? Seeing what happens when we experience things we were not expecting, and learning to know our heart as it moves.

Discernment is the aid in recognising the signals with which the Lord makes himself known in unexpected, even unpleasant situations, as the wounded leg was for Ignatius. A life-changing encounter can arise from them, forever, as in the case of Ignatius. Something can arise that makes you better along the way, or worse, I don’t know, but being attentive: the most beautiful narrative thread comes from the unexpected: “How do I act in view of this?” May the Lord help us listen to our hearts and see when it is He who acts, and when it is not and it is something else.

Catechesis On Discernment: 3. The elements of discernment. Familiarity with the Lord

Wednesday, 28 September 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We resume our catecheses on the theme of *discernment* – because the theme of discernment is very important in order to know what is going on within us. To know about our feelings and ideas, we

have to discern where they come from, where they lead me, to what decisions – and today we focus on the first of its fundamental elements, which is *prayer*. To discern we need to be in an environment, in a state of prayer.

Prayer is an indispensable aid for spiritual discernment, especially when it involves the affective dimension, enabling us to address God with simplicity and familiarity, as one would speak to a friend. It is knowing how to go beyond thoughts, to enter into intimacy with the Lord, with an affectionate spontaneity. The secret of the lives of the saints is familiarity and confidence with God, which grows within them and makes it ever easier to recognize what is pleasing to Him. True prayer is familiarity with and confidence in God. It is not reciting prayers like a parrot, blah, blah, blah, no. True prayer is this spontaneity and affection for the Lord. This familiarity overcomes fear or doubt that his will is not for our good, a temptation that sometimes runs through our thoughts and makes our heart restless and uncertain, or even bitter.

Discernment does not claim absolute certainty, it is not a chemically pure method, it does not claim absolute certainty because it is about life, and life is not always logical. It has many aspects that cannot be enclosed in one category of thought. We would like to know precisely what should be done, yet even when it happens, we do not always act accordingly. How many times have we, too, had the experience described by the apostle Paul, who says: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want” (Rom 7:19). We are not just reason, we are not machines, it is not enough to be given instructions to carry them out: the obstacles, like the supports, to deciding for the Lord are primarily affective, from the heart.

It is significant that the first miracle performed by Jesus in Mark’s Gospel is an exorcism (cf. 1:21-28). In the synagogue at Capernaum, he delivers a man from the devil, freeing him from the false image of God that Satan has been suggesting since the beginning: that of a God who does not want our happiness. The possessed man in that passage of the Gospel knows that Jesus is

God, but this does not lead him to believe in Him. In fact, he says, "Have you come to destroy us" (v. 24).

Many people, even Christians, think the same thing: that is, that Jesus may well be the Son of God, but they doubt that he wants our happiness; indeed, some fear that taking his proposal seriously, the one Jesus proposes to us, means ruining our lives, mortifying our desires, our strongest aspirations. These thoughts sometimes creep up inside us: that God asks too much of us, we fear that God asks too much of us, that he doesn't really love us.

Instead, in our first encounter we saw that the sign of the encounter with the Lord is *joy*. When I encounter the Lord in prayer, I become joyful. Each one of us becomes joyful, a beautiful thing. *Sadness*, or *fear*, on the other hand, are signs of distance from God: "If you would enter life, keep the commandments", Jesus says to the rich young man (Mt 19:17). Unfortunately for that young man, some obstacles did not allow him to implement the desire in his heart to follow the "good teacher" more closely. He was an interested, enterprising young man, he had taken the initiative to meet Jesus, but he was also very divided in his affections. For him, riches were too important. Jesus does not force him to make up his mind, but the text notes that the young man turns away from Jesus "sad" (v. 22). Those who turn away from the Lord are never happy, even though they have an abundance of possessions and possibilities at their disposal. Jesus never forces you to follow him, never. Jesus lets you know his will, with all his heart he lets you know things, but he leaves you free. And this is the most beautiful thing about prayer with Jesus: the freedom that he allows you. On the other hand, when we distance ourselves from the Lord, we are left with something sad, something ugly in our heart.

Discerning what is happening within us is not easy, for appearances are deceptive, but *familiarity with God can melt doubts and fears in a gentle way*, making our lives increasingly receptive to his "gentle light," according to the beautiful expression of Saint John Henry Newman. The saints shine with reflected light and show in the simple gestures of their day the loving presence of

God, who makes the impossible possible. It is said that two spouses who have lived together for a long time, loving each other, end up resembling each other. Something similar can be said about affective prayer. In a gradual but effective way, it makes us more and more capable of recognizing what counts through connaturality, as something that springs from the depths of our being. To be in prayer does not mean saying words, words, no: being in prayer means opening my heart to Jesus, drawing close to Jesus, allowing Jesus to enter into my heart and making us feel his presence. And there we can discern when it is Jesus and when it is us with our thoughts, that so many times are far from what Jesus wants.

Let us ask for this grace: to live a relationship of friendship with the Lord, as a friend speaks to a friend (cf. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 53).

I knew an old religious brother who was the doorman of a boarding school, and every time he could, he would approach the chapel, look at the altar, and say, "Hello", because he was close to Jesus. He didn't need to say blah blah blah, no: "Hello, I am close to you and you are close to me". This is the relationship we must have in prayer: closeness, affective closeness, as brothers and sisters, closeness with Jesus. A smile, a simple gesture, and not reciting words that do not reach the heart. As I said, talk to Jesus as a friend talks to another friend.

It is a grace we must ask for one another: to see Jesus as our friend, as our greatest friend, our faithful friend, who does not blackmail, above all who never abandons us, even when we turn away from him. He remains at the door of our heart. "No, with you I don't want to know anything", we say. And he remains silent. He remains close at hand, at heart's reach because he is always faithful. Let us go forward with this prayer, we could say the "prayer of hello", the prayer of greeting the Lord with our heart, the prayer of affection, the prayer of closeness, with few words but with acts and good works. Thank you.

Catechesis On Discernment: 4. The elements of discernment. Self-knowledge

Wednesday, 5 October 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue to explore the theme of discernment. Last time we considered prayer, understood as familiarity and confidence with God, as an indispensable element. Prayer, not like parrots, but as familiarity and confidence with God; the prayer of children to their Father; prayer with an open heart. We saw this in the last catechesis. Today I would like, in an almost complementary way, to emphasize that good discernment also requires *self-knowledge*. Knowing oneself. And this is not easy. Indeed, discernment involves our human faculties: memory, intellect, will, affections. Often, we do not know how to discern because we do not know ourselves well enough, and so we do not know what we really want. You have often heard: “But that person, why doesn’t he sort out his life? He has never known what he wants...”. Without getting to that extreme, but it happens to us too that we do not know clearly what we want, we do not know ourselves well.

Underlying spiritual doubts and vocational crises, there is – not infrequently – insufficient dialogue between religious life and our *human, cognitive and affective dimension*. A writer on spirituality noted how many difficulties on the theme of discernment are indicative of problems of another kind, that should be recognized and explored. This author writes: “I have come to the conviction that the greatest obstacle to true discernment (and to real growth in prayer) is not the intangible nature of God, but the fact that we do not know ourselves sufficiently, and do not even want to know ourselves as we really are. Almost all of us hide behind a mask, not only in front of others, but also when we look in the mirror” (cf. Thomas H. Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat*, 1984). We all have the temptation to wear a mask, even in front of ourselves.

Forgetting God’s presence in our life goes hand in hand with our ignorance of ourselves – ignoring God and ignoring ourselves – ignorance of our personality traits and of our deepest desires.

Knowing oneself is not difficult, but it is laborious: it entails patient soul-searching. It requires the capacity to stop, to “deactivate the autopilot”, to acquire awareness of our way of acting, of the feelings that dwell within us, of the recurrent thoughts that condition us, and often unconsciously. It also requires that we distinguish between emotions and spiritual faculties. “I feel” is not the same as “I am convinced”; “I feel like” is not the same as “I want”. Thus, we come to recognize that the view we have of ourselves and of reality is at times somewhat distorted. To realize this is a grace! Indeed, very often it can happen that erroneous convictions about reality, based on past experiences, strongly influence us, limiting our freedom to strive for what really matters in our lives.

Living in the computer age, we know how important it is to know passwords in order to get into programmes where the most personal and valuable information is stored. But spiritual life, too, has its “passwords”: there are words that touch our heart because they make reference to what we are most sensitive to. The tempter, that is, the devil, knows these key words well, and it is important that we know them too, so as not to find ourselves where we do not want to be. Temptation does not necessarily suggest bad things, but often haphazard things, presented with excessive importance. In this way it hypnotizes us with the attraction that these things stir in us, things that are beautiful but illusory, that cannot deliver what they promise, and therefore leave us in the end with a sense of emptiness and sadness. That sense of emptiness and sadness is a sign that we have embarked on paths that were not right, that disoriented us. They can be, for example, degrees, careers, relationships, all things that are in themselves praiseworthy, but towards which, if we are not free, we risk harbouring unreal expectations, such as confirmation of our worth. For example, when you think of a study you are undertaking, do you think only of promoting yourself, of your own interests, or also to serve the community? There, one can see the intentionality of each one of us. The greatest suffering often comes from this misunderstanding because none of those things can be the guarantee of our dignity.

