

JOSEF PIEPER'S FESTIVE WISDOM
ON THE VIRTUES OF THE HUMAN HEART
AND HIS WORLD-VIEW ROOTED IN GRATITUDE:

A Lucid Defense of the *Bonum Commune*,
Temporal and Supernatural*

By way of partial tribute to my beloved mentor and spiritual father, Josef Pieper, who passed away at ninety-three years of age on 6 November 1997, almost ten months ago — when I sadly was too far away from him in space, time, and knowledge to be present even at his funeral Mass — I propose to present to your thoughtfulness part of his wonderfully full teaching about the virtues, and some clarifications about his deeper underlying disposition, presuppositions, and serene affirmations of faith, hope and charity. “*Ubi caritas gaudet, ibi est festivitas*” — “wherever charity takes joy, there is present true festivity; wherever selfless love generously radiates joy, the true spirit of festive communion is present and alive.” This quote from St. John Chrysostom touched Dr. Pieper deeply, for reasons that will soon become clearer, I hope.

Moreover, I propose to present this oblation of gratitude to my mentor in spite of the manifold barriers of language, and of understandable (and perhaps irreconcilable) differences with my diverse audience, concerning those indispensably intimate and ultimate things unmistakably pertaining to our origins, life of love, and possible fulfillment. Fittingly, in a lecture he gave in London in 1974, entitled “The Timelessness and Timeliness of the Cardinal Virtues,” Josef Pieper said something important himself about this matter of language, and its importance for the common good (*bonum commune*), as distinct from the common interest or the common expediency. He said:

We must prepare ourselves, I think, for the fact that there exists in the sphere of language a decay of words. This applies especially to the great words, by which I mean those words which designate something morally great. It is precisely these words [like “virtue”] which seem specifically exposed to this kind of corruption.... This, then, seems to be a normal process with words and, as I have said, we have to be prepared for it. The question is how do we prepare ourselves for it? Although there is no real prescription or recipe,.... One cannot make the basic words of human language simply disappear. Nor can they be replaced by other words. What for instance is an equivalent for “love”? The same difficulty occurs in the case of “virtue.”¹

After considering the difficulty with the German word for virtue, *Tugend*, Dr. Pieper continues: What then can be done? My suggestion is this: first to be extremely chary of all great and therefore endangered words; and secondly, to consider and always ponder anew the original and true meaning in and behind those words, keeping their true meaning alive, within the community.²

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This profound and fresh orientation toward language is part of the defense of the common good (*bonum commune*), is it not? If this attentive preservation is not done, will not the ideas and manipulative deceptions of the “timeless” Sophists indeed preponderate, or at least tend to dominate human discourse and thereby impoverish human communication? For, in his analogous essay, entitled “*The Art of Not Yielding to Despair*,” Josef Pieper spoke of such easily pervasive Sophistry and “non-violent totalitarianism,” and its consequences:

“Non-violent totalitarianism” is the most inhuman form of totalitarianism — among other reasons because it can always [sophistically] cite what appears to be valid arguments to prove that it is not what in fact it is. This consummate mendacity must inevitably result in the atrophy of communication between human beings, which is essentially based on trust.³

Furthermore, with specific reference to the language of virtue, Dr. Pieper said in his 1974 London talk, as follows:

So, for instance, taking the original and presumably still valid meaning of the word, “virtue” [*arété, virtus, Tugend*], one would [if he knew the deeper meanings] not be so concerned about whether the actual word “virtue” [in contrast, for example, to “value”] sounds chic and fashionable. One will [thereby] perhaps be less inclined to smile when reading or hearing the word.... “We want to know if the concept of virtue and the idea of man based on that concept is still something that concerns man in our contemporary world; or have virtue and the doctrine of virtues [as distinct from mere “values”] to be written off?” Does virtue still have an existential relevance, which is not only of interest but is also a vital necessity?⁴

However, before more fully examining the idea behind the word “virtue” and the doctrine of the virtues as formulated in the great European tradition (to include the cardinal and infused theological virtues, and the special virtues of *religio, pietas, observantia*, and *miser cordia*), we should reverently consider Josef Pieper as a man of gratitude, and why he was so joyfully and attentively responsive to the gift, wherever he discerned it, and most fundamentally in the donum creationis (the gift of our very created existence) and its manifold implications.

“The test of all happiness is gratitude,” said the Englishman, G. K. Chesterton, whom Josef Pieper so deeply cherished. And the plucky Chesterton, himself also marked by high intelligence and spiritual childhood (docility, humility, and trust) like Josef Pieper, added: “And your world would be so much larger, if you were much smaller in it!”

That is to say, true gratitude is not itself possible without humility, and humility is itself, according to St. Thomas, “the virtue of truth, or reality manifesting itself to a knowing mind in its fully proper proportions and savor.” In contrast to Rudyard Kipling’s “Orangutan,” who had “to much ego in his cosmos,” a humble man of rooted gratitude, like Josef Pieper, does not aggrandize or obtrude himself. For, he knows the wondrous affirmation of love and the priority of the Gift, which conduces to gratitude. Memorably expressing some of his own deepest affirmations about life and its nourishing true sources, Dr. Pieper once said:

We have only to think for a moment how much the Christian understanding of life depends upon the existence of “Grace;” let us recall that the Holy Spirit of God is Himself called a “gift” [in Latin, “*donum*”] in a special sense; that the great teachers of Christianity say that the premise of God’s justice is His Love; that everything gained and everything claimed [even, in justice, as a “right”] follows upon something given, and comes after something gratuitous and unearned; that in the beginning there is always a gift.⁵

