

CATECHESSES
ON
DISCERNMENT

(31 August 2022 – 4 January 2023)

POPE FRANCIS

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— CHAPTER I —

What Does It Mean to Discern?

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 31 August 2022*

Dear brothers and sisters, good day!

Today we begin a new cycle of catechesis: we have finished the catechesis on old age, now we begin a new cycle on the theme of discernment. Discernment is an important act that concerns everyone, because choices are an essential part of life. 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 fisher who selects the good fish and discards 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*, also of *skill* [It: ‘perizia’] 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 fisher reckons with hard work, long nights spent at sea, and then 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 it for us. At a certain point, adults can freely ask for advice; we can 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, 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 Magi 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 correct 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 fisher, 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 — freedom, no? 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 every person, the step he or she takes, must 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.

— CHAPTER II —

An Example: Ignatius of Loyola

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 7 September 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We are continuing our reflection on discernment – in this time we will speak every Wednesday about spiritual discernment – and for this it can help us to refer to a specific witness.

One of the most instructive examples is offered to us by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, with a decisive episode in his life. Ignatius is at home convalescing, after injuring a leg in battle. To dispel the boredom, he asks for something to read. He loves tales of chivalry, but unfortunately only the lives of saints can be found at home. Somewhat reluctantly he adapts, but in the course of reading he begins to discover another world, a world that conquers him and seems to compete with that of knights. He is fascinated by the figures of Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, and feels the desire to imitate them. But the world of chivalry also continues to exert its fascination on him. And so, within himself he feels within himself this alternation of thoughts – those of chivalry and those of the saints – which seem to equate to one another.

Ignatius, however, also begins to perceive some differences. In his Autobiography - in the third person - he writes: “When he thought of worldly things” – and of chivalrous things, one understands – “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 practicing 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 lays 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 we must return 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. Ignatius, when he found himself wounded in his father’s house, 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 found 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, if 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, and 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?". To make good decisions, you need to listen to your heart.

This is why Ignatius will go on to suggest reading the lives of the saints, because they show the style of God in the life of people not very different to us, because the saints were made of flesh and blood like us, in a narrative, comprehensible way. Their actions speak to ours, and they help us to 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 life of the saints, we can recognize another important aspect of discernment, which we already mentioned last time. There is an apparent *randomness* in the events of life: everything seems to arise from a banal mishap – there were no books about knights, only lives of saints. A mishap that nonetheless holds a possible turning point. Only

after some time will Ignatius realize this, at which point he will devote all his attention to it. Listen carefully: God works through unplannable 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 unplannable events, and also through mishaps: “But I was supposed to go for a walk and I had a problem with my foot, I can’t...”. Mishap: 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 buried treasure. A totally unexpected situation. But what is important is that he recognizes 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 to you: “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? See what happens when we experience things we were not expecting, and there we can learn to know our heart as it moves.

Discernment is the aid in recognizing the signals with which the Lord makes himself known in unexpected, even unpleasant situations, as the leg wound was for Ignatius. A life-changing encounter can arise from them, forever, as in the case of Ignatius. Something can arise that that makes you better along the way, or worse, I don't know, but be careful; the most beautiful thread is given to us by the unexpected: "How do I act in view of this?" May the Lord help us to hear our hearts and see when it is He who acts and when it is not, and it is something else.

— CHAPTER III —

**The Elements of Discernment:
Familiarity with the Lord**

Saint Peter's Square
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 constituent 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 in 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, "You have come to ruin 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, that which 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 meeting 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 so long 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 able to recognize 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. St. 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 "Ciao," 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.

— CHAPTER IV —

The Elements of Discernment: Self-Knowledge

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 its indispensable element. Prayer, not like parrots. No: prayer as familiarity and confidence with God; prayer of the sons of the 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*. Self-knowledge. And this is not easy, eh! Indeed, it 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 heard many times: “But that person, why doesn’t he sort out his life? He has never known what he wants...”. There are people who... And then, yes, his life goes like that, because not even he knows what he wants. Without arriving at that extreme, 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 an 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, which must 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” (TH. GREEN, *Weeds Among the Wheat*, 1992). We all have the temptation to wear a mask, even in front of ourselves.