This is why, dear brothers and sisters, it is important to know ourselves, to know the passwords of our heart, what we are most sensitive to, in order to protect ourselves from those who present themselves with persuasive words to manipulate us, but also to recognize what is truly important for us, distinguishing it from current fads or flashy, superficial slogans. Many times, what is said in a television programme, in some advertisement, touches our hearts and makes us go that way without freedom. Be careful about that: am I free, or do I let myself be swayed by the feelings of the moment, or the provocations of the moment?

An aid in this is an *examination of conscience*, but I am not talking about the examination of conscience that we all do when we go to confession, no. That is: "But I sinned in this, that...". No. A general examination of conscience of the day: what happened in my heart during this day? "Lots of things happened...". Which? Why? What traces did they leave in my heart? Carrying out an examination of conscience, that is, the good habit of calmly rereading what happened during our day, learning to note in our evaluations and choices what we give most importance to, what we are looking for and why, and what we eventually find. Above all, learning to recognize what satisfies my heart. What satisfies my heart? For only the Lord can give us confirmation of what we are worth. He tells us this every day from the cross: he died for us, to show us how precious we are in his eyes. There is no obstacle or failure that can prevent his tender embrace. The examination of conscience helps a great deal, because in this way we see that our heart is not a road where everything passes without us knowing about it. No. To see: what passed by today? What happened? What made me react? What made me sad? What made me joyful? What was bad, and did I harm others? It is about seeing the path our feelings took, the attractions in my heart during the day. Don't forget! The other day we talked about prayer. Today we are talking about self-awareness.

Prayer and self-knowledge enable us to grow in freedom. This is to grow in freedom! These are basic elements of Christian existence, precious elements for finding one's place in life. Thank you.

Catechesis on Discernment: 5. The elements of discernment. The desire

Wednesday, 12 October 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In these catecheses we are reviewing the elements of discernment. After prayer and self-knowledge, that is, praying and knowing oneself, today I would like to talk about another indispensable, so to speak, “ingredient”: today I would like to talk about desire. In fact, discernment is a form of searching, and searching always stems from something which we lack but which we somehow know – we have intuition.

What kind of knowledge is this? Spiritual teachers refer to it using the term “desire”, which, fundamentally, is a nostalgia for fullness that never finds complete fulfilment, and is the sign of God’s presence in us. Desire is not the craving of the moment, no. The Italian word, [*desiderio*], comes from a very beautiful Latin term, this is curious: *de-sidus*, literally “lack of the star”. Desire is the lack of the star, the lack of the reference point that orients the path of life; it evokes a suffering, a lack, and at the same time a tension to reach the good that we are missing. Desire, then, is the compass to understand where I am and where I am going; or rather, it is the compass to understand if I am still or if I am moving; a person who never desires is a static person, perhaps ill, almost dead. It is the compass to know if I am moving or if I am standing still. And how is it possible to recognize it?

Let us think, a sincere desire knows how to deeply touch the chords of our being, which is why it is not extinguished in the face of difficulties or setbacks. It is like when we are thirsty: if we do not find something to drink, we do not give up; on the contrary, the yearning increasingly occupies our thoughts and actions, until we become willing to make any sacrifice in order to quench it – almost obsessed. Obstacles and failures do not stifle desire, no; on the contrary, they make it even more alive in us.

Unlike a momentary craving or emotion, desire lasts through time, even a long time, and tends to materialize. If, for example, a young person wishes to become a doctor, he or she will have to embark on a course of study and work that will occupy several years of his or her life, and consequently will have to set *limits*, say “no” first of all to other courses of study, but also to possible diversions and distractions, especially during the most intense periods of study. However, the desire to give his or her life a direction and to reach that goal – to become a doctor was the example – enables him or her to overcome these difficulties. Desire makes you strong, it makes you courageous, it makes you keep going forward, because you want to arrive at that: “I desire that”.

In effect, a value becomes beautiful and more easily achievable when it is *attractive*. As someone said, “more important than being good is having the desire to become good”. Being good is something attractive, we all want to be good, but do we have the wish to become good?

It is striking that before performing a miracle, Jesus often questions the person about his or her desire: “Do you want to be healed?”. And at times this question seems out of place; it is clear that the person is sick! For example, when he meets the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda, who had been there for many years and had never managed to seize the right moment to get into the water, Jesus asks him: “Do you want to be healed?” (Jn 5:6). But how come? In reality, the paralytic’s answer reveals a series of strange resistances to healing, which do not relate only to him. Jesus’ question was an invitation to bring clarity to his heart, to welcome a possible leap forward: to no longer think of himself and his own life “as a paralytic”, transported by others. But the man on the cot does not seem so convinced of this. *By engaging in dialogue with the Lord, we learn to understand what we truly want from our life.* This paralytic is the typical example of those who say, “Yes, yes, I want, I want”, but then, “I don’t want, I don’t want, I won’t do anything”. Wanting to do something becomes like an illusion and one does not take the step to do it. Those people who want and don’t want. This is bad, and that sick man, there for 38 years but always grumbling: “No, you know, Lord, but you know when the

waters move — that is the moment of the miracle — you know, someone stronger than me comes along, they enter, and I get there too late”, and he complains and complains. But beware, because complaints are a poison, a poison to the soul, a poison to life, because they prevent the desire to go on from growing. Beware of complaints. When we complain in the family, married couples complain, one complains about the other, children about their father, or priests about the bishop, or bishops about many other things... No, if you find yourself grumbling, beware, it is almost a sin, because it keeps desire from growing.

Often it is precisely desire which makes the difference between a successful, coherent and lasting project, and the thousands of ambitions and good intentions with which, as they say, “hell is paved”: “Yes, I would like, I would like, I would like...”, but you do nothing. The era in which we live seems to promote maximum freedom of choice, but at the same time it *atrophies desire* — you want to be satisfied continually — which is mostly reduced to the desire of the moment. And we must be careful not to atrophy desire. We are bombarded by a thousand proposals, projects, possibilities, which risk distracting us and not permitting us to calmly evaluate what we really want. Many times, we find people — let’s think about young people for example — with their phone in their hand, searching, looking... “But do you stop to think?” — “No”. Always turned outwards, towards the other. Desire cannot grow in this way; you live in the moment, satiated in the moment, and desire does not grow.

Many people suffer because they do not know what they want from their lives; they have probably never gotten in touch with their deepest desire, they have never known: “What do you want from your life?” — “I don’t know”. Hence the risk of passing one’s existence between attempts and expedients of various kinds, never getting anywhere, and wasting precious opportunities. And so certain changes, though desired in theory, when the opportunity arises are never implemented; the strong desire to pursue something is lacking.

If the Lord were to ask us, today, for example, any one of us, the question he asked the blind man in Jericho: “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mk 10:51) – let us think that the Lord today asks each one of us this: “What do you want me to do for you?” – how would we answer? Perhaps we could finally ask him to help us know His deepest desire, which God himself has placed in our heart: “Lord, may I know my desires, may I be a woman, a man of great desires”. Perhaps the Lord will give us the strength to make it come true. It is an immense grace, the basis of all the others: to allow the Lord, as in the Gospel, to work miracles for us: “Give us desire and make it grow, Lord”.

Because he too has a great desire for us: to make us share in his fullness of life. Thank you.

Catechesis on Discernment: 6. The elements of discernment. “The book of one's own life”

Wednesday, 19 October 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, welcome and good morning!

In these weeks’ catecheses, we have been focusing on the prerequisites for good discernment. In life we have to make decisions, always, and to make decisions we have to go on a journey, a path of discernment. Every important activity has its “instructions” to follow, which must be learned in order for them to produce the necessary effects. Today we will look at another indispensable ingredient for discernment: one’s own life story. Knowing *one’s own life story* is, let’s say, an essential ingredient for discernment.

Our life is the most precious “book” we have been given, a book that unfortunately many do not read, or rather they do so too late, before dying. And yet, precisely in that book, one finds what one pointlessly seeks elsewhere. Saint Augustine, a great seeker of the truth, had understood this just by rereading his life, noting in it the silent and discreet, but incisive, steps of the presence of the Lord. At the end of this journey, he noted with wonder: “You were within, and I without, and there I did seek you; I, unlovely, rushed

heedlessly among the things of beauty you made. You were with me, but I was not with you" (*Confessions* X, 27.38). Hence his invitation to cultivate the inner life to find what one is seeking: "Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth" (cf. *On True Religion*, XXXIX, 72). This is an invitation I would extend to all of you, and even to myself: "Return within yourself. Read your life. Read yourself within, how your journey has been... With serenity. Return within yourself".