Josef Pieper, like his master St. Thomas Aquinas, whom he called “*Thomas a Creatore*,” was always deepening his reflections on the concept of “createdness” and the implications “derived from the gift of creation [the donum creationis] and our own created nature.”⁶ All the “rights of man” presuppose a prior obligation to God, and certainly the obligation of gratitude. He sought to understand the meaning of man in his dependent, yet adventurous, *status creaturae* and *status viatoris*: that is, both in his “state of having been created” by an act

of affirmative love and generosity; and in his “state as a wayfarer” on a journey in time in the condition of attentive and gratefully receptive hope. He once wrote:

The virtue of hope is the first appropriate virtue of the *status viatoris*; it is the genuine virtue of the “not yet.” In the virtue of hope, before all others, man understands and affirms that he is a creature, a creation of God. Human existence and everything that immediately pertains to it have the structure of hope. We are *viatores*, on our way, “not yet” beings. Therein lie a No and a Yes.⁷

“Hope,” he said elsewhere, “represents man’s authentic response to the reality of that part of his existence which has not yet come into being.”⁸ That is to say, we should not prematurely anticipate either “final fulfillment” or “final non-fulfillment,” both of which are deep spiritual and intellectual disorders. The first disposition of mind and soul would be the disorder of “presumption” (also a form of pride), and the second disposition would be the chilling and spiritually deadening disorder of “despair.” Presumption and despair constitute the two forms of hopelessness, which Josef Pieper, in his life and writings, always humbly strove to combat. He once wrote: “The future is void without a past. And a hope without foundation — without a foundation which pre-exists our hope as well as ourselves — might just as well be called despair⁹ — “as if everything were yet to be hoped for, and as if there were nothing to remember and nothing for which to give thanks.”¹⁰

In a touching and very characteristic passage, which interrelates the important fourth cardinal virtue of temperance with purity, and hope, Dr. Pieper says:

Purity means that crystalline, morning-fresh artlessness and selflessness in relating to the world, as it becomes a reality in the person when the shock of a deep pain brings him to the limits of existence or when the nearness of death touches him. In Sacred Scripture it says, “Serious illness sobers the soul” (Sirach 31:2); this sobriety belongs to the essence of purity. The most debated of Aristotle’s tenets points in the same direction: tragedy achieves purification, catharsis. The *donum timoris*, the spiritual gift of fear, which Thomas [Aquinas] subordinates to *temperantia* [the fourth cardinal virtue of temperance], also cleanses the disposition as the blessed experience of the innermost peril to the person; it has that purity as its fruit in virtue of which one renounces the selfish seeking after deceptive and false fulfillment. Purity is the unreserved openness of the entire being, from which alone can be spoken; “Behold the handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38). This supreme realization of purity is expressed in one of the most perfect (and one of the most unknown) German poems in an image of immaculate beauty and radiant authenticity: “*Untroubled, the undaunted rose/ Stays open in hope*” (Konrad Weiss). Here a new depth becomes manifest, namely that purity not only is the fruit of purification, but also comprises in itself the readiness to accept God’s purifications, perhaps terrible and deadly, with the brave openness of a trusting heart [as in the hope of the martyrs], and so experiences its fertile and transforming power.¹¹

Related to this trustfully attained condition of purity and hope is the clearer perception of reality, with an inner silence and quietude and contemplative attentiveness and receptivity. In *The Silence of Saint Thomas*, Josef Pieper once profoundly wrote:

Since we nowadays think that all a man needs for acquisition of truth is to exert his brain more or less vigorously, and since we consider an ascetic approach to knowledge hardly sensible, we have lost the awareness of the close bond that links the knowledge of truth to the condition of purity. Thomas says that unchastity’s first-born daughter is blindness of spirit [*caecitas mentis*]. Only he who wants nothing for himself, who is not subjectively “interested,” can know the truth. On the other hand, an impure selfishly corrupted will to pleasure destroys both the resoluteness of spirit [part of the first cardinal virtue of prudence, as well as of the third cardinal virtue of fortitude] and the ability of the soul to listen in silent attention to the language of reality.¹²

This is why, also, that Josef Pieper was so generously attentive to the growing and troubling “proletarianization” of man in the modern world in his over-strained degradation, hence the inner leveling of his fretful and fettered soul. Josef Pieper once wrote that: “the proletarian is the man who is fettered to the process of work,”¹³ and who “seems to mistrust everything that is effortless; he can only enjoy, with a good conscience, what he has acquired [perhaps pridefully] with toil and trouble; he refuses to have anything as a gift.”¹⁴ And, by way of counterpoint, Dr. Pieper speaks of the world-view of Saint Thomas, who said that “the supreme achievements of moral goodness are characterized by effortlessness — because it is of their essence to spring from love.”¹⁵ Such love is also able and generously willing to suffer. In contrast, says Dr. Pieper, strain and tension are the revealing marks of one who refuses to have anything as a gift, “of that intellectual sclerosis that comes with not being able to receive or accept, of that hardening of heart that refuses to suffer [to endure] anything,”¹⁶ much less to suffer with that deeper purity and trustful hope that my mentor so humbly expressed above.

