

Excerpts from the Pope's catechesis on discernment

Listening to your Heart

Pope Francis

During the last four months of 2022, Pope Francis gave thirteen catecheses on the theme of discernment during his general audiences. Below are excerpts from three of these catecheses that are seemingly central to the topics focused upon in this issue of Ekklesia.

September 7, 2022

When Ignatius found himself wounded in his father's house, Ignatius was not thinking of God at all, or of how to reform his own life, no. He had his first experience of God by listening to his own heart, which presented him with a curious reversal: things that were attractive at first sight left him disillusioned, whereas in others, less dazzling, he perceived lasting peace. We too have this experience; very often we begin to think about something, and we stay there, and then we end up disappointed. Instead, when we carry out a work of charity, do something good and feel something of happiness, a good thought comes to us, and happiness comes to us, something of joy. It is an experience that is entirely our own. He, Ignatius, had his first experience of God by listening to his own heart, that showed him a curious reversal. This is what we must learn: to listen to our own heart, to know what is happening, what decision to make. To make a judgement on a situation, one must listen to one's own heart. We listen to the television, the radio, the mobile phone. We are experts at listening, but I ask you: do you know how to listen to your heart? Do you stop to ask: "But how is my heart? Is it satisfied, is it sad, is it searching for something?". In order to make good decisions, one must listen to one's own heart¹.

October 5, 2022

Underlying spiritual doubts and vocational crises, there is – not infrequently – insufficient dialogue between religious life and *our human, cognitive and affective dimension*. [...]

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. [...]

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. [...]

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.²

October 26, 2022

No one wants to be desolate, sad: this is true. We would all like a life that is always joyful, cheerful and fulfilled. Yet, in addition to not being possible – because it is not possible – this would also not be good for us. [...]

It is important to learn how to read sadness. We all know what sadness is: all of us. But do we know how to interpret it? Do we know what it means for me, this sadness today? In our time, it – sadness – is mostly seen negatively, as an ill to avoid at all costs. Instead, it can be an indispensable alarm bell for life, inviting us to explore richer and more fertile landscapes, which transience and escapism do not permit. Saint Thomas defines sadness as a pain of the soul. Like the nerves for the body, it redirects our attention to a possible danger, or a disregarded benefit (cf. *Summa Theologica* I-II, q. 36, a.1). This is why it is indispensable for our health. It protects us from harming ourselves and others. It would be far more serious and dangerous not to feel this, and to go ahead. At times sadness works like a traffic light: "Stop, stop! It's red, here. Stop".

For those, on the other hand, who have the desire to do good, sadness is an obstacle with which the tempter tries to discourage us. In this case, one must act in a manner that is exactly contrary to what is suggested, determined to continue what one had set out to do (cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, 318). [...] A wise rule says not to make changes when you are desolate.

It will be the time afterwards, rather than the mood of the moment, that will show the goodness or otherwise of our choices³.

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- ¹ Pope Francis. (September 7, 2022). General Audience, Saint Peter's Square. Catechesis On Discernment: 2. An example: Ignatius of Loyola. Vatican City.
- ² Pope Francis. (October 5, 2022). General Audience, Saint Peter's Square. Catechesis On Discernment: 4. The elements of discernment. Self-knowledge
- ³ Pope Francis. (October 26, 2022). General Audience, Saint Peter's Square. Catechesis On Discernment: 7. The subject of discernment. Desolation