Often, we too have had Augustine's experience, of finding ourselves imprisoned by thoughts that lead us away from ourselves, stereotypical messages that harm us: for example, "I am worthless" – and it gets you down; "everything goes wrong for me" – and it gets you down; "I will never achieve anything worthwhile" – and it gets you down, and that's life. These pessimistic phrases that get you down! Reading one's own history also means recognizing the presence of these "toxic" elements, but to then broaden our narrative, learning to notice other things, making it richer, more respectful of complexity, succeeding also in grasping the discreet ways in which God acts in our life. I once knew a person who people said deserved the Nobel Prize for negativity: everything was bad, everything, and he always tried to put himself down. He was a bitter person, and yet he had many qualities. And then this person found another person who helped him, and every time he complained about something, the other one would say: "But now, to compensate, say something good about yourself". And he would say: "Well, yes... I also have this quality", and bit by bit he helped him move forward, to read well his own life, both the bad things and the good things. We have to read our life, and thus see things that are not good and also the good things that God sows in us.

We have seen that discernment has a narrative approach; it does not dwell on the precise action, but rather inserts it into a context: where does this thought come from? What I am feeling now, where does it come from? Where does it lead me, what I am thinking now? When have I encountered it before? Is it something new that comes to mind only now, or have I found it other times?

Why is it more insistent than others? What is life trying to tell me with this?

Recounting the events of our life also enables us to grasp important nuances and details, which can reveal themselves to be valuable aids, hitherto concealed. For example, a reading, a service, an encounter, at first sight considered to be of little importance, over time transmit inner peace; they transmit the joy of living and suggest further good initiatives. Stopping and acknowledging this is essential. Stopping and acknowledging: it is important for discernment; it is a task of gathering those precious and hidden pearls that the Lord has scattered in our soil.

Goodness is hidden, always, because goodness is modest and hides itself: goodness is hidden; it is silent, it requires slow and continuous excavation. Because God's style is discreet: God likes to go unseen, with discretion, he does not impose himself; he is like the air we breathe — we do not see it but it allows us to live, and we realize this only when it is missing.

Getting used to rereading one's own life educates the outlook, it sharpens it, enables it to note the small miracles that good God works for us every day. When we realize this, we notice other possible directions that strengthen our inner taste, peace and creativity. Above all, it makes us freer from toxic stereotypes. Wisely, it has been said that the man who does not know his own past is condemned to repeat it. It is strange: if we do not know the path we have taken, the past, we always repeat it, we go around in circles. A person who walks in circles never moves forward; there is no journey, it is like a dog who chases its own tail; always going this way and repeating things.

We might ask ourselves: have I ever recounted my life to anyone? This is a beautiful experience of engaged couples, who when they become serious, tell their life story... It is one of the most beautiful and intimate forms of communication, recounting one's own life. It allows us to discover hitherto unknown things, small and simple but, as the Gospel says, it is precisely from the little things that the great things are born (cf. Lk 16:10).

The lives of the saints also constitute a precious aid in recognizing the style of God in one's own life: they permit us to become familiar with his way of acting. Some of the saints' behaviour challenges us, shows us new meanings and opportunities. This is what happened, for example, to Saint Ignatius of Loyola. When describing the fundamental discovery of his life, he adds an important clarification, and he says: From experience he deduced that some thoughts left him sad, others cheerful; and little by little he learnt to know the diversity of thoughts, the diversity of the spirits that stirred within him (cf. *Autobiography*, no. 8). Knowing what happens within us, knowing, being aware.

Discernment is the narrative reading of the good moments and the dark moments, the consolations and desolations we experience in the course of our lives. In discernment, it is the heart that speaks to us about God, and we must learn to understand its language. Let us ask, at the end of the day, for example: what happened today in my heart? Some think that carrying out this examination of conscience is like doing the bookkeeping of the sins we have committed – and we commit many – but it is also about asking oneself, “What happened within me, did I experience joy? What brought me joy? Was I sad? What brought me sadness? And in this way, learning to *discern* what happens within us.

Catechesis on Discernment. 7. The subject of discernment. Desolation

Wednesday, 26 October 2022

Discernment, as we have seen in the previous catecheses, is not primarily a logical procedure. It is based on actions, and actions also have an affective connotation, which should be acknowledged, because God speaks to the heart. Let us then turn to the first affective mode, an object of discernment: *desolation*. What does this mean?

Desolation has been defined as follows: “Darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of

confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad and as if separated from his Creator and Lord" (Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 317). We have all experienced this. I think that, in one way or another, we have all experienced this, desolation. The problem is how to interpret it, because it too has something important to tell us, and if we are in a hurry to free ourselves of it, we risk losing this.

No one wants to be desolate, sad: this is true. We would all like a life that is always joyful, cheerful and fulfilled. Yet, in addition to not being possible – because it is not possible – this would also not be good for us. Indeed, the change from a life oriented towards vice can *start from a situation of sadness, of remorse* for what one has done. The etymology of this word, "remorse", is very beautiful: the remorse of the conscience, we all know this. Remorse: literally, it is the conscience that bites [in Italian, *mordere*], that gives no peace. Alessandro Manzoni, in *The Betrothed*, gave us a wonderful description of remorse as an opportunity to change one's life. It is the famous dialogue between Cardinal Federico Borromeo and the Unnamed, who, after a terrible night, turns up exhausted before the Cardinal, who addresses him with surprising words: "You have some good news for me; why do you hesitate to tell it?" "Good news?" says the other. "I have hell in my soul [...]. Tell me, tell me, if you know, what good news could you expect from such a one as I". "That God has touched your heart, and is drawing you to himself" replied the Cardinal calmly" (Ch. 23). God touches the heart, and you feel something within: sadness, remorse for something, and it is an invitation to set out on a new path. The man of God knows how to notice in depth what moves in the heart.

It is important to learn how to *read sadness*. We all know what sadness is: all of us. But do we know how to interpret it? Do we know what it means for me, this sadness today? In our time, it – sadness – is mostly seen negatively, as an ill to avoid at all costs. Instead, it can be an indispensable alarm bell for life, inviting us to explore richer and more fertile landscapes, which transience and escapism do not permit. Saint Thomas defines sadness as a *pain of the soul*. Like the nerves for the body, it redirects our attention to a

possible danger, or a disregarded benefit (cf. *Summa Theologica* I-II, q. 36, a.1). This is why, it is indispensable for our health. It protects us from harming ourselves and others. It would be far more serious and dangerous not to feel this, and to go ahead. At times sadness works like a traffic light: “Stop, stop! It’s red, here. Stop”.

For those, on the other hand, who have the desire to do good, sadness is an obstacle with which the tempter tries to *discourage* us. In this case, one must act in a manner that is exactly contrary to what is suggested, determined to continue what one had set out to do (cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, 318). Think of work, study, prayer, a commitment undertaken: if we abandoned them as soon as we felt boredom or sadness, we would never complete anything. This is also an experience common to the spiritual life: the road to goodness, the Gospel reminds us, is narrow and uphill, it requires combat, self-conquest. I begin to pray or dedicate myself to a good work, and strangely enough, just then, things come to mind that need to be done urgently – so as not to pray or do good works. We all experience this. It is important, for those who want to serve the Lord, not to be led astray by desolation and by this, “but no, I don’t want to, this is boring...” – beware. Unfortunately, some people decide to abandon the life of prayer, or the choice they have made, marriage or religious life, driven by desolation, without first pausing to consider this state of mind, and especially without the help of a guide. A wise rule says *not to make changes when you are desolate*. It will be the time afterwards, rather than the mood of the moment, that will show the goodness or otherwise of our choices.

It is interesting to note, in the Gospel, that Jesus repels temptations with an attitude of firm resolution (cf. Mt 3:14-15; 4:1-11; 16; 21-23). Trials assail him from all sides, but always, finding in him this steadfastness, determined to do the will of the Father, they fail and cease to hinder his path. In spiritual life, trial is an important moment, as the Bible recalls explicitly, and says: “if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation” (Sir 2:1). If you want to take the good path, prepare yourself: there will be obstacles, there will be temptations, there will be moments of

sadness. It is like when a professor quizzes a student. If he sees that the student knows the essentials of the subject, he does not insist: the student has passed the test. But he must pass the test.

If we know how to go through loneliness and desolation with openness and awareness, we can emerge strengthened in human and spiritual terms. No trial is beyond our reach; no trial will be greater than what we can do. But do not flee from trials: see what this test means, what it means that I am sad: why am I sad? What does it mean that in this moment I am in desolation? What does it mean that I am in desolation and cannot go on? Saint Paul reminds us that no one is tempted beyond his or her ability, because the Lord never abandons us and, with him close by, we can overcome any temptation (cf. 1 Cor 10:13). And if we do not overcome it today, we get up another time, we walk and we will overcome it tomorrow. But we must not remain dead – so to speak – we must not remain defeated by a moment of sadness, of desolation: go forward. May the Lord bless this courageous path of spiritual life, which is always a journey.

