

## JOSEF PIEPER

*Josef Pieper is a Thomist who has thought through what Thomas wrote and passed on what he has understood and extended the same approach into areas Thomas never dreamt of.*

The old joke about the writer who did not have enough time to write a short letter has its academic counterpart in the teacher who knows so much he can no longer make himself understood. One of the benefits of the American university system is that few scholars are permitted to teach only graduate students. They must also face undergraduates, and this is the true test of their knowledge. Can they meet the tyro on his own ground and lead him into a subject that looms as a vast *terra incognita*?

Research takes one far from the starting points of a discipline and it can require an imaginative feat to occupy once again the shoes of the beginner. An inability -- I do not say unwillingness -- to do this renders suspect the status of arcane accomplishments.

This by way of fanfare to a paean of praise for one of the most intelligible of philosophers, Josef Pieper, this year celebrating his 97th birthday. Pieper first came to the attention of American readers when T. S. Eliot wrote the preface to the English translation of *Leisure the Basis of Culture*. If this had been a solitary achievement it would still impress, but that extraordinary work is only one of dozens of such short books Pieper has written over the course of his extended active career, most of it spent

at the University of Munster.

To observe that Pieper is a Thomist can occasion surprise among those who think of contemporary students of Aquinas as speaking in Latinate jargon about topics of interest only to those with an acquired taste for them. A reader expecting extended exegesis of texts of Thomas, or even constant allusions to the Master, may be disappointed -- or perhaps pleasantly surprised by a prose which directly addresses the reader in a familiar language on matters of compelling interest.

Of course the whole point of the Thomistic Revival was to bring the thought of Thomas to bear on a contemporary situation very much in need of its light. Responses to this desire of every Pope since Leo XIII (except perhaps John Paul I), have been various. The Leonine Commission, set up to prepare a reliable text, is still fussing away after more than a century. Its editions are swamped in erudition and now lean toward bizarre orthography. Perhaps the Commission should have set up a two track operation, one devoted to Leo's charge, the other to the paleographical pleasantries in which experts delight, but which seldom contribute to or enhance an intelligent reading of Thomas.

There have been many who have sought to develop the relevance of Thomas for issues of our time and there have been some who addressed the general reading public. But no one has done either as effectively and habitually as Josef Pieper.

A few years ago, I visited him in Munster, renewing an acquaintance that had begun when he took part in a Perspectives Series on ethics I arranged at Notre Dame. His study was filled with the work of his artist wife, now deceased, he was then in his late eighties and still at work. It occurred to me that he himself did not fully realize the dimensions of his philosophical achievement. Ever since I have been asking myself how best to describe what Pieper has done.

In the first instance, he has provided a keen pleasure to his reader, the aesthetic pleasure of a well-made book, and the logical pleasure of discourse that moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar. But that is such an abstract way of putting it.

Take a book like *The End of Time*, a meditation on the philosophy of history whose motto is drawn from Hamann. "Who can hope to obtain proper concepts of the present, without knowing the future?" But what can philosophers know of the future? The little they discern must be supplemented. The book culminates in a discussion of the Anti-Christ.

Take *Happiness and Contemplation*, perhaps more typical. Here Pieper undertakes to explain and defend the view that our happiness will be found only in contemplation, a notion he takes from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, but which is discussed not as a scholarly or historical matter, but as the only adequate answer to the human quest.

The professional scholar, the accomplished Thomist, reads Pieper

with amazement. It is not simply that Pieper can popularize the technical and difficult; one finds in his little books fundamental contributions to ongoing learned disputes. No one has written more wisely on the relation between thinking and doing than Pieper, yet there are no obstacles of erudition between the reader and the presentation.

How does he do it? All philosophers long to be intelligible, yet become accustomed to the glazed eyes of listeners when they try to convey what it is they are working on. Suddenly it seems so remote and irrelevant to ordinary life. Yet here is Pieper, making those difficult things intelligible without in any way trivializing them.

C. S. Lewis had a similar knack but his works do not have the range Pieper's do. Of course Pieper was blessed with an exceptionally long life, with a clarity of mind which has yet to desert him. There is an old adage that he himself cites. *Primum vivere, deinde philosophari*. Philosophize only on the basis of lived experience. The complement to that is the requirement that philosophy retain its relevance to life. It does this only when its practitioner achieves the goal of the whole effort, wisdom.

That, I think, is the mark of Josef Pieper's achievement. In reading him, we are listening to a wise man. Some are Thomists in the manner of fans, others are Thomists in the manner of painstaking readers of the texts of Thomas. Josef Pieper is a Thomist who has thought through what Thomas wrote and passed on what he has understood and extended the

same approach into areas Thomas never dreamt of.

In introducing him to English readers, T. S. Eliot contrasted Pieper with the then dominant mode of philosophizing, Logical Positivism, which Eliot characterized as "a method of philosophizing without insight and wisdom." From the outset, it was the sapiential tone of Pieper's thought that struck the reader. Philosophy is of course the pursuit and love of wisdom. But what is wisdom? What men can know of God. Eliot noted that Pieper's "mind is submissive to what he believes to be the great, the main tradition of European thought; his originality is subdued and unostentatious." One might perhaps add that originality is a bonus rather than the aim of his thinking.

Among the heavy debts we owe to Father Joseph Fessio and his Ignatius Press is the reissue of many Pieper titles and the first English edition of many more. These appear in the delightful and impeccable typography we have learned to expect from Ignatius Press. They have also published Pieper's autobiographical volumes. It is only fitting that Josef Pieper should be within such easy reach of the readers for whom he writes.