

TANGAZA COLLEGE

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

SIKUKU EMMANUEL LIKOKO, S. P. S.

QOHELETH AND MODERN CHRISTIANITY **Facing the Challenges to our Faith**

A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies

NAIROBI 2006

TANGAZA COLLEGE

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

SIKUKU EMMANUEL LIKOKO, S. P. S.

QOHELETH AND MODERN CHRISTIANITY
Facing the Challenges to our Faith

Supervisor
Fr. Ambrose Mutinda, C.S.Sp.

A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies

NAIROBI 2006

DEDICATION

To all benefactors of St. Patrick's Missionary Society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to all those who made it possible for me to complete this work. I specially thank Rev. Fr. Ambrose Mutinda, C.S.Sp, for agreeing to be my moderator. He was very generous with his time and was a source of great inspiration in my entire academic program at Tangaza. I thank the entire Tangaza staff for providing a warm and friendly environment for learning. I would also like to profoundly thank the St. Patrick's Missionary Society for facilitating my studies in Tangaza.

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. It has never been submitted to any college or university for academic credits. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed: _____

Name of Student: Sikuku Emmanuel Likoko, S.P.S.

Date:

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed: Fr. Ambrose Mutinda, CSSp

Name of Supervisor: Rev. Fr. Ambrose Mutinda, C. S. Sp.

Date:

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The social world we live in today is dramatically different from the social world of a few years ago, leave alone two thousand, three hundred years ago when the book of Qoheleth was written. Startling political events, technological breakthroughs, and an increasing awareness of global ecology in recent years serve to remind us of the rapid changes in the social order. This dynamism presents us with new challenges and problems¹. To understand change, even as we experience it, is undoubtedly difficult. Making sense of society, especially life has never been easy and it has become increasingly difficult in today's world. Religion, Sacred books or Traditions no longer provide answers. For instance, during the Old Testament times when someone wondered where the rain came from, it could easily be answered that God was watering the world.

Qoheleth raised so many questions regarding the meaning of life. His questions are still our questions today. But, how can we distinguish between what is trivial and what is significant? How can we make a sense out of wholeness in a world that appears to be increasingly fragmented and disjointed? These questions while seemingly rhetorical, are very urgent and intimate to humanity today. People, especially the young (youth) are searching for understanding and meaning in life. However, this "task is

¹ P. W. COOKSON JR. · C. H. PERSELL, *Making Sense of Society*, XI.

often made more difficult by the fact that institutions and organizations of society have lost most of their moral authority”². As a consequence individualism has been raised to the status of a civil religion. The idea of society as a shaper of consciousness has received less attention than it deserves.

Due to liberal viewpoints today, especially in the West, enhanced by what the Americans would call “a free society”, scientific revolution and capitalism have created an individualistic society that allows very minimal dialogue (if any) between various disciplines. Religion has been caught in this web of a fast moving society and it seems only the elderly people can keep hold to their faith. The young are simply blown by the wind of “modern culture” of “I do what pleases me”. This attitude have put nations at loggerheads, divided the society and bombed almost to extinction cultural values of our fathers.

One particular aspect of human life that has suffered most under this *wave* is religion. The new culture of “free society” has encouraged the human person to narrow his focus to him/herself. The modern man and woman have stopped thinking about the “other”, but the “self”. Making money, making oneself comfortable, getting a good job, travelling the world, etc, have become a priority. All these are good things but they come with a price, for we do not live in a perfect society. The question is: How is the modern Christian managing in this environment?

Qoheleth lived in a community that was highly religious and traditional. Answers to questions of life were simply provided by scriptural quotations or traditional dictates. After deep reflections and investigations on the events of his life, he found it hard to believe some of his traditional believes. He realized that there was more to life than what the books said. He felt lost in the world around him. Life seemed to be so monotonous and futile. He wanted to bring meaning into his life, so he resorts to

² P. W. COOKSON JR. · C. H. PERSELL, *Making Sense of Society*, XI.

seeking more knowledge (wisdom). In no time he realized that his adverse knowledge was not making him happier either. There was still something missing.

The modern man seems to have asked the same questions that Qoheleth asked, but seems to have responded differently. While Qoheleth accepted the futility of life and the helpless human condition, the modern man and woman seems to refute his (her) human condition and instead he (she) rebels against anything that seems to remind him (her) of his (her) human condition. Recently, when the European Union was drafting its constitution they omitted issues related to religion completely. The question is: Why? The 1995 massacre in Rwanda has left many with questions that need to be answered! Rwanda was almost 90% Christian at the time of the massacre. Today the world is faced with terrorism attacks at all corners in the name of “God”. All of a sudden, the human population is struggling to survive against the scourge of AIDS. Corruption has penetrated the human psyche, that neighborliness as preached by Christ only exists in the bible. Corruption has almost brought to extinction the virtue of love and charity to the neighbor³. There are so many questions, which Christians are facing today. Suicides have become so common that they are no longer “news”. What is life anyway? Is it of any value? Why do we have to keep up with all the sufferings in this life?

In this research paper I would like to show that the book of Qoheleth is indeed a mirror of the life of the modern Christian. I am going to do this with the intention of helping the modern Christian in facing the paradox of life. This is because many modern Christians have fallen victims of the “free society” *tsunami*, where some have completely lost their faith in life and God and some have simply been demoralized and

³ A neighbor is the one who needs your help; cf. The story of the Good Samaritan – Luke 10, 25 - 37.

thrown into confusion. My procedure will be to present as effectively as possible what I regard as the best view of Qoheleth's relevance to modern Christianity.

I will develop my essay in three main chapters. In chapter one I will explore the teachings and questions on the meaning of life by Qoheleth in particular reference to Old Testament wisdom. I will also look at the New Testament teaching in this regard. In chapter two, I will mainly talk on Christianity in the modern world, and finally in Chapter three I will try to fuse Chapter one and two to show the relevance of Qoheleth in the modern world. My Conclusion will be basically highlights of the insights and lessons learned from this research.

CHAPTER ONE

QOHELTH AND NEW TESTAMENT ON LIFE

1.0 Introduction

This chapter will serve as a reference point for my paper as it will give the biblical background for my arguments in chapters two and three. I am going to highlight briefly what I consider as relevant (for the development of this essay) regarding Wisdom in the Old Testament, in particular the Wisdom taught by Qoheleth. Though the wisdom literature can seem strange to us, it is important to realize that its concerns are modern; in fact they are our concerns. The best route to that realization is reading each book on its own terms. In respect to this my main focus in this essay as reflected in the title will be the theology behind Qoheleth's teaching, and how his seemingly dangerous and pessimistic teaching can be of help to modern Christians.

Qoheleth like any other Old Testament writings cannot be read in ignorance of the New Testament. Therefore, I will also look at the New Testament teaching in relation to Qoheleth highlighting points of meeting and of conflict. The main aim of the whole essay is to show the relevance of the book in our modern age, thus I will not attempt to give a critique of the book but will dwell mainly on the positive side of the book.

1.1 Wisdom in the Old Testament

The development of Wisdom in Old Testament Israel was not unique (to our own cultures). Wisdom or education systems have always developed with the “principle purpose of assisting the individual to cope with life and with the world – the physical world of nature and its demands, the social world of the human beings, and the religious world, that is, our relationship with God”.⁴ However the literary and intellectual aspect of wisdom in ancient Israel, just as the development of education systems today was mainly due to the efforts of a minority elite in the society.

The term “wisdom Literature” refers to seven biblical books, which are: Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Proverbs and Sirach. They are distinguished from the other biblical books by their common themes, style in which they are written and their content. For instance the historical books or the Pentateuch are written in prose, whereas wisdom books are written in poetic form. “It is in fact useful to read them together, for one can clearly see their common themes and subtle differences”⁵. The form of style reflects so much the historical background and character of human agents behind the biblical books.

Most wisdom writings in the OT are attributed to king Solomon. In the Jewish tradition, Solomon was considered as the wisest man ever to have lived (1Kings 5, 9-12):

Moreover, God gave Solomon wisdom and exceptional understanding and knowledge, as vast as the sand on the seashore. Solomon surpassed all the Cedemites and all the Egyptians in wisdom. He was wiser than all the other men – than Ethan the Ezrahite, or Herman, Chalcol, and Darda,

⁴ A. R. CERESKO, *The Old Testament. A Liberation Perspective* 25.

⁵ J. R. CLIFFORD, *The Wisdom Literature* 17.

the musicians - - and his fame spread throughout the neighboring nations. Solomon also uttered three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five.

However, scholars agree that only some of the proverbs could be considered as coming from the pre-exilic period. Though it has proved hard to date them, there is a unanimous consensus that some wisdom writings, certainly Ecclesiastes and Ben Sira to have been written in the post-exilic period, probably in the third century BC⁶. Indeed the majority of wisdom literature is largely post-exilic even though the origins might have been in the pre – exilic period.

The wisdom of the sages in the OT seems to connote a search for “order”. It comes out clearly that the sages believed in the existence of a fundamental order in the world, “discernible by experience”, thus their teachings were designed to bring about conformity with this order that had been determined by God⁷. It is however important to note that the wisdom literature of the Old Testament was influenced by the wisdom tradition of the Ancient Near East. It takes various forms common to the Ancient Near East, which includes short sayings (Proverbs), reflections on life (Qoheleth) and dialogues that deal with problems of life, e.g. Job.

The basic idea of wisdom is reflected in the Hebrew word “hokmah”. Traditionally many of us have looked at this concept in the light of one being “skillful”, “knowledgeable” and it is also associated with “old age” in most African cultures. In the Old Testament, wisdom is referred to in Proverbs 1,5 as knowledge in sound living. The

⁶ L. G. GRENSHAW, “Ecclesiastes”, *ABD* II, 271 – 278, ed. D. N. FREEDMAN, 921 – 6.

