Faith Versus Greed

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In recent decades great progress has been made in the sophisticated ways that the business world uses to communicate as people respond to human needs and desires. But where are we going in our pursuit of happiness?

In no other age has humankind enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic wellbeing. Yet a huge proportion of the world's people is plagued by hunger and extreme need. At no time have human beings had such a keen sense of freedom, only to be faced by new forms of slavery in living and thinking... There is a painstaking search for a better material world without a parallel spiritual advancement (Vatican Council II, The Church in the Modern World #4).

The false goals of materialism and greed have plagued nations for centuries, but never as destructively with regard to human life and the environment as in our own time. Yet world and national political leaders fail to respond when their own personal and party interests conflict with the universal common good. The Pope and other spiritual leaders have proclaimed ceaselessly the Gospel truth that material goals must be ordered to a higher purpose. They have insisted that the world's resources must be shared fairly so that all people have the means of achieving a decent livelihood. Few listen, yet everyone is dismayed when this same greed and selfishness become the occasion for violence and destruction.

The ordinary people of every society include a number who possess the same short-term goals and stunted vision of human life. They too need to hear the challenge of the Gospel. Thus does the Church proclaim the biblical message day by day, week by week. Those who do not hear it in the context of worship should be able to notice what a difference God's Word brings to our lives.

Around us we see people who pursue wealth, power and influence as the highest goal of their lives. Is there some way that they may hear the question of Jesus: "What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life (in the process)?" (Mt 17:26). This same question is posed in the readings for this Sunday.

A respected teacher is expected to solve a great variety of problems. So a dispute about inheritance is brought to the attention of Jesus. Although Jesus would stand up for the poor, he refused to take on the role of arbitrator in this case. Rather he warned the crowd about the disruptions of family and community life caused by greed. Would they look upon this as having the importance of a life-and-death issue? A parable puts the point dramatically before Jesus' listeners and the Church knows that we need this same lesson in our generation. "Eat, drink and be merry!" (Is 23:13). The invitation to a hedonistic approach toward life is pervasive in our culture.
The ultimate folly is to ignore the true meaning and purpose of life. "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you?" (Lk 12:20). How many people in every age are self-centered and so secure in their sense of control with regard to their destiny! Of course, we all want to provide sufficient for our needs and for our families. Important as this industrious, responsible attitude is, we must subordinate all desires and relationships to the primordial call of human beings to intimacy with God. "Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God" (12:21).

The ancient sages of Israel emphasized that God provides for our needs (Ps 127), but many had no clear insight into the mystery of eternal communion with the living God. Like some existentialist philosophers of our time, they bemoaned the ephemeral nature of human efforts. "Man, for all his splendor, does not abide; he resembles the beasts that perish" (Ps 49:13). The name Qoheleth (translated "Ecclesiastes" in Greek) designates an anonymous "preacher to the assembly," a teacher burdened with the pessimism that accompanies a faith that did not yet include an insight into immortality and resurrection. His incessant queries were answered only by Pharisees and Diaspora Jews of the first century B.C. Focusing upon the person of Christ risen and ascended to the Father, Christians can prepare with certitude for the fullness of life (Col 3:1-4). Do we teach the younger generation that this faith is the greatest treasure that we can bequeath to them?