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**"Keep going forward, courageously and joyfully!"**

In his 21 December general audience, Pope Francis continued his cycle of catechesis on spiritual discernment, speaking about aids for the exercise of discernment.

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*Dear brothers and sisters, good morning, and welcome!*

Let us continue – we are concluding – the catechesis on discernment.

Anyone who has been following these catecheses until now might think: what a complicated practice discernment is! In reality, it is life that is complicated and, if we do not learn how to read it, as complicated as it is, we risk wasting our lives, using strategies that end up disheartening us.

During our first meeting, we saw that every day, whether we want to or not, we always perform acts of discernment concerning what we eat, read, at work, in our relationships, everything. Life always presents choices to us, and if we do not make conscious choices, in the end it is life that chooses for us, taking us where we do not want to go.

Discernment, however, is not done alone. Today, let us look more

specifically at *several aids* in this regard that can facilitate this indispensable exercise of discernment in the spiritual life, even if in some ways we have already encountered them in the course of this catechesis. But a summary will help us a lot.

One of the first indispensable aids is evaluating with the *Word of God* and the *doctrine of the Church*. They help us read what is stirring in our hearts, learning to recognize God's voice and to distinguish it from other voices that seem to vie for our attention, but leave us confused in the end. The Bible warns us that God's voice resounds in stillness, in attention, in silence. Let us recall the experience of the Prophet Elijah: the Lord does not speak to him in the wind that smashes the rocks, nor in the fire or the earthquake, but He speaks to him in a light breeze (cf. *1 Kings* 19:11-12). This is a very beautiful

image that helps us understand how God speaks. God's voice does not impose itself; God's voice is discreet, respectful – allow me to say, God's voice is humble – and, for that reason, produces peace. And it is only in peace that we can enter profoundly into ourselves and recognize the authentic desires the Lord has placed in our hearts. Many times it is not easy to enter into that peace of heart because we are so busy with this, that and the other, the entire day... But, please, calm yourself down a little bit, enter into yourself, within yourself. Stop for two minutes. Witness what your heart is feeling. Let's do this, brothers and sisters, it will help us so much because at that moment of calm, the Lord's voice immediately tells, "Well, look here, look at that, what you are doing is good...". When we allow ourselves to be calm, God's voice comes immediately. He is waiting for us to do this.

For the believer, the Word of God is not simply a text to read. The Word of God is a living presence, it is a work of the Holy Spirit that comforts, instructs, gives light, strength, refreshment, and a zest for life. To read the Bible, to read a piece, one or two passages of the Bible, is like a short telegram from God that immediately goes to the heart. The Word of God is a bit – and I am not exaggerating here – it is a little, real foretaste of heaven. A great saint and pastor, Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, understood this well, when he wrote: “When I read Sacred Scripture, God returns and walks in the earthly paradise” (*Letters*, 49.3). With the Bible, we open the door to God who is taking a walk. Interesting.

This affective relationship with the Bible, with Scripture, with the Gospel, leads us to experience an *affective relationship with the Lord Jesus*. Let’s not be afraid of this!

Heart speaks to heart. And this is another indispensable aid that is not to be taken for granted. We can often have a distorted idea about God, thinking of him as a sullen judge, a harsh judge, ready to catch us in the act. On the contrary, Jesus reveals a God who is full of compassion and tenderness for us, ready to sacrifice himself so he can come to us, just like the father in the parable of the prodigal son (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*). One time, someone asked – I don't know if it was a mother or a grandmother who told me this – “What do I need to do in this moment?” – “Well, listen to God, he will tell you what you should do. Open your heart to God”. This is good advice. I remember one time, there was a pilgrimage of young people done once a year to the Shrine of [Our Lady of] Lujan, 70 km away from Buenos Aires. It takes the whole day to travel there. I used to hear confessions during the night. A young man, who was about 22 years

old, came completely covered with tattoos... “My God”, I thought, “who is this person?” And he said to me, “You know, I came because I have a serious problem, and I told my mother, and my mother told me, ‘Go to Our Lady. Make a pilgrimage and Our Lady will tell you’. And I came. I was in touch with the Bible here. I listened to the Word of God and it touched my heart and I need to do this, this, this, this”. The Word of God touches the heart and changes your life. And I have witnessed this many times. Because the Lord does not want to destroy us. God wants us to be stronger, better, every day.