⁷ L. G. GRENSHAW, “Ecclesiastes”, *ABD* II, 271 – 278, ed. D. N. FREEDMAN, 922

heart, which is as the center of moral and intellectual decisions is seen as the seat of wisdom (1 Kings 3:9-12).

Wisdom literature can be divided into two main categories: Traditional wisdom and Critical wisdom. The Traditional wisdom was conservative in content reflecting traditional values; whereas Critical wisdom had a liberal viewpoint challenging the traditional values. According to Traditional wisdom, the good consequences are the result of good behaviour, and the bad consequences are a result of bad behaviour. Blessings in life are explained as God's reward if we do good things; whereas suffering is God's punishment for wrongdoing⁸. Among wisdom books, proverbs, Sirach, Psalms, Song of Songs and Wisdom reflect this kind of wisdom.

Experience, on the other hand, reveals that traditional beliefs are not always correct, nor do they give convincing answers to certain fundamental questions e.g. an untimely death. Critical wisdom tries to seek answers that are not answered by traditional wisdom and also tries to challenge that which seems contradictory in it. This tendency is represented in the bible by the books of Job and Qoheleth.

1.2 Wisdom in Qoheleth.

1.2.1 Historical Setting: The Authorship of the Book.

The author of Ecclesiastes effectively hid his identity under the strange name "Qoheleth", apparently derived from the Hebrew word "Qahal" which can be translated as "congregation" or "community". "Qoheleth" means the one who addresses the

⁸ *The Book of Job.*

assembly -- the “preacher”. The Greek translation of “preacher” is “Ecclesiastes”. The same title is used in the Septuagint. This is the title applied to the book.

The author is not mentioned in any writing outside the text itself, so we know nothing about his personal life in the history that transcends the text. However, “it has been suggested that judging by his use of images from the royal court, the author belongs to the Palestinian aristocracy in Jerusalem. More specifically, he would be a sage who impacts his wisdom in the circles of young Jewish aristocrats, warning them against the apparent newness of the Hellenistic system and culture”.⁹

Traditionally the authorship of the book was attributed to Solomon, because the opening sentence reads: “The words of David’s son, Qoheleth, king in Jerusalem.” However, this view of Solomon as the author has been abandoned today. To lend dignity and power to his message, the author chose to speak with the authority of a king. This disguise is however only thinly veiled and not intended to deceive anyone; There are hints that he was not that historical character, as when he refers boastfully to having acquired more wisdom than all who were before him in Jerusalem; we know that David was the only Israelite king who preceded Solomon¹⁰. The author was a scribe well acquainted with the traditional doctrines, but embraces them in a very critical manner in his search for truth and meaning of earthly life. He honestly faces reality and observes everything that happens. After his reflections, he gives very courageous conclusions that are very challenging to traditional beliefs. However, on the other hand, we also find the author keeping an unshakable faith in God.

⁹ E. TAMEZ, *When the Horizons Close - Rereading Ecclesiastes*, 15.

¹⁰ L. G. GRENSHAW, “Ecclesiastes”, *ABD* II, 271 -- 278, ed. D. N. FREEDMAN, 88.

According to scholars, the book of Qoheleth was probably written in the middle of the third century BC. The influence of the Greek thought on the book and the critical spirit challenging the traditional ideas point to this direction.¹¹ Whereas the sages were largely appraisers and collectors of the wisdom of the East, Qoheleth was bent on assaying traditional values by the experimental method. He is essentially an observer and tester of what takes place on the stage of life; “I Qoheleth... I applied my mind to search and investigate in wisdom all things that are done under the sun” (1: 12f).

1.2.2 Qoheleth’s Teaching: “Vanity of vanities” (1;2)

The framing verses, “Vanity of vanities” (1: 2 – 3 and 12: 8), describe everything as *hebel*, “breath”. Hebel characterizes some aspects of life as insubstantial and transient, and other aspects as wrong and repugnant. To translate every occurrence “absurd” might appear too sweeping, subjective and shallow in our modern perception of life, however this book should be read in its context for it to benefit us in any way.

The book of Qoheleth is not a dramatic dialogue, as Job is, with a certain development and consistency, but rather reflections and writings on the meaning of life. He is constantly shifting his viewpoints – “he is groping through the conflicting facts of experience and belief”¹². At one point he pursues a theme in a pessimistic mood, analyzing it for every possible disadvantage; then he shrugs it off with a perfunctory recommendation to enjoy the good things as they come. Sometimes, he seems unsteady, unsure of himself, continually thinking around and through his problem, adding one

¹¹ Cf. Class Lecture by Fr. Thayil on Wisdom Literature, 2005.

paradox to another, while straining for a satisfactory conclusion. It is actually in these paradoxes that he presents before us that we find his teachings. I will explore his teachings under four subheadings: wisdom, futility, God is judge and the practical rule of life.

a) Wisdom

Qoheleth recognizes the achievements of his profession as a wisdom teacher, yet he is sharp sighted and honest enough to call the pursuit of wisdom (alone) as “vanity”. In praising the profession of his wisdom, the student who edited his book avidly described his master: “besides being wise, Qoheleth taught the people knowledge, and weighed, scrutinised and arranged many proverbs. Qoheleth sought to find pleasing sayings, and to write down true sayings with precision. The sayings of the wise are like goads; like filled spikes are the topics given to the collector” (12: 9 – 11). Both the teacher (1: 18) and student (12: 12) however appreciated the difficulty of their vocation: “In much wisdom, there is much sorrow, and he who stores up knowledge stores up grief” (1: 18). Indeed Qoheleth recognises a certain theoretical superiority in the wise person. He has eyes in his head, whereas the fool walks in darkness (2: 14); it is the advantage of light over darkness. He complained that others did not recognise this and he recalled an episode where a poor man’s wisdom saved a city from a mighty attack of a king without being recognised; “yet the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words go unheeded” (9: 17).

However, the real difficulty that was ever present to Qoheleth was the fact that wisdom is inaccessible: “I said, I will acquire wisdom; but it was beyond me. What

² R. E. MURPHY, *Seven Books of Wisdom* 88 – 89.

exists is far reaching; it is deep, very deep; who can find it out?" (7: 23f). Only God knows the way to it, and man's approach to it only lies in the "fear of God". Being a practical man, he found that pursuit of wisdom is vain because the same lot befalls the wise man and the fool; thus death is the enemy of wisdom. "I know that one lot befalls both of them. So I said to myself, if the fool's lot is to befall me also, why then should I be wise? ... How is it that the wise man dies as well as the fool?" (2: 15f). He does not say that wisdom is useless.

b) Everything is futile

Vanity of vanities, say Qoheleth,
vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!

Qoheleth starts his teaching with the view that everything is futile, which is in sharp contrast with other biblical books. This idea is reiterated throughout the book. The Hebrew word "hebel" literary means "breath", "vapor", "breeze". The word occurs 38 times in the book. It is used in the book of Qoheleth in the sense of "absurdity". Everything is empty and utterly futile. All human experiences, desires, hopes, efforts, accomplishments even virtue and wisdom are transient and without any lasting result, all these change nothing and add nothing. There is nothing new under the sun. The natural forces are in constant movement: every day the wind blows, the river flows to the sea, the sun rises and sets, etc. Everything takes place as it was in the beginning; the cycle is only repeated - nothing is changed (1, 4-11). If so, the author asks, what is the meaning of all toil and efforts of human beings during his lifetime? (3,16); "What has been, will be; what has been done, that will be done. Nothing is new under the sun" (1: 9). After experiencing that everything in life is futile, he makes quite a shocking

statement: “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind” (2:17).

With this statement, Qoheleth appears as someone who stands at the summit of despair (2:17); he is almost suicidal. When he sees the tears and groans of the oppressed, he thinks that it would be better for them to die (4:1-3). Qoheleth becomes a frustrated man who only notices the helplessness of humankind; he says that the human being cannot even determine the way of his life (8:6-8; 2; 22-23; 4:4) - everything is pre-determined. Such an appeal by the preacher is utterly pessimistic and merely a reflection of the feelings of a person in despair. If these had been the only content of the book, then it would have been very dangerous.

c) God will Judge

Despite his pessimism the preacher does not conclude that everything is hopeless¹³; rather he bases his thinking uncompromisingly on the creator – God (12,1) and the ordered creation (7,13; 3,1-9).¹⁴ Qoheleth though in a negative manner, gives a very positive teaching on the problem of evil in the society. Against all odds, he believes that God will judge our actions. The difficulty is that human life seem to come to an end without God ever intervening in a discernible manner, to reward whether for the good or for the evil: I saw wicked men approach and enter, and as they left the sacred place, they were praised in the city for what they had done. This also is vanity. Because the sentence against evil is not promptly executed; therefore the hearts of men are filled with the desire to commit evil – because the sinner does evil a hundred times and survives” (8: 10 – 12).

¹³ W. DRYNESS, *Themes in OT theology* 193.

His complaint is that God does nothing to correct these wrongs: "Love for hatred man cannot tell; both appear equally vain, in that there is the same lot for all, the just and the wicked" (9: 1 - 3). Thus like Job, Qoheleth could not accept the traditional Hebrew theory that God rewards the good with prosperity and punished the evil with misfortune. The astonishing thing is that he nevertheless affirms his faith in God: "Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him, but it will not be well with the wicked...".