Catechesis on Discernment. 8. "Why are we desolate?"

Wednesday, 16 November 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

Today, let us resume the catecheses on the theme of *discernment*. We have seen how important it is to *read* what stirs within us, so as not to make hasty decisions, spurred by the emotion of the moment, only to regret them when it is too late. That is, to read what happens and then make decisions.

In this sense, even the spiritual state we call *desolation*, when everything is dark and sad in the heart, this state of *desolation* can be an opportunity for growth. Indeed, if there is not a little dissatisfaction, a little healthy sadness, a healthy capacity to dwell in solitude and to be with ourselves without fleeing, we run the risk of always remaining on the surface of things and never making contact with the core of our existence. Desolation causes an “unrest in the soul”: when one is sad it is as if the soul were

shaken. It keeps us alert, it fosters vigilance and humility, and protects us from the winds of fancy. These are indispensable conditions for progress in life, and hence, also in spiritual life. A perfect but “aseptic” serenity, without feeling, makes us inhuman when it becomes the criterion for decisions and behaviour. We cannot ignore our feelings: we are human and feelings are part of our humanity. And without understanding feelings, we would be inhuman. Without experiencing our sentiments, we would also be indifferent to the sufferings of others and incapable of accepting our own. Not to mention that such a “perfect serenity” cannot be reached by this path of indifference. This sterile distance: “I don’t get involved in things, I keep my distance”. This is not life. It is as if we lived in a laboratory, shut away, so as not to get germs and diseases. For many saints, restlessness was a decisive catalyst to turn their lives around. This artificial serenity is no good, whereas a healthy restlessness is good, the restless heart, the heart that seeks to seek its way. This is the case, for example, of Augustine of Hippo, Edith Stein, Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, and Charles de Foucauld. Important choices come at a price that life presents, a price that is within everyone’s reach. That is, important choices do not come from the lottery, no. They have a price and you have to pay that price. It is a price that you must pay with your heart. It is the price of the decision, the price of making some effort. It is not free of charge, but it is a price within everyone’s reach. We must all pay for this decision so as to leave behind the state of indifference that always brings us down.

Desolation is also an invitation to *gratuitousness*, to not acting always and solely with a view to emotional gratification. Being desolate offers us the possibility of growth, of initiating a more mature, more beautiful relationship with the Lord and with our loved ones, a relationship that is not reduced to a mere exchange of giving and having. Let us think of our childhood, for example. Think: as children, it often happens that we look for our parents to obtain something from them: a toy, some money to buy an ice cream, permission.... And so, we look for them not for themselves, but for personal gain. And yet, they are the greatest gift, our parents, and we understand this gradually as we grow up.

Many of our prayers are also somewhat like this. They are requests for favours addressed to the Lord, without any real interest in him. We go and ask, to ask, to ask the Lord. The Gospel notes that Jesus was often surrounded by many people who sought him out in order to obtain something: healing, material assistance, but not simply to be with him. He was pushed by the crowds, yet he was alone. Some saints, and even some artists, have contemplated this condition of Jesus. It may seem strange, unreal, to ask the Lord: "How are you?" Instead, it is a beautiful way to enter into a true, sincere relationship with his humanity, with his suffering, even with his singular solitude. With him, with the Lord, who wanted to share his life with us to the full.

It does us a great deal of good to learn to *be with him*, to be with the Lord *without ulterior motives*, exactly as with people we care for. We wish to know them more and more because it is good to be with them.

Dear brothers and sisters, spiritual life is not a technique at our disposal. It is not a programme for inner "well-being" that it is up to us to plan. No. Spiritual life is the *relationship with the Living One*, with God, the Living One who cannot be reduced to our categories. And desolation, then, is the clearest response to the objection that the experience of God is a form of wishful thinking, a simple projection of our desires. Desolation is not feeling anything, when everything is dark, but you seek God in the desolation. In that case, if we think that he is a projection of our desires, we would always be the ones to plan, and we would always be happy and content, like a record that repeats the same music. Instead, those who pray realize that the outcome is *unpredictable*. Experiences and passages from the Bible that have often enthralled us, strangely do not move us today. And, equally unexpectedly, experiences, encounters and readings that we have never paid much attention to or preferred to avoid – such as the experience of the cross – bring immense peace. Do not fear desolation; face it with perseverance. Do not evade it. And in desolation, try to find Christ's heart, to find the Lord. And the answer will come, always.

Faced with difficulties, therefore, please never be discouraged, but confront the test with determination, with the help of God's grace, which is never lacking. And if we hear an insistent voice within us that wants to turn us away from prayer, let us learn to unmask it as the voice of the tempter. And let us not be influenced. Let us simply do the opposite of what it tells us! Thank you.

Catechesis on Discernment. 9. Consolation

Wednesday, 23 November 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue the catechesis on discernment of spirit: how to discern what takes place in our heart and in our soul. After having considered several aspects of desolation – that darkness of the soul – today we will talk about *consolation* – which is the light of the soul and another important element in discernment that should not be taken for granted, because it can lend itself to misunderstandings. We have to understand what consolation is, just as we tried to understand well what desolation is.

What is spiritual consolation? It is an experience of *interior joy*, that lets [us] see God's presence in all things. It strengthens faith and hope, and even the ability to do good. The person who experiences consolation never gives up in the face of difficulties because he or she always experiences a peace that is stronger than the trial. It is, therefore, a tremendous gift for spiritual life and for life in general... and to live this interior joy.

Consolation is an interior movement that touches our depths. It is not flashy but soft, delicate, like a drop of water on a sponge (cf. St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 335). The person feels enveloped in God's presence in a way that always respects his or her own freedom. It is never something out of tune that tries to force our will; neither is it a passing euphoria. On the contrary, as we have seen, even suffering – caused for example by our own sins – can become a reason for consolation.

Let us think about Saint Augustine's experience, when he spoke with his mother Monica about the beauty of eternal life, or of Saint Francis' perfect joy, which moreover, was associated with very difficult situations he had to bear; and let us think of the many saints who were able to do great things not because they thought they were good or capable, but because they had been won over by the peaceful sweetness of God's love. It is the same peace that Saint Ignatius was amazed to discover in himself, when he read about the lives of saints. To be consoled is to be at peace with God, to feel that everything is settled in peace, everything is in harmony within us. This is the peace that Edith Stein felt after her conversion. A year after she received Baptism, she wrote – this is what Edith Stein says: “As I abandon myself to this feeling, little by little a new life begins to fill me and – without any pressure on my will – to drive me toward new realizations. This living inpouring seems to spring from an activity and a strength that is not mine and which, without doing me any violence, becomes active in me” (cf. *Philosophy of psychology and the humanities*, ics Publications: 2000). Thus, genuine peace is one that makes good feelings blossom in us.

Above all, consolation affects *hope*, and reaches out towards the future, puts us on a journey, allows us to take the initiatives that until then, had always been postponed or not even imagined, such as Baptism was for Edith Stein.

Consolation is that type of peace, but not one in which we remain sitting there enjoying it, no.... It gives you peace and draws you toward the Lord and sets you off on a journey to do things, to do good things. In a moment of consolation, when we are consoled, we want to do so much good, always. Instead, when there is a moment of desolation, we feel like closing in on ourselves and doing nothing. Consolation spurs us forward in service to others, society, other people.

Spiritual consolation cannot be “piloted” – you cannot say “now may consolation come” – no, it cannot be “piloted”. It cannot be programmed at will. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It allows a *familiarity with God* that seems to cancel distances. When Saint

Thérèse of the Child Jesus visited the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem in Rome at the age of 14, she tried to touch the nail venerated there, one of the nails with which Jesus was crucified. Thérèse understood her daring as a transport of love and confidence. Later, she wrote, “I truly was too audacious. But the Lord sees the depths of our hearts. He knows my intention was pure [...] I acted with him as a child who believes everything is permissible and who considers the Father’s treasures their own” (*Autobiographical Manuscript*, 183). Consolation is spontaneous and leads you to do everything spontaneously, as if we were children. Children are spontaneous, and consolation leads you to be spontaneous with a tenderness, with a very deep peace. A 14-year-old girl gives us a splendid description of spiritual consolation. We can feel a sense of tenderness towards God that makes us audacious in our desire to participate in his own life, to do what is pleasing to him because we feel familiar with him, we feel that his house is our house, we feel welcome, loved, restored. With this consolation, we do not give up in the face of difficulty – in fact, with the same boldness, Thérèse would ask the Pope for permission to enter Carmel even though she was too young, and her wish was granted. What does this mean? It means that consolation makes us daring. When we find ourselves in a moment of darkness, of desolation, and we think: “I am not capable of doing this”. Desolation brings you down. It makes you see everything as dark.... “No, I cannot do this, I will not do it”. Instead, in times of consolation, you see the same things in a different way and say: “No, I am going ahead. I will do it”. “But are you sure?” “I feel God’s strength and I am going ahead”. And so, consolation spurs you to go ahead and to do those things that you would not be capable of doing in a moment of desolation. It spurs you to take the first step. This is the beauty of consolation.

