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Meaning of Life and Death in the Poetry of John Paul II

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1. Introduction

John Paul II will ever be remembered in the pages of history as a Poet who admitted the 'dark pages' in the Church's history with the same courage with which he had vindicated the rights of the Church. He asked forgiveness for violence used during the Inquisition, the cooperation of Christians with dictatorships, and the anti-Semitic prejudice that prevented from taking stand against the Nazi slaughter of the Jews (Accattoli, 2001, p. 12). Karol Józef Wojtyła, known as John Paul II since his election to the papacy in October 1978, was born in Wadowice, Poland, on May 18, 1920. During the Nazi occupation of Poland, he became member of a Christian democratic underground group that helped Jews escape the Nazis. Later he decided to become a priest and was ordained in 1946. He spent eight years as professor of ethics at Catholic University in Lublin before being named archbishop of Krakow in 1964. Pope Paul VI elevated him to cardinal in 1967. On Oct. 16, 1978, Karol Joseph Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II the first ever Polish Pope (http://www.vatican.va/news). He has been a globe trotter. He came heavily on the communist regimes in East Germany, the Soviet Union and his homeland. He defended human rights and condemned dictatorships of the Third World and spoke against capitalism and communism (Accattoli, 2001, p.12). An assassination attempt in 1981 was made on his life by a Turkish gunman whom he forgave while visiting him in prison (Ibidem, pp. 115-118). The pope has denounced abortion, capital punishment, homosexuality and the ordination of women. He stood by the poor, the disinherited, the oppressed, the marginalized and the defenceless (Ibidem, p. 223).He has written extensively on social, moral, ethical and theological issues in the form encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, apostolic constitutions and apostolic letters. Suffering from Parkinson's disease and

other ailments, he went to his eternal reward on 2 April 2005. The Pope constantly warned people and nations of materialism, selfishness and secularism and called for sharing their wealth with the Third World. He stood alone opposing wars all over the world. His vigorous opposition to Gulf War stemmed from his personal conviction that the moment had come for Christians to object strenuously to war to banish it from the international scene (Ibidem, 230). He has written extensively on social, moral, ethical and theological issues. As a private Doctor he also published five books of his own: "Crossing the Threshold of Hope" (October 1994), "Gift and Mystery, on the fiftieth anniversary of my ordination as priest" (November 1996), "Roman Triptych" poetic meditations (March 2003), "Arise, Let us Be Going" (May 2004) and "Memory and Identity" (February 2005). (http://www.vatican.va/news).

This paper attempts a reading of his Poems entitled *The Poetry of John Paul II: Roman Triptych- Meditations*, consisting of his reflection of the meaning of life and death in three poems: "The Stream," "Meditation on the Book of Genesis at the threshold of the Sistine Chapel," and "A Hill in the Land of Moriah".

2. The Stream

The first poem "The Stream" is a meditation on the wonder of creation and nature's bountiful gifts which is reflected in a mountain stream. The poet traces the mystery of life through his meditation on the mountain stream that leads him to the divine source of life. John Paul is said to have had a personal discussion with a physicist on the wonder of creation. Finally the scientist declared, "from the point of view of science and its method I 'm an atheist… Every time I find myself before the mystery of nature, of the mountains, I feel that He exists." (*RTM*, p.36). The poem is addressed to an unknown God and begins with a line of dedication to "Ruah," the Spirit of God: 'The Spirit of God hovered above the waters.'

Part I of the poem begins with a refrain:

> The undulating wood slopes down
> to the rhythm of mountain streams.
> To me the rhythm is revealing you,
> The Eternal Word (Ibidem, p.7).

The poet tunes his ears to the song of nature reflected in a rhythmic flow of the stream which is a symbol of life and newness. D.H. Lawrence in "River Roses" refers to the music of the river:

> While river met with river, and the ringing
> Of their pale-green glacier water filled the evening (Lines 6-7).