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

Knowing oneself is not difficult, but it is laborious: it implies *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 age of information technology, we know how important it is to know the password in order to get into the programmes where the most personal and valuable information is stored. But spiritual life, too, has its “passwords”: there are words that touch the heart because they refer to what we are most sensitive too. The tempter, that is, the devil, knows these passwords 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 a path that was not right, that has 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, for your own interests, or also to serve

the community? There, one can see the intentionality of each one of us. From this misunderstanding often comes the greatest suffering, 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 that is made, 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 *examination of conscience*, but I am not talking about the examination of conscience that we all do when we go to confession, no. This is: “But I sinned in this, that...”. No. A general examination of conscience of the day: what happened in my heart in 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 happens in 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 satiates the heart. What satiates 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? Seeing the route 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! They are basic elements of Christian existence, precious elements for finding one's place in life. Thank you.

— CHAPTER V —

The Elements of Discernment: The Desire

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 12 October 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In these catecheses on discernment we are reviewing the elements of discernment. After prayer, one element, and self-knowledge, another element, 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 we lack but somehow know, that we intuit.

What kind of knowledge is this? Spiritual teachers refer to it by the term “desire”, which, at root, is a nostalgia for fullness that never finds full 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 “the lack of the star”. Desire is the lack of a lodestar, 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 miss. 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

person who is static, 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 touch deeply 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 the 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”, to 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 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 some have 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 Jesus, before performing a miracle, often questions the person about their desire: “Do you want to be healed?”. And at times this question seems out of place, it is clear the person is sick! For example, when he meets the paralytic in the pool of Bethesda, who had been there for many years and never managed to seize the right moment for getting into the water, Jesus asks him: “Do you want to be well?” (*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 bed does not seem to be so convinced of this. *By engaging in dialogue with the Lord, we learn to understand what we truly want* from life. This paralytic is the typical example of those who say “Yes, yes, I want, I want, I want”, but then “I don’t want, 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 thirty-eight 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 laments. 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, priests about the bishop, or bishops about many other things... No, if you find yourself grumbling, beware, it is almost a sin, because it stops desire from growing.

Often it is indeed desire that makes the difference between a successful, coherent and lasting project, and the thousands of wishes and good intentions with which, as they say, “hell is paved with”: “Yes, I would like, I would like, I would like...”, but you do nothing. The era in which we live seems to promote the 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, many times, we find people, think about young people for example, with their telephone in their hand, looking at it... “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, many of them; they have probably never got 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 our deepest desire, that 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.

— CHAPTER VI —

**The Elements of Discernment:
The Book of One's Own Life**

*Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 19 October 2022*

Dear brothers and sisters, welcome and good morning!

In the catecheses of these weeks we are focusing on the prerequisites for good discernment. In life we have to make decisions, always, and to make decisions we must follow a journey, a path of discernment. Every important activity has its “instructions” to follow, which must be known 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” that is given to us, 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 inner man dwells truth” (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 inwardly, the path you have taken. With serenity. Return within yourself”.

Many times, 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 this becomes your life. These pessimistic phrases that get you down! Reading one’s own history also means recognizing the presence of these “toxic” elements, but then broadening 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 in 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

used to 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 this helped him move forward, to read well his own life, both the bad things and the good things. We must read our life, and by doing so we 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 punctual action, but rather inserts it in 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; 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. The person who walks in circles never goes forward; it is not progress, it is like the dog who chases his own tail; he always goes this way, and repeats 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 to calculate the balance of sins – 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, we learn to *discern* what happens within us.

— CHAPTER VII —

The Subject of Discernment: Desolation

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 26 October 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

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 must be acknowledged, because God speaks to the heart. Let us then enter into 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 all have experience of this. I believe that, in one way or another, we all have experience of this, of 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, besides not being possible – because it is not possible – this would not be good for us either. 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 does not permit peace. Alessandro Manzoni, in *The Betrothed*, gave us a wonderful description of remorse as an opportunity to change one’s life. It is about the famous dialogue between Cardinal Federico Borromeo and the Unnamed, who, after a terrible night, presents himself destroyed by 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 something comes to you inwardly, 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 considered negatively, as an ill to avoid at all costs, and instead it can be an indispensable alarm bell for life, inviting us to explore richer and more fertile landscapes that 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). Therefore, 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 is 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 that case, one must act in a manner 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 this.. “But no, I don’t want to, it 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: “When you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials” (*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 examines 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 traverse 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 every 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 path – courageous! – of spiritual life, which is always a journey.

