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## Rejoicing in the Good: True Festivity

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**Pieper, Josef**, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity* (trans. Richard and Clara Winston, South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999).

Pope Francis recently remarked, “The mystery of Christmas, which is light and joy, challenges and unsettles us, because it is at once a *mystery of hope and of sadness*,” the latter “inasmuch as love is not accepted, and life discarded.”<sup>[1]</sup> Nietzsche observed a similar symptom: nowadays, “the trick is not to arrange a festival, but to find people who can *enjoy* it” (Pieper, 13). Troubled by the specifically modern rejection of festivity and the ever-present phenomenon of the sham festival, Josef Pieper aims to articulate a theory of festivity: what are its necessary conditions, essence, and true object? How can men of our time “preserve or regain the capacity to celebrate real festivals festively?” (13–14). Nietzsche, both a foil and frequent contributor to Pieper’s reflections, also provides the rudiments of an answer to these questions: “To have joy in anything, one must approve everything” (25–26). Pieper’s central idea in this brief but rich book is that there is no true festival without “an absolutely universal affirmation extending to the world as a whole, to the reality of things and the existence of man himself” (26). To be festive, then, is to celebrate reality in recognition of its inalienable goodness, and this assent is given most radically as praise of the creator God through ritual worship, whose fruit is the communication to man of a “superhuman abundance of life” (31–32, 38–39). The truly festive occasion is nothing that man can produce or give to himself; it can only be received as a gift freely offered, to which the appropriate response is joyful praise (39–40).

Pieper develops this idea by exploring various realms of human life and ways in which festivity has been instituted and even displaced by the “antifestival.” He reflects first on the relationship between festivity and work. The festival, while being an exceptional interruption of daily labor, is “not just a day without work” but carries a positive significance (3, 7). Whereas work implies utilitarian activities (*artes serviles*), the festival resides only “in the realm of activity that is meaningful in itself” (*ars liberalis*) (8–9). Our capacity to celebrate thus depends on our capacity

to conceive and engage in free activity. If this is not simply play, which Pieper classifies as a “mere *modus* of action” but not its defining object, then what constitutes intrinsically meaningful activity? (10–12).

In order to answer this question, we cannot avoid having a conception of man and his fulfillment (14–15). Tradition expresses man’s end primarily in terms of the *visio beatifica*, a “seeing awareness of the divine ground of the universe” (15). Pieper thus draws a direct line between contemplation and festivity: “Whenever anyone succeeds in bringing before his mind’s eye the hidden ground of everything that is, he succeeds to the same degree in performing an act that is meaningful in itself, and has a ‘good time’” (16–17). Whether this contemplation is the philosopher’s consideration of the whole, the artist’s search for prototypical images, or prayer, it involves a “relaxation of the strenuous fixation of the eye on the given frame of reference” necessary for any utilitarian activity, allowing the soul to perceive the “illimitable horizon of reality as a whole” (16–17). Another essential element of festivity is the sacrifice that renders it, paradoxically, a “phenomenon of [existential] wealth” (19). Renunciation of, for example, the potential yield of the Sabbath day is only rational in light of the comprehensive affirmation that Pieper identifies as love. Because it escapes “the principle of calculating utility,” giving oneself out of love generates an “area of free surplus” even in the greatest material poverty (19–20).

Pieper also includes rejoicing among the essential attributes of festivity. Joy, however, never exists for its own sake, but follows upon the reception of something beloved: “Joy is the response of a lover receiving what he loves” (22–23). Chrysostom expresses the “inner structure of real festivity” most concisely: “*Ubi caritas gaudet, ibi est festivitas*” (Where love rejoices, there is festivity) (23). Man cannot experience receiving what is loved, however, “unless the world and existence as a whole represent something good and therefore beloved to him” (26). For this reason, affirmation is not simply a condition of festivity but its very substance. “*To celebrate a festival means: to live out, for some special occasion and in an uncommon manner, the universal assent to the world as a whole*” (30, *emph. orig.*). Fundamentally connecting festivity and affirmation, Pieper is led to the conclusion that “there can be no more radical assent to the world than the praise of God,” its Creator and that “ritual festival is the most festive form that festivity can possible take.” To refuse ritual praise is to destroy festivity (31–32).

The necessity of ritual praise does not, however, preclude the secular festival. We can speak of the latter because “real festivity cannot be restricted to any one particular sphere of life”; it “permeates all dimensions of existence” (33). In contrast, the profane festival “is a non-concept” because true festivity entails an exchange between human and divine (34). Man offers his sacrifice of praise in ritual worship, which “is essentially an expression of the same affirmation that lies at the heart of festivity” (36–37). Here, Pieper focuses on the Mass as *eucharistia*, which celebrates nothing less than the “salvation of the world and of life as a whole” (38). What we see especially in the Mass is the hope of every festival, namely, that men will be given a share in divine life, renewed and lifted out of the spatio-temporal bounds of earthly life (38–43). This “fruit” of festivity, its true *raison d’être*, is “pure gift” and can never be produced by man (39–40). If he does attempt to produce his own entry into this “other” world by fending off reality rather than affirming it (through, e.g., sheer entertainment) he achieves only “pseudo-festivity” (58–59).

