



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
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Catechesis on Discernment. 9. *Consolation*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

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

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

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

as we have seen, even suffering — caused for example by our own sins — can become a reason for consolation.

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

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

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

Spiritual consolation cannot be "piloted" — you cannot say "now may consolation come" — no, it cannot be "piloted". It cannot be programmed at will. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It allows a *familiarity with God* that seems to cancel distances. When Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus visited the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem in Rome at the age of 14, she tried to touch the nail venerated there, one of the nails with which Jesus was crucified. Thérèse understood her daring as a transport of love and confidence. Later, she wrote, "I truly was too audacious. But the Lord sees the depths of our hearts. He knows my intention was pure [...] I acted with him as a child who believes everything is permissible and who considers the Father's treasures their own" (*Autobiographical Manuscript*, 183). Consolation is spontaneous and leads you to do everything spontaneously, as if we were children. Children are spontaneous, and consolation leads you to be spontaneous with a tenderness, with a very deep peace. A 14-year-old girl gives us a splendid description of spiritual consolation. We can feel a sense of tenderness towards God that makes us audacious in our desire to participate in his own life, to do what is pleasing to him because we feel familiar with him, we feel that his house is our house, we feel welcome, loved, restored. With this

consolation, we do not give up in the face of difficulty — in fact, with the same boldness, Thérèse would ask the Pope for permission to enter Carmel even though she was too young, and her wish was granted. What does this mean? It means that consolation makes us daring. When we find ourselves in a moment of darkness, of desolation, and we think: “I am not capable of doing this”. Desolation brings you down. It makes you see everything as dark.... “No, I cannot do this, I will not do it”. Instead, in times of consolation, you see the same things in a different way and say: “No, I am going ahead. I will do it”. “But are you sure?” “I feel God’s strength and I am going ahead”. And so, consolation spurs you to go ahead and to do those things that you would not be capable of doing in a moment of desolation. It spurs you to take the first step. This is the beauty of consolation.

But let us be careful. We have to distinguish well between the consolation that comes from God and *false consolations*. Something similar happens in spiritual life that also happens in human productions: there are originals and there are imitations. If authentic consolation is like a drop on a sponge — it is soft and intimate — its imitations are noisier and flashier. They are pure enthusiasm, like straw fires, lacking substance, leading us to close in on ourselves and not to take care of others. In the end, false consolation leaves us empty, far from the centre of our existence. This is why, when we feel happy, at peace, we are capable of doing anything. But let us not confuse this peace with passing enthusiasm because there is enthusiasm today, but then it wanes and is no more.

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

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims taking part in today's Audience, especially those from the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the joy and peace of Christ our Lord.

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *young people*, to *the sick*, to *the elderly* and to *newlyweds*. Next Sunday will mark the beginning of Advent, the liturgical time that precedes and prepares us for the celebration of Holy Christmas. I hope all of you will open your heart to the Lord — don't forget, open your heart to the Lord — in order to pave the way for He who comes to fill each of our human weaknesses with the light of his presence. I offer my blessing to all of you!

APPEALS

In the past few hours, the island of Java in Indonesia was hit by a strong earthquake. I express my nearness to those dear peoples and I pray for the dead and the injured.

Last Sunday, Father Giuseppe (Joseph) Ambrosoli, Comboni missionary, priest and physician was beatified in Kalongo, Uganda. He was born in the Diocese of Como, [Italy] and died in Uganda in 1987, after spending his life for the sick in whom he saw Christ's face. May his extraordinary witness help each of us to be worthy of a Church that "goes forth". A round of applause for the new Blessed!

I would like to send my greetings to the athletes, fans and spectators who, from various continents, are following the Football World Cup being played in Qatar. May this important event be an occasion for encounter and harmony among nations, fostering fraternity and peace among peoples. Let us pray for peace in the world, and for an end to all conflicts, with a special thought for the terrible suffering of the dear and martyred people of Ukraine. With regards to this, next Saturday is the anniversary of the terrible Holodomor genocide, the extermination by hunger artificially caused by Stalin in 1932-33. Let us pray for the victims of this genocide and let us pray for the many Ukrainian children, women and elderly, and babies who are today suffering the martyrdom of aggression.

May World Fisheries Day, which was celebrated the day before yesterday, foster the sustainability of fishing and aquaculture, through respect for the rights of fishers, who through their work contribute to food security, nutrition and to reducing poverty in the world.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

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