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Learning from Pieper: On Being Lutheran in This Time and Place

Gilbert Meilaender

I find it rather interesting to reflect upon the fact that I have been invited to be the banquet speaker at a symposium on “things indifferent.”¹ It is rather comforting really, for it doesn’t raise the standard too high. Whether I am the right person for the occasion is hard to say, however. I am afraid that I have made a career out of being, on the one hand, just a bit indifferent to things other people are prepared to fight about and, on the other hand, almost belligerent (were I not so gentle a soul) on matters about which others are reluctant to say “thus saith the Lord.”

When President Wenthe called to invite me to talk at this banquet, he gave me a very general—not to say vague—assignment: I did not, fortunately, have to talk about Article X of the Formula of Concord. Rather, he wanted me, in some way or other, to think and talk about what it means to be a Lutheran in our time and place, about what issues ought to be engaging our attention now. As I reflected on that invitation and assignment, it occurred to me that what I really wanted to say might be summarized in a way that does relate to Article X, but with a certain twist. One might say that Article X is about discernment—about learning to discern what is really important, what really counts, not anywhere and everywhere, but in a particular time and place. It is about learning where to draw lines and where not to. And I think I have learned something during all these years toiling in the wilderness of academia, and it will, in a sense, be the theme that draws together my scattered reflections tonight. What I have learned is that you have to take your friends where you can find them, and that, in our time and place, they will not all be found in any single ecclesial communion.

¹Because this paper was delivered as a “talk” at a banquet dinner, I have retained its relatively informal style and have not provided footnotes for citations.

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In order to make this theme appear slightly more respectable for an audience such as this one, however, I have decided to title my talk "Learning from Pieper." For each of the three parts of the talk, I shall begin with a passage from Pieper — on the basis of which I will then, as it were, free associate and do a little reflecting of my own.

I.

In every conceivable case love signifies much the same as approval. . . . It is a way of turning to him or it and saying, 'It's good that you exist; it's good that you are in this world!' . . . Human love, therefore, is by its nature and must inevitably be always an imitation and a kind of repetition of this perfected and . . . *creative* love of God.

In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* ["The Gospel of Life"], Pope John Paul II wrote of what he called a "culture of death" manifesting itself especially in advanced western societies such as ours. If we ask what issues ought to be engaging our attention today, what Lutherans ought to be worrying about, this is a good place to start. We ought, the Pope writes, to be "fully aware that we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the 'culture of death' and the 'culture of life.'" We are not asked whether we wish to face this "dramatic clash"; we simply find ourselves in the midst of the conflict. I make reference here not only to abortion, assisted suicide, and euthanasia, but also to a wider range of related questions: the whole paraphernalia of prenatal screening (right down even to the routinely recommended sonogram), which is altering our understanding of the relation of mother and child; decisions about withholding treatment from those whose "quality of life" is diminished; even the approach to organ transplantation that is beginning to train us to think of human beings simply as collections of body parts. In countless ways, we are having trouble saying to others who share our human nature, "It's good that you exist."

Behind all these issues lies the persistent *leitmotif* of modernity: the human will as abstractly creative, as the source of all value and meaning; and, correspondingly, of the natural

world as inert and without order until that human will, in godlike fashion, gives it meaning. Indeed, in the modern period many thinkers have celebrated the limitless creativity of humankind. To all other creatures God has set specific tasks and limits, but the task of man is simply to create himself. We had to wait several centuries, of course, for our own century now moving toward its close, to acquire the biological insight and skill needed to apply this vision directly and powerfully to human life itself. But when we do apply it, the loving affirmation of others that we offer is no longer a recognition of the dignity that is simply theirs as children of God; it is, rather, a value that we first create and only then recognize. Anyone who does not think that this is increasingly the case in our world has simply not been paying attention.