— CHAPTER VIII —

“Why Are We Desolate?”

Saint Peter's Square
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 in the heart everything is dark, it is sad, these things, 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 stay by ourselves without fleeing, we risk always remaining on the surface of things and never making contact with the core of our existence. Desolation causes a “rousing of 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 the spiritual life. A perfect but “aseptic” serenity, without feeling, when it

becomes the criterion for decisions and behaviour, makes us inhuman. We cannot ignore our feelings: we are human and sentiment is a part of our humanity. And without understanding feelings we are inhuman; without living our sentiments we will 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 won’t get involved in things, I will keep my distance”: this is not life, it is as though we lived in a laboratory, shut away, so as not to have microbes and diseases. For many saints, restlessness was a decisive impetus to turn their lives around. This artificial serenity will not do. Yes, a healthy restlessness is fine, the restless heart, the heart that seeks its way. This is the case, for example, of Augustine of Hippo, Edith Stein, Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, or Charles de Foucauld. Important choices come at a price that life presents, a price that is within reach of everyone; or rather, the 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 reach of everyone. We must all pay for this decision so as to leave behind the state of indifference. The state of indifference brings us down, always.

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, the greatest gift is them, 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 to 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, to learn to be with the Lord *without ulterior motives*, exactly as it happens 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, the spiritual life is not a technique at our disposal, it is not a programme for inner “wellbeing” that it is up to us to plan. No. The 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, today, strangely, do not move us. 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 the heart of Christ,

to find the Lord. And the answer will come, always.

Faced with difficulties, therefore, never be discouraged, please, but confront the test with determination, with the help of the grace of God, which is never lacking. And if we hear within us an insistent voice 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.

— CHAPTER IX —

Consolation

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 23 November 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We continue the catechesis on the discernment of spirits and how to discern them when they take place in our hearts and in our souls. After having considered several aspects of desolation – that darkness in the soul – today let us talk about *consolation* – which is light in the soul and another important element in discernment, which is not to be taken for granted, because it can lend itself to misunderstandings. We must understand what consolation is, just as we have tried to understand well what desolation is.

What is spiritual consolation? It is an experience of *interior joy*, consisting in seeing God's presence in everything. It strengthens faith and hope, and even the ability of doing 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 any trial. It is, therefore, a tremendous gift for the spiritual life as well as 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 the suffering – caused for example by our own sins – can become a reason for consolation.

Let's recall the experience Saint Augustine lived when he spoke with his mother Monica about the beauty of eternal life; or of the perfect joy of Saint Francis that was associated with very difficult situations he had to bear; and let's think of the many saints who were able to do great things not because they thought they were magnificent or capable, but because they had been conquered by the peaceful sweetness of God's love. This is the *peace* that Saint Ignatius discovered in himself with such amazement when he would read the lives of the 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” (*Psicologia e scienze dello spirito*, Città Nuova, 1996, 116). So, genuine peace is one that makes good feelings blossom in us.

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

Consolation is that type of peace, but not that we remain sitting there enjoying it, no.... It gives you peace and draws you toward the Lord and sets you off 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 pushes us forward in service to others, society, other people.

Spiritual consolation is not “piloted” – you cannot say now that consolation will come – no, it is not it cannot be “piloted”, programmed at will. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It allows a *familiarity with God* that seems to cancel distances. When she visited the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome at the age of fourteen, Saint Therese of the Child Jesus tried to touch the nail venerated there, one of the nails with which Jesus was crucified. Therese 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. Consolation 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 fourteen-year-old girl gives us a splendid description of spiritual consolation. We can feel a sense of tenderness toward 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, Therese 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, we think: “I am not capable of doing this, no....” Desolation brings you down. Everything is dark.... “No, I cannot do this...I will not do it”. Instead, in times of consolation, the same things – “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 pushes you to go ahead and to do those things that you would not be capable of doing in a moment of; it pushes you to take the first step. This is what is beautiful about consolation.

