Romano Guardini

(1885–1968)

A theologian of great popularity and influence in the years prior to the Second Vatican Council, Romano Guardini contributed to the work of liturgical reform primarily through his insights on the nature of the “liturgical act.” In his writing, teaching, and ministry of presiding at the Eucharist, Guardini championed the rise of active liturgical participation.

His interest in the liturgy as a subject of theological inquiry began in 1906 during a visit to the Benedictine abbey of Beuron. There he witnessed the contemplative practice of liturgy.

Like many other liturgical pioneers, among Guardini’s chief strengths were breadth of interest and lack of a narrow specialty. Amidst the aftermath of the Second World War and the atrocities of the Holocaust, Guardini put his mind and his pen to addressing the absurdity of innocent human suffering. Although teaching and writing occupied the majority of his time and energy, he nurtured a love of culture through visits to the theater, concert hall, and museum. Because of this, his theology was rooted in the fascination of human creativity and ingenuity.

While Guardini was awed by modernity, he was acutely aware of its threat to the liturgy. Thus, his 1918 classic Vom Geist der Liturgie (The Spirit of the Liturgy) promotes the notion that the liturgy is the Church’s objective form of prayer; it depends upon culture and the natural world for its expression, but its pattern and forms are meant to be humbly obeyed. In his words: “The requirements of the liturgy can be summed up in one word, humility. Humility by renunciation; that is to say, by the abdication of self-rule and self-sufficiency” (144).

Especially as he witnessed the triumph of secularism across Europe, Guardini taught that the liturgy contains attitudes that must be learned and practiced. In his 1957 Prayer in Practice, he defined these attitudes in terms of “collectedness,” “adoration,” “praise,” “petition,” and “thanksgiving.” He believed that the expression of “outward attitude” flowing from a right inward disposition would glean what the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy would designate as “full, conscious, and active participation.” Guardini writes: “Again and again the believer must step into the discipline of the liturgy, must take part in its grandeur and in the well-defined order of its ritual. Without this, his personal prayer may be sidetracked into the sentimental, the bizarre, or even the unnatural and diseased” (227).

Guardini was convinced that society’s growing emphasis on individualism and self-sufficiency would be a daunting obstacle for liturgical worship.

When Guardini died on October 17, 1968, the members of the Vatican’s commission for the implementation of Sacrosanctum Concilium sang the De Profundis in gratitude for this scholar’s contribution to liturgical renewal. At the time of his death, Guardini’s writings were read the world over, and his bibliography contained more than sixty books and one hundred articles. In his eulogy, Karl Rahner called Guardini a “religious visionary” who helped shift the worldview of the Church from one of “ghetto Catholicism” to “cultural Catholicism.”

Late in life, Guardini feared that liturgical reform would address the external substance of the liturgy while forgetting the internal spirit of the act. Nevertheless, Guardini, always a theological reformer, spent his life working to challenge this pessimism. For him, this meant that all Christian worshippers “must learn afresh not merely to think about symbolic forms but to see and enter into them; not, during holy ceremonies, to ask what this or that detail means, but to join in with them and thus fully partake of their meaning and contents” (Prayer in Practice, 222).

“The question is whether the wonderful opportunities now open to the liturgy will achieve their full realization; whether we shall be satisfied with just removing anomalies, taking new situations into account, giving better instruction on the meaning of ceremonies and liturgical vessels or whether we shall relearn a forgotten way of doing things and recapture lost attitudes.”

(“A Letter from Romano Guardini,” 1964)