



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 31 August 2022*

[Multimedia]

Catechesis On Discernment: 1. *What does it mean to discern?*

Dear brothers and sisters, good day!

Today we begin a new series of catecheses: we have finished the catechesis on old age, now we begin a new series dealing with discernment. Discernment is an important act that concerns everyone, because decisions are an essential part of life. Discerning decisions. 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 fishers who select the good fish and discard 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*, and also of *skill* 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 fisherman reckons with hard work, long nights spent at sea, and then the fact of 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 them for us. At a certain point, adults can freely ask for advice, 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. In order 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 wise men 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 right 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 fisherman, 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. 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 with every step that people take, they have to 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. Thank you.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims taking part in today's Audience, especially those from Malta, Nigeria and the United States of America. Upon all of you, and your families, I invoke the Holy Spirit's gifts of wisdom, joy and peace. God bless you all!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. I invite everyone to find courage and hope in God, each day, in order to live in full your respective vocations. I offer my heartfelt blessing!

APPEALS

Tomorrow we will celebrate the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, and the beginning of

the Season of Creation, which will end on 4 October, the feast of St Francis of Assisi. May this year's theme, 'Listen to the Voice of Creation', foster in everyone a concrete commitment to care for our common home. At the mercy of our consumerist excesses, our sister Mother Earth groans and begs us to stop our abuse and her destruction. During this Season of Creation, let us pray that the UN COP27 and COP15 summits may unite the human family in decisively addressing the twin crises of climate and biodiversity loss.

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I am following with concern the violent events that took place in Baghdad in recent days. Let us ask God in prayer to give peace to the Iraqi people. Last year I had the joy of visiting, and I felt at first hand the great desire for normality and peaceful coexistence among the different religious communities that make it up. Dialogue and fraternity are the main path to face the current difficulties and reach this goal.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: Today we begin a new series of catecheses dealing with *discernment*, the process of making sound decisions about the meaning and direction of our lives. In the Gospels, Jesus uses everyday discernment practised by fishermen and merchants to teach the importance of wisely choosing to live a life in accordance with God's will. Authentic discernment calls for knowledge, insight and experience but also the wisdom of the heart, firm commitment and unremitting effort. As an exercise of our God-given freedom, spiritual discernment seeks to know our place in the Creator's plan for ourselves and for our world. For our decisions, good or evil, can make the earth either, as God intends, a magnificent garden or a lifeless desert. True discernment, born of our loving relationship with God and our human freedom, brings with it a deep spiritual joy and fulfilment. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten and guide us in our daily efforts to live lives of holiness, wisdom and fidelity to the saving truth of the Gospel.