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## *Laudato Si* and Pope Francis’ “Hero”, Romano Guardini

The article revolves around Romano Guardini’s ideas on ecology that resounded in Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si*. The article shows that Guardini had an indirect influence on the conceptualization by Pope Francis of the problem of ecological education and spirituality.

**Keywords:** ecology, education, spirituality, humanity, creation, Romano Guardini, Pope Francis.

### The Natural Vision of the Relationship between Humanity and Creation

“So great was the honor and providential care which God bestowed upon man that he brought the entire sensible world into being before and for his [humankind’s] sake.”<sup>1</sup> Thus the Greek theologian and monk St. Gregory Palamas (ca. 1296-1359) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The astonishing advances in the areas of technology and the sciences have rendered such serene self-confidence in the meaning of the world and the human person as expressed by Gregory Palamas now extremely rare outside Christianity. Already during the Enlightenment the German poet Friedrich Schiller spoke of “*die Entzauberung der*

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Palamas, *Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and ascetical Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988) p. 76.

*Welt*” (the disenchantment of the world) on account of the technological advances made in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

Orthodoxy and the Catholic Church commemorated together for the first time the “World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation” in 2015. This is a great ecumenical gesture. For the first time Catholics and Orthodox Christians prayed on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 jointly for the preservation of creation. At the same time, 10 AM in Rome, 11 AM in Istanbul and 3 AM Chicago time the Holy Father, Pope Francis in Rome and His Beatitude Patriarch Bartholomew prayed for the preservation of creation. Pope Francis prayed in St. Peter’s Basilica while Patriarch Bartholomew prayed in St. George Cathedral, together with 140 bishops gathered to prepare the first Panorthodox council, which was convened in 2016. “The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.” Thus Patriarch Bartholomew quotes from the encyclical *Laudato Si* penned by Pope Francis.<sup>3</sup> With this decision Pope Francis and the Catholic Church worldwide join annually Orthodoxy in praying for the environment. Orthodox fellow Christians pray for creation since the 1. September, 1989. For our Orthodox brethren the liturgical year begins on September 1<sup>st</sup>. The emissary of Patriarch Bartholomew, the metropolitan bishop and theologian Ioannis Zizioulas (1931-), Metropolitan of Pergamon, had proposed on June 18, 2015 to Pope Francis that both churches pray for the preservation of creation together.<sup>4</sup>

Nowadays the word “creation” encounters difficulties. Many prefer the term “environment.” Such oscillation is not without precedence in history. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (ca. 544-483 BC) expressly denies in the fifth century BC that the cosmos or man was created by one of the gods – *epoiesen* – rather she was always and will always be. Shortly thereafter, however, Plato (427-347 BC) assumes a kind master to have created the world calling him the impersonal *demiourgos*, but also the personal “originator and father” (*poietai kai pater*), who created an intelligible universe. In the New Testament the term of a *demiourgos* and of *poietai*, maker and *ktistes*, creator are used interchangeably to describe the God of the Old and New Testaments as singularly responsible for the genesis of the universe and of humankind.

<sup>2</sup> Klaus L. Berghahn (ed.): *Schillers Gedichte*. (Königstein/Taunus: Athenäum, 1980), p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* 21. Accessed 9, 24, 2019: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/a-comment-on-pope-francis-encyclical-laudato-si->.

By the second century AD the impersonal term demiurge disappears and Christians refer to God as *creator* and *factor mundi*, creator and maker of the world. In the wake of Enlightenment and Deism, Karl Marx (1818-83) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century not only denies the existence of a supposedly oppressive creator God, but announces the need of human beings to create themselves over and against a deity, supposedly merely projected by human beings – à la Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). In this vainglorious trajectory of human beings absolutizing themselves must be seen French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre's (1905-80) call upon people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to confront a liberating “*situation créatrice*“ head on.<sup>5</sup>

At about the same time St. Maximilian Kolbe (1894-1941) writes in 1940: “The aim of creation, the end of man himself, [is] the love of God, creator and Father [nota bene the same words Plato used about 2300 years] – an ever greater love, the divinization of [the human being] ...” (meditation).<sup>6</sup>