But, once again, and it cannot be emphasized too much, Josef Pieper’s unmistakable serenity and deep joy — which is to be felt and savored in all of his talks and writings — are rooted in his deepest trust of the Gift and his answering heart of gratitude, especially for the Creation (to include the creation of grace) and all of its implications of affirmation. That is to say, the healing touch of affirmation, which abides, no matter what tests and losses or evils of injustice there are to be endured (suffered) by a man in this world. Such an existential (and providential) trust further enables a man to endure such things with fortitude, humility, magnanimity, and abiding hope. In his essay, entitled “*The Concept of ‘Createdness’ and Its Implications,*” Josef Pieper says:

It has rightly been said that, if according to the Carmelite custom a fitting surname were sought for [Dr. Pieper’s own mentor] Thomas Aquinas, the one most appropriate would be: *Thomas a Creatore*. This suggestion hits, I think, a very important point. That the world has the quality of something created and that there is no third thing besides the Creator and His Creation — this conception in fact is the center of the world-view of Saint Thomas; and it is his *differentia specifica* also among the great teachers of Christendom, to have gone through with this idea and have taken all its consequences.¹⁷

Revealing his own deep-felt concord with his mentor, Dr. Pieper also says:

The conception [of Creation and “Createdness”] has a twofold implication. The first one: in contradistinction to the very modern view of Marcion [the ancient Gnostic], who said that the Father of Christ has nothing to do with the creation, God, because of His very being the Creator is not a *Deus extramundamus* [as the later secular Deists of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment themselves also believed], but very closely connected with, and working within, the world. “*Oportet quod Deus sit in omnibus rebus, et intime*” (*Summa Theologiae* I, q 8, a 1), [God is in all things, and most inwardly and intimately]. The second implication: The structure and condition of the world before our eyes, and of man himself, is thoroughly stamped [“in-formed”] by their createdness, by their “creatureliness.” And it is this inexhaustible concept of createdness, which I [Pieper] shall try to explain in some of its elements.¹⁸

Among the most important implications for Dr. Pieper, and for our own understanding of his rich doctrine of the virtues (and its long, articulate tradition), is that creation is intelligible and knowable, but unfathomable — intimately accessible, but finally unfathomable, to the finite intellect of man. Hence, there is, intrinsically (and alluringly) both mystery and order: *mysterium et ordo* — two constant themes in all of Josef Pieper’s works and life.

What “createdness” (like human art) has is:

above all, the quality of their being something designed and devised; both are preceded by a design, a plan, a pattern, a device. Both have come about ...through the productivity of an intelligence; more exactly speaking: they [divine createdness and human art, both the divinely designed arm that holds the hammer, and the humanly designed hammer held and used by the arm!] are both “what” they are, their *essentia* has come about per scientiam cognoscentis (*de Veritate*, 3, 3), through the cognition

of an intelligent subject [the Creator, or the maker himself].... Not only do we not make our own nature; our nature is exactly the quintessence and sum of what we are meant to be by virtue of creation.¹⁹

Moreover, “the understandability of nature, which after all is an empirical fact, is based on nothing but on the nature’s being creatively conceived by God.”²⁰ This is the meaning of the traditional concept “truth of things” (*Veritas Rerum*):

The meaning of that concept is ... the ontological lucidness, whereby nature and all other reality become penetrable for human knowledge. The lucidness and brightness of reality as such can again be made plausible only to him who considers the world to be something created, and who agrees with Saint Augustine’s sentence: “We see things because they are; but they are because Thou seeth them” (*Confessions* 13, 38).

It is exactly nothing but this that the concept “truth of things” in fact means; it belongs, as Saint Thomas says, the condition of the world to be placed between two intellects, *inter duos intellectus* (*de Veritate*, 1,2), between the strictly “creatoric” divine intellect and the creaturely intellect; and the world is accessible for our human cognition only by virtue of its being creatively thought and designed by God. Only this makes it meaningful also to speak of the “language of things”.... The primordial creative word, incorporated in the reality of the world, [however,] in fact can never be completely translated into the vocabulary of human language — be it the language of poetry, of science, of philosophy. It cannot even altogether and fully be perceived by any created mind.²¹

That is to say:

Not every cognition is also comprehension.... Comprehensive knowledge means exhaustive knowledge. Now, this definition of Saint Thomas is based on the conviction that it belongs to the very nature of created things that their cognoscibility never can be exhausted by a finite power of cognition. All created beings are, as far as they themselves are concerned, lucid and light to the ground...; things can be known because they are *creatura*. But at the same time it must be said: things are, again because they are *creatura*, unfathomable for a finite power of cognition, which is not sufficient to grasp completely the pattern and design within the Divine Logos, by virtue of which things are nevertheless lucid to the ground.²²

What humility, what trust, what a foundation for sustaining fortitude and hope! What a source for rooted gratitude and the spirit of adventure! Life is, for Josef Pieper, both a gift and an adventure. A gift of Love, and an adventure towards Love, the completion, the perfection, of Goodness.

Now, we may better understand and savor Josef Pieper’s teachings about virtue. He always especially appreciated Saint Bernard of Clairvaux’s deep meaning (and subtle play of words): “*cui sapiunt omnia prout sunt, hic est vere sapiens*.” “That man is truly wise who savors all things as they truly are.” Wisdom is willing and able to taste things, without distortion, as they truly are. It has the salt of reality and savor of true life. And wisdom is winsomely characterized by slow fruitfulness, in the longer light of hope, which is itself a gift, sub. gratia, trustful in adventure.

As with Josef Pieper himself, during his life of trust and gratitude,

Youthfulness and hope are associated with one another in multiple senses. They belong together [he says], in both the natural and supernatural realms. The form of youth is the eternal symbol bearer of hope [as in Charles Péguy’s unforgettable poetry]. Natural hope springs from man’s youthful power and dries up along with it. For supernatural hope [a further gift of grace], however, the reverse is true: it not only is not tied to being naturally young but also is the basis for a much more substantial youthfulness. It endows a person with a “not yet” that simply surpasses and is remote from the decline of natural powers of hope. And the supernatural vigor of hope

overflows and radiates even unto the rejuvenated powers of natural hope. Nothing assures and establishes “eternal youth” (in the most literal sense of the word) as does the theological virtue of hope. It alone is able to provide man with the unalienable possession of that inner tension [of the “not yet” fulfilled, but still expectant] that is both relaxed and taut, that elasticity and agility, that stouthearted freshness, that resilient joyousness, that composed bravery of confidence, which distinctly characterize a young person and thus make him lovable.²³

Such is the meaning of “spiritual childhood” — docility, humility, and trust. Such was the heart of Josef Pieper.