But let’s be careful. We must distinguish well between the consolation that comes from God and *false consolations*. Something similar happens in the spiritual life that happens in human productions: there are originals and there are imitations. If an authentic consolation is like a

drop on a sponge, 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. For this reason, when we feel happy, at peace, we are capable of doing anything. But let's not confuse that peace with passing enthusiasm because there's enthusiasm today, but then it is taken away and is no more.

This is why we have to *discern* even when we feel consoled. False consolation can become a danger if we seek it obsessively as an end in itself, forgetting the Lord. As Saint Bernard would say, this is seeking the consolations of God rather than the God of consolations. We need to seek the Lord, and the Lord consoles us with his presence. He consoles us, makes us move forward. And we should not seek God who brings us consolations here below: No, this is not right, we should not be interested in this. This is the dynamic of the child whom we spoke about last time who looks for his or parents only to get something, but doesn't look for them – he or she is seeking their own interests. “Daddy, Mamma” – 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, of reducing it to an object that we use and consume, losing the most beautiful gift which is

God Himself. So, let us move forward in our lives that 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 that brings peace to the depths of your soul, from a passing enthusiasm, which is not bad, but which is not a consolation from God.

— CHAPTER X —

The True Consolation

Saint Peter's Square
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 the other Wednesday, we ask: how can we recognize true consolation? It is a very important question for a good discernment, so as not to be deceived in the search for our true good.

We can find some criteria in a passage from the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. “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 disturbs the soul, taking away its peace, [taking away the] tranquility 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” (no. 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 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 realizing 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 had 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 to 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 it comes to mind to do so like 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 wrong way.

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. It is necessary to examine well the path of our 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 speak 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 sense where the evil spirit enters, his “password”, 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 weak spots in their personality: and the evil spirit enters 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, it is necessary to understand, to go ahead in understanding what happens in my heart. And this is why 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 filled 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.

— CHAPTER XI —

The Confirmation of the Good Choice

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 7 December 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In the process of discernment, it is also important to 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, 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 “deepening” 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, that 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 liberally in relationship with the Lord.

Another important element is having a sense of *one's place in life* – that tranquillity, “I am in my place” – and feeling that you are part of a larger plan, to which one wishes to make a contribution. In St. 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 possession of 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, 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 Him who is Lord of all things. In His presence, nothing can disquiet us. It is the wondrous experience of St. 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. Have courage!

— CHAPTER XII —

Vigilance

*Paul VI Audience Hall
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.

— CHAPTER XIII —

Aids to Discernment

*Paul VI Audience Hall
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 every day, whether we want to or not, we always perform acts of discernment concerning what we eat, read, at work, in our relationships, 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 the spiritual life, even if in some ways we have already encountered

them in the course of this catechesis. 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 leave us confused in the end. 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. Many times it is not easy to enter into that peace of heart because we are so busy with this, that and the other, the entire day... But, please, calm yourself down a little bit, 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 so much because at that moment of calm, the Lord's voice immediately tells, "Well, look here, look at that, what you are doing is good...". When we

allow ourselves to be calm, God's voice comes immediately. 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, refreshment, 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: “When I read Sacred Scripture, God returns and walks in the earthly 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?” – “Well, 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 the whole day to travel there. I used to hear confessions during the night. A young man, who was about 22 years old, came completely covered with tattoos... “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. Because the Lord does not want to destroy us. God wants us to be stronger, better, every day.

Anyone who remains in front of the Crucifix senses newfound peace, learns not to be afraid of God because on the cross, Jesus does not frighten anyone. It is the image of complete weakness, and, at the same time, of total love, capable of facing any trial for us. The saints always gravitated toward 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 is the door, He is the Lord. 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 traveling, read it a bit. Read a small passage during the day. Allow 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. But do not neglect the Word of God. Take the Gospel with you. One minute every day....

It is very beautiful to think of our life with the Lord as a relationship with a friend which grows day by day. Friendship with God. Have you ever thought about this? Yet, this is the way! Let’s think about God who gives us...doesn’t God give us so much? God loves us, He wants us to be his friends. Friendship with God is able to change the heart. Piety is one of the great gifts of the Holy Spirit, which gives us the ability to recognize 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 are dissolved. Nothing can hinder this love that comes from being in contact with the Lord.