## The Saints' and Guardini's Views

The Holy Father in his encyclical *Laudato Si* – as the title already suggests – is inspired by the founder of the Franciscan order, St. Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226). It should be noted that he mentions 23 times Pope Benedict XVI and four times the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Of special interest, however, is his mentioning the German philosopher, theologian and priest Romano Guardini (1885-1968) six times. Guardini caught the imagination of both Pope Benedict, who had met Guardini personally in the late 1940's and during the 1950's in Munich as seminarian, associate pastor and finally as professor, and of Pope Francis. In fact, Pope Francis had planned to write his doctoral dissertation on the (*Der Gegensatz*) opposition of Logos and Ethos in Guardini's thinking at Sankt Georgen Jesuit theologate near Frankfurt am Main, Germany. This plan never materialized.<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned, in 1950 Guardini had written a precious book titled “*The End of the Modern World.*”<sup>8</sup> There he presciently describes the

<sup>5</sup> Jean Mouzet, “Psychologie de Sartre,” in: *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 140 (2/2015), p. 169-186, at p. 179.

<sup>6</sup> Maximilian Kolbe, accessed 9, 24, 2019: <https://catholicexchange.com/kolbe-heroic-witness-to-our-lady>.

<sup>7</sup> Accessed 9, 24, 2019: <https://www.sankt-georgen.de/button-menuue/mediathek/nachrichten-aus-sankt-georgen/archiv/archiv-2013/>.

<sup>8</sup> Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 1998).

human roots of the present ecological crisis. If the sciences and technology only attempt to harness the environment for the sake of the principles of utility and security he argues, then progress becomes blind and destructive. This will invariably lead to a compulsive consumerism, of a need for completely unnecessary items he apodictically observes. Such an unhealthy disposition invariably leads to a general lack of measure for people of all walks of life. The attendant complete lack of proper balance, in turn, will lead to the supposedly autonomous human subject controlling nature to the detriment of both nature and humankind.

Already in 1923-25 Guardini had made similar observations in his celebrated “*Letters from Lake Como*,”<sup>9</sup> where he describes a gradual decline of culture. Guardini does not oppose technology per se. However, it must be used in such a manner that no harm is done to creation and to the God-given dignity of humankind. This can be achieved if human beings acquire virtuous postures: truthfulness, courage and trust.

Already in the Middle Ages St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) wrote prophetically: “All creation God gives to humankind to use. If this privilege is misused, God’s justice permits creation to punish humanity.”<sup>10</sup>

On a more cheerful note St. John Chrysostom (ca. 349-407) reminds us:

The creation is beautiful and harmonious, and God has made it all just **for your sake**. He has made it beautiful and grand, varied [and] rich. He has made it capable of satisfying all your needs, to nourish your body and also to develop the life of your soul by leading it towards the knowledge of himself – **all this for your sake**.<sup>11</sup>

Humankind is the conscious and indispensable head of the cosmic liturgy, honoring the one and triune God, as it alone is endowed with a rational soul. This critical nexus Pope Francis sees since the advent of the industrial revolution under siege. He wants to rejoin two indispensable elements for people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely what St. Irenaeus (ca. 130-202) so memorably phrased:

The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God. If the revelation of God through creation already brings life to all

<sup>9</sup> Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Accessed 9, 24, 2019: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/quotes/features/view/20274/quotations-by-hildegard-of-bingen>.

<sup>11</sup> St. John Chrysostom in: Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Quotable Saint*, (New York: Checkmark Books, 2002) p. 43. Emphases added.

living beings on the earth, how much more will the manifestation of the Father by the Word bring life to those who see God.<sup>12</sup>

Dogmatic  
Theology

## The Use of Guardini in *Laudato Si*

As Pope Francis cites Guardini's book *The End of the Modern World* six times in his encyclical *Laudato Si!* In every reference the critical issue is the radical change human existence undergoes by virtue of the relentless and breathtakingly accelerated insertion of technology into our world. Without encountering a checking, countervailing power, it inexorably imposes itself upon nature and on the ways human beings live and interact.

Guardini receives particular attention in chapter three "The human Roots of the Ecological Crisis" and in the final chapter six "Ecological Education and Spirituality."