The meaning of this deeper spiritual childhood may be clarified by the following contrast, and Dr. Pieper will help us here, again:

Since supernatural hope implants in man the new future of a simply inexhaustible “not yet,” it establishes a new youthfulness, which can be destroyed only together with hope itself [which is a great danger in the modern world, grown so old and sad]. In the two forms of hopelessness, in despair as well as presumption, this youthfulness of the hoping person comes to nothing all the same, but in different ways: in despair, the way of the senile; in presumption, the way of the infantile. In despair as in presumption, the truly human quality stiffens and congeals, and only hope is able to preserve it in radiant litness. Both forms of hopelessness are in the real sense inhuman and deadly. “These two things kill the soul: despair and perverted hope,” say Augustine.²⁴ _

Moreover, and with characteristic compassion, Dr. Pieper poignantly adds:

A person, who in the final analysis is in despair, can appear to be a thorough-going optimist in the penultimate concerns of existence, such as the naturally cultural, to others and to himself, as long as he is able to seal off radically the innermost chamber of despair, so that no cry of pain can erupt outward (and it speaks volumes that the contemporary man of the world has made a real art of this).²⁵

By way of self-examining humility and unflinching truthfulness about the danger of self-deception, Josef Pieper adds:

It is easy to flatter oneself that one hopes for eternal life; however, it is hard truly to hope while in the midst of temptations to despair. In the situation of utmost bravery [like the unblaspheming fortitude of the martyrs who bore blood witness] it becomes evident whether the hope is authentic. No one knows more deeply than one who is truly brave that and how greatly hope is a “virtue” and thus not “to be had” casually and, as it were, “without charge;” no one experiences more clearly that the hope for eternal life is a grace.²⁶

Like the grace of final perseverance, it is a great gift — a “*magnum donum*,” in the words of the Church.

As always, Dr. Pieper will help us “to forego soothing self-deception and narcosis,” but “without the hopeless bravery of the ‘heroic downfall’.”²⁷ His understanding of fortitude has no contempt or bravado in it, and it is full of a humble sense of limit, and of gratitude for a gift, whether it be light to the intellect or strength to the will, so that a man may be “graceful under pressure”:

If, then, as has been said, at times all natural hopes become meaningless, then that means that, at times, supernatural hope remains simply the only possibility for man to align himself toward Being [toward God]. The despairing bravery of the “heroic downfall” is fundamentally nihilistic; it looks toward nothingness; it presumes that it is able to endure nothingness. The bravery of a Christian, however, thrives on the hope in life’s abundance of reality, in eternal life....²⁸

That is to say:

Christian hope is first and foremost an existential direction of man toward the perfection of his being [in and through grace], toward the fulfillment of his essence [which is, by virtue of his creation, “*capax gratiae*”], thus toward his ultimate realization, toward the fullness of being (to which, to be sure, there corresponds the fullness ... of happiness [or Beatitude, being made happy by God]).²⁹

Such a view corresponds with the traditional adage: “Grace is glory begun, glory is grace perfected” (“*Gratia est gloria incepta, gloria est gratia perfecta*”).

How much more Josef Pieper’s above words will mean to us, if we also realize that they were written in a book published in 1941, and somehow (because of the great personal courage of his editor and some others) “placed on the list of officially permitted literature for mass distribution [to the German military] on the front lines”³⁰ — some of whose soldiers assuredly held a Nietzschean or National Socialist concept of the hero and his finally despairing “heroic downfall.”

We may now more fully savor what Thomas Aquinas and Josef Pieper understood by the brief but important clause: “*virtus est ultimum potentiae*”:

Virtue is the utmost of what a man can be [*ultimum potentiae*]; it is the realization of the human capacity for being. The primal will for the good [including truth, “the good of the intellect”] lives from the ongoing momentum of the original leap by which man, in answer to the creative call of God, crossed over that chasm that divides nothingness from existence [*creatio ex nihilo*]. This is the momentum with which the potential [*potentia*] rushes forth into the radiant early morning of its first realization.... [and] attains the brink of the realm of freedom.³¹

Now we must consider further, in light of the common good (*bonum commune*), this “luminous domain of free human action, governed by knowledge”³² and perfected in and through the life of the virtues.

Thomas Aquinas, “the great teacher of Western Christianity, endeavored to express,” says Dr. Pieper “the Christian image of man in seven theses, which can be summarized in the following manner.”³³ These are also what Josef Pieper deeply affirms and elucidates:

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| (Faith) | 1. “The Christian is one who, in <u>faith</u> , becomes aware of the triune God.” |
| (Hope) | 2. “The Christian strives, in <u>hope</u> , for the total fulfillment of his being in eternal life [<i>vita aeterna</i>],” |
| (Charity) | 3. “The Christian directs himself, in the divine virtue of <u>love</u> , to an affirmation of God and neighbor that surpasses the power of any natural love.” |
| (Prudence) | 4. “The Christian is <u>prudent</u> ; namely, he does not allow his view on reality to be controlled by the Yes or No of his will, but rather makes his Yes or No of the will dependent upon the truth of real things [<i>veritas rerum</i>]” |
| (Justice) | 5. “The Christian is <u>just</u> ; that is, he is able to live “with the other” in truth; he sees himself as a member among members of the Church, of the people, and of any community.” |
| (Fortitude) | 6. “The Christian is <u>brave</u> ; that is, he is prepared to suffer injury and, if need be, death for the truth and for the realization of justice.” |
| (Temperance) | 7. “The Christian is <u>temperate</u> ; namely, he does not permit his desire to possess and his desire for pleasure to become destructive and inimical to his being [<i>i.e.</i> , it is not “selfish,” but “selfless self preservation”].” ³⁴ |