But let us be careful. We have to distinguish well between the consolation that comes from God and *false consolations*. Something similar happens in spiritual life that also happens in human productions: there are originals and there are imitations. If authentic consolation is like a drop on a sponge – it is soft and intimate – its imitations are noisier and flashier. They are pure

enthusiasm, like straw fires, lacking substance, leading us to close in on ourselves and not to take care of others. In the end, false consolation leaves us empty, far from the centre of our existence. This is why, when we feel happy, at peace, we are capable of doing anything. But let us not confuse this peace with passing enthusiasm because there is enthusiasm today, but then it wanes and is no more.

This is why we have to *discern* even when we feel consoled because false consolation can become a danger if we seek it obsessively as an end in itself, forgetting the Lord. As Saint Bernard would say, we seek the consolation of God rather than the God of consolations. We have to seek the Lord, and the Lord consoles us with his presence. He makes us move forward. And we should not seek God because he brings us consolations, with that as an underlying motive. No, this is not right. We should not be interested in this. This is the dynamic of the child of whom we spoke last time, who looks for his or her parents only to get something, but not for their sake; out of their own interests. They go by interest. “Dad, Mom” – children know how to do this, they know how to play, and when the family is divided, and they are accustomed to going to one and going to the other, this is not good, this is not consolation, but personal interest. We too run the risk of living our relationship with God in a childish way, seeking our own interests, trying to reduce God to an object that we use and consume, losing the most beautiful gift which is God Himself. So, let us move forward in our life which progresses between the consolations from God and the desolations from the sin of the world, but knowing how to distinguish when it is a consolation from God, which brings peace to the depths of your soul, and when it is a passing enthusiasm, which is not bad, but which is not a consolation from God.

Catechesis on Discernment. 10. The true consolation

Wednesday, 30 November 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

As we continue our reflection on discernment, and in particular on the spiritual experience called “consolation”, which we spoke about last Wednesday, we ask ourselves: how can we recognize true *consolation*? It is a very important question for good discernment, so as not to be deceived in the search for our true good.

We can find some criteria in a passage from Saint Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*: “We ought to note well the course of the thoughts”, says Saint Ignatius, “and if the beginning, middle and end is all good, inclined to all good, it is a sign of the good Angel; but if in the course of the thoughts which he brings it ends in something bad, of a distracting tendency, or less good than what the soul had previously proposed to do, or if it weakens it or disquiets or disturbs the soul, taking away its peace, tranquillity and quiet, which it had before, it is a clear sign that it proceeds from the evil spirit, enemy of our profit and eternal salvation” (n. 333). Because it is true: there is true consolation, but there are also consolations that are not true. And therefore, we need to understand well the process of consolation: how does it come and where does it lead me? If it leads me to something wrong, that is not good, the consolation is not true, it is “fake”, let’s say.

And these are valuable indications that merit a brief comment. What does it mean that *the beginning* is inclined to good, as Saint Ignatius says of good consolation? For example, I have the thought of praying, and I note that it accompanies affection towards the Lord and neighbour, it invites gestures of generosity, of charity: it is a good beginning. It can instead happen that such a thought emerges to avoid a job or a task that has been entrusted to me: every time I have to wash the dishes or clean the house, I have a strong urge to pray! This happens, in convents. But prayer is not an escape from one’s tasks. On the contrary, it is an aid in accomplishing the good we are required to do, here and now. This regards the beginning.

Then there is the *middle*: Saint Ignatius said that the beginning, the middle and the end have to be good. The beginning is this: I want to pray so as not to wash the dishes: go, wash the dishes, and then

go pray. Then there is the *middle*: that is to say what comes afterwards, what follows that thought. Remaining with the previous example, if I begin to pray and, like the Pharisee in the parable (cf. Lk 18:9-14), I tend to be self-satisfied and to disdain others, perhaps with a resentful and sour spirit, then these are signs that the evil spirit has used that thought as a key to enter into my heart and to transmit his feelings to me. If I go to pray, and the same thing comes to mind as what came to the famous Pharisee – “Thank you Lord, because I pray, I am not like other people who do not seek you, who do not pray” – that prayer ends badly there. That consolation of praying is to feel like a peacock in front of God. And this is the middle that is no good.

And then there is the *end*: the beginning, the middle and the end. The end is an aspect we have already encountered, namely: where does a thought take me? For example, where does the thought of prayer take me? For instance, it can happen that I work hard for a good and worthy task, but this pushes me to stop praying, because I am busy with many things; I find I am increasingly aggressive and angry, I feel that everything depends on me, to the point of losing confidence in God. Here, evidently, there is the action of the evil spirit. I start praying, but then in prayer I feel omnipotent, that everything must be in my hands because I am the only one who knows how to get things done: evidently there is no good spirit there. We have to examine well the path of our sentiments, and the path of good sentiments, of consolation, at the moment in which we want to do something; at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end.

The style of the enemy – when we speak about the enemy, we are speaking about the devil, because the devil exists, he is there! – his style, we know – is to present himself in a devious, masked way: he starts from what is most dear to us and then, little by little, reels us in: evil enters secretly, without the person being aware of it. And with time, gentleness becomes hardness. That thought reveals itself for what it truly is.

Hence the importance of this patient but indispensable examination of the origin and the truth of our thoughts; it is an

invitation to learn from experiences, from what happens to us, so as not to continue to repeat the same errors. The more we know ourselves, the more we can sense where the evil spirit enters from, his “passwords”, the entrance to our heart, which are the points to which we are most sensitive, so as to pay attention to them in the future. Each one of us has their more sensitive spots, the weakest spots in their personality: and the evil spirit enters from there, and leads us down the wrong path, or takes us away from the true, right path. I go and pray but he leads me away from my prayer.

The examples could be multiplied at will, reflecting on our days. This is why a daily examination of conscience is so important: before ending the day, stop a moment. What happened? Not in the newspapers, not in life: what happened in my heart? Was my heart attentive? Did it grow? Did it go through everything unaware? What happened in my heart? And this examination is important, it is the valuable effort of rereading experience from a particular point of view. Noticing what happens is important, it is a sign that God’s grace is working in us, helping us to grow in freedom and awareness. We are not alone: the Holy Spirit is with us. Let us see how things went.

Genuine consolation is a sort of confirmation that we are doing what God wants of us, that we are walking on his paths, that is, on the paths of life, joy, and peace. Discernment, in fact, is not simply about what is good or the greatest possible good, but about *what is good for me here and now*: this is what I am called to grow on, setting limits to other proposals, attractive but unreal, so as not to be deceived in the search for the true good.

Brothers and sisters, we have to understand, to go ahead in understanding what happens in my heart. And in order to do so, an examination of conscience is necessary, to see what happened today. “Today I got angry, I didn’t do that...”: But why? Going beyond the “why” to look for the root of these mistakes. “But, today I was happy but I was bored because I had to help those people, but at the end I felt fulfilled by that help” – and there is the Holy Spirit. Learning to read what happened during the day

in the book of our heart. Do it: it will take just two minutes, but it will do you good, I assure you.

Catechesis on Discernment. 11. The confirmation of the good choice

Wednesday, 7 December 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In the process of discernment, it is important to also remain attentive to the stage that immediately follows the decision taken, in order to either catch *the signs that confirm it* or those that disprove it. I have to make a decision, [so] I make the discernment, pro or con, my feelings, I pray... then this process ends and I make the decision and then comes that part where we have to be careful and see. Because in life some decisions are not good and there are signs that disprove them, while on the other hand, good ones are confirmed.

Indeed, we have seen how *time* is a fundamental criterion for recognizing God's voice amidst so many other voices. He alone is Lord of time: it is a hallmark of his originality, which differentiates him from imitations that speak in his name without actually doing so. One of the distinctive signs of the good spirit is the fact that it communicates *a peace that lasts in time*. If you consider more profoundly, then make the decision and this gives you a peace that lasts through time, this is a good sign and indicates that the path was good. A peace that brings harmony, unity, fervour, zeal. You come out of the in depth process better than when you entered it.

For example, if I make the decision to devote an extra half hour to prayer, and then I find that I live the other moments of the day better, that I am more serene, less anxious, I do my work with more care and zest, and even relations with some difficult people become smoother... These are all important signs in favour of the goodness of the decision taken. Spiritual life is circular: the goodness of a choice benefits all areas of our lives. For it is participation in God's creativity.

We can recognize *some important* aspects that help us read the time after the decision as a possible *confirmation* of its goodness, because the subsequent period confirms the goodness of the decision. In some ways we have already encountered these important aspects in the course of these catecheses but now they find their further application.

