Romano Guardini and the Liturgy

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'The Catholic liturgy is the supreme example of an objectively established rule of spiritual life.' 'The liturgy is the *lex orandi*'. These were the principles of Romano Guardini's liturgical writings, both theological and pastoral. He sought to bring the liturgy into the centre of the Christian's life, at the heart of the many other, more private, expressions of prayer and reverence. He offers an overview of Christian public prayer:

> Prayer must be simple, wholesome and powerful. It must be closely related to actuality and not afraid to call things by their names. In prayer we must find our entire life over again. On the other hand, it must be rich in ideas and powerful images, and speak a developed but restrained language; its construction must be clear and obvious to the simple man, stimulating and refreshing to the man of culture. It must be intimately blended with an erudition which is in nowise obtrusive, but which is rooted in breadth of spiritual outlook and in inward restraint of thought, volition and emotion. And that is precisely the way in which the prayer of the liturgy has been formed.[1]

According to Aidan Nichols,[2] if the principles of Romano Guardini on liturgy had been consistently applied to contemporary sensibility in the 1960s and 1970s, his influence might have stopped the post-conciliar liturgical reform from backing modernity as a winning ticket, just at the point when it became converted into postmodernism. This short sketch points to some of Guardini's insights in the liturgical area, especially on questions which have recently been taken up anew by liturgical thinkers.

Romano Guardini (1885-1968) was a German theological thinker of Italian origin. One of his most original works is entitled *The End of the Modern Age* (1950). It is sometimes described as a prophetic 'postmodern' text, written long before postmodernism came to be an issue. For him the modern era, based on the 18th century Enlightenment ambitions of totalizing knowledge and, as a result, unlimited progress at all levels, was rapidly coming to an end. It was becoming increasingly difficult to place one's trust in human reason, and a new style, a more tentative and less domineering approach to the world, would have to characterise the 'postmodern' age.

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Guardini was not a liturgical 'specialist' in the contemporary sense of the word, but he wrote widely and influentially about it. He wrote descriptively, influenced by the phenomenologists of religion such as Otto and Scheler, and he pointed to patterns of the spiritual life which emerged in the liturgy. Here the great human realities of flesh and spirit, individual and community, freedom and rigour, often opposed to one another, are given a space where they dwell in unison and enrich the interior life. In *The Spirit of the Liturgy,* written in 1923, the devotional *Before Mass*[3] and *Sacred Signs*,[4] Guardini offers both the main lines of his liturgical thinking, and some practical suggestions for applying them in individual and parish life.

The Style of the Liturgy

For Guardini the liturgy has true 'style'. The passing centuries have polished, elaborated and adapted it. An inner world of immeasurable breadth and depth has created for itself so rich and ample an expression, at one and the same time so lucid and so universal in form, that its like has never been seen. This *savoir faire* is shown in particular in the way that it can deal with human emotion, channelling and expressing it without exploitation or indulgence:

> The liturgy as a whole is not favourable to exuberance of feeling .... The liturgy is emotion, but it is emotion under the strictest control. The liturgy has perfected a masterly instrument which has made it possible for us to express our inner life in all its fullness and depth, without divulging our secrets—*secretum meum mihi.*[5]

Examples of this style are to be found in the opening prayers of Sunday Masses. Each of them is a miracle of compression, in which the depths of the spiritual life are touched upon in a couple of well balanced phrases, which manage to touch the heart of devotion without ever straying into sentimentality. An example might be the prayer for the twenty-seventh week of the year:

> Almighty, ever-living God,
> whose love surpasses all that we ask or deserve,
> open up for us the treasures of your mercy.
> Forgive us all that weighs on our conscience,
> and grant us more even than we dare to ask.[6]

It is hard to imagine anyone not identifying with this prayer, but its detached style allows each of us room to deal with the intense feelings it expresses in our own private way, without 'divulging our secrets'.

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Liturgy, not drama

The liturgy's polish and style is, of course, for the sake of the mystery, and is in turn touched and formed by it. Guardini reflects on the way that the Christian mysteries are given to us in the liturgy.

