

"Choices are an essential part of life"

In his 31 August general audience, Pope Francis began a new cycle of catechesis on discernment, a demanding exercise that involves knowledge, experience, emotion, and the will.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good day!

Today we begin a new cycle of catechesis: we have finished the catechesis on old age, now we begin

a new cycle on the theme of discernment. Discernment is an important act that concerns everyone, because choices are an essential part of life. One chooses food, clothing, a course of study, a job, a relationship. In all of these, a life project is realised, and even our relationship with God is concretized.

In the Gospel, *Jesus speaks of discernment with images taken from ordinary life*; for example, he describes the fisher who selects the good fish and discards the bad ones; or the merchant who knows how to identify, among many pearls, the one of greatest value. Or he who, ploughing a field, comes across something that turns out to be a treasure (cf. *Mt 13:44-48*).

In the light of these examples, discernment presents itself as an exercise of *intelligence*, of also of *skill* [It: ‘perizia’] and also of *will*, to seize

the opportune moment: these are the conditions for making a good choice. It takes intelligence, skill, and also will to make a good choice. And there is also a price required for discernment to become effective. To perform his trade to the best of his ability, the fisher reckons with hard work, long nights spent at sea, and then discarding some of the catch, accepting a loss of profit for the sake of those for whom it is intended. The pearl merchant does not hesitate to spend everything to buy that pearl; and so does the person who has stumbled upon a treasure. [These are] unexpected, unplanned situations, where it is crucial to recognise the importance and urgency of a decision to be made.

Everyone has to make decisions; there is no one to make it for us. At a certain point, adults can freely ask for advice; we can reflect, but the decision is our own. We can't say, 'I

lost this, because my husband decided, my wife decided, my brother decided.' No. You have to decide, each of us has to decide, and for this reason it is important to know how to discern, to decide well it is necessary to know how to discern.

The Gospel suggests another important aspect of discernment: *it involves the emotions*. The one who has found the treasure feels no difficulty in selling everything, so great is his *joy* (cf. *Mt 13:44*). The term used by the evangelist Matthew indicates a very special joy, which no human reality can give; and indeed it recurs in very few other passages of the Gospel, all of which refer to the encounter with God. It is the joy of the Magi when, after a long and arduous journey, they see the star again (cf. *Mt 2:10*); the joy, it is the joy of the women who return from the empty tomb after hearing the angel's

announcement of the resurrection (cf. *Mt* 28:8). It is the joy of those who have found the Lord. Making a *good* decision, a correct decision, always leads you to that final joy; perhaps along the way you have to suffer a bit of uncertainty, thinking, seeking, but in the end the right decision blesses you with joy.

In the *final judgement* God will exercise discernment – the great discernment – with regard to us. The images of the farmer, the fisher, and the merchant are examples of what happens in the Kingdom of Heaven, a Kingdom that manifests itself in the ordinary actions of life, which require us to take a stand. This is why it is so important to be able to discern: great choices can arise from circumstances that at first sight seem secondary, but turn out to be decisive. For example, let us think of Andrew and John's first encounter with Jesus, an encounter that stems

from a simple question: ‘Rabbi, where do you live?’ — ‘Come and see,’ says Jesus (cf. *Jn* 1:38-39). A very brief exchange, but it is the beginning of a change that, step by step, will mark their whole life. Years later, the Evangelist will continue to remember that encounter that changed him forever, and he will even remember the time: ‘It was about four o’clock in the afternoon’ (v. 39). It is the hour when time and the eternal met in his life. And in a good decision, correct, there is an encounter between God’s will and our will; there is an encounter between the present path and the eternal. Making the right decision, after a path of discernment, is to make this encounter: time with eternity.

So: knowledge, experience, emotion, will: these are some of the indispensable elements of discernment. In the course of these

catecheses we will see others, equally important.

Discernment — as I've said — involves *hard work*. According to the Bible, we do not find set before us, pre-packaged, the life we are to live. No! We have to decide it all the time, according to the reality that comes. God invites us to evaluate and choose: He created us free and wants us to exercise our freedom. Therefore, discerning is *demanding*.

We have often had this experience: choosing something that seemed good to us and yet was not. Or knowing what our true good was and not choosing it. Human beings, unlike animals, can be wrong, can be unwilling to choose correctly — freedom, no? And the Bible shows this from its very first pages. God gives man a precise instruction: if you want to live, if you want to enjoy life, remember that you are a

creature, that you are not the criterion of good and evil, and that the choices you make will have a consequence, for you, for others and for the world (cf. *Gen 2:16-17*); you can make the earth a magnificent garden or you can make it a desert of death. A fundamental teaching: it is no coincidence that this is the first dialogue between God and man. The dialogue is: the Lord gives the mission, you have to do this and that; and every person, the step he or she takes, must discern which decision to make. Discernment is that reflection of the mind, of the heart, that we have to do before making a decision.

Discernment is demanding but indispensable for living. It requires that I know myself, that I know what is good for me here and now. Above all, it requires a filial relationship with God. God is Father and He does not leave us alone, He is always willing to advise us, to encourage us,

to welcome us. But He never imposes His will. Why? Because He wants to be loved and not feared. And also, God wants children, not slaves: free children. And love can only be lived in freedom. To learn to live one must learn to love, and for this it is necessary to discern: what can I do now, faced with this alternative? Let it be a sign of greater love, of greater maturity in love. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to guide us! Let us invoke Him every day, especially when we have choices to make.

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