A first aspect is whether the decision is seen as a possible sign of response to the Lord's love and generosity toward me. It is not born out of fear, not born of emotional blackmail or compulsion, but born out of *gratitude for the good received*, which moves the heart to live generously in relationship with the Lord.

Another important element is having a sense of *one's place in life* — that tranquility, "I am in my place" — and feeling that you are part of a larger plan, to which one wishes to make a contribution. In Saint Peter's Square there are two precise points — the focal points of the ellipse — from which one can see Bernini's columns perfectly aligned. Similarly, a man can recognize that he has found what he is looking for when his day becomes more orderly, when he feels a growing integration among his many interests, when he establishes a proper hierarchy of importance, and when he is able to experience this with ease, facing the difficulties that arise with renewed energy and fortitude. These are signs that you have made a good decision.

Another good sign of confirmation, for example, is the fact of *remaining free* with regard to what has been decided, being willing to question it, even to give it up in the face of possible denials, trying to find in them a possible teaching from the Lord. This is not because he wants to deprive us of what we hold dear, but in order to live it with freedom, without attachment. Only God knows what is truly good for us. Possessiveness is the enemy of goodness and kills affection. Be attentive to this: possessiveness is the enemy of good, it kills affection. The many cases of violence in the domestic sphere, of which we unfortunately have frequent news, almost always arise from the claim of possessing the affection of the other, from the search for absolute security that kills freedom and stifles life, making it hell.

We can only love in freedom, which is why the Lord created us free, free even to say no to him. Offering him what we hold most dear is in our best interest, enabling us to live it in the best possible way and in truth, as a gift he has given us, as a sign of his gratuitous goodness, knowing that our lives, as well as the whole of history, are in his benevolent hands. It is what the Bible calls the *fear of God*, that is, respect for God – not that God frightens me, no, but a respect, an indispensable condition for accepting the gift of Wisdom (cf. Sir 1:1-18). It is the fear that casts out all other fears, because it is oriented to he who is Lord of all things. In his presence, nothing can disquiet us.

It is the wondrous experience of Saint Paul, which he expressed in this way: “I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:12-13). This is the free man, who blesses the Lord both when good things come and when not-so-good things come: May he be blessed, and let us go forward!

Recognizing this is critical to good decision-making, and it reassures us about what we cannot control or predict: health, the future, loved ones, our plans. What matters is that our trust is placed in the Lord of the universe, who loves us immensely and knows that we can build with him something wonderful, something eternal. The lives of the saints show us this in the most beautiful way. Let us go forward, always trying to make decisions in this way, in prayer and feeling what’s going on in our hearts, and going forward slowly. Take courage!

Catechesis on Discernment. 12. The Vigilance

Wednesday, 14 December 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We are now entering the final phase of this journey of catechesis on discernment. We started out from the example of Saint Ignatius of Loyola; we then considered the elements of discernment, namely, prayer, self-knowledge, desire and the “book of life”; we

focused on desolation and consolation, which form its “matter”; and then we reached the confirmation of the choice made.

I consider it necessary to include at this point a reminder of an attitude essential if all the work done to discern for the best and take the good decision is not to be lost, and this would be the attitude of *vigilance*. We have done discernment, consolation and desolation; we have chosen something ... everything is going well, but now, vigilance: the attitude of vigilance. Because in effect there is a risk, and it is that the “spoilsport”, that is, the Evil One, can ruin everything, making us go back to the beginning, indeed, in an even worse condition. And this happens, so we must be attentive and vigilant. This is why it is indispensable to be vigilant. Therefore, today it seemed appropriate to emphasize this attitude, which we all need for the discernment process to be successful and stay that way.

Indeed, in his preaching Jesus insists a great deal on the fact that the good disciple is vigilant, does not slumber, does not let himself become too self-assured when things go well, but remains alert and ready to do his duty.

For example, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says: “Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes” (12:35-37).

Keeping watch to safeguard our heart and to understand what is happening inside it.

This is the frame of mind of the Christians who await the final coming of the Lord; but it can be understood also as the normal attitude to have in the conduct of life, so that our good choices, taken at times after challenging discernment, may proceed in a persevering and consistent manner, and bear fruit.

If vigilance is lacking, there is, as we were saying, a very high risk that all will be lost. It is a danger not of a psychological order, no, but of a spiritual order, a real snare of the evil spirit. Indeed, he

awaits precisely the moment in which we are too sure of ourselves, and this is the danger: "But I am sure of myself, I have won, now I am fine..." - this is the moment he is waiting for, when everything is going well, when things are going "swimmingly" and we "have the wind in our sails". Indeed, in the short Gospel parable we heard, it is said that the unclean spirit, when it returns to the house from where it left, "finds it empty, swept, and put in order" (Mt 12:44), he finds it nicely prepared, doesn't he? Everything is in its place, everything is in order, but where is the master of the house? He is not there. There is no-one keeping watch over it and guarding it. This is the problem. The master of the house is not home, he left, he was distracted, I don't know; or he is at home but has fallen asleep, and therefore it is as though he were not there. He is not vigilant, he is not alert, because he is too sure of himself and has lost the humility to safeguard his own heart. We must always safeguard our home, our heart and not be distracted and go away... because the problem is here, like the Parable said.

So, the evil spirit can take advantage of this and return to that house. The Gospel says, however, that he does not return alone, but along with "seven other spirits more evil than himself" (v. 45). A company of evil-doers, a gang of delinquents. But how is it possible, we wonder, for them to enter undisturbed? How come the master does not notice? Was he not so good at discerning and banishing them? Did he not receive compliments from his friends and neighbours for that house, so beautiful and elegant, so tidy and clean? The house of the heart, isn't it? Yes, but perhaps precisely because of this he had fallen too much in love with the house, that is, with himself, and had stopped waiting for the Lord, waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom; perhaps for fear of ruining that order he no longer welcomed anyone, he did not invite the poor, the homeless, those who disturbed... One thing is certain: here bad pride is involved, the presumption of being right, of being good, of being in order. Very often we hear someone say: "Yes, I was bad before, I converted and now, now my house is in order thanks to God, you can rest assured...". When we trust too much in ourselves and not in God's grace, then the Evil One finds

the door open. So, he organizes the expedition and takes possession of that house. And Jesus concludes: "The last state of that man becomes worse than the first" (v. 45).

But doesn't the master notice? No, because these are polite demons: they come in without you noticing, they knock on the door, they are polite. "No okay, go, go, come in..." and then eventually they take command of your soul. Beware of these little devils, these demons... the devil is polite, when he pretends to be a great gentleman, isn't he? For he enters with ours to come out with his. Safeguard the house from this deception, that of polite demons. And spiritual worldliness takes this route, always.

Dear brothers and sisters, it seems impossible but it is so. Many times, we lose, many times we are defeated in battles, because of this lack of *vigilance*. Very often, perhaps, the Lord has given so many graces, many graces, and in the end, we are unable to persevere in this grace and we lose everything, because we lack vigilance: we have not guarded the doors. And then we have been deceived by someone who comes along, polite, he goes in and, hello... The devil has these things. Anyone can also verify this by thinking back to their own personal history. It is not enough to carry out good discernment and to make a good choice. No, it is not enough: we must remain vigilant, safeguard this grace that God has given us, but keep watch, because you can say to me: "But when I see some disorder, I realize straight away that it is the devil, that it is temptation...". Yes, but this time he comes disguised as an angel: the devil knows how to dress up as an angel, he enters with courteous words, and he convinces you, and in the end, it is worse than at the beginning... We need to stay vigilant, keep watch over the heart. If I were to ask each one of you today, and also myself, "What is happening in your heart?", perhaps we would not know how to say everything; we would say one or two things, but not everything. Keep watch over the heart, because vigilance is a sign of wisdom, it is above all a sign of humility, because we are afraid to fall, and humility is the high road of Christian life. Thank you.

Catechesis on Discernment

Wednesday, 21 December 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning, and welcome!

Let us continue – we are concluding – the catechesis on discernment. Anyone who has been following these catecheses until now might think: what a complicated practice discernment is! In reality, it is life that is complicated and, if we do not learn how to read it, as complicated as it is, we risk wasting our lives, using strategies that end up disheartening us.

During our first meeting, we saw that always, every day, whether we want to or not, we perform acts of discernment, regarding what we eat, read, at work, in our relationships, in everything. Life always presents choices to us, and if we do not make conscious choices, in the end it is life that chooses for us, taking us where we do not want to go.

Discernment, however, is not done alone. Today, let us look more specifically at *several aids* in this regard that can facilitate this indispensable exercise of discernment in spiritual life, even if in some ways we have already encountered them in the course of these catecheses. But a summary will help us a lot.

