

**“NATURE AND CULTURE IN CATHOLIC ENVIRONMENTALISM:
ROMANO GUARDINI’S LETTERS FROM LAKE COMO”**

Today I would like to speak to you about one of the most profound modern Catholic thinkers on a wide range of questions concerning man’s relation to the natural world. Though the term “environmentalism” did not exist in the early twentieth century, I think it is fair to count Guardini’s short book of 1926, *Letters from Lake Como*, as a foundational text of a tradition of authentically Catholic “environmentalism.” Born in Italy yet raised in Germany, Guardini wrote these letters as a series of reflections inspired by his visit to his mother who had retired to her family’s ancestral home in the beautiful mountain district of Lake Como in northern Italy. In contrast to the modern industrial world of Germany, Lake Como struck Guardini as in some respects a throwback to an earlier time, a kind of pre-modern, pre-industrial Eden that had somehow escaped the ravages of modern industrial development. Still, Guardini was no naïve romantic. He recognized that industrial modernity was slowly making its presence felt even at Lake Como and used this observable contrast

between pre-industrial and industrial relations to the natural world as a way of reflecting on the proper relation of man not simply to the natural environment, but to his fellow man and to God.

Before I turn to Guardini proper, I want to say a few words about what I mean by an authentically Catholic environmentalism. To say that there is a distinctly Catholic environmentalism is not necessarily to dismiss non-Catholic environmental thought. Pope Francis has recently reminded us that good evangelists build bridges, not walls. I believe that the environmental movement presents a tremendous opportunity for evangelism in that loving concern for God’s creation offers a potentially powerful common ground uniting Catholics with non-Catholics. Still, we see challenges even at the basic definition of this common ground. What do we love? The “environment” or “God’s creation?” These terms are not interchangeable, and not neutral. Each of them contains an implicit world view with

very particular assumptions about how we relate to the natural world, each other and God.

I think Catholics concerned for God's creation have been all too willing to adopt a secular language of "environmentalism" in the spirit of building coalitions with non-Catholics. Such coalition building is good in itself, but with respect to the environment/creation, it has been a necessity due to the virtual non-existence of a distinctly Catholic movement. There is no necessary spiritual or intellectual reason for this state of affairs. The official statements of the Church touching on environmental issues over the last fifty years can be interpreted as nothing other than "green" friendly. Still, environmentalists have often been hostile to the Church. In general, environmentalists have often blamed the Book of Genesis for inspiring an exploitative attitude toward nature that really derives more from modern science than biblical theology. More specifically, environmentalists often condemn the Church's opposition to artificial birth control as criminally irresponsible and contributing to the destruction of nature

through overpopulation. In this cultural context, the bridges between Catholic and non-Catholic environmentalists have too often been one-way streets, with Catholics growing more distant from their Church as they grow closer to nature.

The danger here, moreover, is less secularism than a new kind of paganism. Despite the current anxiety over global warming, few people are drawn to the environmental movement in response to the latest findings of science.

Environmentalism has become a new kind of nature worship, often tied to old philosophies and world views rooted in non-Western cultures, be they Native American or East Asian. On this issue, I can speak from experience. I grew up in the 1960s and saw many of my older brothers and sisters drawn out of the faith by the hippie counterculture, which seemed to offer a more spiritual and natural way of living. As I came of high school and college age in the late 1970s and 1980s, I saw this attraction passed on to the youth of my generation, and I know it is still very much alive today. We all know the type of rock star who declares

himself a Buddhist and works to support the environment. The general perception in popular youth culture is that if you care about the environment, you should reject Christianity, or at the very least every organized, institutional expression of Christianity. Despite all of the official hostility to the Church among political leaders of the Western world, the Church still appears to many young people as part of the establishment, and to be young is to rebel against the establishment.

