

Toward a Holistic Contemplative Vision: Creation and Christ in Josef Pieper and the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola

Christian Lingner

Boston College – School of Theology and Ministry (Brighton, MA)

Abstract

Ignatian spirituality is characterized by an emphasis on contemplation as a means of discernment, an approach that highlights the unity of the interior and ethical dimensions of the Christian life. Yet Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises are also defined by the modus operandi of the contemplative method outlined therein, one that highlights the imagination’s role in a receptive and interactive engagement with the person of Christ as depicted in the Gospels. Though 20th century German Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper is most commonly associated with his popular works on Aquinas and the cardinal virtues, there is a contemplative undercurrent throughout his writing that corresponds with the thought of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Pieper defines contemplation as “a visual perception prompted by loving acceptance,” stressing both the receptive posture of the individual but also the intrinsic pairing of contemplation and ethics in an active response of embracing existence. Much as Ignatius believes the imagination, the inner capacity that links creativity and memory in an individual, to be pertinent to spiritual development, so Pieper asserts that an imaginative representation of Being through the creation of art and participation in communal worship proceeds from love and cultivates the individual’s capacity to perceive lovingly.

Text

Josef Pieper, a twentieth-century German Catholic philosopher, is most widely remembered for his pithy works on topics like the cardinal virtues and the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. Perhaps his most important philosophical contribution, however, was his retrieval of what Bernard N. Schumacher calls a “metaphysics of creation”—that is, the belief that all things are made by God, who is the ultimate Good, and are therefore imbued with and reflective of the Good that is God.¹ Given his metaphysics of the Truth of All Things, Pieper believed that

¹ Bernard N. Schumacher, “A Cosmopolitan Hermit: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Josef Pieper,” in *A Cosmopolitan Hermit*, ed. Bernard N. Schumacher (Washington: Catholic University, 2009), 14.

humanity's fully realized purpose and happiness were to be found in the receptive contemplation of the Good as it can be found in all things. Thus, one of Pieper's longstanding goals was to answer the question, "How can man preserve and safeguard the foundation of his spiritual dimension in an uncorrupted relationship with reality?"² In a similar way, St. Ignatius of Loyola begins his *Spiritual Exercises* with an affirmation of the *telos* towards which God has ordered creation, seeking, therefore, to chart out the contemplative path by which human beings may achieve their proper end. This paper intends to address the ways in which these two thinkers' contemplative visions broadly intersect and diverge; however, more to the point, I wish to suggest how, when taken together and integrated properly, these two visions can offer a unified contemplative spirituality that engages the whole human person and presents all of reality as the proper object of contemplation.

Josef Pieper begins *Happiness and Contemplation* by affirming the traditional Christian position that humans are desirous of and ordered to an ultimate happiness that can only be realized in the direct vision of God in heaven. As such, Pieper dually affirms that "[humanity] has received its essence—and along with that its assignment in life—from elsewhere, *ab alio*, from the shaping and life-giving act of creation,"³ and that "man is not happy by virtue of his being."⁴ Despite the seemingly tragic nature of this conjunction of claims, Pieper's analysis of reality is no simple acquiescence to the absurdity of life as one might find in Jean-Paul Sartre and the existentialists, whom Pieper spent much of his career actively opposing. Rather, though Pieper is quick to assert that the human thirst for the beatific vision cannot be satisfied outside

² Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 34.

³ Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 22.

⁴ Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, 27.

heaven, he does not believe that this eliminates the possibility of a foretaste of happiness on earth. When any human being, who is “at bottom a being who craves to see,” encounters goodness in this life, he or she experiences a limited but real encounter with God.⁵

The question then emerges as to the nature of this foretaste, of this peering “through a glass, darkly,” (1 Cor. 13:12, NAB) to which Pieper attaches the term “contemplation.” Rather than denoting a discursive use of the intellect, Pieper is adamant that “to contemplate means first of all *to see*—and not *to think!*”⁶ This “seeing” does not necessitate a sense of intensive strain—on the contrary, Pieper writes that “contemplation is visual perception prompted by loving acceptance,”⁷ placing an emphasis on its receptive and intuitive nature. He drives this point home by writing, “The person who knows by intuition has already found what the thinker is seeking.”⁸ The simple recognition of that which is present, of that which has been offered to the eyes of one’s heart for their pleasure, that act of “seeing” or “beholding” is contemplation.

Of course, this conception assumes something significant about the world that requires further attention—namely, that the world which human beings encounter is imbued with the goodness of God. Pieper grounds the ontological goodness of creation in his metaphysic of the Truth of All Things, which Pieper believes was a predominant element in Western philosophy before the Enlightenment. According to Matthew Cuddeback, Pieper’s understanding of the age-old but ever-relevant idea of *omnes ens est verum*—“everything that is, is true”—can be summed up in three statements: 1) God sees and makes all things according to Divine ideas; 2) the creature is shaped by God and thus is knowable; and 3) the creature is shaped by God and thus is

⁵ Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, 77.