Wordsworth in his *Prelude* Book II expresses his encounter with the divine power in the experience of nature through its rocks and streams.

> … Oh, ye rocks and streams,
> And that still spirit spread from evening air!
> Even in this joyous time I sometimes felt
> Your presence… (Lines 131-4).

For John Paul there is silent presence of God everywhere and in everything. The whole of creation is present in miniature in the 'undulating wood' and all that is carried along 'by the stream's silver cascade, / rhythmically falling from the mountain, / carried by its current…' He asks the existential question 'carried where?' which remains unanswered. Hence the poet enters into a dialogue with the mountain stream. The quest leads him nowhere except plunging him into a world of wonder – 'the threshold of pure wonder,' which only man can experience.

> The rushing stream cannot wonder.
> …but man can wonder' (*RTM*, p. 8).

The man who experienced wonder first is given the name Adam, the culmination of God's creation. But Adam was placed as the master of creation among creatures that were not able to experience wonder. He was alone 'in his wonderment, / among creatures incapable of wonder.' While the creatures merely existed without the grace of wonder, it

was only man who could continue being 'carried along by wonder.' Man became the centre of all creation and all creatures rallied around him. He in turn directed all things to the Eternal Word saying:

> Stop! – in me you find your haven,
> in me you find the place of your encounter
> with the eternal Word (Ibidem).

Part two of the poem entitled 'The Source' begins with the refrain as in the first part after which the poet goes on to reflect on the process of finding the source of his wonder. This is an arduous task.

> If you want to find the source,
> you have to go against the current.
> Break through, search, don't yield,
> You know it must be here somewhere.
> Where are you?… Source where are you?! (Ibidem, p.9).

The mystery of the source puzzles the poet and he has the intuition that breaking through its flow and going against the current will give a touch of its power derived from the very source of its origin. Power of nature itself, the poet feels, will answer his quest. Robert Frost has a similar query in his "West Running Brook."

> …Speaking of contraries, see how the brook
> In that white wave runs counter to itself.
> It is from that in water we were from
> Long, long before we were from any creature.
> Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
> Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
> The stream of everything that runs away.
> ….
> It seriously, sadly, runs away
> To fill the abyss's void with emptiness.
> It flows beside us in this water brook,
> But it flows over us. It flows between us
> To separate us for a panic moment.
> ….

The universal cataract of death (Lines 43-61).

Frost's "West Running Brook" probes into the mystery of love between the husband and the wife. Philosophically, the backward movement of the waves in the mainstream is due to resistance of water on the rocks. This backward flow of waves is symbol of life. The river moves on to the ocean, so too life towards death. The pressure of the rock is representative of the forces of life that gives shape and permanence to the flux. When looking at the backward flow of waves intuitively and mystically one finds in it a divine proclamation or revelation. These two contraries work together to create harmony. To make a marriage successful there is the need for the interaction of the couples. Counter current is part and parcel of the law of nature.

Similarly the Pope continues his quest for the source of the stream and feels that it keeps the mystery hidden to itself.

> Stream woodland stream,
> tell me the secret
> Of your origin! (*RTM*, p.9).

Finally he realizes that it is the experience of the stream itself that gives fulfillment to his quest.

> Let me wet my lips
> in spring water,
> to feel its freshness,
> its life-giving freshness (Ibidem).

The mystery is unfolded in the experience of wetting his lips in the life-giving freshness of the spring water. This may have allusion to Psalm 36: 8-9. 'You let us drink from the river of your goodness. You are the source of life.' The mystery of nature can be unveiled only by an experience of freshness in nature. His quest for the source of the brook takes him finally to a practical experience of the brook itself. He wants to feel its freshness in his lips. Such an experience of nature turns him to the source of creation. It is from 'wonderment' that one can reach the 'source'. Man being

rational, through wonderment, intuition and reasoning, can reach the centre and source of all – his Creator.