The Bonum Commune, the Rights of Others and the Insufficiency of Justice, and Hope in History:

To complete the last section of this essay on my beloved mentor's festive wisdom on the virtues of the human heart, and on his world-view rooted in gratitude, I propose to consider how Josef Pieper views the contemporary use and emphasis on "human rights," and how he proposes certain other virtues and attitudes of heart to complement even the insufficiency of virtuous justice to sustain the common good. I believe that you will find his understanding of these matters full of warm and insightful wisdom and some refreshing surprises.

With special reference to the deepest sustenance of the *bonum commune* — the supernatural (as pointing "beyond" history) as well as the temporal (or intra-historical) common good — three more of Josef Pieper's very sobering questions, and his brief comment, will help us consider the issues of human rights, insufficient justice, and "actively engaging in political activity on the historical plane..., [*i.e.*,] activity directed towards the realization of justice."³⁵

That we may "experience the full impact of the second question posed at the beginning of this discussion ("What is to become of man's hope for the future, and is not the only appropriate response to human history one of despair?"), Dr. Pieper poses three more questions that might shake our hearts, and certainly the hearts of our vulnerable children. He asks:

What reason do human beings have for hope if we must expect temporal history to end in catastrophe? Would not the acceptance of such a view necessarily paralyze, and deprive of value, all active engagement in the historical process? How, under such conditions, can we expect a young person to "set to work with a will"?³⁶

Dr. Pieper comments that, indeed,

The ability not to yield to despair when confronted with the fact of death, as well as with the prospect of the catastrophic end of temporal history is a matter of great practical concern to us all. Even in the midst of catastrophe, a person who possesses this ability [not to yield to despair] remains capable of affirmation, which in turn makes it possible for him to engage in activity on the historical plane....³⁷

Moreover, he says: "We must learn this distinction from the inherent wisdom of language itself, which tells us that hope is always directed toward something which we cannot achieve ourselves."³⁸

When the rather coldly analytical Immanuel Kant surprisingly wrote in his *Zeuge der Wahrheit (Witness of Truth)* that the fundamental philosophical question is "Quid sperandum est?" — "What may I hope for?" — he, too, was pointing beyond temporality. What is the virtuous human response? Josef Pieper says:

For a human being, being right, being "in order," is precisely what is meant by "virtue." Thus hope constitutes an element of human "rightness," not merely by virtue of the fact that it is hope, but because it aims at true fulfillment, which, if it happens at all, will take place "beyond" our corporeal and historical existence, and of which we "know" only through faith.³⁹

There is a further "need to confirm and maintain awareness of [the] crucial insight," says Dr. Pieper, "that precisely because of the irrevocable "Not-yet" structure of human existence, the ultimate fulfillment of human hope (not hopes) [*espérance*, as distinct from *espoir*, which is less fundamental!] cannot be realized this side of death."⁴⁰ Like the Blessed Mother, Mary, at the Annunciation and her humble consent to the Incarnation,

The man who truly hopes, like the man who prays, must remain open to a fulfillment of which he knows neither in what hour nor in what form it will finally come....⁴¹

"Untroubled, the undaunted rose stays open in hope."

However, man may choose finally to despair. He has been granted a fearsome capacity to choose or to refuse the gift. As Gabriel Marcel said, in words full of power also to Josef Pieper:

Everything clearly indicates that we ourselves have been given the authority to build the walls of the prison in which we want to live. This is the terrible price we pay for the unfathomable power which has been entrusted to us and which, moreover, is the foundation of our selfhood.⁴²

Dr. Pieper's words are also powerful: "This is the terrible dowry of freedom, which necessarily involves the possibility of abuse"⁴³ — as with our most intimate and indispensable language.

In his profound essay, entitled "The Rights of Others," Dr. Pieper gradually shows us both the insufficiency of the modern concept (and declarations) of "human rights," but also "the limitations of justice in general"⁴⁴ — given that "the fundamental act of justice [*reddere suum cuique* — to render to each his due] possesses the inner structure of *restitutio* [*i.e.*, of "restitution"], or **restoration**."⁴⁵

His analysis begins by making us aware that, "immediately following World War II," a "special UNESCO commission was assigned the task of formulating a new [UN] declaration of 'human rights'." But, during the course of the Commission's deliberations:

The Chinese delegate, a philosophy professor from a pre-Communist China, informed the other members that the Chinese language contained no word for the topic they were discussing, for the concept of "human rights" had never arisen in the Chinese tradition. Of course, he went on, that which was **implied** by this concept was by no means alien to their tradition. It was simply that the Chinese approached the matter from a completely different angle.⁴⁶

Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, at least at first, Dr. Pieper says:

I believe that it would not be wise to dismiss this case [*i.e.*, "this fact about Chinese Culture"] too quickly. For the really noteworthy thing about it is the fact that what is true of the Chinese tradition is also, to a large extent, true of our own tradition, the mainstream intellectual tradition [*i.e.*, the "*philosophia perennis*"] of Western Europe.... Although the ancient doctrine does in fact speak, in the most emphatic terms, of man's inalienable duties and of that which is his "due," this [traditional] theory never developed — at least not in a formal sense — a doctrine of "human rights."⁴⁷

