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The pope signs a sister's red Bible as she stands among other sisters

Pope Francis signs a Bible as he greets nuns during his general audience in the Paul VI hall at the Vatican Dec. 21, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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Believers do not need to be afraid of obstacles, struggles and choices in life because God is always near, offering his love and guidance, Pope Francis said.

"We can often have a distorted idea about God, thinking of him as a sullen, harsh judge, ready to catch us in the act," the pope said Dec. 21 at his weekly general audience. "On the contrary, Jesus reveals a God who is full of compassion and tenderness for us, ready to sacrifice himself so he can come to us."

Speaking with visitors in the Paul VI audience hall, the pope continued his series of talks about the process of spiritual discernment.

The process may seem complicated, he said, but "in reality, it is life that is complicated and, if we do not learn how to read it, as complicated as it is, we risk

wasting our lives, living it with strategies that end up disheartening us."

"There is no need to be afraid," he said, because God offers many "aids" to help people with this process.

Discernment is needed, he said, because "life always presents choices to us, and if we do not make conscious choices, in the end it is life that chooses for us, taking us where we do not want to go."

"The goal of discernment is to recognize the salvation God is working in my life," he said. "It reminds me that I am never alone and that, if I am struggling, it is because the stakes are high."

God helps people, first of all, with sacred Scripture and church doctrine, Francis said.

"They help us read what is stirring in our hearts, learning to recognize God's voice and to distinguish it from other voices that seem to vie for our attention, but leave us confused in the end," he said.

Christians, he said, should take time every day to read a few verses from the Bible and quietly reflect on it, letting the word enter into and touch their hearts.

God is waiting for people to stop and be silent, he said, because God's voice is "discreet, respectful" and humble, "and it is only in peace that we can enter profoundly into ourselves and recognize the authentic desires the Lord has placed in our hearts."

"The Word of God is not simply a text to read. The Word is a living presence, a work of the Holy Spirit that comforts, instructs, gives light, strength, refreshment and a zest for life," Francis said.

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When the faithful have a consistent and close relationship with Scripture, they will experience a close, loving relationship with Jesus, which is the other "indispensable aid" in discernment, he said.

"Friendship with God is able to change the heart" and change people's lives, he said, because it helps them realize "we have a tender, affectionate father who loves us,

who has always loved us."

"God doesn't want to destroy us, he wants us to be stronger and better people each day," he said.

"When we experience this, our heart melts and doubts, fears, feelings of unworthiness are dissolved," he added. "This love is irresistible."

Another "aid," the pope said, is to pray to the Holy Spirit, "who is present in us, who instructs us, makes the word of God that we read come alive, suggests meaningful new things, opens doors that seem closed, indicates paths in life where there seems to be only darkness and confusion."

The Holy Spirit, he said, is "the presence of God in us. He is the greatest gift, the greatest present, the father assures to those who ask."

In greeting Polish speakers at the audience, the pope noted their tradition of leaving an empty place at the table on Christmas Eve for an unexpected guest. "This year it will be occupied by the multitude of refugees from Ukraine, to whom you have opened the doors of your homes with great generosity."

"May the Son of God, born in Bethlehem, fill each of you, your families and those you help with love," he said.

In his greetings in Italian, the pope asked for continued prayers for the people of Ukraine, especially the children, many of whom no longer smile.

"It's serious when a child loses the ability to smile. These children are burdened by the tragedy of this war that is so inhumane, so hard," he said.

"Let us think about the Ukrainian people this Christmas, without light, without heat, without the essential things for survival," he added. "Let us pray to the Lord to bring peace as soon as possible."