> The memorial of the Mass is celebrated not in the form of a play, but of a liturgy. The object commemorated is not imitated, but translated into symbols.[7]

The Church does not present the Sacrifice to us in dramatic terms, step by step, as may have happened in the *agapes* in the early Church, or as in Passion plays. The Mass presents the Sacrifice *sacramentally.* Bread and wine are given a new, additional significance in a liturgical, ceremonial setting. 'Do this' is the Lord's command. 'This' is now done in a ceremonial, ritual way, without the breath of everyday life, which, we find, for example, in the Gospels, even in the account given there of the comings and goings of the Last Supper. The Liturgy brings these things into a different sphere of reality, a more stylized and detached one.[8]

Guardini's point has found a recent echo in Robert Sokolowski's *Eucharistic Presence*.[9] Sokolowski, too, uses the phenomenological method to disclose what 'appears' in the celebration. He finds that it is a non-dramatic presentation of the Sacrifice of Christ. He argues that if the Eucharist, and particularly its central moment, were presented to us as a drama performed before the congregation, this would have the unfortunate result of shifting

> the focus of the liturgy from its relationship to God the Father to an axis between priest and people. The liturgy would cut away from its presence before God, which had been established in the Preface and Sanctus, and it would be centred on the dramatic impact of the priest acting before the congregation as audience or participants.[10]

For Sokolowski the consecration is in fact a 'sacramental quotation' of Christ's words, within the narrative of the Last Supper. The priest is a servant of Christ and the Church. He becomes 'quotationally transparent' in the words and gestures of the consecration, by permitting Christ to use his voice and hand. This helps the people to turn not to the priest as protagonist but to the Father and to the Son their Redeemer.

The Roman liturgy can thus make its own contribution to this humbling of the ego. As Catherine Pickstock remarks in her distinguished analysis of the Roman liturgy, 'the identity of the [worshipping] I is ... not established ahead of the journey but contemporaneously with its pilgrimage'.[11] Liturgy involves a borrowing

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of personality. In liturgical action, I am not simply and in straightforward fashion myself: so there is little point in attempting to fit the liturgy to 'my' needs! Who am 'I', after all? A mixture of identities: saint, sinner, worshipper. Our Christian 'I' is only finally formed and given its full identity by exposure to the liturgy. As Guardini puts it,

> the soul expands and develops in that width of feeling and clearness of form which together constitute the liturgy, just as it does through communion with great works of art.[12]

The Art of the Sacrament

The liturgy is not a dramatic recreation, but its sacramental quality has some of the power of great art. In it, the sacramental, symbolic qualities of ordinary things are evoked. People who live by the liturgy, Guardini remarks, 'will come to learn that the bodily movements, the actions, and the material objects which it employs are of the highest significance'.[13] They are permitted to mediate the divine in a number of ways: to bring us to a new birth, unite us in a body, strengthen our weak hearts, forgive our sins. As Catholics we begin to suspect the depths contained in these most common things:

> Who can see wheat
> And not remember
> How noble a food it is
> —And not remember?
> And wine—
> Who can see wine
> And not remember
> How noble a drink it is
> And not remember?
>
> Who can a Christian be
> And not remember
> That Christ himself he eats and drinks
> And not remember?[14]

The liturgy reminds us how charged with power and meaning the elements of nature, shaped by man, can be. Guardini claims that the truly liturgical approach is neither Puritan nor Romantic, for it sees that there is a relationship between the spiritual and the physical (which gives rise to a wealth of liturgical symbolism) *and* that the natural and material elements in the liturgy are entirely recast as ritual forms (they are not simply celebrations of the forces of nature). Water, bread, wine, oil and words are permitted to mediate the divine in a number of ways:

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to bring us to a new birth, unite us in a body, strengthen our weak hearts, forgive our sins. The problem is that it is more difficult for us to allow things to be more than what they are, to be signs evoking other things. The Welsh poet and artist David Jones, in the preface to a poem written within the poetic structure of the Mass, points to this blindspot affecting our grasp of the symbolic world:

> In the nineteenth century Western Man moved across a rubicon...affecting the entire world of sacrament and sign .... Does 'H_2O'... [now] evoke 'founts', 'that innocent creature', 'the womb of this devine font', 'the candidates'?[15]

This is why we priests feel the need to explain liturgical matters, and multiply words in doing so. It seems to us that if we don't explain, people (belonging to this bland 'postsacramental' age) will be in the dark. This has a place—a number of moments in the action of the Mass are offered for us to give an explanation—but the symbols of the sacrament and of the liturgy are supposed to have an eloquence of their own, and this eloquence may actually depend on our silence. Guardini offers an interesting example:

> Once in the cathedral of Monreale in Sicily I had the wonderful experience of watching the believers participate in the blessing of the fire and of the Paschal Candle on Easter Saturday. The ceremonies lasted over five hours .... The people had no books and they did not recite the rosary: they only gazed—but with all their souls.[16]

The 'Playfulness' of Liturgy

With all of this intensity Guardini insists that the liturgy is also a playful thing. It is not a utilitarian or 'purposeful' enterprise. It is not there to achieve an end: to foster community or to teach other moral lessons, as the Enlightenment liturgists claimed. 'In [the liturgy] man is not so much intended to edify himself as to contemplate God's majesty'.[17] The Logos is primary, not the Ethos. In the beginning was the Word, not the deed.[18] For Guardini the liturgy is in fact rather close to child's play, which doesn't have to achieve anything.