One of the first indispensable aids is evaluating with the *Word of God* and the *Doctrine of the Church*. They help us read what is stirring in our hearts, learning to recognize God's voice and to distinguish it from other voices that seem to vie for our attention, but that in the end, leave us confused. The Bible warns us that God's voice resounds in stillness, in attention, in silence. Let us recall the experience of the Prophet Elijah: the Lord does not speak to him in the wind that smashes the rocks, nor in the fire or the earthquake, but He speaks to him in a light breeze (cf. 1 Kings 19:11-12). This is a very beautiful image that helps us understand how God speaks. God's voice does not impose itself; God's voice is discreet, respectful – allow me to say, God's voice is humble – and, for that reason, produces peace. And it is only in peace that we can enter profoundly into ourselves and recognize the authentic desires the Lord has placed in our hearts. Often it is not

easy to enter into that peace of heart because we are busy with many things throughout the day.... But please, calm yourself down a little, enter into yourself, within yourself. Stop for two minutes. Witness what your heart is feeling. Let's do this, brothers and sisters, it will help us a lot because in that moment of calm, we immediately hear God's voice saying to us, "Well, look here, look at that, what you are doing is good...". Let us allow God's voice to immediately enter in the [moment of] calm. He is waiting for us to do this.

For the believer, the Word of God is not simply a text to read. The Word of God is a living presence, it is a work of the Holy Spirit that comforts, instructs, gives light, strength, relief, and a zest for life. To read the Bible, to read a piece, one or two passages of the Bible, is like a short telegram from God that immediately goes to the heart. The Word of God is a bit – and I am not exaggerating here – it is a little, real foretaste of heaven. A great saint and pastor, Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, understood this well when he wrote: "while I read the sacred Scriptures, God walks in Paradise" (*Letters*, 49.3). With the Bible, we open the door to God who is taking a walk. Interesting.

This affective relationship with the Bible, with Scripture, with the Gospel, leads us to experience an *affective relationship with the Lord Jesus*. Let's not be afraid of this! Heart speaks to heart. And this is another indispensable aid that is not to be taken for granted. We can often have a distorted idea about God, thinking of him as a sullen judge, a harsh judge, ready to catch us in the act. On the contrary, Jesus reveals a God who is full of compassion and tenderness for us, ready to sacrifice himself so he can come to us, just like the father in the parable of the prodigal son (cf. Lk 15:11-32). One time, someone asked – I don't know if it was a mother or a grandmother who told me this – "What do I need to do in this moment?" – "Listen to God, he will tell you what you should do. Open your heart to God". This is good advice. I remember one time, there was a pilgrimage of young people done once a year to the Shrine of [Our Lady of] Lujan, 70 km away from Buenos Aires. It takes a whole day to travel there. I used to hear confessions during the night. A young man, who was about 22 years old,

completely covered with tattoos, approached me... "My God", I thought, "who is this person?" And he said to me, "You know, I came because I have a serious problem, and I told my mother, and my mother told me, 'Go to Our Lady. Make a pilgrimage and Our Lady will tell you'. And I came. I was in touch with the Bible here. I listened to the Word of God and it touched my heart and I need to do this, this, this, this". The Word of God touches the heart and changes your life. And I have witnessed this many times, many times. Because God does not want to destroy us. God wants us to be stronger, better, every day.

Those who remain in front of the Crucifix sense a newfound peace and learn not to be afraid of God, because Jesus on the cross does not frighten anyone. He is the image of complete weakness, and, at the same time, of total love, capable of facing any trial for us. The saints always had a fondness for Jesus Crucified. The account of Jesus' Passion is the surest way to face evil without being overwhelmed by it. There is no judgement there, not even resignation, because it is shot through with the greatest light, the light of Easter, that allows us to see in those terrible deeds a greater plan that no impediment, obstacle or failure can thwart. The Word of God always makes us look at another side – that is, the cross is here, this is awful, but there is something else: hope, resurrection. The Word of God opens every door because he, the Lord, is the door. Let us pick up the Gospel, take the Bible in our hands – 5 minutes a day, no more. Carry a pocket-size Gospel with you, in your purse, and when you are travelling, read it a bit, throughout the day; a small passage, allowing the Word of God to draw near to your heart. Do this and you will see how your lives will change, with the proximity of the Word of God. "Yes, Father, but I am used to reading the lives of the saints". This is good. It is good for you, but do not neglect the Word of God. Take the Gospel with you and read it even for one minute every day....

It is very beautiful to think of our life with the Lord as a relationship with a friend that grows day by day. Friendship with God. Have you ever thought about this? This is the way! Let us think about God who loves us and wants us as friends. Friendship with God is able to change the heart. Piety is one of the great gifts

of the Holy Spirit, which makes us capable of recognizing God's fatherhood. We have a tender Father, an affectionate Father, a Father who loves us, who has always loved us. When we experience this, our hearts melt and doubts, fears, feelings of unworthiness dissolve. Nothing can hinder this love that comes from the encounter with the Lord.

And this reminds us of another great help, *the gift of the Holy Spirit*, who is present in us and who instructs us, makes the Word of God that we read come alive, suggests new meanings, opens doors that seem closed, indicates paths in life where there seem to be only darkness and confusion. I ask you – Do you pray to the Holy Spirit? But who is this Great Unknown One? Sure, we pray to the Father with the Our Father. We pray to Jesus. But we forget the Spirit! One time when I was doing catechesis with children, I asked the question, “Which one of you knows who the Holy Spirit is?” And one of the children said, “I know!” – “And who is he?” – “The paralytic”, he answered me! He had heard, “the Paraclete”, and had thought that he was a “paralytic”. And often – this made me think – the Holy Spirit is over there as if he were a Person who doesn't count. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives life to the soul! Let him enter. Speak with the Holy Spirit just like you speak with the Father, like you speak with the Son. Speak with the Holy Spirit – who is anything but paralysed. The Church's strength is in him, he is the one who leads you forward. The Holy Spirit is discernment in action, the presence of God in us. He is the gift, the greatest gift the Father assures to those who ask (cf. Lk 11:13). And what did Jesus call him? “The gift” – “Remain here in Jerusalem and wait for *the gift of God*”, which is the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to live our lives in friendship with the Holy Spirit. He changes you. He makes you grow.

The Liturgy of the Hours opens the main moments of daily prayer with this invocation: “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me”. “Lord, help me!” because by myself I cannot move ahead, I cannot love, I cannot live.... This invocation for salvation is the uncontainable request that flows from the depths of our being. The goal of discernment is to recognize the salvation God is working in my life. It reminds me that I am never

alone and that, if I am struggling, it is because the stakes are high. The Holy Spirit is always with us. "Oh, Father, I've done something really bad. I need to go to confession. I cannot do anything...". But have you done something awful? Talk to the Spirit who is with you and tell him, "Help me, I did this really awful thing...". But never abandon this dialogue with the Holy Spirit. "Father, I am in mortal sin": it does not matter. Speak with Him so that he will help you and forgive you. Never abandon this dialogue with the Holy Spirit. And with these aids the Lord gives to us, there is no need to be afraid. Keep going forward, courageously and joyfully!

SUMMARY OF THE HOLY FATHER'S WORDS

1. What does it mean to discern?

Dear brothers and sisters: Today we begin a new series of catecheses dealing with *discernment*, the process of making sound decisions about the meaning and direction of our lives. In the Gospels, Jesus uses everyday discernment practised by fishermen and merchants to teach the importance of wisely choosing to live a life in accordance with God's will. Authentic discernment calls for knowledge, insight and experience but also the wisdom of the heart, firm commitment and unremitting effort. As an exercise of our God-given freedom, spiritual discernment seeks to know our place in the Creator's plan for ourselves and for our world. For our decisions, good or evil, can make the earth either, as God intends, a magnificent garden or a lifeless desert. True discernment, born of our loving relationship with God and our human freedom, brings with it a deep spiritual joy and fulfilment. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten and guide us in our daily efforts to live lives of holiness, wisdom and fidelity to the saving truth of the Gospel.

2. An example: Ignatius of Loyola

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on *discernment*, the process of making sound decisions about the meaning and direction of our lives, we now consider the witness of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. As a young soldier, Ignatius was gravely wounded in battle. During his long convalescence, he was unable to read his favorite novels of chivalry and heroic exploits. The only books at hand were the lives of the saints. Reading them, at first reluctantly, Ignatius came to realize that the stories of the saints brought him lasting joy and happiness, while the other stories left him ultimately arid and empty. This insight was the origin of the method of prayer and discernment that Ignatius left us in his celebrated *Spiritual Exercises*. There he speaks of the importance of distinguishing between worldly and spiritual thoughts, cultivating the latter, and allowing them, by God's grace, to mature within our hearts. In time, then, we come to discern in prayer the often unexpected signs by which God makes

himself known to us, leads us to conversion and shows us his will for our lives.

