



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 5 October 2022

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Catechesis On Discernment: 4. *The elements of discernment. Self-knowledge*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue to explore the theme of discernment. Last time we considered prayer, understood as familiarity and confidence with God, as an indispensable element. Prayer, not like parrots, but as familiarity and confidence with God; the prayer of children to their Father; prayer with an open heart. We saw this [in the last catechesis](#). Today I would like, in an almost complementary way, to emphasize that good discernment also requires *self-knowledge*. Knowing oneself. And this is not easy. Indeed, discernment involves our human faculties: memory, intellect, will, affections. Often, we do not know how to discern because we do not know ourselves well enough, and so we do not know what we really want. You have often heard: “But that person, why doesn’t he sort out his life? He has never known what he wants...”. Without getting to that extreme, but it happens to us too that we do not know clearly what we want, we do not know ourselves well.

Underlying spiritual doubts and vocational crises, there is — not infrequently — insufficient dialogue between religious life and our *human, cognitive and affective dimension*. A writer on spirituality noted how many difficulties on the theme of discernment are indicative of problems of another kind, that should be recognized and explored. This author writes: “I have come to the conviction that the greatest obstacle to true discernment (and to real growth in prayer) is not the intangible nature of God, but the fact that we do not know ourselves sufficiently, and do not even

want to know ourselves as we really are. Almost all of us hide behind a mask, not only in front of others, but also when we look in the mirror” (cf. Thomas H. Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat*, 1984). We all have the temptation to wear a mask, even in front of ourselves.

Forgetting God’s presence in our life goes hand in hand with our ignorance of ourselves — ignoring God and ignoring ourselves — ignorance of our personality traits and of our deepest desires.

Knowing oneself is not difficult, but it is laborious: it entails *patient soul-searching*. It requires the capacity to stop, to “deactivate the autopilot”, to acquire awareness of our way of acting, of the feelings that dwell within us, of the recurrent thoughts that condition us, and often unconsciously. It also requires that we distinguish between emotions and spiritual faculties. “I feel” is not the same as “I am convinced”; “I feel like” is not the same as “I want”. Thus, we come to recognize that the view we have of ourselves and of reality is at times somewhat distorted. To realize this is a grace! Indeed, very often it can happen that erroneous convictions about reality, based on past experiences, strongly influence us, limiting our freedom to strive for what really matters in our lives.

Living in the computer age, we know how important it is to know passwords in order to get into programmes where the most personal and valuable information is stored. But spiritual life, too, has its “passwords”: there are words that touch our heart because they make reference to what we are most sensitive to. The tempter, that is, the devil, knows these key words well, and it is important that we know them too, so as not to find ourselves where we do not want to be. Temptation does not necessarily suggest bad things, but often haphazard things, presented with excessive importance. In this way it hypnotizes us with the attraction that these things stir in us, things that are beautiful but illusory, that cannot deliver what they promise, and therefore leave us in the end with a sense of emptiness and sadness. That sense of emptiness and sadness is a sign that we have embarked on paths that were not right, that disoriented us. They can be, for example, degrees, careers, relationships, all things that are in themselves praiseworthy, but towards which, if we are not free, we risk harbouring unreal expectations, such as confirmation of our worth. For example, when you think of a study you are undertaking, do you think only of promoting yourself, of your own interests, or also to serve the community? There, one can see the intentionality of each one of us. The greatest suffering often comes from this misunderstanding because none of those things can be the guarantee of our dignity.

This is why, dear brothers and sisters, it is important to know ourselves, to know the passwords of our heart, what we are most sensitive to, in order to protect ourselves from those who present themselves with persuasive words to manipulate us, but also to recognize what is truly important for us, distinguishing it from current fads or flashy, superficial slogans. Many times, what is said in a television programme, in some advertisement, touches our hearts and makes us go that way without freedom. Be careful about that: am I free, or do I let myself be swayed by the feelings of

the moment, or the provocations of the moment?

An aid in this is an *examination of conscience*, but I am not talking about the examination of conscience that we all do when we go to confession, no. That is: “But I sinned in this, that...”. No. A general examination of conscience of the day: what happened in my heart during this day? “Lots of things happened...”. Which? Why? What traces did they leave in my heart? Carrying out an examination of conscience, that is, the good habit of calmly rereading what happened during our day, learning to note in our evaluations and choices what we give most importance to, what we are looking for and why, and what we eventually find. Above all, learning to recognize what satisfies my heart. What satisfies my heart? For only the Lord can give us confirmation of what we are worth. He tells us this every day from the cross: he died for us, to show us how precious we are in his eyes. There is no obstacle or failure that can prevent his tender embrace. The examination of conscience helps a great deal, because in this way we see that our heart is not a road where everything passes without us knowing about it. No. To see: what passed by today? What happened? What made me react? What made me sad? What made me joyful? What was bad, and did I harm others? It is about seeing the path our feelings took, the attractions in my heart during the day. Don’t forget! The other day we talked about prayer. Today we are talking about self-awareness.

Prayer and self-knowledge enable us to grow in freedom. This is to grow in freedom! These are basic elements of Christian existence, precious elements for finding one’s place in life. Thank you.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims taking part in today’s Audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Norway, Sweden, Australia, India, Vietnam and the United States of America. I offer a special greeting to the new seminarians from the Pontifical Beda College and to the Catholic Association of Preachers from England. Upon all of you I invoke the joy and peace of Christ our Lord. God bless you!

And let us not forget to pray for martyred Ukraine, always asking the Lord for the gift of peace.

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *young people*, to *the sick*, to *the elderly* and to *newlyweds*. I urge you too to learn from the *Poverello* of Assisi, imitating him in love and in contemplation of the Crucifix.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on spiritual discernment, we have considered the essential importance of growth in prayer. Today we consider, as a necessary complement to prayer, our need to grow in *self-knowledge*. Coming to know ourselves is not easy; it requires honesty and a patient descent into the depths of our heart. Self-knowledge is itself a fruit of God's grace, whereby we are led to abandon our illusions, to understand who we really are, and to embrace the things that can bring us genuine happiness. In effect, we learn the "passwords" that open the portal to our deepest self and the paths that can lead us to lasting spiritual joy and fulfilment, in obedience to God's gracious will. A great help to such prayerful insight into ourselves, and thus to authentic discernment, is the traditional practice of the nightly examination of conscience. Through daily prayer and self-knowledge, may we more readily discern the Lord's plan for our lives, and come to appreciate more fully our dignity and freedom as beloved children of our heavenly Father.