



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

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[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Discernment. 10. *The true consolation*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

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

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

And these are valuable indications that merit a brief comment. What does it mean that *the*

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

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

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

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

Hence the importance of this patient but indispensable examination of the origin and the truth of our thoughts; it is an invitation to learn from experiences, from what happens to us, so as not to continue to repeat the same errors. The more we know ourselves, the more we can sense where the evil spirit enters from, his “passwords”, the entrance to our heart, which are the points to which we are most sensitive, so as to pay attention to them in the future. Each one of us has their more

sensitive spots, the weakest spots in their personality: and the evil spirit enters from there, and leads us down the wrong path, or takes us away from the true, right path. I go and pray but he leads me away from my prayer.

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

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

Brothers and sisters, we have to understand, to go ahead in understanding what happens in my heart. And in order to do so, an examination of conscience is necessary, to see what happened today. "Today I got angry, I didn't do that...": But why? Going beyond the "why" to look for the root of these mistakes. "But, today I was happy but I was bored because I had to help those people, but at the end I felt fulfilled by that help" — and there is the Holy Spirit. Learning to read what happened during the day in the book of our heart. Do it: it will take just two minutes, but it will do you good, I assure you.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims taking part in today's Audience, especially those from England, Australia, Vietnam and the United States of America. I pray that each of you, and your families, may experience a blessed Advent in preparation for the coming, at Christmas, of the newborn Jesus, Son of God and Saviour of the world. God bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *young people*, to *the sick*, to *the elderly* and to *newlyweds*. The liturgical Season of Advent, that began recently, invites us to go to the encounter with the Lord who comes through prayer, penitence and works of charity. Prepare yourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus with assiduous listening to the Word of God and a generous response to his grace.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Apostle Saint Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, Patron of the Church in Constantinople, to where as customary, a Delegation of the Holy See has travelled. I wish to express my special affection to dear brother Patriarch Bartholomew I and to the entire Church of Constantinople. May the intercession of the Holy apostle brothers Peter and Andrew soon grant the Church full enjoyment of her unity, and peace to the whole world, especially at this time, to martyred Ukraine, which is always in our hearts and in our prayers.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

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