

"What am I looking for?"

In his 7 September general audience, Pope Francis continued his cycle of catechesis on spiritual discernment with the example of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

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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.
