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"We can only love in freedom"

In his 7 December general audience, Pope Francis continued his cycle of catechesis on spiritual discernment, speaking about the signs that confirm good choices.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In the process of discernment, it is also important to remain attentive to

the stage that immediately follows the decision taken, in order to either catch *the signs that confirm it* or those that disprove it. I have to make a decision, [so] I make the discernment, pro or con, my feelings, I pray... then this process ends and I make the decision and then comes that part where we have to be careful, see. Because in life some decisions are not good and there are signs that disprove them, while on the other hand, good ones are confirmed.

Indeed, we have seen how time is a fundamental criterion for recognizing God's voice amidst so many other voices. He alone is Lord of time: it is a hallmark of His originality, which differentiates Him from imitations that speak in His name without actually doing so. One of the distinctive signs of the good spirit is the fact that it communicates *a peace that lasts in time*. If you

consider more profoundly, then make the decision and this gives you a peace that lasts through time, this is a good sign and indicates that the path was good. A peace that brings harmony, unity, fervour, zeal. You come out of the “deepening” process better than when you entered it.

For example, if I make the decision to devote an extra half hour to prayer, and then I find that I live the other moments of the day better, that I am more serene, less anxious, I do my work with more care and zest, that even relations with some difficult people become smoother... These are all important signs in favour of the goodness of the decision taken. Spiritual life is circular: the goodness of a choice benefits all areas of our lives. For it is participation in God's creativity.

We can recognize *some important aspects* that help us read the time

after the decision as a possible *confirmation* of its goodness, because the subsequent period confirms the goodness of the decision. In some ways we have already encountered these important aspects in the course of these catecheses but now they find their further application.

A first aspect is whether the decision is seen as a possible sign of response to the Lord's love and generosity toward me. It is not born out of fear, not born of emotional blackmail or compulsion, but born out of *gratitude for the good received*, which moves the heart to live liberally in relationship with the Lord.

Another important element is having a sense of *one's place in life* – that tranquillity, “I am in my place” – and feeling that you are part of a larger plan, to which one wishes to make a contribution. In St. Peter's Square there are two precise points – the

focal points of the ellipse – from which one can see Bernini's columns perfectly aligned. Similarly, a man can recognize that he has found what he is looking for when his day becomes more orderly, when he feels a growing integration among his many interests, when he establishes a proper hierarchy of importance, and when he is able to experience this with ease, facing the difficulties that arise with renewed energy and fortitude. These are signs that you have made a good decision.

Another good sign of confirmation, for example, is the fact of *remaining free* with regard to what has been decided, being willing to question it, even to give it up in the face of possible denials, trying to find in them a possible teaching from the Lord. This is not because He wants to deprive us of what we hold dear, but in order to live it with freedom, without attachment. Only God knows

what is truly good for us.

Possessiveness is the enemy of goodness and kills affection. Be attentive to this: possessiveness is the enemy of good, it kills affection. The many cases of violence in the domestic sphere, of which we unfortunately have frequent news, almost always arise from the claim of possession of the affection of the other, from the search for absolute security that kills freedom and stifles life, making it hell.

We can only love in freedom, which is why the Lord created us free, free even to say no to Him. Offering Him what we hold most dear is in our best interest, enabling us to live it in the best possible way and in truth, as a gift He has given us, as a sign of His gratuitous goodness, knowing that our lives, as well as the whole of history, are in His benevolent hands. It is what the Bible calls the *fear of God*, that is, respect for God – not that

God frightens me, but a respect, an indispensable condition for accepting the gift of Wisdom (cf. Sir 1:1-18). It is the fear that casts out all other fears, because it is oriented to Him who is Lord of all things. In His presence, nothing can disquiet us. It is the wondrous experience of St. Paul, which he expressed in this way: "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:12-13). This is the free man, who blesses the Lord both when good things come and when not-so-good things come: May he be blessed, and let us go forward!

Recognizing this is critical to good decision-making, and it reassures us about what we cannot control or predict: health, the future, loved ones, our plans. What matters is that

our trust is placed in the Lord of the universe, who loves us immensely and knows that we can build with Him something wonderful, something eternal. The lives of the saints show us this in the most beautiful way. Let us go forward, always trying to make decisions in this way, in prayer and feeling what's going on in our hearts, and going forward slowly. Have courage!

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