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General Audience

This morning's General Audience took place at 9.00 in Saint Peter's Square, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian, the Pope resumed his cycle of catechesis on *Discernment*, focusing on the theme: "*Why are we desolate?*" (Bible reading: *Ps* 30: 7-9, 12).

After summarizing his catechesis in several languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the faithful present. He then made an appeal for peace for "martyred Ukraine".

The General Audience concluded with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the apostolic blessing.

Catechesis of the Holy Father

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.

Greeting in English

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!

Appeal of the Holy Father

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.