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Benedict's final theologian quote

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Assuming tonight?s brief salute by Benedict XVI from his balcony at Castel Gandolfo isn?t really a substantive address, he likely delivered the last public remarks of his life this morning in which he'll quote a Catholic theologian.

If so, Benedict went out on a characteristic note, citing [1] the modern thinker who?s had the greatest imprint on his own thinking ?- Romano Guardini.

The Guardini line Benedict quoted in his brief remarks to the College of Cardinals this morning was this: "The church is not an institution devised and built by men, but a living reality.?

It comes from a book called *The Church of the Lord*, published in 1964 ?- as Benedict noted, the same year the Second Vatican Council approved its document on the church, *Lumen Gentium*. Benedict told the cardinals that these words were especially dear to him, in part because Guardini gave him an inscribed copy of the book.

The pope has cited the line often over the years, often in the context of arguing that the church can?t be refashioned according to someone?s own personal design. Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, for instance, included the same quote in a 2002 speech for the opening of a pastoral congress of the Aversa diocese in Italy.

Below is some background on Guardini.

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Benedict?s esteem for Guardini is a matter of record. He gave a keynote speech at a Munich celebration in 1985 commemorating the 100th anniversary of Guardini's birth, and in 1992 he authored an introduction to a new edition of one of Guardini's seminal works, *The Lord*.

Born in Verona, Italy, Guardini moved with his family to Mainz, Germany, in 1886 when he was just one. As a college undergraduate he tried his hand at chemistry and economics, and failed at both. In 1905, he underwent what he would later call a profound religious conversion; he described the event in terms strongly reminiscent of Augustine's *Confessions*, and Augustine, along with Plato and Bonaventure, were formative intellectual influences on Guardini as they were for Ratzinger.

Guardini was ordained in 1910, and became a German citizen in 1911 because otherwise he would be ineligible for most jobs teaching theology (then as now salaried by the state). He went on to complete his dissertation on the doctrine of salvation in the thought of St. Bonaventure.

Guardini had an early taste of how church authority could sting. His seminary rector was fired because of his ?modernist? sympathies, an action Guardini would later refer to as one of ?the frequent sins of orthodoxy.?

From 1915 to 1939, Guardini wrote the works that would make him one of the most famous theologians of his era: *On the Spirit of the Liturgy*, *The Opposites*, and *The Lord*. He also became the national leader of a Catholic youth movement in Germany known as Quickborn, and the spiritual leader of its retreat center at Burg Rothenfels.

Well before Vatican II authorized it, Guardini turned his altar around and said key parts of the Mass in German. His leadership of a youth movement brought trouble with the Nazis, since they didn't want competition with the Hitler Youth. In 1939 he lost his professorship in Berlin, and the Nazis seized Burg Rothenfels and disbanded Quickborn.

In 1941 the Reich prohibited Guardini from giving public lectures, though he never openly opposed the regime. After the war Guardini continued to teach and publish, ending his career with more than 100 articles and 70 books. In 1965 Paul VI offered to make him a cardinal as a form of tribute; Guardini declined. When he retired from the University of Munich in 1963, his chair was taken over by the Jesuit theologian Fr. Karl Rahner.

By writing critical essays on artists such as Dostoevsky and Maria Rainer Rilke, Guardini helped open the church to modern culture. By pushing the boundaries of liturgical reform, Guardini helped bring a movement that had been largely concentrated in Benedictine monasteries out into Catholic parishes and into the mainstream of Catholic thinking. He encouraged greater Catholic appreciation of the Bible.

In all of these ways, Guardini helped blaze the trail that Vatican II would follow.

Guardini contributed to the council in another important way, by helping to articulate the image of the church as the ?mystical body of Christ.? For Guardini it expressed the notion that all the members of the body, clergy and lay alike, should be active in the life of the church. Guardini saw the ?mystical body? model navigating between two extremes: the neo-scholastic definition of the church in purely institutional terms, and the liberal Protestant congregationalist understanding of the church as a social contract.

Ratzinger regards Guardini's thinking on the liturgy as one of his most important contributions. In his 1992 introduction to a reissue of *The Lord*, Ratzinger says that by focusing on the liturgy as the arena where believers meet the living Christ, Guardini pointed a way out of the radical skepticism that had gripped liberal Christianity under the influence of scientific biblical criticism.

Guardini's blind spot, according to most observers, was history. His use of scripture was uncritical in ways that scholars today would find almost painful; as biographer Robert Krieg wrote in 1997, Guardini treated the infancy narratives as if they were newspaper reports. Similarly, Guardini's thinking couldn't easily account for the historical unfolding of church teaching, as changing times and new discoveries create new possibilities for better expressing the same truth.

Guardini was politically conservative, joining Catholic criticism of the Weimar Republic. He witnessed the brief socialist republic established in Bavaria in 1919, which was crushed by the army, and regarded it as proof of the instability of democracy.

In another trope that Benedict XVI would adopt, Guardini argued that only the Catholic church could give the concept ?God? objective meaning.

?If a person means only God, then he can say ?God' and mean only himself. There must be an objective

reference .... There is only one: the Catholic church in its authority and certainty.?

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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