COMMENTS

The Essential Guardini

George A. Panichas

Romano Guardini is sometimes referred to as a “Philosopher of the Christian World” whose lifelong task was that of “proclaiming the sacred in a modern world.” A world-famous Roman Catholic thinker and a prolific writer who was born in Verona, Italy, in 1885, he lived and studied in Germany from the age of one year old, eventually concentrating on theological studies with an abiding interest in liturgy. Ordained a priest in 1910, he held various pastoral positions, interrupted by military service as a hospital orderly during the years 1916-1918. Subsequently he taught philosophy and theology at the University of Bonn, the University of Berlin, the University of Tübingen, and the University of Munich. By the time of his death in 1968 at the age of 83, he had written at least 60 books and 100 articles.

The editor of The Essential Guardini (1997), Heinz R. Kuehn, first came to know Guardini in the fall of 1938, and later, after World War II, studied under him at Tübingen; in especial, he pays warm tribute to his teacher’s enduring legacy as “a Renaissance man, a precursor of Vatican II, a lighthouse in a darkening world, a prophet of things to come, a humanistic scholar in the best sense of the word.” The prophetic dimension of Guardini’s achievement, Kuehn stresses, served as “a determining factor in the selection of the texts in this anthology.” He also stresses that in compiling this book for “Liturgy Training Publications” (Archdiocese of Chicago), with the special aim of “providing materials that assist parishes, institutions, and households in the preparation, celebration and expression of liturgy in Christian life,” he decided to include selections from Guardini’s books “devoted to a critique and analysis of the modern age in all its aspects” so as to illustrate the theologian’s “truly cosmic view of Catholicism and life’s realities.” In this respect, this anthology rightly proposes to delineate Guardini’s contribution as an intellectual, cultural, and spiritual guide in our time. Guardini’s meditations on “the spirit of the liturgy” are here appropriately joined to Guardini’s thoughts on “the end of the modern world” and on “freedom, grace, and destiny.”

Admittedly, Guardini is now a neglected religious thinker. He is not given an entry in The Encyclopedia of Religion (1987), or in The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (1997), and only a brief one in The New Catholic Encyclopedia (2003). Nor is it ever fully acknowledged that it was the Henry Regnery Company of

George A. Panichas is Editor of Modern Age: A Quarterly Review. His new edition of Dostoevsky’s Spiritual Art was published by Transaction Publishers last year.
Chicago that helped to introduce Guardini’s German writings in English translation, beginning with the publication of *The Lord*, in 1954, *Power and Responsibility*, in 1961, and *The Virtues*, in 1967, for a total of nine titles. Henry Regnery’s heroic pioneering effort in behalf of serious European and American authors has yet to be accepted in academic circles dominated by liberal, Marxianst, and now postmodernist ideologues.

ISI Books, Wilmington, Delaware, performed a valuable service in 1998 with the reissuing, in one combined volume, of the 1956 Sheed and Ward edition of *The End of the Modern World* and the 1961 Regnery edition of *Power and Responsibility*. The inclusion of Professor Frederick Wilhelmsen’s original introduction to the first title is especially apropos for it contains Wilhelmsen’s typically illuminating thoughts as embodied in these two concluding sentences: “Guardini has dispelled the fog of secularization; he has cleared the air…. He offers us Faith, neither in man nor in history, but in God alone and in His Providence.” Wilhelmsen’s words cogently summarize Guardini’s significance as an extraordinary commentator on the crisis of modernity in the context of the “search for orientation” and “a course of action for the New Age.”

One who reads Wilhelmsen’s earlier remarks, along with Kuehn’s more recent comments on Guardini’s special significance for “a generation trying to come to terms with the Second World War and its consequences,” will gain a more complete impression not only of Guardini’s influential ideas but also his high place in the intellectual and historical milieu of the twentieth century, commensurate with that of notable religious thinkers like the Russian Orthodox philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev (1874-1948), the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968), and the English “metahistorian” Christopher Dawson (1889-1970).

It should not go unnoticed that Kuehn recalls with appreciation his first personal encounter with Guardini in the fall of 1938 at the Student’s Chapel, Saint Benedict, in Berlin, Charlottenburg, where the latter customarily celebrated the Sunday Mass. Kuehn speaks of this encounter with deep feeling, as he goes on to identify what exactly drew him and the small congregation to Guardini’s Mass, and to the sanctity that permeated it. “His mere appearance,” Kuehn remembers decades later, “radiated something for which I have no better word than luminous; in his presence one fell silent and became all attention. With him on the altar, the sacred table became the center of the universe.” Kuehn singles out the memorable fact that “the impact of the sacred action was all the more profound because Guardini celebrated the Mass versus populum—facing the people.” Several paragraphs later, when recounting what Guardini mainly sought to do in the Saint Benedict Chapel, “to make the truth glow,” Kuehn cites him as a forerunner of Vatican Council II, 1962-1965, in short, as a “spiritual liberator,” as one writer describes Guardini’s role.

