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Acts of Faith

Who is the philosopher who holds so much influence over Pope Francis?

By Matthew Schmitz June 25 at 12:03 PM

This opinion piece is by Matthew Schmitz, deputy editor of First Things.

"Laudato Si," Pope Francis's letter on the environment, has captured the world's attention, but few have considered how heavily it draws on the work of a little-known German philosopher-priest.

Romano Guardini — cited more frequently in the encyclical than anyone besides John Paul II and Benedict XVI — provides some of the encyclical's most salient features: its sense of crisis, its antagonism toward technocratic idols, its hope for spiritual renewal. What are we to make of the influence of this obscure figure on the most sensational papal document in many years?

The story of Francis and Guardini goes back decades. Francis has long admired Guardini, perhaps because both men were the sons of Italian emigres, both answered calls to the priesthood, and both spent time studying chemistry.

As a young Jesuit seminarian in the 1950s, Francis kept a copy of Guardini's book "The Lord" on his shelf. In 1986, after his opponents gained control of the Argentine Jesuit province, Francis moved to Germany with the intention of writing a thesis on an early Guardini work, "Contrasts." The thesis was never written, but "Laudato Si" provides us with Francis's fullest attempt to apply Guardini's thought.

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The book that Francis cites in Laudato Si is Guardini's "The End of the Modern World, "a dark tome written in an era of world war. Guardini's book begins with the premise that "There is only one standard by which any epoch can be fairly judged . . . to what extent did it allow for the development of human dignity?"

In Guardini's terms — not in terms of GDP, of life expectancy, or of any other statistic — Francis finds our own time wanting. Technology has "joined indissolubly" with an economy of "uncontrolled greed" that allows

injustices to combine into an impersonal force — sometimes called "progress," sometimes "the market" — for which no one claims responsibility or accepts blame.

Our glorification of technology, Guardini argues, leads us to view everything and everyone as means rather than ends. This entails consequences extending not only from economic exploitation to nuclear warfare but also "from control of conception to interrupted pregnancy, from artificial insemination to euthanasia, from race-breeding to the destruction of undesirable life."

Guardini's critique cuts across the usual categories of left and right. Viewed with suspicion by the traditional Catholics of his time, Guardini had to find a teaching post at a Protestant, rather than a Catholic, university (he was later forced out by the Nazis, whose ideology he quietly opposed).

Guardini eventually became a major inspiration to many of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, including John Paul II and Benedict XVI. In recent years, he has been read most closely by conservative Catholics, but perhaps that might change.

[Release of encyclical reveals pope's deep dive into climate science]

Given how much Francis draws on Guardini, it is worth noting their disagreements. Whereas Francis is optimistic about the possibility of erecting a global bureaucracy to battle our current crisis, Guardini recoils at the idea of "universal planning." What actually motivates calls for managing resources according to "statistics" and "theory" is not a practical concern for the best outcome so much as a spiritual desire to impose one's will on others.

The two men also envision different roles for the church. Whereas Francis believes that the church can express universal desires and lead all men of goodwill in healing the planet, Guardini predicts that Christianity "will be forced to distinguish itself more sharply from a dominantly non-Christian Ethos." Francis expects cooperation; Guardini, conflict.

Lying behind these political and ecclesial differences is a philosophical one. Guardini believes that our future will be an illiberal one — either humanely under a Christian consensus or inhumanely under a technocratic one.

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The old liberal idea of "getting along with others" by refusing to "incorporate absolutes into existence" is dead. Such a view "can never cope with the existential situation we face today." To get beyond a managerial, technocratic paradigm, we must discard the managerial language of liberalism.

Francis believes in the possibility of a global consensus that is not explicitly Christian. Believers and nonbelievers can cooperate by sharing an "ecological conversion" and then proceeding to save the globe.

For all the anti-modernism of his rhetoric, Francis remains a modern liberal. Unlike his intellectual hero, he is confident in the prospects for bureaucratic management of disagreement and for cooperation between people with widely different viewpoints. Guardini may be the pope's greatest teacher, but Francis is very much his own man.

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