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"Do not flee from trials"

In his 26 October general audience, Pope Francis continued his cycle of catechesis on spiritual discernment, speaking about desolation as an object of discernment.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Discernment, as we have seen in the previous catecheses, is not primarily

a logical procedure; it is based on actions, and actions also have an affective connotation, which must be acknowledged, because God speaks to the heart. Let us then enter into the first affective mode, an object of discernment: *desolation*. What does this mean?

Desolation has been defined as follows: “Darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad and as if separated from his Creator and Lord” (Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 317). We all have experience of this. I believe that, in one way or another, we all have experienced of this, of desolation. The problem is how to interpret it, because it too has something important to tell us, and if we are in

a hurry to free ourselves of it, we risk losing this.

No one wants to be desolate, sad: this is true. We would all like a life that is always joyful, cheerful and fulfilled.

Yet, besides not being possible – because it is not possible – this would not be good for us either. Indeed, the change from a life oriented towards vice can start *from a situation of sadness, of remorse* for what one has done. The etymology of this word, “remorse”, is very beautiful: the remorse of the conscience, we all know this. Remorse: literally, it is the conscience that bites [in Italian, *mordere*] that does not permit peace. Alessandro Manzoni, in *The Betrothed*, gave us a wonderful description of remorse as an opportunity to change one’s life. It is about the famous dialogue between Cardinal Federico Borromeo and the Unnamed, who, after a terrible night, presents himself destroyed by the

cardinal, who addresses him with surprising words: “You have some good news for me; why do you hesitate to tell it?” “Good news?” says the other. “I have hell in my soul [...]. Tell me, tell me, if you know, what good news could you expect from such a one as I”. ““That God has touched your heart, and is drawing you to himself” replied the cardinal calmly” (Ch. 23). God touches the heart, and something comes to you inwardly, sadness, remorse for something, and it is an invitation to set out on a new path. The man of God knows how to notice in depth what moves in the heart.

It is important to learn how to *read sadness*. We all know what sadness is: all of us. But do we know how to interpret it? Do we know what it means for me, this sadness today? In our time, it – sadness – is mostly considered negatively, as an ill to avoid at all costs, and instead it can

be an indispensable alarm bell for life, inviting us to explore richer and more fertile landscapes that transience and escapism do not permit. Saint Thomas defines sadness as a *pain of the soul*: like the nerves for the body, it redirects our attention to a possible danger, or a disregarded benefit (cf. *Summa Theologica* I-II, q. 36, a.1). Therefore, it is indispensable for our health; it protects us from harming ourselves and others. It would be far more serious and dangerous not to feel this, and to go ahead. At times sadness works like a traffic light: “Stop, stop! It is red, here. Stop.”

For those, on the other hand, who have the desire to do good, sadness is an obstacle with which the tempter tries to *discourage* us. In that case, one must act in a manner exactly contrary to what is suggested, determined to continue what one had set out to do (cf. *Spiritual*

Exercises, 318). Think of work, study, prayer, a commitment undertaken: if we abandoned them as soon as we felt boredom or sadness, we would never complete anything. This is also an experience common to the spiritual life: the road to goodness, the Gospel reminds us, is narrow and uphill, it requires combat, self-conquest. I begin to pray, or dedicate myself to a good work, and strangely enough, just then things come to mind that need to be done urgently – so as not to pray or do good works. We all experience this. It is important, for those who want to serve the Lord, not to be led astray by desolation. And this.. “But no, I don’t want to, this is boring...” – beware. Unfortunately, some people decide to abandon the life of prayer, or the choice they have made, marriage or religious life, driven by desolation, without first pausing to consider this state of mind, and especially without the help of a

guide. A wise rule says *not to make changes when you are desolate*. It will be the time afterwards, rather than the mood of the moment, that will show the goodness or otherwise of our choices.

It is interesting to note, in the Gospel, that Jesus repels temptations with an attitude of firm resolution (cf. *Mt* 3:14-15; 4:1-11; 16; 21-23). Trials assail him from all sides, but always, finding in him this steadfastness, determined to do the will of the Father, they fail and cease to hinder his path. In spiritual life, trial is an important moment, as the Bible recalls explicitly, and says: “When you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials” (*Sir* 2:1). If you want to take the good path, prepare yourself: there will be obstacles, there will be temptations, there will be moments of sadness. It is like when a professor examines a student: if he sees that the student

knows the essentials of the subject, he does not insist: the student has passed the test. But he must pass the test.

If we know how to traverse loneliness and desolation with openness and awareness, we can emerge strengthened in human and spiritual terms. No trial is beyond our reach; no trial will be greater than what we can do. But do not flee from trials: see what this test means, what it means that I am sad: why am I sad? What does it mean that in this moment I am in desolation? What does it mean that I am in desolation and cannot go on? Saint Paul reminds us that no one is tempted beyond his or her ability, because the Lord never abandons us and, with him close by, we can overcome every temptation (cf. *1 Cor* 10:13). And if we do not overcome it today, we get up another time, we walk and we will overcome it tomorrow. But we

must not remain dead – so to speak –
we must not remain defeated by a
moment of sadness, of desolation: go
forward. May the Lord bless this
path – courageous! – of spiritual life,
which is always a journey.

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