Well, okay, what does Romano Guardini have to say to all of this? First, a little biographical background. Although he came of age nearly a hundred years ago, he is in some sense our contemporary in that he grew up in a culture that was, like our own, hostile to the Church. Born in 1885 in Verona, Italy, Guardini soon moved with his family to the city of Mainz, in Germany where his father went in search of employment. His parents were faithful, if not excessively devout Catholics who raised Guardini with a love for the great classics of European humanism, ranging from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to Goethe's *Faust*. By the early twentieth century, however, science

had eclipsed literary humanism as the great achievement of European civilization. Indeed, for the enlightened of that age, modern science had rendered traditional Christianity obsolete. Guardini tried to embrace the spirit of his age through the study of chemistry and economics. Attending the University of Munich, he noticed that many of his fellow students had abandoned their religious beliefs; this caused him to begin to question his own faith. Guardini then underwent a period of spiritual crisis that he would later compare to that of St. Augustine. He emerged from this crisis with a renewed faith, but continued to pursue his secular studies. Still, after a few months of studying economics at the University of Berlin, he felt the call to the priesthood, eventually receiving holy orders on May 28, 1910. Over the next ten years, Guardini pursued a Ph.D. that would qualify him to teach in the German university system, served two years of service as a hospital orderly for the German army during World War I, and held various parish assignments.

It was Guardini's parish work, rather than his academic study, that led most directly to

his writing his *Letters from Lake Como*. The letters had originally appeared in the journal *Schidgenossen*, the house organ for Quickborn, the national Catholic youth association of Germany. Guardini had been chaplain to the diocesan youth group in Mainz since the beginning of his parish assignments in 1915. Quickborn means “wellspring of life,” and I think that this gives you some sense of the broad vision of Catholic youth groups at the time. When I was growing up, Catholic youth ministry meant pretty much sports (CYO basketball) and any activity that would keep teenagers busy and out of trouble, particularly trouble of a sexual nature. The youth organizations that swept across the Western world in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were actually in part a response to the very sort of environmental issues that we are discussing here today. Even the most enthusiastic supporters of material and scientific progress recognized that there was something profoundly unnatural and alienating about modern industrial life. Political and cultural leaders of the time felt that the distance from nature demanded by modern industrial life would somehow stunt or distort the natural development of youth.

So too, the breakup of the home economy destroyed the traditional skills and responsibilities that parents passed on to their children as part of their education to adulthood. Schools replaced parents as educators, but did little to bring students into the contact with nature deemed essential to healthy growth and development. In the English-speaking world, we see this concern addressed in the Scouting movement.

Against the Anglo-American-Protestant tendency to view nature as uninhabited wilderness, Guardini experiences the natural beauty of Lake Como as inextricably bound up with human culture. Guardini’s first letter, titled “The Question,” raises the issue of the meaning of industrialism as it has spread into a previously unindustrialized region of Italy. He frames the problem in the following way: “I saw machines invading the land that had previously been the home of culture.”¹ Significantly, he criticizes industrialism as less a corruption of pure nature than a transformation of

¹ Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 5. All future references to this work will be by page number in parentheses following the quote or paraphrase.

culture. Though Guardini constantly scolds himself for lapsing into romanticism and nostalgia, this opening observation marks his distance from the most pernicious form of environmental romanticism, the ideal of pure nature.

Nature was made for human habitation. The question is not whether to interact with nature or leave it alone, but how to live with nature in a manner that is both human and natural. Despite the inroads of industrialism, Guardini encountered in Italy the survival of authentic culture understood as a healthy relationship between man and nature:

As I walked through the valleys of Brianza, from Milan to Lake Como, luxuriant, cultivated with zealous industry, encircled by austere mountains, broad and powerful, I could not believe my eyes. Everywhere it was an inhabited land, valleys and slopes dotted with hamlets and small towns. All nature had been given a new shape by us humans. What culture means in its narrowest sense struck me with full force. The lines of the roofs merged

from different directions. They went through the small town set on the hillside or followed the windings of a valley. Integrated in many ways, they finally reached a climax in the belfry with its deep-toned bell. All these things were caught up and encircled by the well-constructed mountain masses. Culture, very lofty and yet self-sufficient, very naturally—I have no other word.

