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"I feel God's strength and I am going ahead"

In his 23 November general audience, Pope Francis continued his cycle of catechesis on spiritual discernment, speaking about consolation.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We continue the catechesis on the discernment of spirits and how to

discern them when they take place in our hearts and in our souls. After having considered several aspects of desolation – that darkness in the soul – today let us talk about *consolation* – which is light in the soul and another important element in discernment, which is not to be taken for granted, because it can lend itself to misunderstandings. We must understand what consolation is, just as we have tried to understand well what desolation is.

What is spiritual consolation? It is an experience of *interior joy*, consisting in seeing God's presence in everything. It strengthens faith and hope, and even the ability of doing good. The person who experiences consolation never gives up in the face of difficulties because he or she always experiences a peace that is stronger than any trial. It is, therefore, a tremendous gift for the

spiritual life as well as life in general...and to live this interior joy.

Consolation is an interior movement that touches our depths. It is not flashy but soft, delicate, like a drop of water on a sponge (cf. St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 335). The person feels enveloped in God's presence in a way that always respects his or her own freedom. It is never something out of tune, that tries to force our will; neither is it a passing euphoria. On the contrary, as we have seen, even the suffering – caused for example by our own sins – can become a reason for consolation.

Let's recall the experience Saint Augustine lived when he spoke with his mother Monica about the beauty of eternal life; or of the perfect joy of Saint Francis that was associated with very difficult situations he had to bear; and let's think of the many

saints who were able to do great things not because they thought they were magnificent or capable, but because they had been conquered by the peaceful sweetness of God's love. This is the *peace* that Saint Ignatius discovered in himself with such amazement when he would read the lives of the saints. To be consoled is to be at peace with God, to feel that everything is settled in peace, everything is in harmony within us. This is the peace that Edith Stein felt after her conversion. A year after she received Baptism, she wrote – this is what Edith Stein says: “As I abandon myself to this feeling, little by little a new life begins to fill me and – without any pressure on my will – to drive me toward new realizations. This living inpouring seems to spring from an activity and a strength that is not mine and which, without doing me any violence, becomes active in me” (*Psicologia e scienze dello spirito*, Città Nuova, 1996, 116). So, genuine

peace is one that makes good feelings blossom in us.

Above all, consolation affects *hope*, and reaches out toward the future, puts us on a journey, allows us to take the initiative that had always been postponed or not even imagined, such as Baptism was for Edith Stein.

Consolation is that type of peace, but not that we remain sitting there enjoying it, no.... It gives you peace and draws you toward the Lord and sets you off to do things, to do good things. In a moment of consolation, when we are consoled, we want to do so much good, always. Instead, when there is a moment of desolation, we feel like closing in on ourselves and doing nothing.... Consolation pushes us forward in service to others, society, other people.

Spiritual consolation is not “piloted” – you cannot say now that

consolation will come – no, it is not it cannot be “piloted”, programmed at will. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It allows a *familiarity with God* that seems to cancel distances. When she visited the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome at the age of fourteen, Saint Therese of the Child Jesus tried to touch the nail venerated there, one of the nails with which Jesus was crucified. Therese understood her daring as a transport of love and confidence. Later, she wrote, “I truly was too audacious. But the Lord sees the depths of our hearts. He knows my intention was pure [...] I acted with him as a child who believes everything is permissible and who considers the Father’s treasures their own” (*Autobiographical Manuscript*, 183). Consolation is spontaneous. Consolation leads you to do everything spontaneously, as if we were children. Children are spontaneous, and consolation leads

you to be spontaneous with a tenderness, with a very deep peace. A fourteen-year-old girl gives us a splendid description of spiritual consolation. We can feel a sense of tenderness toward God that makes us audacious in our desire to participate in his own life, to do what is pleasing to him because we feel familiar with him, we feel that his house is our house, we feel welcome, loved, restored. With this consolation, we do not give up in the face of difficulty – in fact, with the same boldness, Therese would ask the Pope for permission to enter Carmel even though she was too young, and her wish was granted. What does this mean? It means that consolation makes us daring. When we find ourselves in a moment of darkness, of desolation, we think: “I am not capable of doing this, no....” Desolation brings you down. Everything is dark.... “No, I cannot do this...I will not do it”. Instead, in

times of consolation, the same things – “No, I am going ahead. I will do it”. “But are you sure?” “I feel God’s strength and I am going ahead”. And so, consolation pushes you to go ahead and to do those things that you would not be capable of doing in a moment of; it pushes you to take the first step. This is what is beautiful about consolation.

But let’s be careful. We must distinguish well between the consolation that comes from God and *false consolations*. Something similar happens in the spiritual life that happens in human productions: there are originals and there are imitations. If an authentic consolation is like a drop on a sponge, is soft and intimate, its imitations are noisier and flashier, they are pure enthusiasm, like straw fires, lacking substance, leading us to close in on ourselves and not to take care of others. In the end, false

consolation leaves us empty, far from the centre of our existence. For this reason, when we feel happy, at peace, we are capable of doing anything. But let's not confuse that peace with passing enthusiasm because there's enthusiasm today, but then it is taken away and is no more.

This is why we have to *discern* even when we feel consoled. False consolation can become a danger if we seek it obsessively as an end in itself, forgetting the Lord. As Saint Bernard would say, this is seeking the consolations of God rather than the God of consolations. We need to seek the Lord, and the Lord consoles us with his presence. He consoles us, makes us move forward. And we should not seek God who brings us consolations here below: No, this is not right, we should not be interested in this. This is the dynamic of the child whom we spoke about last time

who looks for his or parents only to get something, but doesn't look for them – he or she is seeking their own interests. “Daddy, Mamma” – children know how to do this, they know how to play...and when the family is divided, and they are accustomed to going to one and going to the other, this is not good, this is not consolation, but personal interest. We too run the risk of living our relationship with God in a childish way, seeking our own interests, of reducing it to an object that we use and consume, losing the most beautiful gift which is God Himself. So, let us move forward in our lives that progresses between the consolations from God and the desolations from the sin of the world, but knowing how to distinguish when it is a consolation from God that brings peace to the depths of your soul, from a passing enthusiasm, which is not bad, but which is not a consolation from God.

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