3. Meditation on the Book of Genesis at the Threshold of the Sistine Chapel

The second poem of His Holiness entitled "Meditation on the Book of Genesis at the threshold of the Sistine Chapel," takes us to the Sistine Chapel, the "Holy of Holies" of the Popes in the Vatican. It is covered with frescoes painted by Michelangelo, the greatest artists of the 15th century. The masterpiece has drawn so much admiration that Goethe after visiting the Sistine Chapel wrote that only those who see it can understand what one man alone is capable of doing. It was Pope Julius II who commissioned Michelangelo in 1508 to repaint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel frescoed earlier by Piero Matteo d'Amelia. He completed the work between 1508 and 1512. The Last Judgement was painted over the altar between 1535 and 1541 commissioned by Pope Paul III. This majestic fresco covers the entire end wall of the chapel (www.christusrex.org)

Michelangelo's paintings present the biblical story of Genesis, beginning with God separating light and dark, the story of Adam and Eve, and conclude with the story of Noah. These central Biblical stories are surrounded by images of prophets and sibyls besides the other biblical subjects. These include paintings from the stories of David, Judith, Esther, and Moses as well as those of the prophets, sibyls and the ancestors of Christ (www.sun.science.wayne.edu) The frescoes are his interpretation of the biblical book of Genesis in the story of the creation of the world. In the central scene God appears in human form as he gives the breath of life to Adam, the first human being. Then there is the scene of the first woman, Eve, as she emerges from Adam's rib (www.christusrex.org).

The Creation of Adam is considered his finest fusion of form and meaning. Adam's reclining on the ground is indicative of the earth from where he was formed. God the Father reaching out to him in the creative act renders

perfectly the concept of the first man made from the earth in the likeness of God. (Wane 2004).The frescoes on the ceiling can be divided into eleven transversal sections: nine bays as well as the spandrels and pendentives over the entry door and the altar. The history panels include the story of creation and other stories from the Book of genesis such as: The Separation of Light and Dark, The Creation of the Plants, Sun, and Moon, The Creation of the Creatures of the Sea, The Creation of Adam, The Creation of Eve, The Temptation and Expulsion from Eden, The Sacrifice of Noah, The Flood and The Drunkenness of Noah. The other panels include Prophets and Sibyls such as The Prophet Zechariah, The Prophet Joel, The Prophet Ezekiel, The Prophet Jonah, The Delphic Sibyl, The Cumaean Sibyl and The Libyan Sibyl www.sun.science.wayne.edu

According to the Judeo-Christian creation story the universe was created by God's command. Finally God created the human race "in his own image," in Adam and Eve, our first parents. "And God said; Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:26-27).

The poem entitled "Meditation on the Book of Genesis at the threshold of the Sistine Chapel," is John Paul's reflections based on these Biblical stories. It takes the readers to his meditation on how Michelangelo discerned the vision of God. It is this vision of God that he reproduced on the fresco. Adam and Eve had the vision of God and everyone is called to 'recover that gaze.' The Sistine chapel becomes the backdrop for the poet's reflection on mortality and his own final bidding to life. He goes on an imaginative journey into what will happen after his death when the Conclave of Cardinals would meet in the Sistine chapel to elect his successor. The poem is divided into four sections with an epilogue.

Through the reflection on the fresco, he is further drawn to the way Michelangelo discerned the vision of God. He saw with the creative gaze of God and reproduced on the wall his

vision of God and the world. There are the figures of Adam and Eve representing the whole of humanity.

The opening lines contain the central ideas.

> In Him we live and move and have our being.
> …He is the Creator:
> He embraces all, summoning to existence from nothing,
> …
> Everything endures, is constantly becoming –
> "In the beginning was the Word, and through Him
> All things were made" (*RTM*, p. 13).