> The fact that the liturgy gives a thousand strict and careful directions on the quality of the language, gestures, colours, garments and instruments which it employs, can only be understood by those who are able to take play seriously.[19]

The liturgy, with endless care, with all the seriousness of a child and

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the strict conscientiousness of the great artist, has toiled to express in a thousand forms the sacred, God-given life of the soul to no other purpose than that the soul may have its existence there and live its life.

In the liturgy we are 'at play in the presence of God' (Prov 8:30) and Guardini believes that the essence of the liturgy is to be at play, to fashion a work of art in God's sight, mixing the artist's punctiliousness and the child's aimless joy. The liturgy creates a universe (or, might one suggest, a 'sealed garden'?) brimming with fruitful spiritual life, where we may wander about at will. This means that the liturgy does not, properly speaking, have a purpose, for 'in the liturgy man is no longer directed towards himself; his gaze is directed towards God'.[20]

Taught by the liturgy

'They shall all be taught of God' (John 6:45). The liturgy itself, with its nuances, its style and its grace, is our great teacher, showing us how to achieve a balance between emotion and structure, between mystical exaltation and everyday life. St Irenaeus suggested that the Son of God became the Son of Man in order to 'accustom' God and man to one another. Liturgical life shares in that task, introducing us playfully, sacramentally and beautifully to the presence of God.

Our faith is that Christ is present in the Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. This presence is a sacramental one, laying hold of material reality in the stylized way that Guardini describes, shaping the liturgy over the centuries, giving it this unique style, under the care of the Church. Each liturgical action is an action of Christ and of his Body, for, to allow Guardini the last word,

> the liturgy is no mere commemoration of what once existed, but is living and real; it is the enduring life of Jesus Christ in us, and that of the believer in Christ, eternally God and Man.[21]

1 Romano Guardini *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (translated by Ada Lane), Sheed and Ward, London 1938, p. 36.
2 *Looking at the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1996, p. 81.
3 *Before Mass* (translated by Elinor Castendyk Briefs), Longmans, London 1955, also available as *Preparing Yourself for Mass*, Sophia Institute Press, Manchester NH, 1997.
4 *Sacred Signs*, Veritas, Dublin 1979.
5 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, pp. 18-22.
6 Translation from *The Divine Office*, Collins, London 1974.
7 *Before Mass*, p. 154.
8 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, pp. 58-60.
9 *Eucharistic Presence. A Study in the Theology of Disclosure*, CUA Press, Washington 1994.
10 Robert Sokolowski 'Praying the Canon of the Mass', in *Homiletic and Pastoral*

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Review, July 1995, 11.

11 *After Writing. On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Blackwell, Oxford 1998, p. 184.
12 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 68.
13 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
14 Guido Gazelle, the Flemish nineteenth-century poet, quoted in Michael Schmaus, *The Essence of Christianity*, Scepter, Dublin 1961, p. 93.
15 David Jones, *The Anathemata*, Faber, London 1972, p. 16.
16 *Before Mass*, pp. 24-25.
17 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 96.
18 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 103.
20 *Ibid.*, p.96.
21 *Ibid.* p. 65

Reviews

Book Notes

Despite the overall decline in the numbers of men and women joining religious orders some still thrive and are the focus of interest. First among these must be Society of Jesus. Alan Woodrow's book, ***The Jesuits*** (Geoffrey Chapman, 1996, 296 pp) is subtitled 'a story of power' and it recounts the high points and the low points of Jesuit history, in which the sons of St. Ignatius have been welcomed to court, exiled and massacred, and examines Jesuit power in past ages. In the past 30 years, under the leadership of their General Pedro Arrupe and influenced by Vatican II, the order has renounced power and prestige and returned to its missionary roots: an astonishing change which affects the Catholic Church world-wide. The question which the order and the Church faces is whether this line will be maintained in the face of the current conservative clampdown. ***The Jesuit Mystique*** (Harper Collins, 1995, 276 pp.) also concentrates on the power which the Jesuits are alleged to have within the Church. By and large it offers a defence against allegations that the Jesuits are a 'church within a church', using interviews with many members and ex-members of the Society. It looks at the contribution of the modern Jesuits to education, liberation theology, literature, academic life and spirituality.

In English church life the Jesuits are best known as educators. Running schools, which number amongst their pupils such diverse characters as Cardinal Heenan and Alfred Hitchcock, has long been the strength of the Society. Ian D. Roberts' ***A Harvest of Hope*** (The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1996) celebrates this major contribution to cultural life in England. Roberts displays painstaking and

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