



DICASTERIUM  
PRO LAICIS, FAMILIA ET VITA

## **DISCERNMENT: A CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE**

*Institutional greeting*

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“She is that woman who rejoiced in the presence of God” (GE176)

I am pleased to extend my greetings, also on behalf of the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, Card. Kevin Farrell, to all those present and to those who follow us *online*. I greet, in particular, the Grand Chancellor of the Institute - His Excellency Archbishop Paglia - the Dean - Prof. Philip Bordeyne - fellow Professors and students. And I thank the Diocese of Rome for its support in organizing these seminars, which in communion with our Dicastery, the John Paul II Institute, has conceived and promoted in order to respond, in a specific way, to the invitation of the Holy Father Francis to work together in this special "*Amoris laetitia* Family Year," with the intention of bringing to fruition the third phase of the extraordinary synods on the family, the *implementation* phase: the time in which the reflections gathered in the apostolic exhortation can be gradually welcomed by the particular Churches, permeating the pastoral path with itself.

I therefore take this opportunity to share with you some brief reflections on the central theme of today's seminar: discernment as a path of Christian life.

Discernment constitutes one of the central issues in the magisterium of Pope Francis. Ever since *Evangelii gaudium*, we have been called in a very explicit way to walk together - laity and pastors, by virtue of our common Baptism - in a Church that is not only "a place of mercy," but makes itself a place of continuous discernment (EG 30) *of the paths of the Spirit* (EG 45). The Holy Father's call to evangelical pastoral discernment leads us to make demanding reflections, in many ways laborious, which must take into account the complexity of today's pastoral reality, especially in relation to the family. It requires of us pastoral intelligence, apostolic generosity, prudence, and a desire to participate in processes to make possible what Pope Francis always hoped for in *Gaudete et Exsultate* 169: "*Discernment is necessary not only at extraordinary times, when we need to resolve grave problems and make crucial decisions. It is a means of spiritual combat for helping us to follow the Lord more faithfully. We need it at all times, to help us recognize God's timetable, lest we fail to heed the promptings of his grace and disregard his invitation to grow.*" Since the goal, *Evangelii gaudium* 24 urges us, is precisely to accompany humanity in processes, to accompany people in that inner revolution that only God can accomplish.

Discernment, then, is crucial for every good Christian, but even more so for young people, who will hold the Church of the future in their hands, and for families, in whose hands the Lord places the welcome and care of every new life and of vocations. Now more than ever, since the Holy Father has already called us to a new synodal journey, which is intended to be the culmination of a process of listening and discernment within the Church in order to be all participants in the mission in a spirit of authentic communion. A journey in the Spirit.

In the highly secularized world that today insistently enters our hearts and homes, discernment wants to be the profound gaze of the Christian who "feeds on the light and strength of the Holy Spirit" (EG 50), who never renounces the good that is possible, who strives to make himself and reality permeable to grace, and - as St. Ignatius<sup>1</sup> said

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<sup>1</sup> Ignazio di Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, n. 353

- always *in a feeling with the Church*. Never alone, never having self-reference as a horizon of meaning. Because our heart, in order to be saved, needs to be docile and know that we have God as our father and the Church as our mother<sup>2</sup>, so that we do not feel like orphans, but like beloved children.

The discernment we wish to reflect upon today, therefore, is not only a decision-making process, but *a Christian way of life*, a personal existential process, before being ecclesial. In particular, it should be understood as a desire and a constant search for the *signs* of God's presence in our lives in order to guide individual, conjugal and family life in a wise way, in conformity with each person's call to holiness. Young people who are about to start a family need this, but so do newly married couples, for whom abandoning the illusions of a life as lovers must mean embarking on more radical paths of love and self-giving; and spouses after decades of life together, even when they are in crisis, but above all when they are not, to continue to discover the grace in their sacrament, without being content to survive or wait until their strength runs out and the Church is always forced to work like a "field hospital". We have to consider it a pastoral urgency to make the tools of discernment known to families: we could prevent so much suffering, so many relational fractures, so many abandonments that permanently wound children, so many betrayals that deprive us of hope.

*Amoris laetitia* did not indicate for the mission of the Church only the most fragile part of relationships, feelings, promises, in short, the area of crisis, but every dimension and every moment of family life: conjugal love, openness to life and the birth of children, the education and accompaniment of children and young people in the discovery of their vocation, the challenges and difficulties of every day, those that arise within the heart of man, as well as those that come from outside, from a culture that is increasingly individualistic and secularized, that breaks bonds, that distances from God. All of this is the space today for us of discernment, the space in which we have learned that time is superior to all our ability to think about reality and requires patience, processes,

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Cipriano, *De unitate ecclesiae*, 6, PL 3, 503.

interior silences, in which we learn to listen-discern the voice of God, others, reality itself that always challenges us in new ways (GE 172), since it is always possible that God is offering us something more (GE 172).

The meaning of the word discern is very demanding: it refers to the act of "choosing by separating." "It is based on the conviction that God is at work in the history of the world, in the events of life, in the people I meet." So, as Pope Francis has defined it, discernment is that inner attitude rooted in a continuous act of faith<sup>3</sup>. This conviction asks us to learn to think about reality not according to men, but according to God. It helps us to "discern what really comes from God" (EG 119), what unites us to God, as opposed to what instead closes us in on ourselves, in our fears, in our frailties. It is a journey, a dynamism, that does not allow us to remain alone; a path, not a goal to be reached, to orient our individual and social choices to the good and the beautiful." (EG 77)

In the difficult situations of today's families, discernment can help us understand the scope of new life in Christ, which transforms our plans, changes our decisions and makes us capable of choices we never imagined before in order to return to Him each time.

The Church calls families to be the subject of the new evangelization, because more than anyone else they are witnesses to a reality that they alone can know in depth, but they need to learn to read their reality "according to God". Discernment has this function: to make their reality permeable to God, to be able to see him act, to be able to perceive him, to know how to listen to him.

Let us help young people, spouses and families to read the signs of God in their lives. Let us train ourselves to know how to accompany them, when the crisis is strong, but also when things seem to be going well: that is the perfect time to train ourselves in

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<sup>3</sup> Francis, Address to the First General Congregation of the XV Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment*, October 3-28, 2018.

family discernment in everyday life. He “gives everything to us. He does not want to enter our lives to cripple or diminish them, but to bring them to fulfilment.” (GE175)

Thank you and good work to all.