All exist in Him the author of life and His 'eternal vision and eternal utterance' revealed the Word who is Christ His Son. In *The Bible* we read, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:1-2). God's concept of the Creative Word resurfaces in the opening of John's Gospel: "Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God. In the beginning the Word was with God, and the Word was God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." (John 1:1-3). The poet continues his analysis of Creation and says:

> He who created, saw – He saw "That it was good,"
> He saw with a vision unlike our own.
> He – the First to see –
> Saw, and found in everything a trace of his Being,
> Of his own fullness (Ibidem).

In creating the world God found satisfaction in his deed of love and delighted in his creative goodness and 'All is laid bare and revealed before his eyes.' (Hebrews 4:13). John Paul continues to speak of God finding in everything 'fullness of his being' and it is:

> 'laid bare and transparent-
> true and good and beautiful-
> He saw with a vision quite different from our own
> Eternal vision and eternal utterance:
> "In the beginning was the Word, and through Him

all things were made" (Ibidem, pp. 13-14).

Once again reference is made to the 'Word" of God, the wondrous and eternal Word in Christ the incarnate Word. The concept sums up the entire Biblical theology of Incarnation and Redemption and propounds the Christological doctrines of Christianity. From theologising the poet enters into the world of art that has depicted the vision of God by Michelangelo in the fresco. The Book of Genesis finds powerful expression in creative art.

> But the Book awaits its illustration – And rightly.
> It awaited its Michelangelo
> The one who created "saw" – He saw it was "good."
> …
> I am calling you, all "who see" down the ages.
> I am calling you, Michelangelo! (Ibidem, pp. 14-15).

It is a clarion call to everyone to behold the vision of the Word. This vision has been captured and expressed in art by the genius of the artist. God's Creative vision becomes Michelangelo's vision in art which is a portrayal of reality through the faculty of Imagination.

> We are standing at the threshold of a Book.
> It is the Book of Beginnings – Genesis
> Here, in this chapel, Michelangelo penned it,
> Not with words, but with the richness
> Of a riot of colors.
> We enter in order to read it,
> Passing from wonder to wonder (Ibidem, p. 15).

The Holy Father further reflects on the end of things and the Last Judgment as he sees in the painting scenes of the beginning of things from nothingness. Genesis leads to the Last Judgment as well. Life and death commingle. Eternity and mortality are two things to be reckoned with.

> The judgement, the Last judgement,
> This is the road that all of us walk-
> Each one of us (Ibidem).

Part two of the poem entitled "Image and likeness" has several sub-headings: "Him," "Man (Me)," "Michelangelo," and "Them." The Poem opens once again with the Genesis story of creation. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."(Genesis 1:28). "…And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." (Genesis 2:25). The poet, seeing the picture of Adam and Eve, before and after the fall, raises the question:

> Could it be?
> …but ask Michelangelo.
> …Ask the Sistine Chapel.
> How much is spoken here, on these walls.
> The beginning is invisible. Everything here points to it.
> … The End too is invisible,
> Even if here, passer-by, your eyes are drawn
> By the vision of the Last Judgement.
> How can it be made visible,
> How can we break beyond the bounds of good and evil?
> The Beginning and the End, invisible,
> Break upon us from these walls (Ibidem, p. 16).

The consequence of Original Sin brings in the realization of their nakedness. John Milton brings out powerfully the sense of shame and loss of honour in *Paradise Lost Book IX*:

> False in our promised rising; since our eyes
> Opened we find indeed, and find we know
> Both good and evil, good lost and evil got,
> Bad fruit of knowledge, if this be to know,
> Which leaves us naked thus, of honour void,
> Of innocence, of faith, of purity (Lines 1070-5).

Realizing their nakedness after the fall, they covered their loins with fig leaves, but were never 'at ease of mind.' "Their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons." (Genesis 2:7). John Paul makes the contrasting situation of the first parents before and after the fall. The

consequence of Original Sin is the realization of their nakedness. The poet says that the fall of Adam and Eve reminds us that we are frail and, 'This is the road that all of us walk – each one of us.' Adam and Eve represent every human being and their vision of the Last judgment is passed on from generation to generation. We live it daily and need to encounter it in our lives and become 'sharers of that gaze.' Every one has to recapture and 'recover that gaze.' George Herbert in "Easter Wings" sums up the fallen nature in similar manner:

> Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
> Though foolishly he lost the same,
> Decaying more and more,
> Till he became
> Most poor: (Lines 1-5).