We stand, therefore, not only on the brink of a new millennium but at the end of the long attempt to Christianize European societies. The theme sounded by *Evangelium Vitae* is essentially that articulated near the beginning of the second century of the Christian era by the Didache, which begins: "There are two paths to follow: one is life and the other is death. There is a profound difference between the two." The long, slow process of imprinting "the way of life" upon our societies, a process that took centuries, has now begun to turn back upon itself. Christians taught us to esteem highly the individual will that must either turn in love to God, the source of life, or back upon itself and certain death. That very Christian estimation of the will, taken still further, has now become a human will without limit, that creates value or denies it as if by divine fiat—no longer a will that, as Pieper put it, understands itself as an imitation or a repetition of the creative love of God.

This is where we stand right now, where the people in your congregations stand, whether they think about it or not. How well positioned are we to think and teach about such matters of practical reason? Not very well, I sometimes fear, and one of the reasons, strangely enough, may be indirectly related to what we have made of the concerns of Article X. The clash between the way of life and the way of death compels us to think about many questions on which the Bible is silent or to which it speaks

only obliquely, and we are often very reluctant to do that. Garrison Keillor captures our weakness quite nicely in his "Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra." "Suppose," he says, "that you, a young Lutheran, find yourself to have musical talent—not just more than the other people in your family, but real talent. You ought to ask yourself, 'Which instrument should a Lutheran play? If our Lord had played a musical instrument, which one would he have played—assuming he was a Lutheran?'"

The approach is low key, but the point is serious. If we have trained ourselves to suppose that Christian teaching is nothing more than simple and direct application of Bible passages—without the intervening mediation of theological and moral reflection—we may well conclude that the clash between these two ways is something about which we can say very little. We will have to be silent about some of the most crucial and defining features of our epoch, lest we should say more than we ought without a clear and simple biblical directive. Thus, as Oliver O'Donovan puts it in his recent and very important book, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, "those who want never to be out of date will never interpret their today; they will wait until they can read about it in the newspapers. But those whose business lies with practical reason cannot take their place among what P. T. Forsyth called 'bystanders of history.'"

A decision lies before us. We can concentrate our attention chiefly on those questions the Bible addresses clearly, or we at least think it addresses clearly—but at the risk of becoming bystanders of history. Or we can take a different sort of risk—speaking not just in the voice of individual opinion, but on behalf of the church, to questions the Bible addresses less clearly—but which may be the more important questions demanding the church's attention. Now, of course, one might say that there is no need to make a choice here. Let us just address all questions. But then we will have to do it pretty much on our own, without the help of many other Christians who might sharpen our vision and deepen our understanding.

We will not be taking our friends – on these matters of crucial human import – where we can find them.

I can only testify to you that that has not worked very well for me. In order to think about the sorts of questions I mentioned earlier – in order to reflect upon how we ought to live, how we ought to say “it’s good that you exist” to fetuses, the sick and dying, the mentally infirm, the disabled – I have had to learn from and make common cause with Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Jews, those whose religion is largely a kind of natural piety, and even one Methodist, to whom my debts are incalculable.

On the wide range of issues that practical reason addresses, I am almost compelled to suggest that if the Pope did not exist we would have to invent him. For – and think how different this is from the situation that faced Lutherans in the sixteenth century – we are essentially parasitic upon his political clout. Remember, for example, the publicity surrounding, first, the United Nation’s 1994 Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (when an abortion-rights agenda advocated by the United States delegation shoved all other population and development issues into the background), and, second, the United Nations 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (in which issues of sexuality and reproduction, and the very meaning of motherhood and family, were hotly debated). Suppose I were to ask, “Who represented *our* interests on these occasions?” The best answer, I think, is: “The Holy Father.”