Anyone who remains in front of the Crucifix senses newfound peace, learns not to be afraid of God because on the cross, Jesus does not frighten anyone. It is the image of complete weakness, and, at the same time, of total love, capable of facing any trial for us. The saints always

gravitated toward Jesus Crucified. The account of Jesus' Passion is the surest way to face evil without being overwhelmed by it. There is no judgement there, not even resignation, because it is shot through with the greatest light, the light of Easter, that allows us to see in those terrible deeds a greater plan that no impediment, obstacle or failure can thwart. The Word of God always makes us look at another side – that is, the cross is here, this is awful, but there is something else, hope, resurrection. The Word of God opens every door because He is the door, He is the Lord. Let us pick up the Gospel, take the Bible in our hands – 5 minutes a day, no more. Carry a pocket-size Gospel with you, in your purse, and when you are traveling, read it a bit. Read a small passage during the day. Allow the Word of God to draw near to your heart. Do this and you will see how your lives will change, with the



proximity of the Word of God. “Yes, Father, but I am used to reading the lives of the saints”. This is good. But do not neglect the Word of God. Take the Gospel with you. One minute every day....

It is very beautiful to think of our life with the Lord as a relationship with a friend which grows day by day.

Friendship with God. Have you ever thought about this? Yet, this is the way! Let's think about God who gives us...doesn't God gives us so much? God loves us, He wants us to be his friends. Friendship with God is able to change the heart. Piety is one of the great gifts of the Holy Spirit, which gives us the ability to recognize God's fatherhood. We have a tender Father, an affectionate Father, a Father who loves us, who has always loved us. When we experience this, our hearts melt and doubts, fears, feelings of unworthiness are dissolved. Nothing

can hinder this love that comes from being in contact with the Lord.

And this love reminds us of another great help, *the gift of the Holy Spirit*, who is present in us and who instructs us, makes the Word of God that we read come alive, suggests new meanings, opens doors that seem closed, indicates paths in life where there seem to be only darkness and confusion. I ask you – Do you pray to the Holy Spirit? But who is he? The Great Unknown One. Sure, we pray to the Father with the Our Father. We pray to Jesus. But we forget the Spirit! One time when I was doing catechesis with children, I asked the question, “Which one of you knows who the Holy Spirit is?” And one of them said, “I know!” – “And who is he?” – “The paralytic”, he answered me! He had heard, “the Paraclete”, but thought that it was “paralytic”. How often – this made me think – the Holy Spirit is over

there like a Person who doesn't count. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives life to the soul! Let him enter. Speak with the Holy Spirit just like you speak with the Father, like you speak with the Son. Speak with the Holy Spirit – who is anything but paralyzed, right? He is the Church's strength, he is the one who will lead you forward. The Holy Spirit is discernment in act, the presence of God in us. He is the gift, the greatest gift the Father assures to those who ask (cf. *Lk 11:13*). And what did Jesus call him? “The gift” – “Remain here in Jerusalem and wait for *the gift of God*”, which is the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to live our lives in friendship with the Holy Spirit. He changes you. He makes you grow.

The Liturgy of the Hours opens the main moments of daily prayer with this invocation: “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me”. “Lord, help me!” because

by myself I cannot move ahead, I cannot love, I cannot live.... This invocation for salvation is the uncontainable request that flows from the depths of our being. The goal of discernment is to recognize the salvation God is working in my life. It reminds me that I am never alone and that, if I am struggling, it is because the stakes of the game are high. The Holy Spirit is always with us. "Oh, Father, I've done something really bad. I need to go to confession. I cannot do anything...". Okay, you've done something awful? Talk to the Spirit who is with you and tell him, "Help me, I did this really awful thing..." Never abandon this dialogue with the Holy Spirit. "Father, I am in mortal sin" – that does not matter. Speak with Him so that he will help you and forgive you. Never abandon this dialogue with the Holy Spirit. And with these aids the Lord gives to us, there is no need to be afraid. Keep

going forward, courageously and joyfully!

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