The poet wonders how 'the vision of the Last judgment' can be made visible to man. He wants the spiritual experience of the Last judgment to 'break beyond the bounds of good and evil, revealing the beginning and the End' which the walls of the Sistine Chapel remind us of. He wants to interiorise the experience in art and 'break upon us from these walls.'

John Paul's vision of everything is reflected on the painting and he calls the attention of the 'passer-by' to make their existential decision for God, making visible the 'vision of the Last Judgment.' The question remains:

> How can it be made visible,
> How can we break beyond the bounds of good and evil? (*RTM*, p. 16).

"Him" traces the mystery of the 'Eternal Word' made flesh in the incarnation of Christ. The poet dwells on the mystery of Christian redemption. 'In Him we live and move and have our being' recalls the creative work of God.

> He embraces all things, creating them and
> Sustaining them in being (Ibidem, p. 17).

The message of St. Paul who preached on the Areopagus on the unknown God becomes central to John Paul's verse:

> For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being the Lord of heaven and earth… In him we live and move and have our being; …but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts of the Apostles 17:23-31).

The creative goodness of God, thwarted by Original Sin, is redeemed by 'the Eternal Word.' This is the mystery of salvation and redemption the Holy Father analyses in this section.

In the "Man (Me)" section there is personalisation of the redemption of mankind. Every human being is created in the 'image and likeness' of God. It is this mystery of the love of God for man that Michelangelo portrays in his work of art. For him it was a life of meditation and prayer through art while he cloistered himself in the Sistine Chapel. The fruit of his labour is the fresco depicting the mystery of creation as recounted in the Book of Genesis.

"Them" is a section that supplements the story of the first parents who were mystified in the all embracing love of God.

> It is he who allows them to share in the beauty
> Which He himself had breathed into them!
> It is He who opens their eyes (*RTM*, p. 19).

In God they found their meaning of existence. They always wanted to remain in his life walking in his Grace. Their transparency was reflected in their familiarity and openness before God which was 'a hymn of thanks, a Magnificat from deep within their humanity.' The Magnificat recall the hymn of

praise The Blessed Virgin Mary sang in the Gospel of Luke, 1:46-55.

> My soul magnifies the Lord,
> and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
> for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
> .....
> For he who is mighty has done great things for me,
> An holy is his name.

When Michelangelo completed his work of creation in the fresco it was a polychromy. It became a 'pre-sacrament' through which the 'invisible becomes visible.' The poet examines "Pre-sacrament" in the third section which takes the readers to the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

> Who is He? The Ineffable. Self-existent Being.
> One. Creator of all things.
> And yet, a Communion of Persons (*RTM*, p. 20).

It was Christ himself who spoke of the Triune Godhead in whose image man was created. This is depicted in the fresco. For the poet this is s 'Pre-sacrament' which is an external sign of eternal love.

The "Fulfilment – Apocalypse" section takes the readers to thoughts of parousia, the second coming of Christ and the last things. It reflects on the beginning of all thing in the eternal Word and fulfilment in the same Word made flesh in Christ. All things return to Him – the alpha and the omega (the beginning and the end).

> The End is invisible as the Beginning.
> The universe came forth from the Word,
> And returns to the Word (Ibidem, p. 22).

Michelangelo carefully depicted this in the fresco 'in the visible drama of the Judgment.' Man will be judged by his response to the Word in Christ. Man came from nothingness by God's creative love and will return to dust and decay. But his indestructible soul will continue to exist. The Poet

recollects the story of the final judgment as narrated in Matthew's Gospel Ch. 25:31-46, and sums it up:

> Come you blessed… depart from me, you accursed.
> And so the generations pass –
> Naked they come into the world and naked they return
> To the earth from which they were formed.
> …
> What was alive is now dead.
> What was beautiful is now the ugliness of decay.
> And yet I do not altogether die,
> What is indestructible in me remains! (Ibidem).