Fear of God seems to be the ultimate truth according to Qoheleth, though he say not a word about the manner in which "it should be with those who fear God", because he does not know. Human beings cannot know the ways of God, they can only live in trust - "there is a time and season for everything". He believes that the wicked man will not escape God; his "lack of reverence" will not put him in any better position; his wickedness will not help him to live any longer¹⁵. He warns the young that in as much as they enjoy they should bear in mind that God will judge them in all that they do (11,9). He warns the youth to serve God while there is opportunity (12, 1-4).

d) Practical rule of Life

"Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what he has made crooked? On a good day enjoy good things, and on an evil day consider: Both the one and the other God has made, so that man cannot find fault with him in anything" (7: 13f). These words of Qoheleth point the way to the series of practical conclusions, which run

¹⁴ W. DRYNESS, *Themes in OT theology* 193.

through his little work. When he finds that he cannot conclusively find an answer to the question he has been asking – “all is vanity” – he surrenders. His resignations seem to be moments he gives his practical rule of life that echoes not less than eight times he sets down his conclusions:

- i) “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil” (2: 24a).
- ii) “I know there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live” (3: 12).
- iii) So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot...” (3: 22).
- iv) “This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of life God gives us:” (5: 17).
- v) “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider...” (7: 13f).
- vi) “So I commend enjoyment...” (8: 15).
- vii) “Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart... Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love...” (9: 7 – 18).
- viii) “Even those who live many years should rejoice in them...” (11: 8 - 10).

There is a tone of resignation with these texts; this is the best one can do with life. Though life is vanity, it can be enjoyed. The little pleasures of life are recognised by Qoheleth as gifts of God which lead man to “gloss over the shortness and inadequacy

¹⁵ Cf. Qoheleth 7: 18f, 12: 13f.

of life” (Murphy pp. 102). In view of the emptiness of the netherworld (9: 10), man and woman must make the best of it while they really live.

Qoheleth’s insistence of enjoyment is a remarkable fact which suggests that his pessimism could be something “of a literary device, an exaggeration directed to attract attention to the ‘divine dissatisfaction’, that it was his lot to experience in the affairs of life”¹⁶. In as much as his conclusions might seem shallow and far-fetched, it is not surprising that they are still appealing even in the full light of Christianity today. Indeed happiness, comfort and pleasure are used by many as yardsticks to measure one’s success.

1.3 New Testament on the Meaning of Life (Luke 12: 22-40).

The pointed question of Christ: “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Mt. 16: 26), was almost anticipated by Qoheleth, some three hundred years before him. However, there is a tremendous difference between Qoheleth’s questions directed at ‘this life’ and the question asked by Christ. Listening to the words of Jesus, we immediately become aware of how superficial human thinking can be. Jesus says: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you’ll eat, or about your body and what you’ll wear, for life is more than food and clothing ... Instead, seek his kingdom and these other things will be given you besides...”¹⁷.

¹⁶ R. E. MURPHY, *Seven Books of Wisdom* 102.

¹⁷ Cf. The Gospel of Luke 12: 22 - 40.

Jesus warns that the desire for earthly comforts is not what matters but “acceptance of God as the single most important source of life, under whom all else find its subordinate and secondary place”¹⁸. One must trust in God’s love and live in faith. Jesus emphasizes the value of good deeds over earthly comforts; the later will wear out and pass away, but the former lasts forever. With this in our mind, Qoheleth seems to be in despair due to his narrow view of life. Qoheleth is trapped in a somewhat Pelagian¹⁹ mind, which assumes that the human being can solely redeem himself. Jesus on the other hand instructs us to see life beyond earthly comforts and to always have faith in unfailing God’s love. He uses the example of ravens and lilies²⁰. Ravens are known for their helplessness while lilies for their delicateness and short life span. Jesus directs our imagination to situations whose existence seem helpless and short-lived as that of ravens and lilies and authoritatively assures us (of “little – faith”) of God’s gracious and faithful care for us.

Qoheleth seemed to be weighed down by a negative attitude towards life unlike Jesus’ teaching on positive living. Jesus proclaims the message of the kingdom of God, to which all human beings should strive to be part of. Faith involves all human faculties. One is not supposed to manifest his faith in God only at prayer, but in every action and moment of his life. This is what is lacking in Qoheleth and in many Christians today. Just like Qoheleth, many Christians have fear of God but have very little faith in his abounding mercy and love. A believer needs to be totally bonded with God at all times.

¹⁸ J. J. KILGALLEN, *A Brief Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* 137.

¹⁹ Pelagianism designates in theology a heretical position with regard to the problems of grace and freedom. It goes back to the British monk Pelagius (Morgan) who about the year 400 preached in Rome a strictly biblical spirituality with strong emphasis on the human will; see, RAHNER, K. *Encyclopaedia of Theology*.

²⁰ Cf. The Gospel of Luke 12, 24 – 27.

The strong faith of Moses is what saw the Israelites through the desert; the Israelites themselves, murmured against God and Moses because of their little faith (Cf. Num. 14:11; 20:12; Deut 9: 23; etc). Moses suffered the same way as the other Israelites in the desert, but the suffering did not trouble his trust in God, for he knew what God was to do for them. The Israelites suffered the pains of the desert to reach the Promised Land; however, Jesus promises us eternal life; "... he who believes in me, has eternal life" (Cf. John 3:15 – 36; 5: 24; etc).

Qoheleth judges life by its earthly comforts, forgetting that these are mere accidents. When Jesus talks about discipleship, he says that those who want to save their life must be ready to lose it first (Mark 8:35). One to be a true disciple, he or she must refuse to make himself or herself the center of his or her life nor pursuit of self-fulfillment²¹. Those who are bent on saving their bodily life will only experience it's loss, rather they should be ready to see the higher good which is beyond this earthly life, eternal life, which they should strive to achieve in their daily living.

The story of the Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) gives us the best lesson on how to perceive our earthly life. For Qoheleth, people like Lazarus are better dead because of their misery²². However, Jesus says that what is important is not wealth or earthly comforts but a virtuous life. Jesus does not condemn wealth but advocates for a proper use of what one has. This parable is thus given as an example, or rather a warning, with regard to human conduct²³.

²¹ Cf. D. Mc BRIDE, *The Gospel of Mark, A Reflective Commentary* 137.

²² Cf. 4:1-2 – Qoheleth says that after considering the misery of life, he feels those dead are more fortunate in death than those still living in oppression with none to comfort them.

²³ I. H. MARSHALL, 1978 - 632.

1.4 Conclusion

The book is essentially a philosophical work. The author tries to see and interpret everything through the use of reason, with which he comes to the conclusion, that “all is vanity”. I am more inclined to understand Qoheleth’s theme, “all is vanity” as referring to **life on earth being taken as an end in itself**. This is a life of those who do not fear the Lord; i.e. of those who do not acknowledge their human weaknesses and tend to think that they can order their own lives. It is this understanding of Qoheleth that leads us to the understanding of the New Testament teachings: Christ says, “Everyone who drinks this water shall thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst” (John 4, 14 –14). Christ warns us against the temptation of putting too much value in earthly things that never satisfy our desires. This comes out more clearly in the parable of the “Rich Fool”²⁴(Luke 12: 13 – 21). According to Qoheleth, such a life is like a “chase after wind”.

Qoheleth is an eye opener to all of us. It is true that no human being is perfect; indeed one time or another we might fall into Qoheleth’s pessimistic attitude. But we should be honest like Qoheleth and speak out our frustrations. Qoheleth is honest with himself and makes us look straight at our own ignorance and at the darkness of the unknown world beyond. Qoheleth is simply compelling us to seek understanding of our own religious beliefs and practices well: WHAT we believe and WHY we believe. To have a firm basis for our faith, we should not shy away from doubt or pessimism but face our doubts and pessimistic attitude, which only affirm our humanity. A religious faith that is not examined and cautiously accepted is not faith at all. In this sense, most

Christians do not have faith at all. Socrates said, “unexamined life is not worthy living”²⁵.

The New Testament message on the other hand is very important when reading Qoheleth because it gives us an eschatological view of life, which Qoheleth lacks. The New Testament does not only preach the “fear” of God or how to live a meaningful life on earth, but invites us to share in the eschatology itself. St. Paul says that there is nothing the human race can boast about, unless they boast about the Lord (1 Cor. 1:26 – 31). The New Testament eradicates our fears and establishes an intimate relationship between us with God. The “Kingdom of God” is already here. Thus we should not live by judging our lives in regard with material comforts, but how well we are relating with God. This can only be manifested in our relationship with one another, as John says “If anyone says, “I love God,” but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen (1 John 4, 20).

²⁴ Jesus warns against greed, that even though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions. Fools are those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God.

CHAPTER TWO

QUESTIONS RAISED BY CHRISTIANS TODAY

2.0 Introduction

We are living in a very rich spiritual age that is built on 2000 years of Christian Spirituality. In spite of this spiritual wealth, the 20th century witnessed some of the saddest moments in the history of humankind ever recorded; for instance the “earth-shaking social and political upheavals” of the two world wars, the Holocaust, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the rise and fall of Communism, the social and political turmoil in Latin America and Africa. (In Rwanda alone, almost 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed within three months).²⁶ The 9/11, terrorism, the mutilations and killings in Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda are just a few of the worst human castigated evil acts that we can think of today. It is unfortunate that slave trade²⁷ is also still practiced in the 21st century – young girls and boys being picked to be sex workers, house helps for the rich, etc. It is hard to explain some human practices today such as those experienced during the apartheid era in South Africa, racism in America and many parts of the Western world, tribalism in Africa, etc. Such situations have brought many people to despair with many questions that need immediate answers. Many

²⁵ Socrates on authentic living (I am unable to locate the source itself).

²⁶ ORIGINS: CNS Documentary Service, May 25, 2000; Vol. 30, No. 2, Art. *Catechetical Leadership Conference* by Bishop Ramirez.

