



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Catechesis on Discernment: 6. *The elements of discernment. "The book of one's own life"*

Dear brothers and sisters, welcome and good morning!

In these weeks' catecheses, we have been focusing on the prerequisites for good discernment. In life we have to make decisions, always, and to make decisions we have to go on a journey, a path of discernment. Every important activity has its "instructions" to follow, which must be learned in order for them to produce the necessary effects. Today we will look at another indispensable ingredient for discernment: *one's own life story*. Knowing one's own life story is, let's say, an essential ingredient for discernment.

Our life is the most precious "book" we have been given, a book that unfortunately many do not read, or rather they do so too late, before dying. And yet, precisely in that book, one finds what one pointlessly seeks elsewhere. Saint Augustine, a great seeker of the truth, had understood this just by rereading his life, noting in it the silent and discreet, but incisive, steps of the presence of the Lord. At the end of this journey, he noted with wonder: "You were within, and I without, and there I did seek you; I, unlovely, rushed heedlessly among the things of beauty you made. You were with me, but I was not with you" (*Confessions* X, 27.38). Hence his invitation to cultivate the inner life to find what one is seeking: "Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth"(cf. *On True Religion*, XXXIX, 72). This is an invitation I would extend to all of you, and even to myself: "Return within yourself. Read your life. Read yourself within, how your journey has been... With

serenity. Return within yourself”.

Often, we too have had Augustine’s experience, of finding ourselves imprisoned by thoughts that lead us away from ourselves, stereotypical messages that harm us: for example, “I am worthless” — and it gets you down; “everything goes wrong for me” — and it gets you down; “I will never achieve anything worthwhile” — and it gets you down, and that’s life. These pessimistic phrases that get you down! Reading one’s own history also means recognizing the presence of these “toxic” elements, but to then broaden our narrative, learning to notice other things, making it richer, more respectful of complexity, succeeding also in grasping the discreet ways in which God acts in our life. I once knew a person who people said deserved the Nobel Prize for negativity: everything was bad, everything, and he always tried to put himself down. He was a bitter person, and yet he had many qualities. And then this person found another person who helped him, and every time he complained about something, the other one would say: “But now, to compensate, say something good about yourself”. And he would say: “Well, yes... I also have this quality”, and bit by bit he helped him move forward, to read well his own life, both the bad things and the good things. We have to read our life, and thus see things that are not good and also the good things that God sows in us.

We have seen that discernment has a narrative approach; it does not dwell on the precise action, but rather inserts it into a context: where does this thought come from? What I am feeling now, where does it come from? Where does it lead me, what I am thinking now? When have I encountered it before? Is it something new that comes to mind only now, or have I found it other times? Why is it more insistent than others? What is life trying to tell me with this?

Recounting the events of our life also enables us to grasp important nuances and details, which can reveal themselves to be valuable aids, hitherto concealed. For example, a reading, a service, an encounter, at first sight considered to be of little importance, over time transmit inner peace; they transmit the joy of living and suggest further good initiatives. Stopping and acknowledging this is essential. Stopping and acknowledging: it is important for discernment; it is a task of gathering those precious and hidden pearls that the Lord has scattered in our soil.

Goodness is hidden, always, because goodness is modest and hides itself: goodness is hidden; it is silent, it requires slow and continuous excavation. Because God’s style is discreet: God likes to go unseen, with discretion, he does not impose himself; he is like the air we breathe — we do not see it but it allows us to live, and we realize this only when it is missing.

Getting used to rereading one’s own life educates the outlook, it sharpens it, enables it to note the small miracles that good God works for us every day. When we realize this, we notice other possible directions that strengthen our inner taste, peace and creativity. Above all, it makes us freer from toxic stereotypes. Wisely, it has been said that the man who does not know his own past is condemned to repeat it. It is strange: if we do not know the path we have taken, the past,

we always repeat it, we go around in circles. A person who walks in circles never moves forward; there is no journey, it is like a dog who chases its own tail; always going this way and repeating things.

We might ask ourselves: have I ever recounted my life to anyone? This is a beautiful experience of engaged couples, who when they become serious, tell their life story... It is one of the most beautiful and intimate forms of communication, recounting one's own life. It allows us to discover hitherto unknown things, small and simple but, as the Gospel says, it is precisely from the little things that the great things are born (cf. *Lk 16:10*).

The lives of the saints also constitute a precious aid in recognizing the style of God in one's own life: they permit us to become familiar with his way of acting. Some of the saints' behaviour challenges us, shows us new meanings and opportunities. This is what happened, for example, to Saint Ignatius of Loyola. When describing the fundamental discovery of his life, he adds an important clarification, and he says: From experience he deduced that some thoughts left him sad, others cheerful; and little by little he learnt to know the diversity of thoughts, the diversity of the spirits that stirred within him (cf. *Autobiography*, no. 8). Knowing what happens within us, knowing, being aware.

Discernment is the narrative reading of the good moments and the dark moments, the consolations and desolations we experience in the course of our lives. In discernment, it is the heart that speaks to us about God, and we must learn to understand its language. Let us ask, at the end of the day, for example: what happened today in my heart? Some think that carrying out this examination of conscience is like doing the bookkeeping of the sins we have committed — and we commit many — but it is also about asking oneself, "What happened within me, did I experience joy? What brought me joy? Was I sad? What brought me sadness? And in this way, learning to *discern* what happens within us.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims taking part in today's Audience, especially those from Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Indonesia, Canada and the United States of America, including the priests of the Institute for Continuing Theological Education at the Pontifical North American College. In greeting the pilgrims present from Nigeria, I think of the violent rains that have fallen on their country in these days, causing flooding, numerous deaths and tremendous damage. Let us pray for all who have lost their lives and for everyone affected by this devastating natural disaster. May these, our brothers and sisters, experience our solidarity and the support of the international community.

And let us turn our thoughts to martyred Ukraine and pray for Ukraine. Let us pray for the bad things that are happening there, the tortures, the deaths, the destruction.

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *young people*, to *the sick*, to *the elderly* and to *newlyweds*. During this month of October dedicated to the Virgin of the Rosary, I wish to invite you to look with filial trust to the Mother of God, drawing the strength to go ahead, from her example and her intercession.

I offer my blessing to all of you.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on spiritual discernment, we now consider the importance of interpreting, in the light of God's provident care, our own life story. Through prayer and spiritual insight, we can learn to discern the thread of God's grace running through our lives. Taking stock of our personal history in this way can make us aware of negative attitudes harmful for our spiritual growth, but also open our eyes to the often hidden events and encounters that quietly reveal the Lord's loving plan for our eternal happiness. The lives of the saints also shed light upon our personal path to holiness. In the *Confessions*, Saint Augustine shared his gradual understanding of how God mysteriously led him to discover and embrace the truth that alone satisfies the deepest desires of our heart. Saint Ignatius Loyola, another great spiritual guide, drew upon his own journey of conversion in order to teach us how to discern God's voice speaking deep within us, guiding our steps through life, and calling us to ever deeper union with himself.