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Reflections from Romano Guardini on Being “Lost in Chaos”

Refleksje Romano Guardiniego o byciu „zagubionym w chaosie”

ABSTRACT: The text was written as a contribution to the celebration of the 92nd birthday of Joseph Ratzinger, who considered Romano Guardini to be one of the intellectual heroes of his youth. The author of the article discusses Guardini’s monograph published in 1933, entitled *Das Gute, das Gewissen und die Sammlung*. Among the enemies of moral life, Guardini included Immanuel Kant and his concept of absolute autonomy of conscience, Friedrich Nietzsche, according to whom Christianity is a form of slave morality, and Bolshevism (today we would call it Marxism). As was diagnosed by Guardini, those who want to make an effort to evaluate a moral act feel “lost in chaos.” Conscience is susceptible to three types of error: the search for easy solutions; the exaggeration of duties; the adoption of false interpretations resulting from following conscious or unconscious desires. In Guardini’s opinion, conscience is the living voice of God’s holiness in man. The moral law is not the law of the human ‘I,’ and Kant’s thesis is both philosophically and theologically incorrect. God gives grace of a pure conscience to man praying for the fulfilment of His will, while the sacrament of Confirmation gives man gifts of the Holy Spirit. The last part of Guardini’s work focuses on the importance of prayer and concentration, as well as the supervision of the senses.

(summary prepared by Sławomir Zatwardnicki)

KEYWORDS: Romano Guardini, Joseph Ratzinger, conscience, moral life, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bolshevism, Marxism, conscience and spiritual life

ABSTRAKT: Tekst powstał jako wkład w obchody 92. urodzin Josepha Ratzingera, który uważał Romano Guardiniego za jednego z intelektualnych bohaterów swojej młodości. Autorka artykułu omawia monografię Guardiniego wydaną w 1933 roku, zatytułowaną *Das Gute, das Gewissen und die Sammlung*. Do wrogów moralnego życia Guardini zaliczył Immanuela Kanta i jego pojęcie absolutnej autonomii sumienia, Friedricha Nietzschego, według którego chrześcijaństwo jest formą niewolniczej moralności, oraz bolszewizm (dziś nazwalibyśmy go marksizmem). Zgodnie z diagnozą

Guardiniego osoby chcące podjąć wysiłek oceny aktu moralnego czują się „zagubione w chaosie”. Sumienie jest bowiem podatne na błędy trojakiemu rodzaju: szukania łatwych rozwiązań; wyolbrzymiania obowiązków; przyjęcia fałszywych interpretacji wynikłych z podążania za świadomymi czy nieświadomymi pragnieniami. W opinii Guardiniego sumienie jest żywym głosem świętości Boga w człowieku. Prawo moralne nie jest prawem ludzkiego „ja”, a teza Kanta jest błędna zarówno filozoficznie, jak i teologicznie. Bóg człowiekowi modłącemu się o spełnienie Jego woli daje łaskę czystego sumienia, z kolei sakrament bierzmowania obdarowuje człowieka darami Ducha Świętego. Ostatnia część pracy Guardiniego koncentruje się na znaczeniu modlitwy i skupienia, a także nadzorowania zmysłów.

(streszczenie przygotował Sławomir Zatwardnicki)

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Romano Guardini, Joseph Ratzinger, sumienie, życie moralne, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, bolszewizm, marksizm, sumienie a życie duchowe

In 1933, Romano Guardini published a small monograph consisting of three lectures around the subject of conscience. It was originally titled *Das Gute, das Gewissen und die Sammlung* – the good, conscience and inner composure. It was recently republished in Italian under the more simple title *La coscienza*.¹

As a contribution to the celebration of Joseph Ratzinger's 92nd birthday who described Guardini as one of the intellectual heroes of his youth, I have summarised the contents of *La coscienza*, including some translations of the most significant paragraphs.

Guardini begins his book by saying that he hopes to offer some aid to the Christian conscience in the struggle around the foundations of moral life, especially as the spiritual situation in Germany conditions this struggle. He asks rhetorically: “fight: but who are our enemies?”²

The first name on his list of enemies of the moral life is Immanuel Kant. He attributes the notion of the absolute autonomy of conscience to Kant. Friedrich Nietzsche comes second since, according to him, Christianity is a form of slave morality that excludes believers from greatness. The third is Bolshevism or what we would now more commonly call Marxism. Bolshevism “suffocates the living spirit, and destroys the free personality in the collective and the process of history, thereby diminishing it to a mere organ for the realization of super-individual needs.”³ Although other enemies, he noted, could be named, these were his top three. In short, Kantians, Nietzscheans and Marxists are the foes of a moral life!