²⁷ Slavery institutions of the society enabled one person to acquire ownership and free disposition of another person. The slave trade which began in the 16th century resulted in over 15 million black Africans being transported to the Western hemisphere to provide cheap labour in Agriculture and mines. Today, the Africans are doing the same to their fellow brothers and sisters.

Christians have become victims of such a cruel reality of human life, and it is of the same that I will try to expound on in this chapter.

People in the modern world seem to be always seeking to understand and to go beyond the seemingly doomed life here on earth. They are constantly seeking to learn how to respond to reality, to act in a wise way, to do what brings them and others happiness and success. In this time of turmoil and change, some are even seeking a reformation of traditional values, whereas some try to find solutions for their problems by a radical rejection of the past, religious beliefs, etc, (for their despair is too much that everything seems meaningless). The struggles of Qoheleth to bring meaning to life have not been diminished but only increased in this modern age. In this context, I will look at challenges facing Contemporary Christians, and explore the mission and message of the Church as reflected in the magisterial teaching.

2.1 The present day world and its challenges to Christians

The Christian today is a widow in Somalia trying to bring up five children; is a child soldier in Northern Uganda who participated in the killing of his own dad; is a mother in Northern Ireland who lost her only son in the “inter – religious” wars; is a father in America whose son is doing some repairs on a space shuttle; is a forty years old grand mother in township South Africa trying to bring up three Aids orphaned grand children; is one of the presidents in a G8 meeting in Russia discussing global warming; is a leader of a country considering building a nuclear weapon; is a priest going to preach about contraceptives... The list is endless. The question is: What is going on in the minds of each of these people? How do they manage to keep their Christian faith?

Truly, I might seem pessimistic as Qoheleth with the examples I have given above. I do acknowledge that many good things are happening today too: We are living in an age of great abundance of wealth, resources and economic well being. Today, men and women live in a great sense of freedom than ever before, etc. Actually looking at today's life, one can easily term it as better, organized, hopeful than the previous ages. However, why should I highlight the good that is happening? Goodness should be the norm. Things are supposed to be good - what is good is what is normal. What is abnormal (the bad) is what has taken away the meaning of living. There is a lot of despair today because what is normal is no longer the "norm"; what is abnormal is what is chosen as normal. How can one explain the shocking cases of rape today? How can one explain the increased number of suicides, drug/alcohol abuse, homicides, wars, corruption, torture, congested prisons, etc?

2.1.1 Feeling the absence of God

We are living in a rapidly changing world. The phenomenon of globalization is having a devastating effect on the countries of the world, especially the "developing world". One world is being erased and another is in the process of emerging that has no "pre-established model for its construction - some form of balances are disappearing and new balances are having difficulty in getting established..."²⁸. Today, God is no longer at the center, instead man and woman who have emerged as autonomous subjects²⁹. I believe that it is such a human centered attitude that could explain the

²⁸ Letter of the Bishops to the Catholics of France, "*Proposer la foi dans la société actuelle*" *Le Cerf*, 1997, p.22.

²⁹ Cf. OMNIS TERRA: pontifical Missionary Union, No. 328, June 2002, Art. *Living and Thinking about the Mission at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, by Fr. Christopher Roucou pp.249.

reasons for the problems and challenges in the modern world. A woman who has lost her only son in the war in Iraq might ask: "Why me God?" This same question can be heard by the hungry, the AIDS victims, rape victims, land mine victims, robbery victims, etc. Everyone in despair seems to be a victim of a certain cause; the question is: What is this cause? Is there any hope?

We can only be able to answer these questions if we could answer the seemingly unerasable question asked by the Psalmist 25 centuries ago: "Who is man?" (Ps 8,5). In a more inclusive language: Who is the human person? Of what value is his or her life? The answer to this question seemed somewhat clearer in previous ages, but with scientific advances today and broadened academic discussions, the human person has found him/herself living in ignorance with regards to it. Such issues as Euthanasia, artificial procreation, abortion, use of contraceptives, capital punishment have only provoked heated arguments without answering the question. The same question was asked after the genocide in Rwanda and Cambodia.

Like Qoheleth, the modern Christian is also afflicted by pain, suffering, imminent death, poverty, hopelessness, anger, etc. There are reported cases of accidents that wipe out whole families. Wars that turn into ethnic cleansing, e.g. in Darfur, Sudan. There have been cases of horrific natural disasters, for instance the earthquakes in Indonesia, hurricanes in America etc. Such moments have left many to wonder if God really exists, or if he exists but is not present all the times when we need him. Some ask: Did he create the world and left it for creatures to fend for themselves? Does he deliberately leave his creation suffer? God is really present and ever present, except that often we are not capable of seeing, hearing and discovering the signs of his presence.

We might better understand this in relation to the Emmaus story (Luke 24,1f): The disciples walk on their way so distraught and down trodden, feeling abandoned by the Lord in whom they had put all their trust. In their grumbling and complaining, they are not aware of the presence and nearness of the Lord to them. They are not aware that the person they are complaining to is the Lord himself. It is only through a progressive listening to him and in the breaking of bread are they able to recognize him.

Fr. Christopher Roucou says, “these feeling of absence, this indecisive context, is a call to us to seek a spiritual attitude adapted to these times, a renewed understanding of faith. It is a call to rediscover the face of God that Christian Tradition transmits to us in Jesus Christ...”³⁰. It is our critical situation that drives us, on the contrary, to go to the sources of our faith and become disciples of Jesus Christ in a more decisive and radical way³¹. The Emmaus story should be taken as a whole; one cannot separate one moment from the other. This should also reflect our lives. In order for men and women of our times, especially the young people, to discover the presence of God in our lives, it is necessary for us to keep listening to Christ through the signs he has established on earth, in the environment around us, in our daily life, and in the church (particularly in the sacraments).

Many times the modern man and woman is too busy to listen. It is normal today to find someone working from six in the morning to eight in the evening. It has become normal taking their children (only months old) to kindergartens because they do not have time to look after them themselves. Worshiping on Sundays interferes with their

³⁰ OMNIS TERRA: pontifical Missionary Union, No. 328, June 2002, Art. *Living and Thinking about the Mission at the Dawn of the Third Millenium*, by Fr. Christopher Roucou p.251.

³¹ Letter of the Bishops to the Catholics of France, “*Proposer la foi dans la societe actuelle*” Le Cerf, pp. 20 – 21. Cf. OMNIS TERRA, No. 328, June 2002, p.251

weekly schedules, etc. The story of Mary and Martha³² is a good lesson for us. Martha can be quickly praised by modern minds, because she is the one who is up (at least doing something). But Jesus says: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her”.

2.1.2 *Is the Search for pleasure a solution?*

Qoheleth says: “And I detested all the fruits of my labour under the sun, because I must leave them to a man who is to come after me... For what profit comes to a man from all the toil and anxiety of heart with which he has laboured under the sun?” (2, 8-22). After looking at what looks like a “doomed” world, the preacher sees that the only way one can console him/herself is to grasp the current moment and enjoy before the imminent death arrives³³. Just like Qoheleth, many Christians today tend to see no hope. Life seems so short and full of misery. Faced with such a situation they tend to rationalize the Christian values to make room for gratification of flesh. They might say: “God did not put us in this world to suffer, but to enjoy”. “There is no need to punish our bodies”. “What is wrong with me enjoying myself if I am not hurting anyone”.

The words of Qoheleth might be very comforting to the modern man and woman. However, Qoheleth concludes his statement on seeking pleasure with “all is vanity”. He realized that in as much as he tried to enjoy himself, his desires were not quenched; he desired more. With the dawn of capitalism the human mind is so much conquered that the “rational mind” has become “the greedy mind”. A greedy mind wants self-

³² Cf. Luke 10: 38 - 42.

gratification, but does not know where to stop. The search for “self-gratification” becomes the search for “self destruction”. Looking around today, we notice that desperation in life due to unemployment, family problems, political problems, mistreatments (etc) have led many to resort to use of drugs, alcohol, sex, etc, with the hope of making themselves happy. We all know where such paths end. For Qoheleth, search for pleasure should come with the fear of God: “Rejoice, O young man, while you are young and let your heart be glad in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart. The vision of your eyes; Yet understand that as regards all this God will bring you judgement” (11: 9). We have to ask ourselves, in seeking our happiness, do we ever consider of God’s judgement of our actions? Are we the one’s bringing desperation to ourselves, for we venture into things blindly?

2.1.3 Is there any hope?

One may ask the question: Is there any hope in the midst of all these human sufferings? With this question, I think it is now high time to remember the great and extraordinary people whose lives have brought light to a world in darkness and salt to an earth in times of hopelessness, cynicism, confusion and doubt. These include Maximilian Kolbe, John XXIII, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, etc. Among those living, am happy to mention Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Wangare Maathai, just to mention a few.

These martyrs, prophets and countless others assure us of the divine presence among us, that the Trinity, even in the midst of the darkest and longest nights still

³³ African Bible: *Ecclesiastes* 9,7;

abides in the heart of the world. What keeps such people going? All these people had one thing in common: they all experienced great suffering. Christianity, religion or good life is not only for those who experience a life without suffering, but for those who find life in the suffering. As Bishop Ramirez says, “Religion understood as doing all the ritual things, is for those who are afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for those who have gone to hell and back”³⁴.

2.2 Modern Christian’s and the Magisterial Teaching:

In the early 20th century, the Church was very guarded against the ideologies and ways of the modernists. The storm clouds broke in 1907, first with “*Lamentabili Sane exitu*”, a syllabus of errors issued in July by the Holy office with the approval of the pope, followed in September by “*Pascendi dominici gregis*”, Pius X’s encyclical concerning the “Doctrines of the Modernists”. The church perceived modernity as a threat to Christian life and tried its best with all in its power to condemn it. In a very painful and slow process, however, this attitude started to change. The church started to realize that modernism was not to be condemned but needed to be guided and cared for. Indeed, the modernist was no other than the Christian faithful. The church’s pastoral concern for the modernist came to full realization with the Second Vatican council.