Pope Francis reminds the reader of his encyclical that also the acquisition of technical power, be it nuclear power, bio technology or knowledge of the human DNA, served totalitarian powers of different persuasions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to justify mass murder. In a nuanced manner, the author does add that such power holds the promise of vitality and greater appreciation for values. Francis writes

There is a tendency to believe that every increase in power means 'an increase of 'progress' itself', an advance in "security, usefulness, welfare and vigour; ... an assimilation of new values into the stream of culture, as if in reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such.<sup>13</sup>

Paraphrasing Guardini, Pope Francis sees a general lack of education and human formation to deal with such power leading to a naïve freedom without norms. Thus, technical progress lacks direction and self-control. Along with Guardini, Francis stresses that by virtue of its indwelling logic such instrumental or reified reason – created so to speak outside the human mind by the inexorable self-dynamics of technical progress – begins to take control of human society. Rather than developing along the lines of the common good and benefit for humankind, it automatically asserts itself over nature and human beings. This leads to the emergence of compulsive consumerism, which

<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses* IV, 20, 7. Accessed 9, 24, 2019: [https://web.archive.org/web/20170126222027/http://earlychurchtexts.com/public/irenaeus\\_glory\\_of\\_god\\_humanity\\_alive.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20170126222027/http://earlychurchtexts.com/public/irenaeus_glory_of_god_humanity_alive.htm).

<sup>13</sup> *Laudato Si!* 105. Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, 9th ed., (Würzburg: Echter, 1965), p. 87 (English: *The End of the Modern World*, p. 82).

craves for even the completely unnecessary. A conversion is called for that is not only based on the individual human being. “The work of dominating the world calls for a union of skills and a unity of achievement that can only grow from quite a different attitude.”<sup>14</sup>

Compulsive consumerism is one example of how the techno-economic paradigm affects individuals. Romano Guardini had already foreseen this: “The gadgets and technics forced upon him by the patterns of machine production and of abstract planning mass man accepts quite simply; they are the forms of life itself. To either a greater or lesser degree mass man is convinced that his conformity is both reasonable and just”.<sup>15</sup>

Just slightly earlier than Charlie Chaplin’s film *Modern Times* (1936) and Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* (1927), Guardini apprehended in the signs of the times a peril of unusual proportions, but also a unique singular, kairotic chance. Likewise, also Pope Francis sees the perils of a blind trust in technology potentially leading people not to a greater communitarian consciousness. With the aid also of Guardini Francis sees deeper than the twentieth century philosophers Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Jürgen Habermas (1929-), Botho Strauß (1944-), Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) or Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). On the basis of Christianity he appreciates in the crisis provoked by the unprecedented preponderance of technology a chance for greater *humanitas*.

## Guardini’s Vision of the new Human Being

*The End of Modernity* had been penned by Guardini during his time teaching at Tübingen University (1945-47). It was succeeded by *Die Macht* in 1951 (a treatise on *Power*, heretofore not translated into English).<sup>16</sup> However, these texts are not without an important preceding text. When travelling to his native Italy, Guardini had spent time at Lake Como, north of Milan, at the feet of the Alps. Experiencing palpably how technology creeps gradually into the regular, dreamy lifestyle of the local population, the simple folk, he authored the now famous *Letters from Lake Como* between 1923 and 1925. These

<sup>14</sup> *Laudato Si!* 219. Referencing Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, p. 72. English: *ibid.*, *The End of the Modern World*, p. 65f.

<sup>15</sup> *Laudato Si!* 203. Quoting Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, pp. 66-67. English: *The End of the Modern World*, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> Published together: Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit: ein Versuch zur Orientierung; Die Macht: Versuch einer Wegweisung* (Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewald, 2016).

people were living through their architecture and craftsmanship non-invasively and respectfully as part of nature. The homes, vineyards and fields blended into the beautiful landscape. But he foresees this bucolic world fading as people lose control over technology. This is manifest seemingly without any apparent reason in the homes built in the 1920's. They now want to take control of nature. The motor boats no longer peacefully ply the waters of the idyllic lake, but cut through with no regard for the winds and waves, doing thereby violence unto the natural constitution of the lake.

