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"Fragility makes us human"

In his 4 January general audience, Pope Francis concluded his cycle of catechesis on spiritual discernment, speaking about spiritual accompaniment.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Before beginning this catechesis, I would like us to join with those here beside us who are paying their

respects to Benedict XVI, and to turn my thoughts to him, a great master of catechesis. His acute and gentle thought was not self-referential, but ecclesial, because he always wanted to accompany us in the encounter with Jesus. Jesus, Crucified and Risen, the Living One and the Lord, was the destination to which Pope Benedict led us, taking us by the hand. May he help us rediscover in Christ the joy of believing and the hope of living.

With today's catechesis, we will conclude the cycle dedicated to the theme of discernment, and we will do so completing the discourse on aids that can and must support it: support the discernment process. One of these is *spiritual accompaniment*, important first and foremost for self-knowledge, which as we have seen is an indispensable condition for discernment. Looking at oneself in the mirror, alone, does

not always help, as one can adjust the image. Instead, looking at oneself in the mirror with the help of another, this helps a great deal because the other tells you the truth – when he or she is truthful – and in this way helps you.

God's grace in us always works on our nature. Thinking of a Gospel parable, we can always compare grace to the good seed and nature to the soil (cf. *Mk* 4:3-9). First of all, it is important to make ourselves known, without fear of sharing the most fragile aspects, where we find ourselves to be more sensitive, weak, or afraid of being judged. Making oneself known, manifesting oneself to a person who accompanies us on the journey of life. Not who decides for us, no: but who accompanies us. Because *fragility* is, in reality, our true richness: we are rich in fragility, all of us, the true richness which we must learn to respect and welcome,

because when it is offered to God, it makes us capable of tenderness, mercy, and love. Woe to those people who do not feel fragile: they are harsh, dictatorial. Instead, people who humbly recognize their own frailties are more understanding with others. Fragility, I dare say, makes us human. Not by chance, the first of Jesus' three temptations in the desert – the one linked to hunger – tries to rob us of fragility, presenting it as an evil to be rid of, an impediment to being like God. And yet it is our most valuable treasure: indeed God, to make us like him, wished to share our own fragility to the utmost. Look at the crucifix: God who descended into fragility. Look at the Nativity scene, where he arrives in great human fragility. He shared our fragility.

And spiritual accompaniment, if it is docile to the Holy Spirit, helps to *unmask misunderstandings*, even

grave ones, in our consideration of ourselves and our relationship with the Lord. The Gospel presents various examples of clarifying and liberating conversations with Jesus. Think, for example, of those with the Samaritan woman, which we read and read, and there is always this wisdom and tenderness of Jesus; think of the one with Zacchaeus, think of the sinful woman, think of Nicodemus, and the disciples of Emmaus: the Lord's way of approaching. The people who had a true encounter with Jesus were not afraid to open their hearts, to present their own vulnerability, their own inadequacy, their own fragility. In this way, their self-sharing becomes and experience of salvation, of forgiveness freely received.

Recounting what we have lived or are searching for, in front of another person, helps to bring clarity to ourselves, *bringing to light the many*

thoughts that dwell within us, and which often unsettle us with their insistent refrains. How many times, in bleak moments, thoughts like this come to us: “I have done everything wrong, I am worthless, no-one understands me, I will never succeed, I am destined for failure”, how many times it comes to us to think these things. False and poisonous thoughts, that the exchange with another helps to unmask, so we can feel we are loved and valued by the Lord for what we are, capable of doing good things for him. We discover with surprise different ways of seeing things, signs of goodness that have always been present in us. It is true, we can share our frailties with the other, with the one who accompanies us in life, in the spiritual life, the teacher of spiritual life, be they a layperson, a priest, and say: “Look what is happening to me: I am a wretch, these things are happening to me”.

And the one who accompanies answers, “Yes, we all have these things”. This helps us to clarify them well, to see where the roots lie and thereby overcome them.