In his article on Vatican council II and the church today, Bishop Fiorenza³⁵ said that, the Vatican council continues as “the instrument of navigation that sets the course we will follow through any and all events that transpire in this new millenium”. Such a

³⁴ ORIGINS: CNS Documentary Service, May 25, 2000; Vol. 30, No. 2, Art. *Catechetical Leadership Conference* by Bishop Ramirez.

³⁵ Bishop Fiorenza was the president of the US Bishops in the year 2000.

seemingly overwhelming task might seem impossible for our Holy church due to its many human faces, but fairly enough the Teaching office of the church hasn't shied away from this enormous task. It has produced a number of encyclical letters as evidence of the work that the church is already committedly carrying out in its mission to the whole world. I thus realize that it is of paramount importance that I look at some of these church teachings without with my essay will be incomplete.

The second Vatican council in its constitution on the church in the modern world starts with these words: "The joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxiety of men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts ... That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with the human race and its history by the deepest bonds"³⁶. With this we note that, the church recognizes that its first mission challenge is the task to interpret the world and its contemporary man and woman.

Vatican II looks at the world in its entirety in relation to the human history. It looks at humanity, not only at the marks of its travail and failure, but also at its triumph and happiness. This is one thing that most of us lack, just as Qoheleth did. Qoheleth and many Christians today interpret their lives basing on particular instances, missing the fact that life as a whole cannot be measured as such. The church recognizes the worries of the modern man and woman: "Man today is troubled and perplexed by questions about current trends in the world, about their place and their role in the universe, about the meaning of the individual and collective endeavour, and finally about the destiny of nature and of men" (GS 3). In Solidarity with the human family today, Vatican II tries

to clarify today's problems in the light of the Gospel under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, unlike Qoheleth who endeavored to answer these questions with the use of his own reason alone.

Many philosophers have fallen into Qoheleth's trap of looking at the human predicament only in its materiality. According to the Church, the human being is more than his own body; for us Christians we believe that we are also Spiritual beings. It is our belief as taught by the Scriptures (Acts 4:12) that Christ, who died on the cross, was raised for the sake of us, and he is the one to show us the way and strengthen us through the Spirit in order to be worthy of his destiny. We also believe that the key, the center and the purpose of the history of all humanity is to be found in the Lord and our master³⁷.

When reading Qoheleth, one encounters a person who seems to be alone, abandoned and lost. There seems to be no life-force behind him except his own will power to live on; as many will say, he is just surviving – living a day at a time. Many people today are indeed sharing Qoheleth's bed. One may ask, why do we have so many suicides, wars, corruption, prostitution, etc? There is so much evil in the world that even some religious sects have started interpreting it as a sign for the "ending" of the world. Driven by hopelessness, many people today seem to live by Qoheleth's motto: Enjoy all the fruits of your labour under the sun during the limited days of life which God gives you; for this is your lot (5:17). If we live a life like this, truthfully we wouldn't be different from animals in a game reserve. Inevitably, it would turn out to be "the survival of the fittest" – and is this not happening today? The church teaches us that, as

¹⁶ Gaudium et Spes, No. 1

³⁷ Gaudium et Spes, No. 10.

Christians we should allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit of the Lord, who fills the whole world (GS 11); and it is by this faith in the Lord that we should seek to find solutions to the human predicament.

From scripture, we learn that we are created in the image of God himself (Gen. 1:26). By bringing us into existence, God does not abandon us but calls us into communion with him; “For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence” (GS 19). We can only live wholly if we freely acknowledge God’s love for us and surrender our whole lives into his hand. It however sad that many people today, like Qoheleth, have either forgotten God’s love for his creation or sometimes explicitly reject it and seek to determine their own destiny.

Vatican II seeks a communitarian approach to the human vocation, unlike Qoheleth’s individualistic approach to life. The Church grounds this teaching on Scriptural passages as in Rom 13: 9-10: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Cf. I John 4:20). Obviously it his individualistic approach that leads Qoheleth to despair about his immediate situation. He fails to understand that we live for each other. It is not a matter of striving “to strive” or enjoying today (cf. Qoheleth 3:13), but the need to look upon one’s neighbour, “to make ourselves the neighbour of every man, no matter who he is ...” (Gs 27). As the Lord himself taught us (Mt 24:13), life itself is at war with powers of evil, but man and woman has to struggle and do what is right by trusting in God’s love. Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2). Indeed, as Christians we should not measure our happiness or destiny by earthly moments but by our intimacy with the Lord.

2.3 Conclusion

It is true that the modern man and woman are struggling with the same questions that Qoheleth had. As modern Christians strive to answer their God-given call, living life to the full, they can learn a lot from Qoheleth. He challenges us to think about the uncertainty of the future (3: 14 – 22), social disorders, which are so prevalent today (4: 1 – 6), the importance of reverence for God (4: 17 – 5: 6), and the pervasion of justice (5: 7 – 8). He also decries the uselessness of riches (5: 9ff) and desires (6: 7 – 12). Qoheleth also talks about the place of the youth (11: 7 – 10). This is important because around 55% of the world population today is composed of young people. It will be only out of ignorance or arrogance that someone could say that the book of Qoheleth does not give us any insight on how we should live today.

Qoheleth's question reflects our questions too: Our desperation, misconceptions and struggles to overcome them. We can better understand the message of Qoheleth for us if we briefly reflect on the book of Wisdom 2 – 3. According to Wisdom, it is the wicked (those who lack wisdom) who speak of the shortness of life, live in fear of death, fear not to be remembered when they die and thus seek maximum bodily gratification while they are still alive (Wis. 2). According to the author of wisdom, such a pessimistic attitude towards life is unwarranted because God created "all things that they might have being; and the creatures of the world are wholesome, and there is not a destructive drug among them..." Pleasure, like all reality, must have its limits. This is something "fools" do not understand; only the wise know the proper order of creation (Qoh. 3: 1 – 8).

The degeneracy of the wicked takes an evil turn when they wish to silence the voice of wisdom and justice (Wis. 2: 10 – 20). The wicked plan to test the just (vv. 17 – 20) to see whether, like Job (Job 1: 6 – 12), the just would persevere in their conviction. This is a great lesson to modern humanity. In fact, haven't we brought forces of despair on ourselves? Haven't we allowed the wicked, the unwise to speak on our behalf? Haven't we let the unjust to be our leaders? Let us emulate the great example of the great saints and leaders I mentioned earlier and be conquerors. If we live a godly life, forces of evil will never block our path to a full life with Christ.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RELEVANCE OF QOHELETH TODAY

3.0 Introduction

As I have mentioned in Chapter two, above, we are living in a rapidly changing society; however, despite the uniqueness of our age the problems humanity was grappling with twenty centuries ago are still very much alive today. The approach might be different, but the goal is the same: to live a successful and happy life. In this chapter, I would like to show that the book of Qohelth has a universalistic appeal, and as such it also has lessons for us today. Its application goes beyond boundaries of time, race or colour.

We should not find it unusual for our faith in God to be tested, or proved, when we are confronted with difficulties and problems in our every day existence. As we have seen in the previous chapters, challenges to our convictions or religious beliefs are inevitable; in fact, it is the challenges that make our beliefs alive. What is important is how we harmonize our personal experiences with these challenges, i.e. how we respond to difficulties in our life. Qoheleth had challenges in his life. He experienced difficulty moments but it appears he overcame them. His written reflections are a clear sign that the challenges did not crush him but became moments of reflections on the meaning of life and his faith in God. His challenges are ours too. Is their anything we can learn from his attitude towards life?

3.1 The significance of the book of Qoheleth today

The themes the author discusses are life situations, which concretely touch on the modern Christian in his or her experience of Christian living and life in general. He addresses relevant issues: Vanity of earthly things (1,1-11), vanity of wisdom (1,12-18), vanity of pleasure (2,1-12), uncertainty of the future (3,14-22), social disorder (4,1-16), reverence for God (4,17-5,6), justice (5,7-8), riches (6,7-12), youth (11,7-18), etc.

It is not for us modern Christians to complain or criticise the examples Qoheleth has chosen in his treatise. As Murphy Roberts says, Qoheleth is not quarreling with the activity in nature as such; “rather, this activity simply mirrors the monotony and sameness in human life which is the really burden of his complaint” (Murphy 90). “The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor is the ear filled with hearing (1: 8). If we understand his thought correctly, Qoheleth means to say that the man’s or woman’s restless searching goes beyond the regularity that he sees in the world. Man seems to be ever seeking what is beyond units of time. It is a fact that seemingly all tribes, races, and groups of people in the world had a religion at one stage. In these religions, they all seemed to believe in some sort of being that lived outside time. Could this be an affirmation that the human being has an intrinsic desire for the timeless; a going beyond the regularity which is only apparent?

When one considers the precarious grasp that man has on his possession, the vanity of earthly things become apparent. Qoheleth says that in his experience of various instances of life, he has learned a lot, e.g. a man dies before he could enjoy his riches. This reminds us of the story of the rich fool (Lk. 12: 13 – 21). He is called the fool because he becomes so blinded with earthly riches and happiness, forgetting that

there is more to life than the treasures in this world. The world today is filled with a lot of greed for earthly treasures, propelled by capitalism. There seem to be a blind scramble for earthly resources, wealth, pleasure and power with little regard for human value. In fact, people are amassing wealth, not to use but just for the sake of having more and more. Are we any different from the rich fool?

