



# SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

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## General Audience

This morning's General Audience took place in Saint Peter's Square, where the Holy Father Francis met with groups of pilgrims and faithful from Italy and all over the world.

In his address in Italian, the Pope continued his cycle of catechesis on old age, focusing on *Qoheleth: the uncertain night of the meaning and things of life* (Bible reading: Qoelet 2: 17-18; 12: 13-14).

After summarizing his catechesis in various languages, the Holy Father addressed special greetings to the groups of faithful in attendance. Then, recalling the mass shooting in a primary school in Texas, he made an appeal against the indiscriminate trade in firearms.

The General Audience concluded with the recitation of the *Pater Noster* and the apostolic blessing.

## Catechesis of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our reflection 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: "Everything is vanity", everything is "fog", "smoke", "emptiness". It is surprising to find these expressions, which question the meaning of existence, within Holy Scripture. In reality, Qoheleth's continuous vacillation between sense and non-sense is the ironic representation of a knowledge 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).

Faced with a reality that, at certain times, seems to us to accommodate all opposites, reserving for them the same destiny, which is to end up in nothingness, the path of indifference may also appear to us to be the only

remedy to a painful disillusionment. Questions like these arise in us: Have our efforts changed the world? Is anyone capable of validating the difference between the just and the unjust?

It is a kind of negative intuition that can arise in any season of life, but there is no doubt that old age makes the appointment with disenchantment almost inevitable. And so *the resistance of old age to the demoralising effects of this disenchantment* is decisive: if the elderly, who have now seen it all, keep intact their *passion for justice*, then *there is hope for love*, and also for *faith*. And for the contemporary world, the passage through this crisis has become crucial, a salutary crisis, because a culture that presumes to measure everything and manipulate everything also ends up producing a collective demoralisation of meaning, of love, of goodness.

This demoralisation takes away our will to act. A supposed 'truth', which limits itself to registering the world, also registers 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 – which combines knowledge and irresponsibility – is a harsh repercussion. Indeed, the 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.

Qoheleth, with its irony, already unmasks this fatal temptation of an omnipotence of knowledge – a "delirium of omniscience" – that generates an impotence of the will. The monks of the earliest 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*". It is not simply laziness. It is not simply depression. Rather, it 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 all ethical responsibility and all affection for the real good, is not harmless. It does not merely take away the powers of the desire for the 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 and prosperity, we have really become a "society of weariness". We were supposed to produce widespread well-being and we tolerate a scientifically selective market in health. We were supposed to put an insurmountable limit on peace, and we see more and more 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 knowledge of truth. It is no coincidence that ours is the age of *fake news*, collective superstitions, and pseudo-scientific truths. Old age can learn from the wry wisdom of Qoheleth the art of bringing to light the deception hidden in the delusion 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 sad worldly knowledge devoid of the wisdom of life. And they bring them back to Jesus' promise: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Mt 5:6).

### Appeal of the Holy Father

My heart is broken over the massacre at the primary school in Texas. I pray for the children and adults killed, and 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.