That is to say, when "those who bore witness in our own tradition speak about justice, they never think in terms of the **man with rights**, but rather in terms of the **man with obligations**." It is the proper concern of the just man, they say, "to give others their due rather than to obtain what is due to him."⁴⁸ This unmistakable emphasis thus also implies that:

To be cheated out of what is due oneself is an altogether different matter than to withhold, curtail, or take away from someone else what is due to him.... "To be sure [says Socrates], this statement has been made many times; but it will not do any harm to say it once again: He who commits an injustice is worse off than he who suffers injustice."⁴⁹

We may now better understand that, in contrast to the contemporary orientation or "shift in emphasis,"

The ancient doctrine of justice is not primarily an exposition of the rights owed to people, which they can with all propriety demand. Instead it is the exposition and validation of the obligation to respect rights.⁵⁰

The contemporary accent, however, is not the man with obligations but the man with rights. We tend to focus on what other people owe us, an incentive, perhaps, also to self-absorption and selfishness.

Josef Pieper himself raises a thoughtful question: "Does not the declaration of human rights, which at first glance appears a highly aggressive tactic, at bottom possesses a defensive character and almost the character of resignation?"⁵¹ For, he adds, "the question of whether or not a person receives what is due to him depends solely on the justice of those who have the power to grant or refuse him his due."⁵²

My mentor then poses another question, with an intentionally corrective tendency to it:

Is it not far more audacious and aggressive, and also more realistic, to stimulate respect for the principle of justice by encouraging those with obligations ... to fulfill them rather than placing our emphasis on those with rights?... The essential thing is to convince them that there are grounds for their obligations, and to reveal the inalienable nature of what is due to others.⁵³

When the ancients speak of rights they are always, says Dr. Pieper, “referring exclusively to ‘the rights of the other person,’ that is, the rights of “a being whose nature it is to exist for his own fulfillment.”⁵⁴

If “human nature is regarded as the ultimate foundation of these rights,” then it is unsurprising that “experience has taught us over and over again that we can accomplish nothing through the [mere] appeal to ‘human rights’!”⁵⁵

What grounds do constitute the ultimate basis of human rights, however? In times like these, “in an age of radical negations in which the exercise of authority has degenerated into mere barbarism, and in which programmatic theories are used to justify the treatment of human beings [including pre-born children] as if they essentially had no rights at all,” we, clearly, “cannot shirk the responsibility to speak of the most profound, the ultimate cause of the inalienable nature of that which is due to a human being.”⁵⁶ And, apropos of the true *bonum commune*, virtue requires that

We must use all the means at our disposal to implement our insight within society and to ensure that it remains an operative factor in people’s consciousness and lives. The insight to which I am referring is this: Ultimately, man possesses inalienable rights because behind man there stands an Authority [i.e., “sine auctoritate, nulla vita”!] who transcends all human debate, because, to state the matter more clearly, God created man as a person [as “a being whose nature it is to exist for his own true fulfillment”]. This, and nothing else, is in the end the only valid ground for the unconditional nature of man’s obligation to exercise justice.⁵⁷

And, what “if all knowledge of this ultimate cause of man’s obligation to exercise justice were to vanish utterly from human consciousness”?⁵⁸ The result, says Dr. Pieper:

Might well be a state of affairs with which we are not altogether unfamiliar: a state of affairs in which the executioner does not know and does not choose to acknowledge the fact that — and the reason why — his victim possesses rights, and in which, moreover, the victim himself may no longer be capable of stating why what is happening to him constitutes an injustice.⁵⁹

Moreover, “to be just means to acknowledge the rights of another person precisely in those cases in which one is incapable of loving him.”⁶⁰ *Justitia est ad alterum.*

“Justice essentially has to do with the other person,” with the rights of the other person, and it “formally confront[s] the other person as ‘another’.”⁶¹ In contrast to “the structure of justice,” love does not involve another as “a stranger,” but rather as “one who is part of oneself, to whom one is closely bound.”⁶² That is to say, “love involves the mutual exchange of gifts, but an act of justice is not a gift but the discharge of a debt.”⁶³ Moreover, “the claim implicit in the principle of justice” is that “we must confirm the other person in his otherness and procure for him that which is his due” — “no more than is due him, but in any case no less.”⁶⁴

Going to the heart of Josef Pieper’s own world-view, he says:

The distinction between a gift and the discharge of a debt becomes crucial.... Herewith we have inadvertently touched on certain questions, of a quite different order, which exert a crucial influence on man’s existence in society [hence, on the *bonum commune*]. The inability or refusal to accept anything as a gift, and the unwillingness to express gratitude, ... are in fact rather problematic issues. However, these issues suggest a more fundamental question: Does justice, despite the fact that it forms the solid, indispensable core of any society, nevertheless constitute an inadequate basis for the realization of truly humane relations [the *bonum commune*] between human beings?⁶⁵

As it happens, and Josef Pieper profoundly agrees with them, “the great thinkers of the past believe that justice is not adequate for this purpose.”⁶⁶

Given that “the name commonly used to designate the fundamental act of justice.... *Restitutio*, i.e., restitution, restoration, reparation”⁶⁷ and given that “the great thinkers of the past place such exceptional

emphasis on the concept of restitution,”⁶⁸ does it not also, says Pieper, “imply a comprehensive view of the nature of all historical acts”?⁶⁹ That is to say:

The view that, in human society, the state of total balance between demand and performance — in other words the state of justice — can never be created once and for all.... [T]his state must be continually re-created, re-stored, over and over (*iterato*, “repeated”).... The “restoration of balance” ... the act of restitution or restoration, is by its very nature a never-ending task.... That very quality in justice ... its lack of finality, its provisional and makeshift quality ... results, quite simply, from the basic nature of the world entrusted to his care.⁷⁰

By way of contrast, “the militant implementation of precisely defined plans ... designed to establish or create justice on earth, once and for all, necessarily leads to inhuman conduct,” and “indeed, much of our experience with history clearly confirms that this is so”⁷¹ We must humbly remember, Dr. Pieper accentuates, that “the fundamental act of justice possesses the inner structure of *restitutio*, or restoration”⁷² — and maybe also restoration through grace.