We need, in short, to develop a certain sense of what counts, of where our energies ought to be directed at a given time and place – not to suppose that we stand where Lutherans stood fifty, or even twenty-five, years ago. I have never forgotten reading an account of the rebuke issued by Hans Asmussen to Werner Elert, who was a great Lutheran proponent of the law/gospel distinction and, in many respects, a very conservative Lutheran theologian. Elert flirted with the German Christians from a distance, but he also offered a theologically serious critique of the Barmen Declaration, which had been drafted mostly by Karl Barth as the Confessing Church’s

statement of opposition to the Nazi regime's attempt to take over the churches. Asmussen responded to Elert: "Excuse me, Herr Professor, for bringing to your attention the latest news. For the last year thousands of pastors have had their existence as Christian preachers threatened, thousands of congregations have had their existence as Christian communities threatened. We find ourselves in a raging sea after a shipwreck. A seaworthy ship [the Confessing Church] is near by, ready to rescue the shipwrecked. Believe me, those who have been shipwrecked will not jump into the water again, because an engineer on the land has shown that in his opinion our ship's mast is slightly askew." That is, Elert lacked a sense of what counted at the time and place in which he found himself. We need such a sense — need to learn who our friends are and where to direct our energies today — if we are really to be of service to both church and world.

II.

Do we not find ourselves somewhat caught in the modern world of work — faced with the increasing politicalization of the academic realm and the ominous shrinking of inner and outer opportunities for public discourse, and especially for genuine debate? Where shall we seek the "free area" in which alone *theoria* can thrive? . . . We begin to understand that Plato's Academy had been a *thiasos*, a religious association assembling for regular sacrificial worship. Does this have any bearing on our time?

This passage, in context, comes from Pieper's discussion of the boundaries that marked the medieval period at either end. He suggests that we might place that period's beginning at the time when Cassiodorus — the younger contemporary of Boethius — decided that philosophy could not really be done in the court of the German ruler Theodoric and fled his official position at the court to found a monastery. And, Pieper notes, "for almost a thousand years to come Boethius remained the last 'layman' in the history of European philosophy." We might, at least symbolically, place the end of this period at the moment when William of Ockham reversed the direction of Cassiodorus'

flight and left the cloister for the German imperial court. Whereupon philosophy again took up its residence in the world. With that in mind, Pieper suggests, we have to ask how hospitable the world in our time has become to serious philosophical work—or whether, in fact, it might now be that the church will become the only place in which genuinely free discussion and argument can survive, as eastern Europeans learned during the decades of Soviet domination.

That is, I believe, something to which we might aspire and through which we might serve our world. Freed by our baptism from what Augustine would have called “domination by the lust for domination,” we can begin to think seriously about hard questions—not just safe questions. With our identity established by our baptism, we should be set free at least to some degree from the identity politics that positively engulfs the modern academy and often renders genuine discussion impossible. We ought to be able to have the kind of free-wheeling discussion available only to those who know that certain things are given.

Consider where things now stand in the relation between church and society. The church first flourished in a society that was hardly hospitable to its presence. The result of that flourishing was Christendom—that is, Western civilization’s attempt to let the triumph of Christ over the powers of evil actually begin to infiltrate the structure of society. It was a noble attempt, whatever its dangers and failings. Among those failings, of course, were some that threatened the very existence of Lutherans in the sixteenth century. The background for Article X of the Formula of Concord was political controversy between Lutherans and Catholics and, then, between different “brands” of Lutherans. How much compromise, they asked themselves, is permissible under threat of persecution from others who are fellow Christians but, yet, political enemies?

Our situation is very different today. We find ourselves in a world that once again is not all that hospitable—in public—to the faith Christians share, unless that faith remains resolutely private. Indeed, Christians may gradually learn what it was like to be Jews in Christian Europe. In such circumstances we must

take our friends where we can find them. The threat does not come from any other Christian ecclesial communion. It comes from the spirit of modernity – which, of course, penetrates and influences every ecclesial communion, including our own. In the face of such circumstances, the church must be or become the place where the hard theological and philosophical questions are again taken up.

As many of you know, I have written a good bit over the years for the magazine *First Things*. It has no party line, but its contributors tend to be concerned about classical Christian belief and the way that belief relates to the whole of life. Indeed, its contributors tend to have such concerns even when they are Jewish, for they see better than we how, as I said before, Christians may come to learn what it meant to be Jews in medieval Europe. And I have been regularly amazed, when I write for *First Things*, at the responses I get from all sorts of people. They are people who care deeply about the faith, but they are scattered across many different ecclesial communions. I have concluded that people are eager to talk and think about important questions within the context of shared commitment to classical Christian belief. Indeed, they thirst for such opportunities. They sense that our situation has changed drastically in just the last quarter century. They are not devoted so much to old battles, because they sense that more important challenges lie before Christians now. And they are looking for help.