⁶ Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 73. Emphasis original.

⁷ Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 75.

⁸ Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, 74.

unfathomable.⁹ In other words, since all things came into existence and persist in existence through and in the mind of God, human beings can and do encounter God when they look into the world and even at themselves. With this in mind, it is little wonder that Pieper finds no reason to distinguish between types of contemplation—whether philosophical, theological, or aesthetic—since each instance of “beholding” edifies and perfects humans as long as their contemplation comes from a place of receptivity and loving affirmation.¹⁰ Certainly, as noted before, Pieper differentiates between the ultimacy of the beatific vision and the finitude of earthly contemplation—yet, this distinction between the heavenly and temporal visions of the Good is primarily one of degree, not quality. During their temporal existence, human beings are finite and therefore cannot attain to a full theophany of God. Nevertheless, all things made by God are a manifestation of Him.

How then does Pieper suggest that human beings develop the loving and receptive eyes that are required for seeing the world for what it is: the loving creation of God that reveals God? The primary step toward this gift of sight is the cultivation of love for all things, which can be brought about by allowing oneself to experience openness and attentive silence as well as active participation in “feasts,” by which Pieper refers to communal celebrations of the Good.¹¹ Whole essays could be devoted to the role of these elements in Pieper’s broader philosophy and ethics. However, most pertinent to this discussion is the central role that Pieper believes the creation of art can play in the development of one’s spiritual life. He notes: “Nobody has to observe and

⁹ This understanding of Pieper’s concept of Truth of All Things articulated here relies heavily on Matthew Cuddeback’s essay, “Josef Pieper on the Truth of All Things and the World’s True Face,” in *A Cosmopolitan Hermit*, ed. Bernard N. Schumacher (Washington: Catholic University, 2009), 228-250.

¹⁰ Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, 80.

¹¹ Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 25.

study the visible mystery of a human face more than the one who sets out to sculpt it.”¹² Drawing from literary figures like Gerard Manley Hopkins and Leo Tolstoy, Pieper demonstrates that true art expresses love and that this expression further perfects the love of the one who beholds—setting into motion a cycle that drives the individual into further and deeper contemplation.

Thus runs Pieper’s contemplative vision, beginning with God’s loving, creative act, and culminating with humanity’s cultivation of love. Yet a critique is in order, despite all the virtues of this vision. While Pieper is right to affirm the ontological goodness of creation, he roots his contemplative vision so completely in creation that he fails to adequately incorporate the creation’s fallenness. In other words, though God calls creation “good,” all of creation—including the objective world and subjective human nature—is morally broken and distorted. As such, human beings cannot affirm without further qualification *omnes ens est verum*. What, then, are human beings to do, since they crave to see yet find themselves peering with inhibited vision into a world of shifting shadows? Is there a way that we can reconcile Pieper’s claim that truth can be found in all things with the biblical narrative of the Fall?

What I would like to suggest is that Pieper’s vision is incomplete, though not wrong if contextualized properly—if taken apart from the biblical narrative, his vision could run counter to Christian orthodoxy. To be charitable, there is a sense in which I believe Pieper’s role as a German writing around the time of the Second World War discouraged him from making extensive reference to the Fall. I believe his desire to affirm the goodness of the created world was prompted by the fact that the world in which he and his audience were living was so obviously fallen.

¹² Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 35.

Nonetheless, I believe that Pieper's vision might be completed by an incorporation of Ignatius of Loyola's contemplative vision. The consonance of these two contemplative ways is immediately striking. Ignatius begins his *Spiritual Exercises* with the concise but comprehensive threefold assertion that "I come from God; I belong to God; I am destined for God."¹³ Like Pieper, Ignatius believes that a true understanding of life proceeds from the recognition that, while God in no way *had* to create, He nevertheless *did* create. In this way, God's perfect freedom suggests that creation is an expression of love. Within this creation, human beings hold a special place as creatures made in the image of God. As Ignatius writes: "My soul is in His image, all my being bears the stamp, the living stamp of His attributes."¹⁴

However, for Ignatius, these statements about the world's creation before the Fall necessitate an immediate pivot into a reflection on the ways in which the world today does not wholly reflect the goodness for which it was intended. After a brief theological discourse devoted to creation's *telos*, the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* is devoted to meditations on Adam's sin, the effects of mortal and venial sins, and the habitation of the damned. Ignatius pulls no punches, asking his readers to apply all five senses as they imagine the unfathomable pain and suffering of those in hell. For instance, he elicits the retreatant's sense of smell with these words: "Imagine you smell the fire, the brimstone, the infection which exhales from so many hideous corpses."¹⁵

In contrast to Pieper's passive approach, Ignatius emphasizes the need for an intensive, discursive investigation of the moral depravity of the individual and his world.¹⁶ Yet this

¹³ Ignatius of Loyola, *Manresa: or, The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: for General Use* (London: Burns, Oats, and Washbourne, Ltd., n.d.), 21.