An insistent concern with the theme of hope, now in this new millenium reveals a crisis of hope and need to rebuild a utopia in our own time (Tamez p. 1). A reason for living, or the meaning of life, is one of the most profound and universal questions that human beings have asked through the centuries and are still asking today. It entails an effort, which often has been in vain, to understand future events in history and even beyond earthly existence. It has often been in vain because people have been impatient, wanting immediate answers, and they have also mostly used the wrong approach. To seek the reason for living is not just a philosophical or scientific concern; It should derive from our desire to live with dignity in the face of conflicts and challenges, whether these are economic, cultural, social or political. That is, it is wholistic to the human person.

The book of Qoheleth written around the second half of the third Century B.C.E, during the Ptolemaic Empire, raises this problem. Qoheleth “experiences reality as a great emptiness, masked by the change and agitation around him; he is anguished by his inability to envision a liberating future; and amid this crisis of meaning he reflects on the inevitability of death and the impossibility of effectively challenging God’s intention’s” (Tamez p. 2). We may ask: Are Qoheleth’s proposed answers to this problem valid for our time?

We can identify four desires³⁸ in Qoheleth, which basically mirror the concerns of the modern man and woman: for knowledge of the times, for justice and freedom, for happiness, and for the transcendence of death.

1) Desire for Knowledge

Reading through the writings of the sages in the Old Testament, it seems knowledge is salvation. Indeed knowledge gets us out of the darkness or ignorance in our daily living. It is important to “know the future in order to make the present ‘absurdity’ bearable and find a place within it” (Tamez p. 19). The helplessness of not knowing the times or the divine purposes causes Qoheleth suffering because he cannot put together a coherent praxis. Qoheleth posits that wisdom is better than wealth and power, among other things, but wisdom also has limits. In fact he criticises his own wisdom, and says that it is all “vanity”.

The search for knowledge seems to be intrinsic to the modern man and woman. Illiteracy today is considered as barbaric and antidevelopment. Governments and people are investing billions of dollars in scholarly and scientific projects with the quest for knowledge on the past, present and future. There is no age that has seen such an upsurge of scientific researches as we have them today. Archeology, technology and forecasts have taken scientific researches by a storm. In spite of these, the modern man and woman finds himself (herself) still living in the unknown. Natural phenomenas have still taken their cause. There have been rains, there have been droughts. There have been volcanoes, there have been floods. There have been floods, there have been winds. There have been earthquakes, there have been Tsunamis. People have been born, people

³⁸ E. TAMEZ, *When the Horizons Close, Rereading Ecclesiastes 19 –23*.

have died. People have been hungry, they have eaten. Science, despite its advancement has had no control over these.

Looking at our world today, there is no doubt that Qoheleth's desire for knowledge was quite different from ours. His desire was to find meaning in life and his faith in God. His motivation was the need to go beyond what diminished life. So what motivates humanity today in its search for knowledge? What motivates scientists to risk their lives, boarding robots (space shuttles) to space without a guarantee of their safe return? NATO administrator Michael Griffin told the US congress in 2005 that what it takes to be a great nation in the 21st century is to send people in space without seeking outside help.³⁹ Hearing such statements, we should ask ourselves: Is our quest for knowledge misplaced? Has the search for wisdom become a search for supremacy? Is NASA morally right in spending over two hundred million dollars every year on space projects, when more than half of the world population is not guaranteed good health and food? I think it is high time for the modern man and woman to rethink their priorities. Qoheleth will ask: With all my knowledge, is my life better?

The modern man should be able to realize that, knowledge (rationality) alone is not enough. Qoheleth realized that, human beings cannot objectively control and rationalize the natural order of things; he thus projected everything to God's control -- "there is time for everything". Such an attitude "re-humanized" him, since it permitted him to know his limits, i.e. his own human condition. It is thus a call for modern man and woman, to realize their own limits when approaching reality. This is what has been lacking most; thus the reason for the social, economic, political and cultural chaos in our society today.

2) The desire for Justice and Freedom

Who does not desire justice and freedom? According to Qoheleth, the society is inverted with wickedness in place of justice (3: 16); power is in the hands of the oppressors; the poor are violently oppressed, and there is no one to comfort their tears (4: 1). The state does not fulfill its task of administering justice and social welfare (5: 8), and the tyranny of the king is unbearable; no one can approach him, for he does whatever he pleases as if he were God (8: 3 – 4), and his spies are all around (10: 20). Is this not the political situation today?

Qoheleth's desire for freedom and justice is indeed one of the deepest desires of man and woman in our society today. The church has realized this and we have seen to the establishment of Justice and peace commissions in various dioceses all over the world. South Africa is just healing from the wound of apartheid. America is yet to forget the scar of segregation between whites and blacks. Most third world countries are staggering under the weight of corruption and dictatorial governments, etc. The non-*hebel* society of Qoheleth is where justice, law and freedom reign. Is this not also our dream?

We have however to acknowledge that the notion of freedom has been slightly exaggerated today in some cultures. Today we encounter sentiments like: I do what I wish provided I am not hurting anyone; This is a free world, do your business, I do mine. Freedom that was meant to enhance life, is being used as a tool for individualism under the umbrella of a "civilized society". Contentious issues like abortion, gay marriages, homosexuality and Euthanasia have been legalized in some countries not in

³⁹ News Week, July 18, 2005.

respect to religious beliefs, or traditional values but under the notion of a “free and civilized society”.

3) Desire for Happiness

The desire for happiness felt by Qoheleth appears explicitly in the refrain, “there is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil”. But it also appears in the rejection of toil. He says that laborious toil to accumulate wealth is worthless, if “I am depriving myself of pleasure”, (4: 8), or if one can live two thousand years and yet “enjoy no good”. He does not reject the process of labour but rather the enslaving way in which one toils but does not enjoy his product. He thus recommends moderation in work: “Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after wind” (4: 6).

What is the reason behind capitalism today? What is the reason behind greed in the society today? In fact, today people do not study with primary aim of acquiring knowledge but securing good jobs – well paying jobs. It is a fact today that young people in the developed world are no longer interested in menial jobs. Ire-land, which was once a great producer of potatoes, is now importing. Elderly parents are now selling of their farms because their children are no longer interested in farming. The modern man and woman is seeking ways of maximizing pleasure with as little personal input as much as possible. But the question is: Do these earthly pleasures give really satisfaction? Is this ‘pleasure principle’ not self-defeating? Looking at life today, we can be affirmative that ‘pursuit of pleasure is what thwarts it’. Just looking at the mobile phone industry, one buys a phone today but when he is walking on the streets the following day he notices a better brand. He buys that one, but before the month ends, a

new one is advertised. Before a year is over, one has changed his/her phone more than three times. In the end, the pursuit for pleasure becomes a reason for frustration. Qoheleth says: “All man’s toil is for his mouth, yet his desire is not fulfilled... This also is vanity and a chase after wind”. Indeed pursuit of earthly pleasure as an end in itself is self-defeatist. There is a lot we can learn from the parable of Jesus of the ‘rich fool’⁴⁰ when we conduct our affairs on this earth.

4) Implicit Desire to Transcend Death

On the topic of death, Qoheleth has been wrongly judged as representing modern materialists.⁴¹ Qoheleth’s work is actually not speculative philosophy. Qoheleth does not deny the realm of the Spirit, as the materialists do. By equating humans with animals, can simply be explained that Qoheleth does not know the meaning of the philosophical term soul.⁴² The Hebrew had no concept of “soul” as an independent spirit in man, which is his animating principle. The term life – breath (*ruah*) is to be understood from Genesis 2: 7; God “breathed into man’s nostrils the breath of life” and man became a living being. Thus Qoheleth is only voicing the traditional view. The life – breath of man and the beast is taken away when they die. Thus, with such an understanding one cannot rightly infer that Qoheleth is saying that man and beast have the same nature.

Qoheleth is angry that both the just and the wicked die, with no distinction between them (9: 2 – 3). Looking negatively at his thoughts we might infer that for Qoheleth, the wicked should die but not the just; or the wicked should suffer a more

⁴⁰ Cf. Luke 12: 13 – 21.

⁴¹ R. E. MURPHY, *Seven Books of Wisdom*, 91.

cruel death than the just. According to him, death not only makes equal human beings of different conditions, but also levels beasts with humans (3: 20 – 21). Qoheleth does not formulate a possibility of resurrection, because this discussion had not yet arisen in Judaism in the third Century B. C. E.

According to Qoheleth, death is a given, uncontestable reality and no one knows what lies beyond it; and since no one knows his or her time, Qoheleth simply accepts it. By accepting it, he acknowledges his human condition. As Christians today, we should thus feel more fortunate, for unlike Qoheleth, Christ revealed to us the ultimate truth of our destiny, which does not end at death but projects to an eternal union with God, the Father. Thus, where Qoheleth despaired we should be rejoicing in the Lord.

From the acknowledgement of his helplessness before death, Qoheleth derives two viable alternatives⁴³. 1) Not to hasten the time of death by doing things that causes harm; and 2) to enjoy the present life intensely, especially before old age sets in and announces the imminent coming of death. Some of Qoheleth's advice about the imminence of death is quite limited and very short – sighted when we look at them as Christians today. According to him, if society is so inverted that things go badly for the righteous and well for the wicked, then one should be neither too righteous nor too wicked (7: 16 – 19). Obviously this is a very subjective if not an extreme political argument about the truths of faith. Jesus said that something has to be either hot or cold, if it is lukewarm, "spit it out". As Christians we should always seek to be purely righteous. The reason for our existence is not from within us (no one contributed towards his being), but is from without. If we become obsessed with the self, the now,

⁴² R. E. MURPHY, *Seven Books of Wisdom*, 94.