Pieper's final three chapters help us discern true festivity from its falsifications. At the heart of his cultural critique is the insistence that festivity is only possible when man "accepts it as pure gift" rather than "imagining himself self-sufficient" and thus refusing "to recognize that Goodness of things which goes far beyond any conceivable utility" (71). Through vivid depictions of the French Revolution's "bombastic," state-instituted festivals—e.g., the "philosophical festival" in which the mayor of Paris held the Constitution "out to his fellow citizens like a monstrosity" (66)—we learn that festive affirmation is not excessive optimism with regard to achieving human happiness through social or political means (70). Nor is affirmation the exertion of human power. Whereas Revolutionary festivals suffered the "infinite boredom of utter unreality," they had not yet achieved the "purest form of rationally calculated utility" characteristic of totalitarian governments' festivals of human labor (65, 72). Pieper recalls the Bolshevik regime's transformation of May 1st labor strikes into "festivals" of voluntary work (75–76). The coercive character of this "celebration"—ultimately of state power—reappears in Nazi Germany's "striking displays of weapons of destruction" (77–79). When "festivity" becomes a mandated display of human power and self-sufficiency, what results is "the total subjection of human beings to work" and, finally, to the effort of destruction. "The artificial holiday . . . borders so dangerously on counterfestivity that it can abruptly be reversed into 'antifestival'" (78–79).

The destruction that is antifestivity manifests itself not only in war—which Pieper considers but ultimately rejects as the modern equivalent of festivity—but also in the "will to nothingness" present, especially after Nietzsche, in the modern attitude towards life (80–83). Pieper looks boldly upon this "affirmation of negation," concluding that in the face of evil, only the "conviction that there is a divinely guaranteed Goodness of being" can forestall despair (82–83). Even so, seeds of true festivity remain for man in poetry and art, love uncorrupted by "delusions of sensuality," death "accepted with . . . an unarmored heart," and philosophy in awe before the mystery of being (85–86). The book concludes hopefully: "Because the festive occasion pure and simple, the divine guarantee of the world and of human salvation, exists and remains true continuously, we may say that in essence one single everlasting festival is being celebrated" (86).

Basing festivity on the affirmation of creation, Pieper's book accords with magisterial teaching on integral ecology. Both festivity and concern for "our common home" are grounded in receiving creation "as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all and as a reality illuminated by . . . love" (*Laudato Si'*, 76). There is a great deal of overlap between Pieper's call to festivity and Pope Francis's spirituality of praise inspired by each creature's "singing the hymn of its existence" (*LS*, 85; cf. 69, 87). In fact, if the pope defines ecology as the study of the relation between living beings and their environment (*LS*, 138), Pieper's study of festivity could perhaps be considered a "creaturely ecology": a study of living beings joyfully affirming their world as gift. Moreover, the pope's treatment of sacramental worship harmonizes with Pieper's: the Sabbath rest, "centered on the Eucharist," includes the "pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality"—and hence *God's* affirmation of creation by bringing it to eternal rest in himself (*LS*, 237). In this way, "Christian spirituality incorporates the value of relaxation and festivity" (*LS*, 237).

Pieper makes a strong case for festivity as praise of God and his creation even while proffering evidence of its susceptibility to corruption. It seems that the greatest difficulty for Pieper's

notion of festivity is that of affirmation itself: what is the final justification for saying yes to all in the face of evil, in a world where goodness is so often rejected? Pieper gives us the principles with which to answer this question but leaves us with the “intellectually and existentially extremely demanding task of facing naked reality” (82–83). Yet our affirmation is not unprecedented, for it always follows upon the “divine assent to Creation. . . . We cannot conceive a more radical . . . justification of the essential goodness of all reality than this, that God Himself, in bringing things into being, affirms and loves these very same things” (47). Here, Pieper’s “underlying assumption” of all things’ being made whole in Christ seems essential (38). Through the Incarnation, God permits us to seek him in unexpected places and thus enables us to hope: we can realistically expect to find the true cause of festivity in every corner of creation. Festivity, then, is possible not because of a blanket affirmation that overlooks reality but because of the real communication of divine goodness, the light that shines in the darkness.[2]

[1] Francis, *Homily at Midnight Mass for the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord*, December 24, 2016.

[2] “It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation. . . . The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes, not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours. In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living center of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life” (*LS*, 236).

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