We have to ask ourselves whether we have served them well, whether we have provided our pastors with the kind of education that prepares them to begin to speak to that thirst for Christian understanding, whether we are in a position to form both the heart and the mind of those who seek our help. Dorothy Sayers once wrote that “the dogma is the drama.” It is, she wrote, “the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.”

Are we communicating that—the sheer intellectual astonishment and audacity of Christian belief? The difference it makes? Where among us are the magazines and the journals in which the most fundamental Christian beliefs are taken up and rethought in relation to our time and place? Or do we simply presume that all those matters are clear and then devote our energy to the practical tasks of ministry or church growth? All around us there are, I think, signs of a genuine thirst for rearticulation of the most basic—and most supernatural—beliefs of the church. There is a desire for a “space” in which to carry on that discussion freely, imaginatively, and openly. We should be asking ourselves how we may contribute to that effort that is underway among many Christians, for it is what we really need just now.

To undertake such a task, to provide the space in which such Christian thinking can go on, will call for the virtue of patience. We will need to learn sometimes to say “I don’t know.” I can still remember the tensions of my years as a seminary student in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Those were not altogether pleasant times to be at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. And I remember how, whenever a difficult question arose, I would take myself off to the library to try to find an answer. That wasn’t all bad. I learned a lot. But in retrospect I realized that I also, rather unwittingly, sometimes felt that if I failed to figure out an answer the church might not survive. It took me a few more years—and some help from that one Methodist—to learn sometimes to say “I don’t know” in the confidence that the church would somehow manage to carry on. The task before us is simply this: to learn to offer to God the whole of our intellect with all its powers, yet not to suppose that the church is built upon that intellect—which task calls for and demands the virtue of patience. Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* is unfinished—all those volumes, but never completed. St. Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* is unfinished—in his case, at least according to the stories, by choice. In an age where classical theological reflection has often given way to identity politics on the one hand and practical tasks on the other, we have an opportunity to provide something in very scarce supply—a space for true theological conversation. Understand—if we don’t, the church

will survive. Someone else will do it. But wouldn't it be nice if we could?

In order to do it, however, we will have to learn to take our friends where we can find them. Not too long ago I wrote an article for *The Journal of Religious Ethics* analyzing certain themes in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* ["The Splendor of Truth"], an encyclical that treats some fundamental themes in moral theology. In that article I did not shrink from characterizing the encyclical's position as "semi-Pelagian" and as failing really to understand the place of the *sola fide* in the moral life. And having made those claims and supported them as best I could, I wrote a closing paragraph that went this way:

If *Veritatis Splendor* requires such correction, it is at least also true that it speaks a theological language serious enough to invite such a response. One is—or I, at least, am—hard pressed to imagine an equally serious statement on the nature of theological ethics issuing at this time from any major Protestant body. Those who wish to keep alive the questions of the Reformation and the centrality of the language of faith in our vision of the Christian life must therefore be thankful for *Veritatis Splendor*. Ironical as such a conclusion to this essay may seem, it accurately reflects the state of "theological existence today."

If we think hard about the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and if we think honestly about what we as Lutherans have to contribute to the wellbeing of both church and society, this is, I think, something like the tone we need to learn to adopt. Learning it will mean breaking ourselves of some very old habits grounded in a quite different time and place—just as Cassiodorus once did, and William of Ockham did centuries later. It means learning to rethink who are our friends and who our enemies. I do not know whether "we" are up to it. We have come close to creating a generation fearful of really serious theological conversation. Indeed, I sometimes think that just as the Israelites who had been marked by the experience of slavery in Egypt had to die before "Israel" was ready to take possession of the land of promise, just as the controversies among Lutherans in the sixteenth century could be resolved only when

new leaders replaced Melanchthon and Flacius who were so marked by the old battles, so perhaps only the generation that succeeds my own will be able to take stock — with a certain sense of freedom — of where we Lutherans really find ourselves today, and who are our friends and who our enemies. Perhaps, though, even we are not entirely ruined, and even we can make a beginning.