The fourth part "Judgment" is a journey back to the Sistine Chapel where Michelangelo has his classical work on the Last Judgment. It is a mighty composition, around the dominant figure of Christ uttering verdict of the Last Judgement (Matthew 25:31-46). His calm imperious gesture seems to both command attention and placate the surrounding agitation. It starts a wide slow rotary movement in which all the figures are involved. Excluded are the two upper lunettes with groups of angels bearing in flight the symbols of the Passion (on the left the Cross, the nails and the crown of thorns; on the right the column of the scourging, the stairs and the spear with the sponge soaked in vinegar). Next to Christ is the Virgin, who turns her head in a gesture of resignation: in fact she can no longer intervene in the decision, but only await the result of the Judgement. The Saints and the Elect, arranged around Christ and the Virgin, also anxiously await the verdict. Some of them can be easily recognized: St Peter with the two keys, St Laurence with the gridiron, St Bartholomew with his own skin which is usually recognized as being a self-portrait of Michelangelo, St Catherine of Alexandria with the cogwheel and St Sebastian kneeling holding the arrows. In the centre of the lower section are the angels of the Apocalypse who are wakening the dead to the sound of long trumpets. The Last Judgement also caused violent reactions among the contemporaries for the many nude figures in it. In 1564 some of the figures of the Judgement that were considered "obscene" were covered. (www. *VaticanArt.com*)

> Here, the invisible End becomes impressively visible.
> This End is also the height of transparency –
> Such is the path that all generations must tread (*RTM*, p. 23).

The Last Judgment brings us face to face with the reality of the 'imperishable' in man as the poet quotes Horace 'Non omnis moriar' (I shall not altogether die). It is the final reckoning which makes one stand 'face to face before Him Who Is!' Recalling the story of Original Sin the poet reflects on its impact as a legacy to humanity.

> All those who fill the main wall of the Sistine painting
> Bear in themselves the legacy of the reply of yours!
> The question asked of you and your response!
> Such is the End of the path you trod (Ibidem, p. 24).

The Pope's thoughts are evocative of the final message of the author of *Everyman*:

> God will say: *ite maledicti in ignem aeternum*
> And he that hath his account whole and sound,
> High in heaven he shall be crowned; (Lines 915-17).

In the "Epilogue" to "The Meditations on the Book of Genesis at the threshold of the Sistine Chapel," the poet speaks of the 'legacy of the keys of the Kingdom' which refers to the Conclave of the collage of Cardinals. Keys of the Kingdom is taken from Matthew's Gospel Ch. 16:18-19, where Peter is told, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven…"

Conclave is derived from Latin 'cum clavis,' meaning 'with key.' It is the private meeting of cardinals who gather in prayer at the Sistine Chapel after the death of the reigning Pontiff to elect his successor.

> It is here, beneath this wondrous Sistine profusion of color
> That the Cardinals assemble –

The community responsible for the legacy of the keys of the Kingdom.
…
And once more Michelangelo wraps them in his vision (*RTM,* p. 24).

The College of Cardinals assumes supreme ecclesiastical authority at the death of the Pope. The whole area surrounding the Sistine Chapel is closed and kept under guard so that there is no external influence on the secret ballots held several times a day until one gets two thirds majority to be declared the future Pope. White smoke is sent out of a chimney to signal the success of the election, until which black smoke keep puffing after each secret ballot. The dean of the cardinals asks the consent of the pope-elect and formally announces the election result at the St. Peter's Basilica proclaiming 'Habemus Papam' (We have a Pope). John Paul II attended two such Conclaves as a Cardinal – one in August 1978 – the other two months later at the sudden demise Pope John Paul I in October 1978, when he himself was elected to lead the church as Pope John Paul II.