⁴³ E. TAMEZ, *When the Horizons Close, Rereading Ecclesiastes* 23.

the earthly, we can easily forget that our being is not destined to end in this world. We are beings projected towards eternal glory; our being in this world is only transitory. What lies beyond our being in this world should be the source of our happiness. The heavenly glory, the life with the Father should be the motivation for our actions, not self-gratification in the here and now.

Qoheleth does not fear the arrival of death, nor does he love it or encourage suicide; he sees it as a reality to be beaten at its own game, by enjoying many days of material happiness before it arrives. In as much as his attitude seem to be too limited, we can learn a lot from him, especially in our society today which is afflicted by many suicides orchestrated by fear of suffering and pain. Those who do not enjoy life in the midst of so much enslaving toil under the sun are only letting death win prematurely.

At some point Qoheleth's reasoning reaches its limit: God is God and the human being is a human being. Qoheleth expresses his helplessness in the face of transcendence and divinity. This does not mean to be afraid of God, rather, recognizing "God's extraordinary numinous aspect, which overwhelms human beings because it is inscrutable, unpredictable, undecipherable enigma".⁴⁴ Ultimately according to him, God is a mystery. Translating the helplessness of Qoheleth into our time today, we should notice that it is a positive helplessness that thrusts human beings into the dimension of faith. Faith in turn gives us the energy for life. As St. Paul says: "Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12: 10).

⁴⁴ E. TAMEZ, *When the Horizons Close - Rereading Ecclesiastes*, 29.

3.1.1 There is No Human fulfillment in a world without purpose (1: 4 – 11)

“There is no human fulfillment in a world without purpose” (1: 4 – 11).

With these words, Qoheleth invites us to pause in our own time and reflect on the meaning of life in our own particular situation. With profound honesty, Qoheleth sets out to understand the events of his reality, “everything that happens under the sun”, using wisdom. His intention is to focus all the efforts of knowledge on penetrating the enigma of the events of his world. “Four words suggest the intensity of this purpose: he turns his heart (mind) to seek, to spy or investigate, and wisdom”⁴⁵. As humans in the world today, this task is intrinsic to us, not optional. God gave us life and the world to live in. However, it is unfortunate that many people are unable to live out this gift of life in thankfulness. Life is even perceived by some as a burden.

Qoheleth’s subjective dissatisfaction with life on earth is great. He does not understand how one can attain self- fulfillment in a world where human beings are not recognized as being human, nor can they intervene in history - everything seems predetermined. In 1: 12 – 18, Qoheleth tried to understand the events of his reality through wisdom, but in turn he only became more sorrowful, because he understood that “what is crooked cannot be made straight”. Despite this anguish, Qoheleth does not waver in his faith as we might infer from his poem on time (3: 1 – 9). Qoheleth’s recommendation is to accept life as a gift of God and to make use of its gratifying moments. The important thing in these “discouraging situations is to discern the times and not to live against the times” (Tamez, pp. 61).

There is an explosively rebellious attitude in the world today! With the increased challenges to people’s lives: unemployment, lack of better housing, dysfunctional

families, poor childhood, broken relationships, poverty, wars, etc, many people have taken radical stands against what would have been easily embraced in the previous centuries. Some see traditional values as useless; religion seen as waste of time; etc. Due to frustrations, some people have lost faith in the society and its institutions. Whatever goes wrong in the world is either blamed squarely on God, the church or older generations. It is this blame game that has resulted in rebellion especially among the young generation. As Qoheleth (3: 11), it is important for us to accept that man and woman cannot understand all events of history. It is dehumanizing to try to do everything in a world where we have little understanding. Qoheleth recommends four ways of resisting frustrations in a present whose horizons are closed⁴⁶:

- By affirming the faith that there is a time and season for everything. From which we might also infer that, in as much as things might seem so unbearable now, there is a time when they will be better.
- By affirming real life, the now, living the present to the fullest, as a rhythm of life in opposition to the rhythm of a society that has no interest in human beings. In as much as the wicked seem to prosper, the poor oppressed, and everything made level by death, Qoheleth still encourages a good living in the now.
- The fear of God as recognition of the human condition, as finite and limited. Qoheleth tried to pursue wisdom more than any of his contemporaries, but he still found himself helpless when it came to the reality of life. For him this did not lead him to despair but only opened the door for a great faith in

⁴⁵ E. TAMEZ, *When the Horizons Close, Rereading Ecclesiastes* 44.

⁴⁶E. TAMEZ, *When the Horizons Close, Rereading Ecclesiastes* 143.

God who has everything under control. Human beings today are frustrated, rebellious, unfocused because they fail to recognise their human condition which should be the reason for their faith in God than rebellion against religion and all that comes with it.

- The attitude of discernment and wisdom in “the everyday tasks of the ‘meanwhile’ in a society whose ideology seems to be ‘save your own skin’”. Qoheleth is not frustrated from continuing to discern about life by the injustices around him, this only serves as an impetus of understanding the human condition and as a reason to live the present to the full in “fear” of God.

3.2 A Non- Vanity life: A life in Faith

As Christians living today, the questions raised by Qoheleth should provoke us to intimately look at the life of Jesus if we intend to find any meaning in life. As Sr. Clare Manning says, life in abundance is only possible to those who have faith, because it is only the one with faith who dares to find the center of his existence and the meaning of his or her life outside the ego⁴⁷. Those whose center is within themselves become “atrophied” and cannot live life to the full. “Faith is the ability to perceive the real, to recognize that encounter with others, and with events, is gift precisely in being a summons to the wholeness, a call to growth and genuineness” (AFER Vol. 24, 1982, p. 41). When one is open to the whole reality with an attitude of acceptance, then we can

⁴⁷ AFER, vol. 24, No. 1, Feb 1982. Article by Clare Manning: *Faith as a Challenge. Personal Reflections* Pp. 41.

say that that person is a Christian since he is open to growth and he is able to acknowledge his human condition. Thus we can honestly say that Qoheleth's attitude should be the basic disposition for any modern Christian for the seeds of faith to be planted. As a Christian, one should be committed to God in all areas of his or her life; not only in areas which sound fine; not only reaching out for communion with God for my benefits and happiness.

Faith demands of us to respond to the call of God in the whole of life. Abraham by his faith in God's promise was considered the "just man". His faith was seen in his immediate action and in the risk he took in leaving his country, uprooting himself, and his family, even before he knew where or when the promise would be fulfilled. "Abraham had become so attracted by God's love and fidelity that his whole being yearned to give itself totally to God regardless of the cost to himself"⁴⁸. The true greatness of his faith lay in the fact that throughout his trial he did not doubt God's faithfulness and God's goodness, and he knew that somehow God would fulfill his promises. He believed even when it seemed he had nothing to gain but all to lose, for instance, the sacrifice of his only son (Gen. 22: 1 - 24). This is the height and depth of the faith to which all people are called and can aspire. I have to say however, that only those people, who have critically examined their lives, recognised their human condition as Qoheleth did could be compelled to such great heights of faith.

Paul on the other hand, having critically examined his life changed the whole direction of his life, left behind the security he had as a respected Pharisee, risked his whole life to do the will of the Lord and grew daily in communion with Christ (2 Cor.

⁴⁸ AFER, vol. 24, No. 1, Feb 1982. Article by Clare Manning: *Faith as a Challenge. Personal Reflections* Pp. 42.

4: 7 – 10); in thus responding to the needs of God's people, he eventually could say "I live, no, not I, but Christ lives in me". The reward for his total surrender is salvation. Actually we might say that, Qoheleth raised the questions, created a utopia but Paul lived the praxis. We could criticise Qoheleth for not offering practical solutions, however to be fair to him we should take his questions and apply them to our events of life. As Paul we would not be stopped by the injustices in the world, instead they would only propel us to shout louder in our quest for justice and freedom. Mary was disturbed when she heard God's call. But it was her faith that enabled her to suffer and endure when she stood at the foot of the cross on which her son died. Even in that moment when all seemed lost and her son dead like a criminal, she believed in God's faithfulness and His love.

The life lived by Abraham, Paul and Mary is what Qoheleth will call Non-Vanity life. Believing is indeed taking a risk, but faith gives life at many levels. Abraham's faith gave life not only to himself but also to Isaac. Saul became a new man; as Paul he was gradually transformed completely, "I live, not I but Christ in me". Mary surrendered her life that God may live as a man. Jesus gave his life that through his death we might come to life. We thus realise that earthly obstacles, trials, injustices, etc., cannot stop one from living life to the fullest if that person has genuine faith in God.

3.3 Conclusion

Qoheleth, re-orientates the world towards non- vanity by putting it in God's time – "there's a time and season for everything". He is liberated by faith, that he is not

paralyzed by the absurdity of the present life. God is in control of the times and it will go well for those who fear God, i.e. for those who recognise their limits. This is the power of faith, although Qoheleth seem not to experience it in the present moment. He has faith that God will act and judge with justice in the opportune time (3: 17 -- 18; 8: 12 – 13; 12: 14).

After reading Qoheleth we realize that the Question remains: Is embracing “the present” sufficient for human fulfillment in our world today? In spite of the fact that the proposals of Qoheleth still raise other questions, for instance, they lack praxis in outlook, we cannot deny the importance of discussing his proposals in depth. The questions unanswered by Qoheleth are the reason why Qoheleth is relevant today. By reading Qoheith we should be provoked to start looking at our own lives, the events in our lives, more seriously and find out if we are living our lives for a purpose, or just living in rebellion. We should be able to ask ourselves if we are Christian enough by acknowledging our human condition.

