

Pieper, Josef. Précis of *On Hope*

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Since Leanne has been speaking about virtue, one of the principal virtues that I think all of us need to take away with us from this conference is hope.

Leanne has mentioned Pieper's book, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*¹. There is another work by Pieper that deals with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. I just want to say a brief word about the concept of hope. In the evangelical faith within which many of us were raised, hope was not something we were taught much about. Hope seemed to be an expectation of something that would occur in the distant future, in eschatological time—at the end of time, when we are in heaven, in the eternal state. At that point we would all eventually be “healed,” but there was not a sense that this life is about a journey toward wholeness, a progress in becoming.

Pieper in his book *On Hope*² defines life as possessing an incomplete quality, a state of being “on the way.” It's the condition of being on a journey toward fulfillment, one that is not yet complete and therefore has potential pitfalls and detours along the way. Because this is so, we can't simply relax and say, “No effort is needed on my part in this process of sanctification because everything has already been done; I'm complete, I'm already there.” By contrast, the Apostle Paul says, “I have not yet attained. Therefore I make every effort to pursue what it is that God has called me to.” So, there is a sense in the Scriptures that sanctification is “progressive”, a process not yet complete.

¹ Josef Pieper, *The four cardinal virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, Harcourt Brace & World, New York, 1965 / Notre Dame, Ind., 1966/1990 ISBN: 0268001030 (translation, by Lawrence E. Lynch, Daniel F. Coogan, and Richard and Clara Winston, of: *Das Viergespann - / Über die Tugenden: Klugheit, Gerechtigkeit, Tapferkeit, Mass*, Kösel Verlag, Munich/München, re-issue ed. 1991/2004 (original: 1954); ISBN: 3466401623 / 3466401720).

² *On Hope*, Josef Pieper (with Victoria H. Lane - illustrator, Mary F. McCarthy - translator), Ignatius Press, 1986; ISBN: 0898700671 (translation of: *Über die Hoffnung*, Hegner, Leipzig, 1949; later Kösel; recent re-issue edition: Johannes, Einsiedeln, 2006; ISBN 3894113944 / 978 3 89411 394 0).

Pieper identifies two dangers, two potential enemies of hope. Both will destroy hope by eliminating the quality of being “on the way.” The first is a premature determination that you are not destined for fulfillment. It's the determination, or what Pieper calls the “anticipation,” of nonfulfillment. What he means by anticipation is not an expectancy of, or looking forward to, nonfulfillment, but anticipation in the sense of a premature conclusion. If you open a door for me and then walk in front of me, you've anticipated me by moving out of turn. That's the sense of the word “anticipation” in Pieper's writings. Pieper defines this as “despair”—an anticipation of nonfulfillment made at the level of the will. It is not simply a matter of our feelings, but it is rather a decision that we have made, perhaps unconsciously, but nevertheless one for which we must take responsibility. It frequently sounds something like this: “It does not matter what I do. Nothing I attempt will ever succeed; nothing will ever change.”

The insidious evil in this posture is that it is not only a conclusion about your nature as a person made in God's image, but it is also a conclusion about the character of God. It is, in effect, saying to God that He has set things up in such a way that you **MUST** despair of being who He called you to be. It's just not possible **TO** be, and you know better than He does. There's a pride in that kind of thinking. It is moreover very tempting for people who have suffered a great deal to believe that the circumstances of life have so conspired against them that they simply must acquiesce in the evil that has come against them. For example, “If my parents didn't love me, I must be unlovable. I therefore give up attempting to live a life that's full of self-respect and dignity.” When that belief is present, there is a need for repentance from despair, because you have turned away from the high calling that God has for you.

The virtue that accompanies that hope within you is magnanimity, the capacity and the aspiration of the soul to great things. It's not grandiosity; it's not an unrealistic assessment of what you can do, but it is a right assessment of the call that God has given you to know and appreciate and take into yourself great things.

Now the other enemy of hope is the anticipation of fulfillment, and that is the form of presumption that says, “I don't need to make any effort because I am fine just as I am,” or, “The way that fulfillment is going to come to me is through a magical thunderbolt that will instantaneously absolve me of any need to make moral effort.” In other words, “I hope that God will change me, but He's going to do it, and if it's not done, well, I guess that's because God's not done anything yet, has He? Therefore, I can sit back in passivity.” That attitude also destroys the nature of our journey, of our need to continue persevering in the direction of becoming.

There is no need to hope for fulfillment when one believes that it is already in one's possession. So presumption and despair are the two enemies that destroy hope.

Part of what anchors us to both the limitations and the greatness of our calling is the virtue of humility. Humility teaches us that we are not yet complete, that we are finite, and that we are dependent on God's grace for whatever progress we will make. Magnanimity teaches us that we are called to greatness, and that we must not settle for less than what God has named and called us to. Humility and magnanimity are thus the twin virtues that accompany and support hope. Despair and presumption are the two enemies that destroy it.

When you see these sins in your soul, the repentance does not necessarily need to be one in which you fall weeping to the floor. It can be very simply a turning of your mental perspective and of your will to understand the right ordering of the way God has made you to live in this life.

One of the things I had to repent of was a despair that I took in very early on - probably even in the womb - that somehow I was not going to be able to become the man that God had made and called me to be. When I realized that I needed to repent, I saw that despair coming out of me like a black cord that had wound itself around my heart. As I gave it to the Lord, I made a decision to change my thinking in one very important area: the belief that the circumstances of my life were intended to crush me, and therefore I had a right to be bitter and complaining and bitchy. And when I realized that God had allowed difficulties in my life, not for the purpose of crushing me, but for the purpose of giving me the chance to become a person of character, then I chose to embrace that reality as the avenue to virtue.

So as you come to the prayer for healing of memories, the Lord may put His finger on despair or presumption in your soul. Give that to Him, and you will find a renewed power for change released in your life.