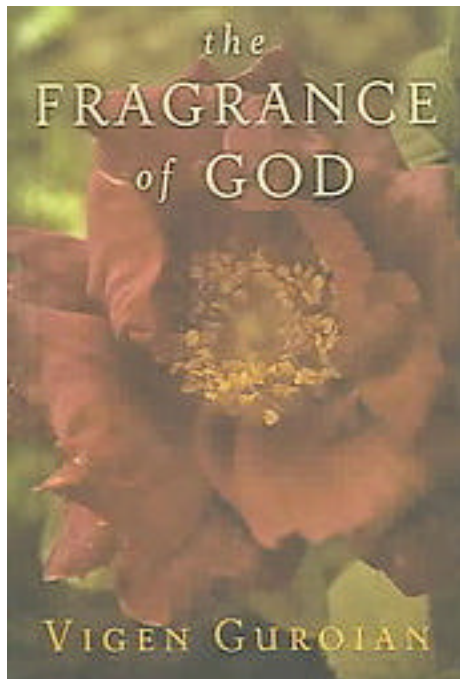


Vigen Guroian, *The Fragrance of God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006. 128+pp. ISBN 0802830765. US\$13.00.



**By Adam A.J. DeVille**

This is a deceptive little book. I admit that I approached it with reluctance, knowing that its seven short chapters consist of ruminations on gardening. My reluctance stems from the unhealed wound to my childhood self-esteem suffered when my chores included being sent out to the family vegetable garden to weed, water, and waste time I should much rather have spent reading. I dreaded gardening tasks, finding them unspeakably boring. It did not help matters that I was a hugely carnivorous child and the only vegetables I ate without protest were potatoes and corn, which we did not grow.

Given such a background, which long residence in urban centres and academic environments has done nothing to decrease, I picked up this book like one picking up his fork to eat the mandatory quota of lima beans or other such disgusting horrors. Having picked it up, however, I feasted on the book quickly and with surprising enjoyment. For in the hands of Vigen Guroian, the Armenian Orthodox theologian teaching at Loyola College in Baltimore, one has a book that is not merely an extended encomium for azaleas or a rhapsodic soliloquy in the presence of sunflowers. This book is a thorough-going work of theology of a very impressive caliber.

Guroian is a prolific author who has published many books and articles in a wide variety of areas. Perhaps his signal achievement is to bring Orthodox theology into dialogue with the many ethical issues of our day in books like *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* and *Ethics After*

*Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic*. These, together with many articles, have filled an enormous lacuna in the theological literature.

Guroian, however, has not confined himself to theological “pigeonholes.” His writings evidence a vast learning and a genuinely catholic interest in many intellectual, political, historical, and cultural topics. In addition to such interests, his clear and passionate avocation is gardening, about which he published another book (*Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*) in 1999.

Upon reflection, it is perhaps not quite accurate to call Guroian’s interest in gardening an “avocation” insofar as that implies that his time amidst the flowers and vegetables takes away from his time thinking or is otherwise a distraction to it. It is not, and *The Paradise of God* is clear evidence of time spent in the garden bearing both literal and intellectual fruits.

This short book consists of a series of reflections on reasons for gardening; “the ecological garden” (in which Guroian commendably reveals himself to be allies with neither the radical romantics about all things earthly nor the ravenous rapists of the planet’s resources); leaving a garden (when Guroian and his family moved from Maryland to a new home in Virginia); beauty in a garden (and how theophanic beauty is); and sin, death, and resurrection in a garden. Guroian deftly weaves very personal reflections with an astonishing array of theological figures, ancient and modern, scriptural and patristic, Latin and Greek, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. But his clearly favourite companion is that extraordinary fourth-century poet and hymnographer, Ephraim the Syrian. Saint Ephraim’s *Hymns on Paradise*, as well as other works, are frequently quoted throughout the book and Guroian very aptly knows which passages to quote and how much without overwhelming the reader.

The balance of Guroian the author is evident in the balance of Guroian the thinker also. As noted above, he is neither a romantic nor a fanatic. He is clearly aware that gardening is “such a bittersweet activity” because it, like all human activity, participates not only in life and beauty but also in

death and decomposition. Even in dark December days, however, Guroian presses on and insists we must also: "I am Adam east of Eden, struggling to make the earth like Paradise until Resurrection Day, when the Gardener and his Mother, the Garden's Opened Gate, will welcome me back in." In one's struggle – whether in the garden or the soul – against sin and death and toward eternal life, Guroian is always aware that his efforts are not his own: there is a necessary synergy between human efforts and divine grace. He can plant, prune, and pray for good weather, but in the end the tastiness of the tomatoes that year depends on the efforts of Another.

He is also aware that "nature" can be capricious and destructive, and of itself has no capacity to glorify God. The heavens can only declare the glory of God through human voice and song. Humans, then, must not be deluded about "nature" (as he nicely puts it, "Christians are the 'real' realists") but equally they must not be deluded into being destructive when exercising dominion over the earth. They are to be gardeners, caretakers, or, in a word preferred by the gospels (but usually in a different context), "stewards."

Why do some garden and others do not? Why do some do it but not consider themselves gardeners, while others do it and wear that badge with honour? Guroian distinguishes between the two, noting that "gardening and being a gardener are not always the same thing." He confesses that he started off initially as what might perhaps be called an instrumentalist gardener, which is to say, he gardened to grow vegetables and thus save money after he was first married and had children to feed. Later on, however, Guroian tells us that he became a "true gardener" and that one can distinguish such creatures from mere "farmers" or instrumentalists because the "true" gardener is "inspired by a love of beauty and a desire for peace and perfection that the world views as prodigality." Just when Guroian's reflections in this chapter are veering toward an unattractive gardening snobbery, he immediately introduces a very mundane note by telling how he pointed out to his children a section of the garden where he said, "That's where I want you to bury me, like a big seed." (His children express horror that the town zoning laws will never permit such a thing but Guroian is insouciant in his hope nonetheless).

The droll informality of this remark is in stark contrast to the formality and intense intimacy of the last chapter, when Guroian addresses not his children but his own mother who, after a stroke and heart attack, is clearly in the sunset of her life. This last chapter does not quite fit with the rest of the book. It adopts a different tone and somewhat different method from the earlier ones, but its effect is to make the reader feel as though he really should look away and not read something that does not pertain to him. Unlike the more relaxed reflections of earlier chapters, Guroian's balance betrays him here as he tries too hard in this chapter and the result is a heavy-handed lecture disguised as a letter to his mother, whose faith in the resurrection would seem to be waning and in need of buttressing.

That, however, must not detract from this delightful little book of a master craftsman whose prose is sown with much wisdom, pruned with much grace, and therefore blossoms with much wisdom.

*About the Reviewer:* Adam A.J. DeVille is a doctoral candidate at the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, where he is writing a dissertation on Orthodoxy and the Roman papacy.