And this love 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 he? The 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 them said, “I know!” – “And who is he?” – “The paralytic”, he answered me! He had heard, “the Paraclete”, but thought that it was “paralytic”. How often – this made me think – the Holy Spirit is over there like 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 paralyzed, right? He is the Church’s strength, he is the one who will lead you forward. The Holy Spirit is discernment in act, 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 of the game 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...”. Okay, you’ve done something awful? Talk to the Spirit who is with you and tell him, “Help me, I did this really awful thing...” Never abandon this dialogue with the Holy Spirit. “Father, I am in mortal sin” – that 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!

— CHAPTER XIV —

Spiritual Accompaniment

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 4 January 2023*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Before beginning this catechesis, I would like us to join with those here beside us who are paying their respects to Benedict XVI, and to turn my thoughts to him, a great master of catechesis. His acute and gentle thought was not self-referential, but ecclesial, because he always wanted to accompany us in the encounter with Jesus. Jesus, Crucified and Risen, the Living One and the Lord, was the destination to which Pope Benedict led us, taking us by the hand. May he help us rediscover in Christ the joy of believing and the hope of living.

With today's catechesis, we will conclude the cycle dedicated to the theme of discernment, and we will do so completing the discourse on aids that can and must support it: support the discernment process. One of these is *spiritual accompaniment*, important first and foremost for self-knowledge, which as we have seen is an indispensable condition for discernment. Looking at oneself in the mirror, alone, does not always help, as one can adjust the image. Instead, looking at oneself in the mirror with the help of another, this helps a great deal because the other tells you

the truth – when he or she is truthful – and in this way helps you.

God's grace in us always works on our nature. Thinking of a Gospel parable, we can always compare grace to the good seed and nature to the soil (cf. *Mk* 4:3-9). First of all, it is important to make ourselves known, without fear of sharing the most fragile aspects, where we find ourselves to be more sensitive, weak, or afraid of being judged. Making oneself known, manifesting oneself to a person who accompanies us on the journey of life. Not who decides for us, no: but who accompanies us. Because *fragility* is, in reality, our true richness: we are rich in fragility, all of us, the true richness which we must learn to respect and welcome, because when it is offered to God, it makes us capable of tenderness, mercy, and love. Woe to those people who do not feel fragile: they are harsh, dictatorial. Instead, people who humbly recognize their own frailties are more understanding with others. Fragility, I dare say, makes us human. Not by chance, the first of Jesus' three temptations in the desert – the one linked to hunger – tries to rob us of fragility, presenting it as an evil to be rid of, an impediment to being like God. And yet it is our most valuable treasure: indeed God, to make us like him, wished to share our own fragility to the utmost. Look at the crucifix: God who descended into fragility. Look at the Nativity scene, where he arrives in great human fragility. He shared our fragility.

And spiritual accompaniment, if it is docile to the Holy Spirit, helps to *unmask misunderstandings*, even grave ones, in our consideration of ourselves and our relationship with the Lord. The Gospel presents various examples of clarifying and liberating conversations with Jesus. Think, for example, of those with the Samaritan woman, which we read and read, and there is always this wisdom and tenderness of Jesus; think of the one with Zacchaeus, think of the sinful woman, think of Nicodemus, and the disciples of Emmaus: the Lord's way of approaching. The people who had a true encounter with Jesus were not afraid to open their hearts, to present their own vulnerability, their own inadequacy, their own fragility. In this way, their self-sharing becomes an experience of salvation, of forgiveness freely received.

Recounting what we have lived or are searching for, in front of another person, helps to bring clarity to ourselves, *bringing to light the many thoughts that dwell within us*, and which often unsettle us with their insistent refrains. How many times, in bleak moments, thoughts like this come to us: "I have done everything wrong, I am worthless, no-one understands me, I will never succeed, I am destined for failure", how many times it comes to us to think these things. False and poisonous thoughts, that the exchange with another helps to *unmask*, so we can feel we are loved and valued by the Lord for what we are, capable of doing good things for him. We discover with surprise different ways of seeing

things, signs of goodness that have always been present in us. It is true, we can share our frailties with the other, with the one who accompanies us in life, in the spiritual life, the teacher of spiritual life, be they a layperson, a priest, and say: “Look what is happening to me: I am a wretch, these things are happening to me”. And the one who accompanies answers, “Yes, we all have these things”. This helps us to clarify them well, to see where the roots lie and thereby overcome them.