"Con-clave": a shared concern for the legacy of the keys,
the keys of the Kingdom.
Lo, they see themselves in the midst of the
Beginning and the End,
Between the Day of Creation and the day of Judgment…
(Ibidem, p. 25).

The election takes place in a prayerful atmosphere under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who they believe will lead them through the exercise to point out the one to lead the Church from the chair of St. Peter. For the poet, Michelangelo's vision of truth will teach them the truth.

During the conclave Michelangelo must teach them –
…
You who see all, point to him!
He will point him out… (Ibidem).

4. A Hill in the Land of Moriah

This third poem "A Hill in the Land of Moriah" is a reflection on Mount Moriah where Abraham was asked to sacrifice his only son Isaac. The poem dwells on the concept of 'sacrifice' which is central to the Christian concept of the redemptive sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.

Abraham or Abram is the biblical patriarch of the Hebrews according to the Book of Genesis. He probably lived in the period between 2000 and 1500 BC. Muslims call him Ibrahim and consider him ancestor of the Arabs through Ishmael. Abram was the son of Terah, born in the city of Ur of the Chaldees. He married his half sister Sarai, or Sarah. Prompted by some divine inspiration he left Ur with Lot and family to the Promised Land. God promised Abram a son by his wife Sarai. God made a covenant with him and later renewed it and the rite of circumcision was established. His name was changed from Abram to Abraham. He was promises a son by Sarah through visiting angels.

Mount Moriah occurs twice in the Bible. In Gen 22:2 Abraham was commanded to go to the land of Moriah and offer his son as a burnt offering. The only note of location in the text is that the place was three days distance from Beersheba. The other Biblical reference is 2 Chronicles 3:1, which names the site of the building of Solomon's temple as Mount Moriah (Chapman, 1983, p. 320). Abram and Isaac depart from their land of Ur and climb the Mount Moriah. Their dialogue reflects their fears and hopes.

The first part "Ur in the land of the Chaldeans" narrates the story of the Chaldeans who were a wandering herds-people. Abram left the Chaldeans and abandoned the land of Ur in response to a voice he heard calling him for a particular mission.

> … All that we know is that he heard a Voice,
> which told him: Go!
> Abram chose to follow the Voice.
> The Voice said: You will be the father of many nations.

> Your offspring will be numerous as the sand on the seashore (*RTM*, p. 29).

Abram was puzzled with the voice as he had no son of his own. Bit the voice re-assured him saying that he would become a father:

> You will become the father of many nations.
> Your offspring will be numerous as the
> Sand on the seashore (Ibidem, p. 30).

In the second part entitled in Latin "Tres vidit et unum adoravit," meaning "He saw three, yet worshipped one," brings to our minds the story of the three visitors in Genesis 18: 2ff. "He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, "My lord, if I have found favour in your sight do not pass by your servant…. The Lord said, "I will surely return to you in spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son."

This passage is attributed to the Trinitarian mystery of God who visited Abram and made the promise. Abram listened to the unknown voice of the "Nameless One." It is this same "Nameless One" that came to visit him in the three travellers. Abram is promised a son in his old age and he would become father of a multitude of nations. The miraculous promise made is affirmed by God changing his name into "Abraham" which means "he who believed against all hope."

> He, Abraham, put his faith in the One Who Is,
> With Whom he spoke, when he followed the Voice,
> To Whom he opened the entrance to his tent,
> Whom he invited as a guest,
> With Whom he dwelt.
> Today, then, we go back to these places,
> Because God passed by here, when he came to Abraham (*RTM*, p. 32).

The Pope is evidently pained and worried by the state of affairs in the world, ravaged by war in Iraq and the violence

in the Middle-east (Accattoli, 2001, p.229). Ur is said to be in the present-day Iraq and some writers have interpreted the Pope's mention of it with reference to the painful happenings there. It may be recalled that the Pope was strongly opposed to the war in Iraq and he told the leaders that in conscience they would be answerable to God for waging it.