¹ R. Guardini, *La coscienza*, Brescia 2009.

² Ibidem, p. 5.

³ Ibidem.

Regarding the spiritual situation in Germany, he states:

We live in a devastated age. The things of the spirit and the things of salvation no longer have their own seat. Everything is thrown on the road...

We have forgotten that what the spirit reflects is a very demanding nobility and that understanding it is only possible under certain conditions. [We have forgotten] that the different interests of the spiritual world from time to time cast a different way of speaking and listening; they require a different interior space, in which this speaking and listening can take place.

We live in a time, in which the degradation of the honor that belongs to the spirit has become a common practice, which no longer impresses in a particular way. To notice it, it is enough to take a careful look at public education, with its conferences, discussions, magazines and with its newspapers; it is enough to observe the bad habits followed in dealing with spiritual things, the language used in this.⁴

Guardini goes on to speak of “moral disorientation.” He suggests that “in the judgement of many, the moral act does not compensate for the serious effort it requires,” while others, who would be ready for such an effort, do not know where to start. They feel “lost in chaos.”⁵

Our conscience, he argues, is not a “mechanical instrument, a magnetic needle that puts itself in place, but something alive, and everything that is living is prone to error.”⁶ While our conscience is our supreme compass, it can nonetheless lose its compass. He suggests that this can happen in three ways:

[First], the conscience can become superficial, reckless, obtuse. Consciousness makes life more burdensome. It makes life richer in content, more dignified, but this also means heavier. As a consequence we have a tendency to seek the easy ways and free ourselves from the burdens. There is an internal operation that aims to cushion the need for conscience. It is not always a conscious desire; it may be that the sphere of the subconscious acts. This can happen in a thousand ways: by doing so, for example, that the gaze is distracted by the unpleasant lines of what we are dealing with; that the most important point remains veiled;

⁴ Ibidem, pp. 8–9.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 21.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 29.

that the situation with its fatiguing unicity and unrepeatability is flattened on a more comfortable general scheme. At other times the warning of conscience is silenced and reassured, saying that in the end it is not a matter of what is 'so bad.' Points of view aimed at challenging this judgement are emphasized. We refer to what others do; one looks for one's own judgment, there is a remission of responsibility with reference to the traditional bad habit, which 'was always like that'; to the environment that 'is also of good will' to 'good common sense' and the like, and so the moral requirement, which always has something hard in itself, is weakened.

[Second], consciousness may also be refined excessively. A person may see duties where there are none; to feel responsibilities which do not exist; to exaggerate obligations beyond the limits of what is right and possible. (And this is especially so for the person predisposed to sociality, who is in danger of overburdening his conscience). Consciousness can therefore be subject to real diseases. The pure and clear duty which, however difficult, always raises upwards, can turn into an obsession. The command of consciousness must be perceived in freedom. But when the conscience has suffered damage, this freedom disappears and from the need that it poses derives a real slavery: the anguished conscience, the scruple. Within the human person the secret instinct to torment oneself is deeply rooted, and in certain temperaments this instinct works with particular force. If it is not cured with prudent care it can degenerate into melancholy.

Thirdly, consciousness can also be altered in its contents. Our knowledge is not a mirror which simply reproduces what is in front of it. We do not view a situation the way that a camera photographs an object. In our view we are present ourselves. We ourselves, with our temperament, with our desires, with our secret and overt motives, are already contained in the gaze, which we direct on things: thus, by looking at them, we shape them. We do not take them as they are in themselves, but as we wish they were, that is, to find a welcoming environment for our desires and our feelings. We would like to see the confirmation of what we are in the situation. We would like to see from it what we bring into ourselves as an aspiration. So we interpret the situation according to our conscious and unconscious desires. The latter especially exert a strong influence. Modern psychology has demonstrated how profound is the influence of the unconscious will upon the acts of perception.⁷

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 28–32.