He or she who accompanies does not substitute the Lord, does not do the work in the place of the person accompanied, but walks alongside him or her, encouraging them to interpret what is stirring in their heart, the quintessential place where the Lord speaks. The spiritual accompanier, whom we call *spiritual director* – I don’t like this term, I prefer *spiritual accompanier*, it is better – they say: “Fine, but look here, look here”, they draw your attention to things that perhaps pass you by; they help you understand better the signs of the times, the voice of the Lord, the voice of the tempter, the voice of the difficulties that you are unable to overcome. Therefore, it is very important not to journey alone. There is a wise African saying – because they have that tribal mysticism – which says: “If you want to arrive quickly, go alone; if you want to arrive safely, go with others”, go in company, go with your people. This is important. In the spiritual life it is better to be accompanied by someone who knows about us and helps us. And this is spiritual accompaniment.

This accompaniment can be fruitful if, on both sides, one has experienced *filiality* and spiritual *kinship*. We discover we are children of God at the moment that we discover we are brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. This is why it is essential to be *part of a journeying community*. We are not alone, we belong to a people, a nation, a city that is on the move, a Church, a parish, this group... a community on the move. One does not go by oneself to the Lord: this will not do. We must understand this clearly. As in the Gospel account of the paralytic, we are often sustained and healed by the faith of someone else (cr. *Mk 2:1-5*) who helps us go forward, because we all at times have inner paralyses and it takes someone who helps us to overcome that conflict, with help. One does not go to the Lord by oneself, let us remember this clearly; other times we are the ones who take on this commitment on behalf of another brother or sister, and we are companions who help that other person. Without the experience of filiality and kinship, accompaniment can give rise to unrealistic expectations, misunderstandings, in the forms of dependence that leave the person in an infantile state. Accompaniment, but as children of God and brothers and sisters among ourselves.

The Virgin Mary is a great teacher of discernment: she *speaks little, listens a lot, and cherishes in her heart* (cf. *Lk 2:19*). The three attitudes of Our Lady: she speaks little, listens a lot, and cherishes in her heart. And the few times she speaks, she leaves a mark. For example, in the

Gospel of John there is a very short phrase uttered by Mary which is a mandate for Christians of all times: “Do whatever he tells you” (cf. 2:5). It is curious: once I heard a very good, very pious elderly woman, who had not studied theology, she was very simple. And she said to me, “Do you know what Our Lady always does?” I don’t know, she embraces you, she calls you... “No, the gesture Our Lady does is this” [points with his finger]. I didn’t understand, and I asked, “What does it mean?”. And the old lady replied, “She always points to Jesus”. This is beautiful: Our Lady takes nothing for herself, she points to Jesus. *Do whatever Jesus tells you*: that is what Our Lady is like. Mary knows that the Lord speaks to the heart of each person, and asks for these words to be translated into actions and choices. She knew how to do this more than any other person, and indeed she is present in the fundamental moments of Jesus’ life, especially in the supreme moment of death on the Cross.

Dear brothers and sisters, we are ending this series of catecheses on discernment: discernment is an art, *an art that can be learned* and which has its own rules. If learned well, it enables spiritual experience to be lived in an ever more beautiful and orderly manner. Above all, discernment is a gift from God, which must always be asked for, without ever presuming to be expert and self-sufficient. Lord, give me the grace to discern in the moments of life, what I must do, what I must

understand. Give me the grace to discern, and give me the person who will help me to discern.

The voice of the Lord can always be recognized; it has a unique style it is a voice that pacifies, encourages and reassures in difficulties. The Gospel reminds us of this continually: “Do not be afraid” (*Lk* 1:30), how beautiful is the Angel’s word to Mary after the resurrection of Jesus; “Do not be afraid”, “Do not be afraid”, it is the style of the Lord, “Do not be afraid”. “Do not be afraid!” the Lord repeats to us today too, “Do not be afraid”: if we trust in his word, we will play the game of life well, and we will be able to help others. As the Psalm says, his Word is *a lamp to our feet and a light to our path* (cf. 119, 105).