The third part "A Conversation between a father and son in the land of Moriah," narrates the story of Abraham climbing mount Moriah with his son Isaac for the sacrifice. "After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as burnt offering…" (Genesis 22:1-3). The poet dwells at length on Abraham's confused frame of mind as he climbs the mountain with his son for the sacrifice. It has overtones of the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.

> With this silence he sank once more into a hollow abyss.
> He had heard the Voice which was leading him.
> Now the Voice was silent.
> …
> In a moment he will build a sacrificial pile,
> Light the fire; bind the hands of Isaac- and then – what?
> The pyre will burst into flame… (Ibidem, p. 33).

The flame will consume his only son God had given in promise. This is a limit to his fatherhood. But it is symbolic of the sacrifice God will make in the death of his Son to redeem the world from sin.

> Here another Father will accept the sacrifice of his Son.
> Do not be afraid, Abraham, go ahead,
> Do what you have to do.
> …
> He himself will hold back your hand,
> As it is ready to strike that sacrificial blow… (Ibidem, p.34).

The poem ends with the fourth part "The God of the Covenant." God was pleased with the obedience of Abraham to his will and spared his son and send a lamb for the sacrifice instead. But in the redemptive sacrifice, God did not spare his Son from death on Calvary. The poet invites everyone to make a journey back to history and reflect on the mystery of redemption.

> Abraham – God so loved the world
> That he gave his only Son, that all who believe in Him
> Should have eternal life (Ibidem, p. 35).

5. Conclusion

Pope John Paul's *Roman Triptych: Meditations*, is unique for its theme of life and death – as he reflects on his own final farewell to this world. The three poems "The Stream," "Meditation on the Book of Genesis at the threshold of the Sistine Chapel," and "A Hill in the Land of Moriah" blend very well celebrating life and death in God. His profound thoughts remind me of what Rabndranath Tagore wrote in the opening lines of *Gitanjali*: "Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life" (Tagore, 2002, p.1).

Though I do not know Polish to read the original text, I find the translation somewhat bizarre and lifeless. There is a great deal of over-punctuations throughout. Many lines in the *Roman Triptych* are rendered in prose. Obscurity in several line can be understood only by one well versed in Biblical Theology and Catholic Doctrines. But no doubt the intellectual pursuit coupled with a life of holiness through intense love and prayer is evident in the poems. The poem is a thought provoking reflection on sacrifice and the wonder of God's love for mankind.

The Pope's meditation ultimately leads to the 'visible drama of the judgment' and 'The End is as invisible as the Beginning' (*RTP*, 22). Philosophically speaking, human angst *(dread)* is innate to human predicament (Kierkegaard, 1980, pp. 41- 5). But, John Paul is undaunted by *angst* of life as

his life is built on the Christians hope in the second coming of Christ (Slater, 1987, pp.59-61). The chief motive and foundation of Christian hope is God, God alone…which is repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments." (Ramirez 1967:136). The object of hope is most frequently eschatological with hope of glory in Christ (Colossians 1:27) and it is made real through faith (Hebrews 11:1) (McKenzie, 1984, pp. 368-9).

"The Stream" constantly reminds him that 'The End is as visible as the Beginning.' The world still groans in pain, though at its creation, 'God saw all that he had made and found it very good'? Is this not denied by history?' Finally his yearning for divine leads him to thoughts of sacrifice and total self giving in Christ. He believes that death would lead him through the mystical vision of Genesis and its fulfilment. He could sing with the poet `: "Like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their mountain nests let all my life take its voyage to its eternal home in one salutation to thee" (Tagore, 2002, p.108) of homesick The Pope's use of the imagery of a mountain stream, the Sistine chapel and the story of Abraham and Isaac hinges on the idea of God as the alpha and the omega of creation – the fulcrum of life and death.

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