



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 25 May 2022

[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Old Age: 11. *Ecclesiastes: the uncertain night of meaning and of things in life*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our reflection on old age — we are continuing to reflect on old age — today we are dealing with the Book of Qoheleth, [or Ecclesiastes], another jewel set in the Bible. On a first reading, this short book is striking and leaves one bewildered by its famous refrain: “All is vanity”, all is vanity: the refrain that comes and goes, all is vanity, all is “fog”, all is “smoke”, all is “emptiness”. It is surprising to find in Holy Scripture these expressions that question the meaning of existence. In reality, Qoheleth’s continuous vacillation between sense and non-sense is the *ironic representation of an awareness of life that is detached from the passion for justice*, of which God’s judgement is the guarantor. And the Book’s conclusion points the way out of the trial: “Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man” (12:13). This is the advice to resolve this problem.

Faced with a reality that at certain times seems to us to accommodate all contradictions, attributing the same destiny to all of them — which is to end up in nothingness — the path of indifference may also appear to us as the only remedy to a painful disillusionment. Questions like these arise in us: Have our efforts perhaps changed the world? Is anyone capable of validating the difference between the just and the unjust? It seems that all this is useless.... Why make so much effort?

It is a kind of negative intuition that can manifest itself in any season of life, but there is no doubt that old age makes this encounter with disenchantment almost inevitable. Disenchantment comes in old age. And so *the resistance of old age to the demoralising effects of this disenchantment* is decisive: if the elderly, who have seen it all by now, keep intact their *passion for justice*, then *there is hope for love*, and also for *faith*. And for the contemporary world, passing through this crisis, a healthy crisis, has become crucial. Why? Because a culture that presumes to measure everything and manipulate everything also ends up producing a collective demoralization of meaning, a demoralization of love, even a demoralization of goodness.

This demoralization takes away our will to act. A supposed “truth” that limits itself to observing the world also notes its indifference to opposites and consigns them, without redemption, to the flow of time and the fate of nothingness. In this form — cloaked in the trappings of science, but also very insensitive and very amoral — the modern quest for truth has been tempted to take leave of its passion for justice altogether. It no longer believes in its destiny, its promise, its redemption.

For our modern culture, which would like to consign practically everything to the exact knowledge of things, the appearance of this new *cynical reason* — that combines knowledge and irresponsibility — is a harsh repercussion. Indeed, knowledge that exempts us from morality seems at first to be a source of freedom, of energy, but soon turns into a *paralysis of the soul*.

With its irony, Qoheleth has already unmasked this deadly temptation of an omnipotence of knowledge — a “delirium of omniscience” — that generates an impotence of the will. The monks of the most ancient Christian tradition had precisely identified this illness of the soul, which suddenly discovers the vanity of knowledge without faith and without morality, the illusion of truth without justice. They called it “*acedia*”. And this is one of the temptations for everyone, even the elderly... But it is [a temptation] for everyone. It is not simply laziness; no, it’s more than that. It is not simply depression. No. Rather, *acedia* is the surrender to knowledge of the world devoid of any passion for justice and consequent action.

The emptiness of meaning and lack of strength opened up by this knowledge, which rejects any ethical responsibility and any affection for the real good, is not harmless. It not only takes away the strength for the desire for good: by counterreaction, it *opens the door to the aggressiveness of the forces of evil*. These are the forces of reason gone mad, made cynical by an excess of ideology. In fact, with all our progress, with all our prosperity, we have really become a “society of weariness”. Think about it: we are the society of weariness. We were supposed to produce widespread well-being and we tolerate a market that is scientifically selective with regard to health. We were supposed to put an insuperable threshold for peace, and we see, one after another, increasingly ruthless wars against defenceless people. Science advances, of course, and that is good. But the wisdom of life is something else entirely, and it seems to be stalled.

Finally, this an-affective and irresponsible reason also takes away meaning and energy from the

knowledge of truth. It is no coincidence that ours is the age of *fake news*, collective superstitions and pseudo-scientific truths. It's curious: in this culture of knowledge, of knowing everything, even of the precision of knowledge, a lot of witchcraft has spread, but cultured witchcraft. It is witchcraft with a certain culture but that leads you to a life of superstition: on the one hand, to go forward with intelligence in knowing things down to the roots; on the other hand, the soul that needs something else and takes the path of superstitions, and ends up in witchcraft. From the wry wisdom of Qoheleth, old age can learn the art of bringing to light the deception hidden in the delirium of a truth of the mind devoid of affection for justice. *Elderly people rich in wisdom and humour* do so much good for the young! They save them from the temptation of a knowledge of the world that is dreary and devoid of the wisdom of life. And these elderly people also bring the young back to Jesus' promise: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Mt 5:6). They will be the ones to sow the hunger and thirst for justice in the young. Take courage, all of us older people! Take courage and go forth! We have a very great mission in the world. But, please, we must not seek refuge in this somewhat non-concrete, unreal, rootless idealism — let us speak clearly — in the witchcraft of life.

Special Greetings:

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially those from Nigeria, Lebanon and the United States of America. In the joy of the Risen Christ, I invoke upon you and your families the loving mercy of God our Father. May the Lord bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. The Feast of the Ascension of the Lord, now very close, prompts me to greet all of you. Ascending into Heaven, Jesus Christ leaves a wise message and programme for the entire Church: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20). May making the Word of Christ known and witnessing it with joy be the ideal and commitment of each person in his or her respective state of life.

I offer my blessing to all of you.

Appeal

My heart is broken over the massacre at the primary school in Texas. I pray for the children and adults killed, and for their families. It is time to say "no more" to the indiscriminate trafficking of weapons. Let us all strive to ensure that such tragedies can never happen again.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear brothers and sisters: In our continuing catechesis on the meaning and value of old age in the light of God's word, we now consider the Book of Ecclesiastes, with its proverbial refrain, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2). With great realism, the elderly author speaks of how easy it is to grow disillusioned with life and to give up the struggle to make our world a better place. That temptation, of course, is perennial; even today, great scientific and technical progress is often accompanied by a growing sense of disenchantment and resignation: we fear that justice and peace are unattainable goals. The Christian spiritual tradition speaks of the sin of "sloth", the listlessness born of a loss of passion for our vocation to resist evil and to strive to grow in holiness and fidelity to God's word and his promises for our world. Ecclesiastes rejects all such resignation and instead urges obedience to the commandments and trust in God's saving plan. May his wisdom and experience be reflected in all those elderly persons who continue to put their faith in God's word and its power to renew our lives and to change our world.