He or she who accompanies does not substitute the Lord, does not do the work in the place of the person accompanied, but walks alongside him or her, encouraging them to interpret what is stirring in their heart, the quintessential place where the Lord speaks. The spiritual accompanier, whom we call *spiritual director* – I don’t like this term, I prefer *spiritual accompanier*, it is better – they say: “Fine, but look here, look here”, they draw your attention to things that perhaps pass you by; they help you understand better the signs of the times, the voice of the Lord, the voice of the tempter, the voice of the difficulties that you are unable to overcome. Therefore, it is very important not to

journey alone. There is a wise African saying – because they have that tribal mysticism – which says: “If you want to arrive quickly, go alone; if you want to arrive safely, go with others”, go in company, go with your people. This is important. In the spiritual life it is better to be accompanied by someone who knows about us and helps us. And this is spiritual accompaniment.

This accompaniment can be fruitful if, on both sides, one has experienced *filiality* and spiritual *kinship*. We discover we are children of God at the moment that we discover we are brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. This is why it is essential to be *part of a journeying community*. We are not alone, we belong to a people, a nation, a city that is on the move, a Church, a parish, this group... a community on the move. One does not go by oneself to the Lord: this will not do. We must

understand this clearly. As in the Gospel account of the paralytic, we are often sustained and healed by the faith of someone else (cr. *Mk 2:1-5*) who helps us go forward, because we all at times have inner paralyses and it takes someone who helps us to overcome that conflict, with help. One does not go to the Lord by oneself, let us remember this clearly; other times we are the ones who take on this commitment on behalf of another brother or sister, and we are companions who help that other person. Without the experience of filiality and kinship, accompaniment can give rise to unrealistic expectations, misunderstandings, in the forms of dependence that leave the person in an infantile state. Accompaniment, but as children of God and brothers and sisters among ourselves.

The Virgin Mary is a great teacher of discernment: she *speaks little, listens*

a lot, and cherishes in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19). The three attitudes of Our Lady: she speaks little, listens a lot, and cherishes in her heart. And the few times she speaks, she leaves a mark. For example, in the Gospel of John there is a very short phrase uttered by Mary which is a mandate for Christians of all times: “Do whatever he tells you” (cf. 2:5). It is curious: once I heard a very good, very pious elderly woman, who had not studied theology, she was very simple. And she said to me, “Do you know what Our Lady always does?” I don’t know, she embraces you, she calls you... “No, the gesture Our Lady does is this” [points with his finger]. I didn’t understand, and I asked, “What does it mean?”. And the old lady replied, “She always points to Jesus”. This is beautiful: Our Lady takes nothing for herself, she points to Jesus. *Do whatever Jesus tells you*: that is what Our Lady is like. Mary knows that the Lord speaks to the

heart of each person, and asks for these words to be translated into actions and choices. She knew how to do this more than any other person, and indeed she is present in the fundamental moments of Jesus' life, especially in the supreme moment of death on the Cross.

Dear brothers and sisters, we are ending this series of catecheses on discernment: discernment is an art, *an art that can be learned* and which has its own rules. If learned well, it enables spiritual experience to be lived in an ever more beautiful and orderly manner. Above all, discernment is a gift from God, which must always be asked for, without ever presuming to be expert and self-sufficient. Lord, give me the grace to discern in the moments of life, what I must do, what I must understand. Give me the grace to discern, and give me the person who will help me to discern.

The voice of the Lord can always be recognized; it has a unique style it is a voice that pacifies, encourages and reassures in difficulties. The Gospel reminds us of this continually: “Do not be afraid” (*Lk* 1:30), how beautiful is the Angel’s word to Mary after the resurrection of Jesus; “Do not be afraid”, “Do not be afraid”, it is the style of the Lord, “Do not be afraid”. “Do not be afraid!” the Lord repeats to us today too, “Do not be afraid”: if we trust in his word, we will play the game of life well, and we will be able to help others. As the Psalm says, his Word is *a lamp to our feet and a light to our path* (cf. 119, 105).