He attempts to uncover the causes for these variegated phenomena. He sees all factors subcutaneously interconnected: 1. The causes for the decline in culture, 2. The destruction of nature, 3. "*seelische Ortlosigkeit*" (the lack of a spiritual home) and 4. The vainglory of modernity. This latter phenomenon he describes as the "hubris of autonomy," reflecting humankind succumbing to "the machine" and power.

Yet, one would do Guardini great injustice were one to equate his analysis with Oswald Spengler's (1880-1936) then much discussed, as almost contemporary and hugely successful book *The Decline of the West* (1918-22).<sup>17</sup> Nothing like cultural pessimism befalls Guardini. His is the joy of Easter. By no means does he advocate a return to a preindustrial age, or a rejection of modernity or succumbing to sorrow, let alone a return to a pre-Enlightenment naïveté. Nor does he reject technology per se. He apprehends "something greater gaining contours." Especially in the ninth and tenth *Letters from Lake Como* something amazing occurs: he prophesizes the birth of something altogether novel arising precisely from the unharnessed and chaotic forces technology unleashes. He asserts that the novel age of technology is at present destructive merely because the commensurate or congenial human being has yet to be born. Ever again and anew, human beings are called to position themselves in the reality of an ongoing creation. The process need be transformed by human beings. In and of themselves neither technology nor the sciences are contrary to Christianity or let alone human dignity in general. Guardini struggles to develop an essential relationship between Christianity and categories for mastering the world on a higher plane. It must be a spiritual relationship of heightened, personal awareness. This will find its expression in a new dimension of human freedom and "A religious process of incalculable importance has begun – the Church is coming to life in the souls of

<sup>17</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Knopf, 1966).

men.”<sup>18</sup> And, this notwithstanding, he concedes the tragic facticity of human existence will endure. Only a human being who lives out as “a redeemed soul” in a conscious and grateful immediacy with God will be a good master of the thus reconfigured world; a world of harmony between humankind, nature and *techné*, as the people will have rejected the temptation of being a *homo faber*. He need acknowledge afresh his dignity as a creation reborn through the mysteries of Good Friday and Easter morning. People may not fall prey to “the demonic powers of the number, machine and will to rule ...” Human beings are called to form “the new chaos” from within a deeper spirituality (*Geistigkeit*), freedom and interiority.” He advocates not less but more technology. More to the point, he calls for more considered and more humane technology. “The soul touches us from something grander that will approach [us], although we sense the questionableness [of the novel] and the deliciousness of the old luminously shines forth.”<sup>19</sup>

The danger lies in severing modernity from the divine reality which sustains creation. As technology and the natural sciences do not generate on their own values, invariably human personhood will be imperiled. Thus three postures are required – as already mentioned – truthfulness, courage and trust as correctives to a collective distancing from any appreciation for timeless values. Only in a deliberate vis-à-vis to God can human beings survive as persons. Thus, the danger of absolute impersonal control by faceless, technological exigencies contains also the chance for fuller human maturity.

One recognizes how Guardini clairvoyantly sees the threats technology poses. It is the mystery of the incarnation that keeps him from subscribing to antiquarianism or *larmpoiment*. He teaches us to pose questions lucidly and to countenance honestly also a future monstrosity, i.e. to accept in sobriety the challenges a particular age offers. If our gaze is set firmly on the sources and wellsprings of *humanitas*, on what constitute the essentials of being human, then the possible threats technology poses are not greater than predicaments in previous ages.

Pope Francis laments the present earth as an “immense pile of filth”<sup>20</sup> and people living in a “throwaway culture.”<sup>21</sup> He sees in Romano Guardini an important prophet and ally to gain a proper cosmological sensibility on a higher plane. Forcefully Pope Francis wants to reinsert

<sup>18</sup> Romano Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic*, (New York: Ward and Sheed, 1940) p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-8.

<sup>20</sup> *Laudato Si!* 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Laudato Si!* 22.



Jesus Christ in the center of human existence. As Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes* 22 memorably teaches, inspired i.a. by St. John Paul II (1920-2005) and Henri de Lubac SJ (1896-1991):

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* 22. Accessed 9, 23, 2019: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).