3. The elements of discernment. Familiarity with the Lord

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on *discernment*, the process of making sound decisions about the God-given meaning and direction of our lives, we now consider the importance of prayer. Praying is never a purely intellectual exercise; it also engages the heart and the emotions. Through prayer, we deepen our friendship with the Lord; we grow in trust as we realize that, in coming to understand and embrace his holy will, we find our true happiness. One of the great temptations in the spiritual life is the fear that fidelity to God's will can make us sad or unfulfilled. Prayer helps us to overcome such empty fears, and brings instead a deep spiritual joy, even in the midst of trials and tribulations. As the fruit of prayer, discernment makes us sensitive to God's "kindly light", illuminating our minds and warming our hearts. Drawing each day closer to the Lord, we come, by a certain "connaturality", to recognize more fully his will for our lives, and in that will to find our peace and our authentic fulfilment.

4. The elements of discernment. Self-knowledge

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on spiritual discernment, we have considered the essential importance of growth in prayer. Today we consider, as a necessary complement to prayer, our need to grow in *self-knowledge*. Coming to know ourselves is not easy; it requires honesty and a patient descent into the depths of our heart. Self-knowledge is itself a fruit of God's grace, whereby we are led to abandon our illusions, to understand who we really are, and to embrace the things that can bring us genuine happiness. In effect, we learn the "passwords" that open the portal to our deepest self and the paths that can lead us to lasting spiritual joy and fulfilment, in obedience to God's gracious will. A great help to such prayerful insight into ourselves, and thus to authentic discernment, is the traditional practice of the nightly examination of conscience. Through daily prayer and self-knowledge, may we more readily discern the Lord's plan for our

lives, and come to appreciate more fully our dignity and freedom as beloved children of our heavenly Father.

5. The elements of discernment. The desire

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on spiritual discernment, we have considered the importance of prayer and growth in self-knowledge. Today we consider a third necessary element of discernment, which is *desire*, the deep longing for happiness and fulfilment present in the human heart. In our spiritual tradition, desire is seen as evidence of our innate yearning for God and the peace that he alone can give: a kind of compass directing our lives to their ultimate goal. In seeking the Lord and trusting in his promises, we find the strength to persevere amid difficulties, to accept sacrifices joyfully, and to strive in all things to live in accordance with his will. In the Gospels, Jesus often asks those who seek a miracle what it is that they ask of him (e.g., Mk 10:51). Our own dialogue with the Lord in prayer helps us to articulate our inmost desires and to allow him to work miracles of grace and healing in our lives. For that is Jesus' own greatest desire: to make us sharers in his own divine life and to enable us to find, in him, our eternal happiness and fulfilment.

6. The elements of discernment. "The book of one's own life"

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on spiritual discernment, we now consider the importance of interpreting, in the light of God's provident care, our own life story. Through prayer and spiritual insight, we can learn to discern the thread of God's grace running through our lives. Taking stock of our personal history in this way can make us aware of negative attitudes harmful for our spiritual growth, but also open our eyes to the often hidden events and encounters that quietly reveal the Lord's loving plan for our eternal happiness. The lives of the saints also shed light upon our personal path to holiness. In the *Confessions*, Saint Augustine shared his gradual understanding of how God mysteriously led him to discover and embrace the truth that alone satisfies the deepest desires of our heart. Saint Ignatius Loyola, another great spiritual guide, drew upon his own journey of conversion in order to teach us how to discern God's voice

speaking deep within us, guiding our steps through life, and calling us to ever deeper union with himself.

7. The subject of discernment. Desolation

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on discernment, we now consider what the spiritual masters call “desolation”, those moments when we experience interior darkness, unrest and distance from God and from the consolations of faith. For our spiritual growth, it is important to confront these dark nights of the soul and to discern what the Lord wishes to tell us through them. At times, desolation can be a summons to acknowledge our sinfulness and to embrace God’s offer of love and forgiveness. Saint Thomas says that our souls, like our bodies, can experience a kind of pain that makes us aware of threats to our spiritual health. At other times, the experience of desolation can be a temptation to grow slack in prayer and in the discipline of the Christian life. Here too, the great spiritual teachers urge us not to yield to this temptation, but to persevere, confident that by this testing the Lord will guide us to a fuller understanding of his gracious plan for our lives and a deeper union with him in faith, hope and love.

8. "Why are we desolate?"

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on discernment, we have seen the importance of interpreting the movements of our heart, including occasional experiences of “desolation” or interior unrest and dissatisfaction. Such moments are in fact a challenge to our complacency and an incentive to growth in the spiritual life. In the case of many great saints like Augustine, this sense of inner unrest was the prelude to a profound conversion. The experience of desolation can open our eyes to see things in a new light, to appreciate the blessings we so often take for granted, and to find our peace in drawing closer to the Lord. In this way, we deepen our relationship with Jesus, which brings not only consolation, but also new challenges to mature in Christian discipleship. At times of desolation or discouragement, may we embrace the experience as an invitation to deeper prayer, closer union with Christ and steadfast trust in his promises.

9. Consolation

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on discernment, we now consider the experience of spiritual “consolation”, that sense of deep inner joy, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to sense God’s comforting presence and providential care in all things, even in moments of trial and difficulty. Saint Ignatius compares this grace-filled movement of the heart to a drop of water on a sponge: quietly and in full respect for our freedom, the Lord confirms us in faith and hope and confident trust in his undying love. In the lives of great saints like Ignatius, Edith Stein and Therese of Lisieux, we see how experiences of spiritual consolation not only bring profound interior peace and conviction, but also grant the strength to accomplish extraordinary things in God’s service. The sign of an authentic consolation is precisely the serene, fruitful and lasting peace that it brings. Discernment is needed to distinguish true consolations from those that are false, shallow and self-indulgent; in our spiritual journey, may we always heed the sound advice of Saint Bernard, who urges us to seek the consolations of God, and not the God of consolations.

10. The true consolation

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on discernment, we have discussed the experience of spiritual “consolation”, that sense of deep inner joy, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to sense God’s comforting presence and providential care in all things, even moments of trial and difficulty. Authentic consolation is the fruit of divine grace, drawing us to grow in love of the Lord and our neighbour, to discern God’s will in our lives and to carry out works of spiritual and practical charity. Saint Ignatius tells us that true prayer bears good fruit at every stage: in its beginning, its middle and its end. It is important to discern the fruits of our prayer and to learn to recognize the hidden temptations that would deceive us into substituting a lesser for a greater good. A great aid to discerning authentic consolation is the daily examination of conscience, which purifies our minds and hearts, and opens them to God’s will for our growth in holiness and in union with him.

11. The confirmation of the good choice

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on discernment, we now turn to the signs that confirm the rightness of our decisions. The most important of these is the test of time. Decisions wisely discerned give rise to lasting peace. The spiritual life is “circular”: our decisions, as the fruit of our interior freedom and openness to God’s will, bring goodness, harmony and integration into our daily lives, our relationships and our work. A further sign of a spiritually sound decision is the conviction that it was in fact freely chosen out of love for God and in grateful response to his grace. The wisdom and rightness of our decisions is also confirmed by an increased sense of tranquillity, order and direction in our lives. For true wisdom, as the Bible teaches and the example of the saints bears witness, is born of the fear of God, the confident assurance that our lives are in his hands and that our human freedom finds its supreme fulfilment in trusting obedience to his will.

12. The Vigilance

Dear brothers and sisters: In our catechesis on discernment, we have considered its various elements, including prayer, self-knowledge, spiritual experience and the signs assuring us of the rightness of our decisions. A fundamental attitude that must guide the entire process of discernment, however, is that of *vigilance*. Jesus often warns his disciples of the need to be watchful, lest the enemy take advantage of our distraction and bring our good efforts to nought. The Lord gives the example of an unclean spirit who, chased from a house, returns to find it clean but empty, since its owner is absent, and then comes back with seven of his companions. Like that owner, we too can fail to guard our house and keep our hearts pure as a dwelling for the Lord. When we trust excessively in ourselves and not in the Lord’s grace, our presumption can open a door to the evil one and can find ourselves “worse than before” (cf. Lk 12:45). In our exercise of discernment, may we always remain vigilant, for vigilance is a sign of spiritual wisdom and of the humility that is at the heart of the Christian life.

Conclusion

Dear brothers and sisters: Today we conclude our series of catecheses on spiritual discernment by considering some aids that can help us rightly to discern God's will for our lives and our happiness. We begin, naturally, with an encounter with the word of God and with the Church's teaching. Quiet prayer with the Scriptures helps us to sense the Lord's presence, to hear his voice, and to become conscious of the deepest desires of our heart. In this way, we grow in love and closeness to Jesus, who assures us of the Father's merciful love and, by his death on the Cross, reveals God's power to bring life out of death and good out of evil. Friendship with Jesus and trust in God's guidance of our lives is a great gift of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in our hearts and inspires our discernment at every stage. In the Church's daily prayer, each canonical hour begins by asking God to come to our assistance. Trusting in that help, may we learn to discern wisely the paths that lead us to the Father and to respond each day to his loving offer of salvation.

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Vaticana**

English translations drawn from www.vatican.va

Published February 2023



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