Furthermore, the idea that there are “limitations of justice in general,” that “justice is simply not enough to keep human society going” also “implies a comprehensive view of the basic structure of all social relations, and not merely of the relations between man and other men [for the temporal common good].”⁷³ One element of this world-view, he says, could be formulated, as follows:

There are debts whose nature it is that they cannot be paid. Thus there exist a creditor, a debtor, and a debt; but the debtor cannot repay the debt.⁷⁴

That is to say, there are intrinsically unrepayable debts, so that even if a man is just and, hence, by definition, “he steadfastly wills to give the person with whom he is dealing that which is due him,” it is then that such a virtuous just man will “experience the full poignancy of his impotence to pay what he owes.”⁷⁵

And now Josef Pieper poses another profound question, and partially answers it, by way of introduction to a deeper wisdom:

And what kind of relationships are these in which there exist debts which cannot be paid? The answer is that they are the relationships fundamental to existence.⁷⁶

Indeed, “the paradigm of all case of indebtedness whose nature it is that the debt cannot be paid” is in “the relationship of man to God.”⁷⁷ For, “any possible obligations which God might have toward man followed upon His previous bestowal of a gift: life itself,” and “there is no way to compensate or ‘make up for’ this gift” — “the *donum creationis*, the gift of our existence.”⁷⁸ With further reverence, Josef Pieper says:

It is inconceivable that a man could ever be justified in turning to God and saying: “Now we’re even!” “To be even” means to have paid one’s debts. Being even, being “square,” is precisely the condition which justice aims to bring about. Thus we can say that, in the relationship of man to God, there can be, strictly speaking, no such thing as justice.⁷⁹

In a relationship such as this with God (and also, as we shall soon see, between human beings), “in which it is impossible to manifest justice,” we must, therefore, “employ something else in its place — an alternative attitude [disposition]”.⁸⁰ This alternative attitude which, in man’s relationship to God, is “substituted for justice” is called “*religio*.”⁸¹ *Religio* is “an attitude of man toward God” and “the logical connection, the conceptual link, between *religio* and the theme of justice is this,” says Dr. Pieper:

Only when a person, by virtue of his relationship to God, has recognized and “realized” the existence of this discrepancy which cannot be “made up for,” the existence of a debt, a *debitum*, which by its very nature cannot be paid or settled, only then, and only by virtue of this realization, does it become possible for him to understand the intrinsic structure of the religious act (worship, devotion, sacrifice) and above all to perform this act [*i.e.*, the “*cultus*”].⁸²

That is to say, one knows that it is impossible to match one's reception of gifts, but one becomes thereby more responsively generous with God — “for example, by an act of sacrifice ... of something of intrinsic value,”⁸³ by giving up a lesser good for a greater good.

But, connected with our theme of “justice in the relations between human beings,” so as to promote the common good, is the fact that “in the human realm, too, there exist debts whose nature it is that they cannot be paid.”⁸⁴ For example, “one cannot pay back or restore what is due to one's mother, one's father, or anyone else who plays a parental role in one's life.”⁸⁵ Once again, strictly speaking, “justice is ... not operative in this case,” and thus “the attitude of pietas” is to substitute for justice.⁸⁶ And the important thing, says Josef Pieper,

Is that we keep clearly in mind the meaning of pietas. It implies the acknowledgment that we owe certain people a debt which we are incapable of paying.⁸⁷

Pietas is also, in part, a respect for our roots — in our family, in our country.

By way of sobering contrast to this desirable and intimate disposition of soul, Dr. Pieper says poignantly:

It appears to me that the concept of pietas plays virtually no role in the code of human values by which most of our contemporaries actually govern their lives, and that any attempt to restore this virtue to its former status would fail unless certain fundamental conditions were met. For example, pietas could evolve into an element of social life [for the common good] only if the concept of “authority,” which is now little more than a wasteland, were to be restored to its proper place in the social order. As we all know, there is little likelihood that anyone could achieve this end.⁸⁸

This insight brings home the meaning of the Latin adage of wisdom: “sine auctoritate, nulla vita.” Without authority, there is no life. And the bonum commune is subverted.

Moreover, says Josef Pieper,

The task of rehabilitating pietas is virtually hopeless if, in addition, we take into account a third concept [of virtue] which, in the ancient theory of justice, resemble religio and pietas in that it represents an attitude which is fitting, and indeed obligatory, for man to exhibit a response to the fact that he owes a debt he cannot pay. Even the word commonly used to designate this concept has all but disappeared from our language. In Latin this word is observantia. Dictionaries translate it as “deference” [or “respect”].⁸⁹

But, what does observantia mean? When, “the individual is ceaselessly nourished by the fact ... that other people [teachers and judges, for example] carry out their duties efficiently [and generously], which alone enables the individual to live in an ordered society” and this is “a state of affairs which can by no means be taken for granted.”⁹⁰ However, Dr. Pieper continues:

This fact results in an indebtedness on the part of the individual, who cannot really compensate or reimburse for their labors all the people [for example, his intellectual and spiritual mentor] to whom he is indebted.⁹¹

Thus, “this attitude of observantia, *i.e.*, the deliberate achievement and testimony of respect” tells the other person — for example, one's mentor: “I owe you something which I cannot ever adequately repay, and I hereby declare that I am aware of this fact!”⁹² Josef Pieper felt this for his mentor, Father Romano Guardini, and graciously told me some moving stories about his own shy efforts to thank Romano Guardini, and fittingly when I once shyly tried to convey my own gratitude to Dr. Pieper himself. Josef Pieper discerningly saw my diffidence at that moment, and remembered poignantly his own!