Towards the end of his life Guardini was offered the cardinal’s hat, which he refused, according to Kuehn. His precursory status in the history of Vatican II has been variously commented on with approval by Kuehn and others; his death in 1968, however, doubtlessly curtailed his potential position among pre- and post-Vatican II reformers, and in any case made it impossible to assert any misgivings he may have even had regarding the “neo-modernist” results of the Council. It was a vexed and aged philosopher and man of letters, Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), in his book *The Peasant of the Garonne* (1966; 1968), who warned against the aberrations of the “new theology threatening the Church’s traditional spirituality and doctrine,” giving birth to the “temporaliz-
ation of Christianity.” Certainly, Guardini’s pre-Vatican II proclivities should be considered side-by-side with Maritain’s post-Conciliar demurrals regarding “demythicizing” practices affecting “the Church, Bride and mystical body.”

Unfortunately, Kuehn chooses not to assess Guardini’s role in “paving the way for Vatican II,” and this failure, from the standpoint of evaluative interpretation, constricts a reader’s sharper understanding of Guardini as both a Catholic writer and a “candid Monsignor.” Here, then, we have an example of how an anthologist can shortchange his readers. That Kuehn fails, also, to include any selections from Guardini’s probing study on Dostoevsky, *Religiöse Gestalten in Dostojewskijs Werk* (1951), several chapters of which appeared in English translation in the American journal *Cross Currents* in 1952 and 1956, and also from *The Virtues* (1963, 1967), on “forms of moral life,” adds to one’s disappointment, especially when an editor sets out to present “the essential Guardini” to a new generation of readers. Indeed, the book ultimately ends up as more of a primer than a full-scale anthology, and thus it comes up short of helping to explain and clarify, for example, why Guardini received in 1962 the Erasmus Award of the European Foundation of Culture, which had been given to philosopher Karl Jaspers in 1959 and to painter Marc Chagall in 1960. The point here is that the work of Erasmus, “prince of humanists,” has in Guardini an intellectual and religious continuator for reasons that are worthwhile validating.

Despite its unevenness and thinness, *The Essential Guardini* puts us in contact with a religious life and mind eminently worthy of our consideration. Clearly, Guardini continues to speak words of insight and wisdom—speaks to our condition; if this “anthology” does nothing more than reconnect us with an exemplary Christian humanist and theologian who defends spiritual truths, it has a distinct pertinence at a time in history when religious breakdown is everywhere apparent. To arrest this trend we need all the support we can muster. “The problems which face us today are so gigantic that we must reach for a deeper hold,” Guardini wrote over fifty years ago, and his words are even more applicable to our postmodern situation. In its whole and in its parts, *The Essential Guardini* provides us with a useful picture of the modern age as it developed and why it was coming to an end with the arrival of a “non-human humanity.” Guardini’s examination of the process of drifting and shifting in religious values and truths, and of the awesome power and effects of social engineering, helps us to perceive how “the rationality of science and functionalism of technology” have gradually pushed aside ethical norms and the “metaphysical worth” of man and nature.

What Guardini sees beyond modernism is characterized by sagacity, a quality that endows his words with integral truth and renders his testimony genuine in its concern. “What will count,” he declares, “will be not details or elaborations, but fundamentals; dignity or slavery; growth or declines; truth or lie; the mind or the passions.” His cogitations on the world, present and future, are not mere rhetoric but anxious concerns that, in turn, lead to a profound discernment regarding the destiny of mankind in a world that scorns distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, nature and spirit, impiety and piety, denial and affirmation—in short, between the sacred and the profane. What Guardini discloses most of all to his readers and auditors is the constant need for spiritual effort to redeem the time from the jaws of nature, person-
ality, and culture, a dissonant triad that has shaped not only modern man, in his rootlessness, but also the new Mass Man, in his ignominy. “Things lose their transparency,” Guardini writes, “becoming calculable forms with specific economic, hygienic and aesthetic values.” History itself, he declares, is cut off from Providence and becomes “a mere string of empirical processes.”