¹⁴ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 22.

¹⁵ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 77.

¹⁶ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 46.

discursive moment gives way to the longest and perhaps most profound portion of the *Exercises*: the contemplation of Jesus Himself. This contemplation of Christ runs from the start of the Second Week through the first part of the Fourth, and Ignatius explains why these elements must come in this order: while the First Week prompts the reader to acknowledge “how far we have wandered from the path which leads to our last end. . . . The purpose of the second week is to propose to ourselves Jesus Christ as the true way.”¹⁷ Ignatius continues to implore his contemplatives to apply all five senses to the person of Jesus, encouraging them to imagine the sights and sounds and smells of various scenes from the Gospels, but this section is characterized by a more receptive posture than the First Week. Charles J. Healey writes that, in the Second Week, “We are urged to bring the mystery before us in a personal way, to insert ourselves into it, to ‘see the persons,’ ‘to observe, consider what they are saying,’ ‘to behold and consider what they are doing.’”¹⁸ During this stage of the *Exercises*, one must receive the truth through contemplation and only afterward proceed to a mode of active consideration of that which has been given.

Such language ought to sound familiar. It is at this point that the intersections and divergences between Ignatius and Pieper’s respective views become most apparent. In harmony with Pieper, Ignatius conceives of contemplating the Good as the reception of a gift—it is a witnessing or beholding. Additionally, Ignatius believes that imaginative representation, in this case imagining the Gospel as opposed to creating art, incites one to further knowledge of God and His goodness. However, the primary difference between the two visions lies in the object of the contemplative’s gaze. Whereas Pieper affirms that all things are the proper object of

¹⁷ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 107

¹⁸ Charles J. Healey, *The Ignatian Way: Key Aspects of Jesuit Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 2009.), 50.

contemplation, Ignatius makes Jesus Christ his sole object, for, as he writes, “Jesus Christ is, in fact, the Divine model whose example must reform and regulate our lives.”¹⁹ Again, Jesus must be the focus of contemplation because, “as the life of our Savior is the very perfection of holiness, it follows that the more faithfully we imitate Him, the more perfect our lives will be.”²⁰

This emphasis on the contemplation of Jesus as the central means to holiness brings us to our final point, for it is here that we can see the ways in which Ignatius’ vision makes tenable the radical claims of Pieper. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius asserts that all true contemplation begins and ends with Jesus, the hermeneutical key for each individual seeking to discern what is good in life. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life—that is, the only one who can save human beings from sin on earth and hell for eternity. This reference point, the orienting person of Jesus, is lacking in Pieper’s contemplative vision; however, once Jesus placed at the center of his spirituality, Pieper’s insistence that all things are worthy of contemplation is found to be entirely warranted. Since Christ is the image of the Father, and therefore the greatest and clearest theophany possible on earth, reference to Jesus Christ makes discernment between good and evil possible. Therefore, though not *all things in this world* are good, by beholding Jesus and seeing His works and hearing His words, contemplation of the truth *in all things* is made possible.

Finally, I want to finish with an additional thought that will be left unexplored here, but is perhaps worth our attention going forward. I believe that Ignatius’ emphasis on the central role of Jesus in contemplation allows us to push Pieper’s claim of the Truth in All Things to a further extent than Pieper ever proposed. I would like to suggest that, when taken in light of the Incarnation, Cross, and Resurrection, even the humblest, ugliest, and most wretchedly deformed

¹⁹ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 107.

²⁰ Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 107.

aspects of creation become a proper object of contemplation. Jesus looked upon fallen humanity and elected to obey the Father in offering Himself, descending even unto death in order to restore human beings to a right relationship with Him. Therefore, through His example of condescension, His humble self-emptying at the incarnation and death on the cross, Jesus calls us to look even into the darkest elements of our own lives and the world, in order that we might be moved to imitate Him in offering ourselves as living sacrifices—which is, perhaps, the proper definition of what it means to live in “loving acceptance.”

Bibliography

- Cuddeback, Matthew. “Josef Pieper on the Truth of All Things and the World’s True Face.” In *A Cosmopolitan Hermit*, edited by Bernard N. Schumacher, 228-250. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2009.
- Ignatius of Loyola, Saint. *Manresa, or, The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: for General Use*. London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, Ltd.
- Pieper, Josef. *Happiness and Contemplation*. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston. South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998.
- Pieper, Josef. *Only the Lover Sings*. Translated by Lothar Krauth. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990.
- Schumacher, Bernard N. “A Cosmopolitan Hermit: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Josef Pieper.” In *A Cosmopolitan Hermit*, edited by Bernard N. Schumacher, 1-23. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2009.