My mentor also later wrote that:

Almost all services rendered by human beings involve an element which the person who benefits from them [a beneficiary, as well, by partaking of the bonum commune] cannot, strictly speaking, repay. Neither the friendliness of a waiter, nor the reliability of a housekeeper, can be recompensed in such a way that we have, in the strict sense, paid them all that is due to them. And thus in a great variety of situations in which

justice [or even mercy, which means “giving more than is due”; *misericordia* means charity reaching out to alleviate the suffering of a wretched heart (as is implied in its etymology)] cannot be fully manifested, we must substitute for justice that very *observantia* [and courtesy, as a form of charity!] which tells the other person [and tactfully]: “I am in your debt; I know and acknowledge this fact.”⁹³

How could you or I now sufficiently express what Josef Pieper has given to us and to the larger common good — in its temporal and its supernatural dimension? His gifts have made us desire to be even more generous with others, to be more and more selflessly generous and radiant with gratitude. Do we agree?

I wish now to leave with you two final questions posed by Josef Pieper. They are, I believe, questions which, if remembered, will keep him in our heart. They are abiding questions that also “bear an obvious and startling relevance to contemporary life” and further imply an “all-embracing view of the world and of history”⁹⁴ — and of our possible final fulfillment. These two questions also deftly imply Josef Pieper’s gracious and festive wisdom on the virtues of the human heart and his world-view rooted in gratitude. For the sake of the common good, temporal and supernatural (our salvation and beatitude), he limpidly speaks to our hearts:

Does not the life which man shares with other men in society inevitably become inhuman when the individual, regardless for what reasons, ceases to regard himself as someone who is indebted to, and has received gifts from, both God and men?...⁹⁵

Thus once again I ask whether the life we share with other human beings does not inevitably become inhuman the moment we try to interpret it, and above all to structure and to live it, solely with a view to one question: What are my rights?⁹⁶

By contrast, Josef Pieper was always attentively receptive to the rights of **the other** (*i.e.*, to the just claims of the other, whoever he was) for he himself was deeply aware of all that he had undeservingly and generously received as a gift. Deeply grateful was his answering heart.

May Josef Pieper now also know that true plenitude of life, in full festive communion with his beloved.

— *Finis* —

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- ¹ Text of Dr. Pieper's lecture, given at Netherhall House, London, 24 November 1974, at a Conference on *Lasting Values and Modern Man*, p. 3.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 4 — emphasis added.
- ³ Josef Pieper, "The Art of Not Yielding to Despair," in his book, *The Problems of Modern Faith* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1985), p. 182.
- ⁴ Text of 1974 London Lecture, pp. 4–5 — emphasis added.
- ⁵ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*, (New York: Random House-Mentor Book, 1963), p. 33.
- ⁶ Josef Pieper, "Pastless Future, Groundless Hope," from his book *The Problems of Modern Faith* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press), p. 170.
- ⁷ Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart (Kleines Lesbuch von den Tugenden des menschlichen Herzens)* — first published in 1941 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991, p. 48)
- ⁸ Josef Pieper, "Pastless Future, Groundless Hope," in his book, *The Problems of Modern Faith*, p. 157.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, — emphasis added.
- ¹¹ Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart*, pp. 45 -- 46.
- ¹² Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Saint Thomas: Three Essays* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1965), pp. 19–20.
- ¹³ *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*, p. 50.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ¹⁷ Josef Pieper, "The Concept of 'Createdness' and Its Implications," from *Atti Del Congresso Internazionale*, Numero 5, L'Agire Moral (Naples, Italy: Eazioni Domenicane Italiane), p. 20.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.21.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22 – 23 — emphasis added.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 23 – 24.
- ²³ J. Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart*, pp. 49 – 50 —emphasis added.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50 — emphasis added.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51 — emphasis added.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 52 – 53.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54 — emphasis added.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53 – 54 — emphasis added.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9 — emphasis added.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19 –20.
- ³⁵ Josef Pieper, "The Art of Not Yielding to Despair," from his book, *Problems of Modern Faith*, p. 186.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 175 and 184 — emphasis added, except for the original text's own emphasis on hope.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186 — emphasis added, except for the first emphasis on not, which was in the original text.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184 — emphasis added, except for the original text's emphasis on cannot.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 189 — emphasis added.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 183 –184, citing Gabriel Marcel's *The Mystery of Being*. Emphasis added.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- ⁴⁴ Josef Pieper, "The Rights of Others," in his book, *The Problems of Modern Faith*, p. 213.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, — emphasis in the original.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 203 – 204 — emphasis added.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205

- ⁵² *Ibid.* — emphasis added.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, —emphasis added.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206 — emphasis added.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 206 – 207.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, — emphasis added.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, — emphasis added.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, — emphasis added.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 209 — emphasis added.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 210 – 211.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*,
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213 — emphasis added.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 214 — 215.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 215 – 216.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 216 – 217.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 218.