



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

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[Multimedia]

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

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

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

In this sense, even the spiritual state we call *desolation*, when everything is dark and sad in the heart, this state of *desolation* can be an opportunity for growth. Indeed, if there is not a little dissatisfaction, a little healthy sadness, a healthy capacity to dwell in solitude and to be with ourselves without fleeing, we run the risk of always remaining on the surface of things and never making contact with the core of our existence. Desolation causes an "unrest in the soul": when one is sad it is as if the soul were shaken. It keeps us alert, it fosters vigilance and humility, and protects us from the winds of fancy. These are indispensable conditions for progress in life, and hence, also in spiritual life. A perfect but "aseptic" serenity, without feeling, makes us inhuman when it becomes the criterion for decisions and behaviour. We cannot ignore our feelings: we are human and feelings are part of our humanity. And without understanding feelings, we would be inhuman. Without experiencing our sentiments, we would also be indifferent to the sufferings of others and incapable of accepting our own. Not to mention that such a "perfect serenity" cannot be

reached by this path of indifference. This sterile distance: "I don't get involved in things, I keep my distance". This is not life. It is as if we lived in a laboratory, shut away, so as not to get germs and diseases. For many saints, restlessness was a decisive catalyst to turn their lives around. This artificial serenity is no good, whereas a healthy restlessness is good, the restless heart, the heart that seeks to seek its way. This is the case, for example, of Augustine of Hippo, Edith Stein, Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, and Charles de Foucauld. Important choices come at a price that life presents, a price that is within everyone's reach. That is, important choices do not come from the lottery, no. They have a price and you have to pay that price. It is a price that you must pay with your heart. It is the price of the decision, the price of making some effort. It is not free of charge, but it is a price within everyone's reach. We must all pay for this decision so as to leave behind the state of indifference that always brings us down.

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

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

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

Dear brothers and sisters, spiritual life is not a technique at our disposal. It is not a programme for inner "well-being" that it is up to us to plan. No. Spiritual life is *the relationship with the Living One*, with God, the Living One who cannot be reduced to our categories. And desolation, then, is the clearest response to the objection that the experience of God is a form of wishful thinking, a simple projection of our desires. Desolation is not feeling anything, when everything is dark, but you seek God in the desolation. In that case, if we think that he is a projection of our desires, we would always be the ones to plan, and we would always be happy and content, like a record that repeats

the same music. Instead, those who pray realize that the outcome is *unpredictable*. Experiences and passages from the Bible that have often enthralled us, strangely do not move us today. And, equally unexpectedly, experiences, encounters and readings that we have never paid much attention to or preferred to avoid — such as the experience of the cross — bring immense peace. Do not fear desolation; face it with perseverance. Do not evade it. And in desolation, try to find Christ's heart, to find the Lord. And the answer will come, always.

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

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims taking part in today's Audience, especially those from England, Denmark, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Canada and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the joy and peace of Christ our Lord. God bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *young people*, to the *sick*, to the *elderly* and to *newlyweds*. Following the example of Saint Margaret of Scotland and Saint Gertrude, whose festivity we celebrate today, always seek light and support for every choice in daily life, in Jesus. I offer my blessing to all of you.

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APPEAL

I have learned with sorrow and concern the news of a new and even more severe missile attack on Ukraine, which has caused deaths and damage to much civilian infrastructure. Let us pray that the Lord will convert the hearts of those who still insist on war, and make the desire for peace prevail for martyred Ukraine, to avoid any escalation and open the way to a cease-fire and dialogue.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on discernment, we have seen the importance of interpreting the movements of our heart, including occasional experiences of

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