Not only is the conscience not a mirror or a camera, not a magnetic needle or any other kind of mechanical instrument, Guardini goes to argue that it is not a "law that hangs somewhere," "not a simple idea," "not a concept in the air," but rather "the living voice of God's holiness in us."⁸ That means that as soon as we start to engage with our conscience, we "strike a religious ground." The Old Testament describes it as "walking in the sight of God" or "walking in the presence of God." In this context, Guardini explains:

God is not a concept, an idea, a feeling, a sociological need. God is real and absolute reality. And in the consciousness of those who approach him sincerely, he will not fail to bear witness to himself. God will make sure that in his sight the sincere conscience acquires the freedom to see without blindness and to decide rightly. To those who pray: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, God will give the grace of a clear conscience.⁹

Although three enemies are listed at the beginning of the book, the weight of the argumentation is against the Kantian enemy. Guardini spends several paragraphs firing canons into the idea that a person who looks to God for knowledge of what is right and moral is a slave to others and fails the autonomy test. God, he asserts, "surrounds us, envelopes us, penetrates us."¹⁰ He is "present in our intimacy." He "speaks within us." He "speaks from the inside with the raising of the conscience, from the outside with the disposition of things."¹¹ "The word of the one is clarified by the word of the other." "Man is regenerated, from God the Father, in Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit, to participate in the divine life."¹² Therefore the moral law is not a law of my 'I.'

Guardini describes the Kantian belief that the moral law is a law of my 'I' as "an inner optical illusion" and "an incorrect thesis," both philosophically and theologically.¹³ God, he declares, is not an 'other.' Instead, "religious relationship with God is determined precisely by that unique phenomenon that does not repeat elsewhere."¹⁴ The fact is that "the more deeply I abandon myself to Him,

⁸ Ibidem, pp. 32–33.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 35.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 36.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 37.

¹² Ibidem, p. 38.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 39.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 40.

the more fully I allow Him to penetrate me, the greater the force the Creator asserts in me, the more I become myself.”¹⁵

Having dealt with Kant’s optical illusion, Guardini then deepens his theological analysis by suggesting that people often forget that there is a sacrament of the Christian conscience called Confirmation that comes with some seven gifts. He also endorses the prayer of Blessed John Henry Newman for clarity of conscience against ears that are deaf to the voice of God and eyes that are blind to the signs of God.

In the final section that focuses upon the importance of prayer and recollection, as well as the concept of “custody of senses,” Guardini states:

Let not all that beats at the door of the senses and attention enter; that we know how to distinguish between good and evil, between what is noble and what is ignoble, between what has value and what is worth nothing, between what brings awareness and order and what creates only confusion and drags us into the base.¹⁶

Moreover, Guardini suggests that we need to prevent newspapers pouring “all that jumble of political junk, of intellectual trifles, of dark and sensational news, of truth and falsehood, of beauty and vulgarity, of gossip and other things” into our interior lives.¹⁷ We need to learn to take from newspapers only the critical information that directly concerns us and not to waste our time on the rest of the data which is presented to us. We need to find pleasure “in engaging the fight against the precarious barbarity that surrounds us,” so that we are not the “laughing stock of the cultural chaos that surrounds us” but are, on the contrary, “free masters of ourselves.”¹⁸

For Guardini it is axiomatic that the human person must be attentive to their conscience, but the conscience can be erroneous for the three reasons he gave. For those “lost in chaos,” his message was: forget Kant, forget Nietzsche and do not degrade yourself with Marxist ideologies. Pray for the grace to hear the voice of God in the depths of one’s soul.

Such reflections by Guardini can be found echoed by Joseph Ratzinger in his *Values in a Time of Upheaval*. In this collection of essays, Ratzinger concluded:

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 56.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 57.

It is indisputable that one must always follow a clear verdict of conscience, or at least that one may not act against such a verdict. But is quite a different matter to assume that the verdict of conscience (or what one takes to be such a verdict) is always correct, ie infallible – for if that were so, it would mean there is no truth, at least in matters of morality and religion, which are the foundations of our very existence.¹⁹

TRACEY ROWLAND (PROF.) – holds two doctorates in theology, one from the Divinity School of Cambridge University (the civil PhD) and one from the John Paul II Institute at the Pontifical Lateran University (the pontifical STD) in addition to degrees in law and philosophy. From 2001–2017 she was the Dean of the John Paul II Institute in Melbourne. In 2010 she was awarded the Archbishop Michael J Miller Award by the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, for the promotion of faith and culture. In 2011 she was awarded the Officer’s Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland and in 2014 she was appointed to the International Theological Commission. She is currently a member of the ITC’s sub-commission on religious freedom.

¹⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, San Francisco 2006, p. 76.