Qoheith is indeed a modern book in the bible. In an age when life appears chaotic and meaningless, Qoheleth has a special message for us, being dedicated to teaching men and women to love life, accept its limitations, and rejoice in its blessings.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

It is true that a first time serious reading of the Wisdom books brings many reactions. One might feel confused, for instance by Yahweh's thunderous speeches to Job (Job 38 -- 41), the philosophical critiques of pagan worship in Wisdom of Solomon (13 – 15), etc. The seeming “banality of Proverbs' sayings, the portrait of a testing God in Job, and misogyny of Ben Sira” can put off many readers⁴⁹. However, as I partly mentioned in the introduction to Chapter one, though the Wisdom Literature can seem strange to us, it is important to realize that its concerns are modern; in fact they are our concerns. The best route to that realization is reading each book on its own terms as I have done in this essay.

After reading Qohelth, it becomes apparent that his eye sees what many of his compatriots do not see. It also immediately becomes obvious (after reading other Wisdom books) that the author is in a very delicate position in his rejection of the Jewish traditions as historically unverifiable and his rejection (ridicule) of the leadership at the time. In trying to find meaning in earthly life, the author seems to be going through a crisis of faith, unable to see any hope in the social organisation. However, as we further analyse the book, we see that Qohelth manages to come out of this dilemma, but only in part. On one hand, he manages to project his inability to see into the future onto a transcendent God, who mysteriously acts and organises a time for everything – “there is a season for everything”. On the other hand, he categorically affirms a solution in living intensely from day to day as an affirmation of life, in order to be happy (3: 1 – 8).

Qoheleth is a deeply human book that speaks to the modern age with the “immediacy of contact and of a contemporary”.⁵⁰ The importance of the book is seen in the central message, namely: What is the value of life? Qoheleth’s answer seems to lie in the doctrine of opportunism⁵¹ – take your opportunity today: “It is well for a man to eat and drink and enjoy all the fruits of his labor under the sun during the limited days of the life which God gives him” (5,17). Reading Qoheleth therefore, we need to be very cautious. We need to see behind his rational philosophy and pick out his adamant faith in God. Qoheleth was critical of those who taught that wisdom gives everything people need. He is no skeptic because he believes that the world belongs to God. “The deeper meaning of our inability to gain mastery of time is that “God has done it all in such a way that people must fear him”⁵². He simply teaches us that everything is in the hands of God.

Our life as Christians is not doomed to end at death but is manifestly eschatological. What the church’s proclamation offers or teaches of our “present decision of faith is Jesus Christ as the grounding event”⁵³. Whatever we make of life today depends fundamentally on our present decision of faith, since our faith (vital commitment and trust in God) is not only confined to the soul but embraces our whole cosmic life too. Vanity is not characteristic of life in general, but is only characteristic of the life of those who attempt to treat the created world as an end in itself. The *hebel* – life is a life lived without hope, without faith in God. It is a life that has ignored the

⁴⁹ J. R. CLIFFORD, *The Wisdom Literature* pp. 18.

⁵⁰ R. GORDIS, *Koheleth - The man and his World, A Study of Ecclesiastes VII*.

⁵¹ Africa Bible

⁵² J. R. CLIFFORD, *The Wisdom Literature* pp. 111.

⁵³ N. FOGLIACCO, *Christian Eschatology*, Class notes, PP. 4.

limited condition of humanity. It is those who boast of wisdom as granting all human needs that live in “vanity”.

The questions that Qoheleth ask reflect the mood of the modern world. It is obvious that Qoheleth did not intend to teach Theology or convey a teaching about God, but to tell what he had discovered regarding life and what a person might gain from life – whatever is in this book is a result of personal reflection. The book is important because of the light it sheds on Traditional Jewish thinking. He dares to delve into riddles and unresolved problems with candor, sincerity and honesty. To do this, he required a lot of courage because he often went against the current opinion of his day.

Looking back through history and as affirmed by the Christian tradition, we gain the belief that God loves this world and that our life is not absurd, futile or full of “vanities”. As asserted by Fr. Christopher Roucou, “it is up to us to develop the listening and contemplation that links intelligence with the heart and with faith in order to understand the world and discover the signs of God’s presence and action through his spirit and word in it”⁵⁴. It is with such listening that people like Maximilian Kolbe, Oscar Romero, Mahatma Gandhi, Mandela and many others were able to find meaning to life despite the humiliations and great sufferings they went through.

It is a matter of fact that we are now living in a pluri-cultural and pluri-religious society. In schools, neighbourhoods, cities, etc we find ourselves mixed with people of different skin colours, languages and culture. This is a very complex and challenging situation for Christians today just as it was for Christians 2000 years ago as described in

⁵⁴ Cf. OMNIS TERRA: pontifical Missionary Union, No. 328, June 2002, Art. *Living and Thinking about the Mission at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, by Fr. Christopher Roucou.

the letter to Diognetus⁵⁵: “For Christians cannot be distinguished from other men because of their country or the language or their way of dress. They do not live in cities that are their own, they do not use an unusual dialect, and their kind of life has nothing unique about it... Every foreign land is their homeland and every homeland is a foreign land”. It is thus a challenge for Christians to take their place in today’s society. But the question is: How are they going to do this?

We need to be people of faith despite the challenges. We need to be motivated by the love of God that we have received through Jesus Christ. We should be able to show others that our life is beyond earthly goodies. We should be able to say with St. Paul that: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? Yet in all this we are conquerors, through him who has granted us love” (Rom. 8,35-37).

⁵⁵ “*Epître a Diognete*”, Vol. 1-5, Col. “*Sources Chretiennes*” · No. 33, transl. H.I. Marrou, *Le Cerf*., also see OMNIS TERRA, No. 328, June 2002 P 249.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BERGANT, D., *What are they Saying about Wisdom Literature?*, New York 1984.
- CERESKO, R.A., *The Old Testament. A Liberation Perspective*, Bombay: St Pauls 1993.
- CLIFFORD, J.R., *The Wisdom Literature*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1998.
- DRYNESS, W., *Themes in OT theology*, Capetown 1979.
- GORDIS, R., *Koheleth - The Man and his World, A Study of Ecclesiastes*, New York 1968.
- GRENSHAW, L.J., *Old Testament Wisdom. An Introduction*, Kentucky: John Knox Press 1998.
- Kilgallen, J. J., *A Brief Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, New York: Paulist Press 1988.
- Mc BRIDE, D., *The Gospel of Mark, A Reflective Commentary*, Dublin 1996.
- MURPHY, R. E., *Seven Books of Wisdom*, Milwaukee 1960, 87 – 103.
- RAD, G., *Old Testament Theology. The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions 2*, London: Oliver & Boyd Ltd 1965.
- SCHNACKENBURG, R., *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, Wellwood 1982.
- TAMEZ, E., *When the Horizons Close – Rereading Ecclesiastes*, New York 2000.
- The African Bible. Biblical Text of the New American Bible*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 1999.

Articles

- ADDISON, G.W., “Ecclesiastes”, *NJBC*, 489 - 495, ed. BROWN, R. E. – al., New Jersey: Prentice Hall 1990.
- GRENSHAW, LG., “Ecclesiastes”, *ABD II*, 271 – 278, ed. FREEDMAN, D. N., New York: Doubleday 1991.
- NAVONE, J.J., “The Patriarchs of Faith, Hope, Love”, *The Bible Today* 22 (1985), 34 – 41.
- ORIGINS: CNS Documentary service, Vol. 30 - 24, Article: Vatican II Council and the Church Today by Bishop Fiorenza Nov. 23, 2000.
- ORIGINS: CNS Documentary service, Vol. 30 - 2, Article to the Catechetical Leadership Conference by Bishop Ramirez May 25, 2000.
- OMNIS TERRA: Pontifical Missionary Union, No. 328, Article: *Living and Thinking about the Mission at the Dawn of the Third Millenium*, by Fr, Christopher Roucou, June 2002.
- AFER, Vol. 24 - 1, Article: *Faith as a Challenge. Personal Reflections*, by Clare Manning, Feb. 1982.

Church Documents

- FLANNERY, A., ed., *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, Gaudium et Spes. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Mumbai: St Pauls 2001.
- JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Letter "Fides et Ratio" on the Relationship between Faith and Reason* (14th September 1998), Nairobi: Paulines 1998.
- PAUL VI, *Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" on Evangelization in the Modern World* (8th December 1975), Kampala: St. Paul n.d.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	ii
DECLARATION.....	iii
GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE.....	5
QOHELTH AND NEW TESTAMENT ON LIFE.....	5
1.0 <i>Introduction</i>	5
1.1 <i>Wisdom in the Old Testament</i>	5
1.2 <i>Wisdom in Qoheleth</i>	8
1.2.1 <i>Historical Setting: The Authorship of the Book</i>	8
1.2.2 <i>Qoheleth's Teaching: "Vanity of vanities" (1:2)</i>	10
1.3 <i>New Testament on the Meaning of Life (Luke 12: 22-40)</i>	16
1.4 <i>Conclusion</i>	18
CHAPTER TWO.....	21
QUESTIONS RAISED BY CHRISTIANS TODAY.....	21
2.0 <i>Introduction</i>	21
2.1 <i>The present day world and its challenges to Christians</i>	22
2.1.1 <i>Feeling the absence of God</i>	23
2.1.2 <i>Is the Search for pleasure a solution?</i>	26
2.1.3 <i>Is there any hope?</i>	27
2.2 <i>Modern Christian's and the Magisterial Teaching</i>	28
2.3 <i>Conclusion</i>	31
CHAPTER THREE.....	34
THE RELEVANCE OF QOHELETH TODAY.....	34
3.0 <i>Introduction</i>	34
3.1 <i>The significance of the book of Qoheleth today</i>	35
3.1.1 <i>There is No Human fulfillment in a world without purpose (1: 4 - 11)</i>	44
3.2 <i>A Non- Vanity life: A life in Faith</i>	46
3.3 <i>Conclusion</i>	48
GENERAL CONCLUSION.....	50
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	54