



Address at Morning Prayers, Memorial Church, Harvard University, 1997.

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Pride

Responsive reading: Psalm 139

Lesson from Scripture: Proverbs 16:18-23

Even when appearing under my own name, I am often guilty unwillingly of misadvertising: those not already acquainted with me see the letters J-A-N in the first name and expect a woman rather than a man—or they see the whole name and are disappointed to encounter an American rather than a Pole. Considerably different have been the few occasions when I have stepped in to impersonate colleagues who have fallen ill by reading their papers for them. But today is the first time I have taken the place of a bishop. This happenstance has caused me to collect my thoughts on the topic of PRIDE.

In my opinion, pride is one of the most complicated failings to which human beings may succumb. In many quarters it is chic to worry more about overcoming one of the opposites to pride—what we could call insecurity or lack of confidence—and fostering self-esteem. In such cases what the well-intentioned want is to instill pride, that is, the hope of maintaining or even increasing self-worth that is a major component in proper behavior. Within our own privileged square, controlling the negative aspects of pride may seem to be a more pressing issue. Folks outside our fences of brick and iron may be overready to find folks inside our community self-centered and arrogant...but they are right in sensing that the justified satisfaction we take collectively and individually in our achievements sometimes leads us to a pride that entails special dangers.

Pride in the form of self-glorification and boasting is easily recognized and dealt with, even when it masks as a false modesty that is meant first and foremost to elicit praise. Almost all of us know, either at the moment itself or at the latest a short time afterward, when we are puffing up ourselves or the dear ones with whom we are affiliated. Much harder to spot and eradicate is presumption: an excess of confidence, a sense of invulnerability to what some would call error and others sin, a conviction that we can handle everything and that we do not have human limits.

A moment ago I talked about a salutatory sort of pride, in the form of self-esteem. I would like to take a risk by saying that even the unhealthy brands of pride—the boasting and especially the presumption—have their benefits. By making this statement I am not questioning the basic wisdom that holds pride to be the breeding ground of all sin. Rather, I am suggesting that the mistakes which come of pride are essential to our self-understanding as human beings—

and that such self-understanding is itself a prerequisite in most people to attaining the ability to empathize that leads to many of the most generous and compassionate acts we can ever hope to witness. I would not wish anyone to fall from pride—but I think that a little stumbling now and then reminds us to keep our eyes sometimes on the ground and on the other mortals around us and not just always on the stars.