

# A Brief Philosophy of Feasting

In one of my favorite books – *In Tune With the World: A Theory of Festivity* – German philosopher Josef Pieper takes up the question: What is a feast?

On this, Thanksgiving Day, it seems worth looking at his answer...

Pieper acknowledges that feasts are typically associated with “having a good time.” And what is a “good time”? According to Pieper, one cannot answer this question without first determining what is the overall good for man, i.e., the purpose of his life.

According to the Western tradition (both Hellenistic and Christian), the ultimate purpose/good of man was the “beatific vision” – the eternal vision and contemplation of the divine. As it reads in Plato’s *Symposium*, “This is that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of divine beauty; this makes man immortal.”

“From this it follows,” concludes Pieper, “that the concept of festivity is inconceivable without an element of contemplation.” In other words, there should be some time set aside on a feast day for reflection upon the object of the feast and its relation to man’s ultimate purpose. As Pieper reminds us, “Bustle does not make a festival; on the contrary, it can spoil one.”

Second, Pieper holds that a feast day involves the renunciation of profit from one’s labor, a “day off”:

*“A definite span of usable time is made, as the ancient Romans understood it, ‘the exclusive property of the gods.’ As the animal for sacrifice was taken from the herd, so a piece of available time was expressly withdrawn from utility.”*

The obverse of this second characteristic of a feast, then, is that “the totalitarian laboring society must of necessity be an altogether unfeastive society.”

Third, Pieper says that a feast is marked by a certain amount of “excess”:

*“A festival is essentially a phenomenon of wealth; not, to be sure, the wealth of money, but of existential richness. Absence of calculation, in fact lavishness, is one of its elements.”*

Feasting involves indulging in a luxuriance that does not similarly mark one's everyday routine. Of course, as Pieper warns, the excess that is proper to a feast can be transgressed when one participates in a "senseless and excessive waste of the yield of one's work, to an extravagance that violates all rationality." (Think of the debt some take on for the sake of their wedding receptions.)

To conclude, Pieper claims that true feasting involves contemplation, a rest from work, and excess. Happy Thanksgiving. May your feasting today be marked by these same characteristics.

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