Nature, then has been reshaped, subjected to mind and spirit, yet it is perfectly simple. . . . Here nature can pass over smoothly into culture. There is nothing alien or *antithetical* to culture that must wither away if this humanity, this *urbanitas*, this art of living is to come into being. I cannot find a way to express how human this nature is and how we feel in it the possibility of being human in a totally clear but inexhaustibly profound sense.

Yet all at once, then, on the singing lines of a small town, I saw the great box of a factory. (5-6)

Guardini clearly presents the “great box of a factory” as an intrusion, a violation of sorts, but he sets this against “the singing lines of a small town,” not pristine, uninhabited nature.

The box shape of the factory contrasts with the “lines of the roofs” that merged “in different directions,” “integrated” and reaching a “climax in the belfry with its deep-toned bell.” The bell tower of a pre-industrial town would in most cases be connected to a church. Here Guardini implicitly comments on the way that the factory whistle had come to replace the church bell as society’s time keeper. Modern industrialism in this way usurped the cultural authority of the Church in ways that affected people much more directly than the criticisms leveled against the Church by skeptical, secular intellectuals.

Guardini acknowledges that many might find his critique of factories as a romantic luxury insensitive to the stark economic realities facing poor Italians with few employment options. Sympathetic to the plight of the poor, Guardini nonetheless insists on the need to make real distinctions

between what is between natural and unnatural in man’s relationship to nature. In his second letter, “Artificiality of Existence,” he contrasts an ocean liner and a sail boat. The ocean liner is a tremendous technical achievement, but the achievement lies in creating an artificial distance between man and the sea. The great boast of many cruise ships today is, somewhat paradoxically, is that you can be on a cruise and never know feel that you are at sea; the ocean is reduced to scenery and salt air. Contrast this with the physical reality of a sail boat:

The lines and proportions of the ship are still in profound harmony with the pressure of the wind and waves and the vital human measure. Those who control this ship are still very closely related to the wind and the waves.

We have here real culture—elevation above nature, yet decisive nearness to it. We are still in a vital way body, but we are shot through with mind and spirit. We master nature by the power of mind and spirit, but we ourselves remain natural. (12)

Other contrasts include the horse-drawn plow vs. the tractor, an open hearth cooking vs. a coal stove, and candle light vs. electricity. In all of these developments, Guardini sees our experience of life becoming increasingly abstract and distanced from nature.

Guardini was neither the first nor the last to make these criticisms of industrialism. This type of critique can be difficult to read for people who happen, through no fault of their own, to live at a certain remove from nature—that is, for the vast majority of people in the developed world. How are we to respond? What are we to do? Go sailing? Work on a farm? Abstain from electricity? Most of us are not in a position to practice this type of extreme renunciation. But here is where Guardini’s emphasis on culture opens up other possibilities. The unnatural relation between man and nature extends to social and economic relations among people. The factories that destroy nature also introduce an unnatural relation of production and consumption into human society. Against theorists such as Adam Smith, Guardini sees capitalism destroying “the organic interplay of supply and demand,”

creating a system of “unlimited production” in which “every art of force and cunning must be used to produce unlimited consumption” (58). This is where most of us experience the assault on nature most directly, but where the assault is perhaps least apparent. Many of us have some vague awareness that all the mass-produced junk we consume is produced in far away factories that probably harm nature, not to mention the factory workers. Yet the rage for “clean energy” and “sustainability” suggests that we miss the assault on nature right in front of our eyes, represented by the consumption on demand mentality of our society.

The post-industrial, high-tech economies of today far outpace the older industrial models in the incitement of insatiable desire—just think of the internet. We now expect everything from pornography to EWTN to be just a click away on our computer. Hardly any of the consumer goods that drive our economy are essential; most of them are positively harmful to proper human flourishing. A Catholic environmentalism could well begin with a heroic, but ultimately quite practical, detachment from

consumerism. This detachment would entail less a renunciation of desire than a discovery of true desire and true need. To use one of Guardini’s metaphors, this detachment would enable us to become true sailors of desire, learning to listen to and conform ourselves to the authentic, God-given needs present in our bodies and souls.