III.

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 knowing of truth to the condition of purity. Thomas says that unchastity's first-born daughter is blindness of the spirit. 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 resoluteness of spirit and the ability of the psyche to listen in silent attention to the language of reality.

This leads me, finally, to some brief reflections on the kind of pastors we need in this time and place if we are to help the people in our congregations with the kinds of questions I have noted and if we are to find a worthwhile role to play within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. What Pieper suggests that we need is, in a word, chastity. Not because we have tunnel vision and can think about nothing but sexual morality, but because without chastity we must suffer "blindness of the spirit," an inability "to listen in silent attention to the language of reality."

What does this mean? It means that the unchaste man wants to grab what is not his. He wants for himself what is another's or cannot rightly be his. He does not see — because he *will* not see — that what he wants *is* not his. He understands many things, of course — his own desire for happiness, the importance of fulfillment and satisfaction in human life, the truth that even great sinners can be forgiven and that there is no human being

who is not accurately described as simply a justified sinner. But all of these understandings—true enough in themselves—become only so many ploys in a dishonorable and often pitiable pursuit of self-interest. Once we understand this larger meaning of chastity, that it is part of the more general virtue of temperance, we will see that this tendency to grab what is not ours, to be unjust, can manifest itself also in many contexts other than sexuality—in the tendency to manipulate people in a congregation, to set them against each other so that they will not be against us; in the tendency to manipulate the truth in an attempt to retain control of parishioners, which manipulation may seem easier than the hard intellectual labor needed to converse with them; in the tendency to cloak whatever our goals may be in a language like that of “evangelism,” secure in the knowledge that no one will be willing to criticize such an unquestioned good.

If we pastors are to learn chastity once again, we will have to be willing to do what all serious practical reason requires—to hold others to a standard higher than we ourselves have sometimes met, higher than our structures of discipline have sometimes managed in the recent past. We will need district presidents and bishops who sound more like Dr. Laura than like someone who has been reading the latest book on the latest approach to pastoral counseling. And, of course, if we are really to be serious about such discipline, we will need, as I have been suggesting all night long, a finely honed sense of what really counts—lest an ugly clericalism should reassert itself more often than it already does, and we should decide to be unyielding on all the wrong issues.

What, then, should Lutherans be thinking about and trying to do here and now in order to serve both church and world? Well, in case I have not been clear enough, let me put it again quite directly. First, we should begin to understand how Christian vision on essential questions about the meaning of our humanity is being marginalized in our society, and we should consider the possibility that the development of common Christian vision on these questions—a vision based neither on mere citation of the biblical witness nor on the distinction

between law and gospel, but on the structure of created reality—may be more important than some other matters about which we are accustomed to debate. Second, we should take seriously the need for a place—and a space—in which those who care about classical Christian commitments can explore in fresh ways the dogma that is itself the drama at the heart of the faith. Third, we will not develop a pastorate that can see the truth in these matters or teach it effectively unless we refuse to let our own vision be shaped by the grasping, manipulative unchastity of spirit that asserts the self rather than seeks the truth.

All this, my friends, under the admittedly somewhat elastic rubric of “Learning from Pieper.” I have deliberately chosen as my starting points some passages from Pieper that you may not have read and that may have seemed unfamiliar. And, indeed, a part of what we really need right now is to range more widely in our reading and discussion, to become more truly catholic in our theological vision. I have not therefore taken up the *crux theologorum*, the *ichtheologie*, or the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*—theologically important as these questions are, and essentially correct on them as I believe Franz Pieper to have been. I have, instead, sought to think with you about some other passages on other matters from an other Pieper—Josef Pieper, a wonderfully learned and instructive German Catholic philosopher of our century, whose books I commend to you this evening.