Though Guardini is deeply troubled by the forces, systems, and ideas in “unbroken ascendancy” in the modern era, especially as manifested in the new concepts and application of power, he does not allow feelings of despair to cloud his vision or shake his faith. Repeatedly he counsels the “possibilities of action” and the need for *metanoia* as a form of conversion and a reappraisal of our view of life in a common search for a “genuine realism” and “a contemplative attitude.” To be sure, Guardini has trenchant insights into a destructive gnostic spirit that has not only engulfed modern existence, but also secularized religious principles to the point that an authentic affirmation of Christian witness is steadily being annexed by a new moral order. “What is needed,” Guardini insists, “is not universal insurance but the kind of world in which human sovereignty with its greatness can express itself.” The disproportion between “what is needed” and *what is*, however, becomes even more apparent and threatening in the new millennium, so that Guardini’s “message of salvation” may be out of reach for many. Our Judeo-Christian patrimony can in fact be viewed as an endangered species, which Guardini, were he alive, would doubtlessly acknowledge.

Part 2, “Jesus Christ,” and Part 3, “The Church,” contain selected texts that can be highly praised; these parts also confirm the enormous challenge, in both the Age of Technology and the Age of the Computer, that a believer must inevitably confront in a postmodern setting in which, as Guardini candidly admits, a distaste for the Sermon on the Mount is hard to overcome: in which, above all, a life of faith and a “grammar of assent” are consigned to exile. Guardini’s inspiring and ennobling thoughts on the “Pentecost: The Consequences” must also remind even the Remnant that “the Church of the Lord” faces powerful enemies internally and externally. For one, the growing evidence of the alliance of technics and ideology, as its lordship and omnipotence spread almost unchecked throughout a pluralistic society, grimly testifies to a post-Christian hegemony difficult to resist, let alone overcome.

“What is the Church?” Guardini asks. And he answers, “It is the kingdom of God—it is the epitome of Christianity.” His reflection here is eminently confluent with “adoration” itself, the occasion for kneeling, when “things fall into true perspective. Vision sharpens. Much that troubles us rights itself,” as Guardini wondrously expresses the blessed and healing practice of adoration. To study *The Essential Guardini* a contemporary reader must be prepared to deal with what can be called *meta-reality*, the Greek prefix here signifying change of place, order, condition, or nature. The writings excerpted in this book bring us directly into the meta-reality of human existence as we enter the twenty-first century. We have far behind us at this point the epochal happenings associated with World Wars I and II; their dramatic results have heralded a radically new language of politics, religion, culture, personality, imagination, and faith. This does not mean that Guardini’s thinking is now *passé*, or that his Christian world view is unimportant. It does mean, nonetheless, that communicating with his world and thoughts—with “the idea of the holy”—is to communicate with moral and ethical norms that have been dislodged by a meta-realism and a new dogmatism that make his testi-
mony harder to comprehend and even harder to implement.

A de-divinized and desanctified language of life and faith, as it has emerged and solidified in the modern and now the postmodern world, has become a kind of superstructure in which a verb like *venerate* and a noun like *reverence* are debased words. Guardini’s thoughts on Christian faith and revelation show him at his best in his contention with the empirical process and habits of mind; steadfastly he testifies to the sacredness of humankind regardless of the demons “who rule people once they have abdicated their responsibilities.”

“When I affirm the church,” he writes, “I am at the same time affirming individual personality, and when I speak of the interior life of the Christian, I imply the life of the Christian community.” He emphasizes what too often even some religious seem to forget, “that the purity, greatness and strength of individual personality and of the church rise and fall together.” In this connection, Guardini illustrates for us the need for firm spiritual roots if we are not to be swallowed up by progressivist ideologues and advocates of terrestrial panaceas. The order of the community, he suggests, is inseparable from the order of the soul. Guardini’s enduring contribution, as this anthology demonstrates, has the salvific value of pointing out the spiritual pathways on which, as William Tyndale, the seventeenth-century biblical scholar and martyr, famously puts it, a religious seeker is able to walk surely and even know the true from the false. On these sacred pathways, as Guardini iterates, reverence for the holy is kindled.

It is fitting that Guardini’s profound reflections on “the spirit of the liturgy” and on “sacred signs” occupy the fourth and last part of *The Essential Guardini*. Here an effulgent spiritual fervor illumines the pathway to supernatural reality. “In reverencing God’s name we reverence also the holiness of our own souls” reads the concluding sentence in the anthology. These words convey the essentiality of Guardini’s legacy, steeped as it is in the virtue of reverence that challenges the blatant impiety that a secular world prescribes so fearlessly. The transcending value and challenge of his legacy, then, is that it strives to elevate the human spirit by bringing it closer to the spirit of eternity. In the end, his meditations, which defy paraphrase and adjudication, become aids to a resurgence of the religious sense.

Romano Guardini reminds us, above all, to render “to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s.” His writings help us, finally, to recognize the spiritual necessity of not being slaves of the things of the world. His testimony thus pleads with us to disentangle ourselves from the enemies of the permanent things. Surely, this is a plea that needs to be heeded until the end of time.