Ok, detachment. But what are we going to do with all that free time? Well, Guardini saw this problem even back in the 1920s. Mass production and consumption had so distorted natural human living that people were nearly unable to imagine any other way of living: the artificial had become natural. In his seventh letter, titled “The Masses,” Guardini observed: “How we long for an arcane discipline that will protect what is sacred from the marketplace, including the marketplace within” (60). Guardini could say this because he in fact spent most of his life as a priest developing such a discipline. That discipline is the liturgy. Though Guardini’s *Letters from Lake Como* offers invaluable insights into man’s relationship with creation, his first and still best known book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (1918), sought to bring man into a

closer and more authentic relation with his Creator.² Guardini’s writing on the liturgy is rich and complex, and I can only skim the surface of it here. With respect to the themes of nature and culture in *Letters from Lake Como*, I think one of the most important points of contact is Guardini’s insistence that liturgy is the expression of a communal, rather than individual, reverence for God. To be fair, Guardini thought that the average Catholic mass of the early twentieth century also failed to satisfy this desire. Hardly anyone could understand Latin and there were bilingual missals were rare. Few people received communion on a regular basis. Even the most devout tended to spend most of their time at mass reciting private prayers and devotions rather than following what the priest was doing. Following the exhortation of no less a figure than Pius X, Guardini wrote of the need to develop a more active, conscious participation of the laity in mass. Guardini dedicated much of his work with the Catholic youth organization Quickborn to introducing youth to some of the liturgical innovation being

² Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1998).

conducted in Benedictine monasteries in France and Germany.

Today, liturgy may not seem to offer much potential as a unifying cultural alternative to secular consumerism and neo-pagan environmentalism. Among many Catholics, it is a cause for indifference; among the committed few, has been an occasion for total war. The liturgical documents of the Second Vatican Council reflect many of Guardini's ideas of communal, active participation, yet Guardini was deeply troubled by what he saw taking place in the name of liturgical renewal in the middle of the 1960s. Despite his concern to foster conscious participation and emotional engagement in the liturgy, he saw in post-Vatican II liturgical reform an explosion of new forms of the spiritual individualism he had long argued against. The communal fellowship of the liturgy required a type of a surrender of independence that was anathema to the post-Vatican II generation. The Gospel truth that in order to save your life, you must first lose it, has never been an easy teaching to accept, much less understand.

Again, this is not the place to go into the particulars of Guardini's understanding of the liturgy. The immediate task before us is simply to put liturgy at the center of our cultural life. Pay attention to and observe the liturgical calendar. Pray the liturgy of the hours. Go to daily mass. I try to do all these things. They remain a great mystery to me. But whether I understand them fully or not, I am at least directing my attention toward God and the communion of saints rather than surfing the internet or pursuing some solitary communion with nature. Structured as it is according to the hours of the day and the days of the year, the liturgy is the most ecological of cultural practices. It instills an awareness of and submission to the natural rhythms of life that in the long run will do more to save the environment than any media spectacle orchestrated by would be eco-warriors.

Though I would like to hold up liturgy as an authentically Catholic ecological practice, I realize it presents certain dangers. In Guardini's time as in our own, there is always the romantic temptation to turn to liturgy, as to nature, as a retreat from the harsh realities of the modern world. I would

like to conclude with a few words of caution from Guardini himself:

We must not oppose what is new and try to preserve a beautiful world that is inevitably perishing. Nor should we try to build a new world of the creative imagination that will show none of the damage of what is actually evolving. Rather, we must transform what is coming to be. But we can do this only if we honestly say yes to it and yet with incorruptible hearts remain aware of all that is destructive and nonhuman in it. Our age has been given to us as the soil on which to stand and the task to master. (80-81)