

# The Sabbath and Sunday Worship

*And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; — it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." ~ Mark 16:1-7*

**T**HE LOVE of neighbor commanded by God in the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) is considered important by most people, but God's commandment to keep the sabbath holy (see Ex 20:8) frequently is not observed at all. And yet the sabbath is a foundational and fundamental element of God's creative activity: *"And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation"* (Gn 2:2-3). We know that God, who is spirit and all-powerful, did not need to rest on the seventh day. Why, then, did he do it?

## Why God Created the Sabbath

God created the sabbath for us, his human creatures. We are created with a need to worship him and, physically and spiritually, we need rest and lei-



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*Chapel of Sacred Heart Church in Bowie, Maryland, built in 1741*

*sure. As with everything else about God's creation, he is mindful of our needs and sees to it that they can be met. By "resting," God not only gave us a holy example to follow, but the time and opportunity to praise him and all that he has done as well.*

In the Scriptural account of God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses, God elaborated on the commandment to keep the sabbath holy: *"Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made Heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it"* (Ex 20:9-11). Not only does keeping the sabbath imitate God's action, but keeping the sabbath is not just for a few of us, but for everyone — the whole family, employees, strangers —

***"We are created with a need to worship him and, physically and spiritually, we need rest and leisure."***

and even for the animals that serve us.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God's

commandment is elaborated even further. The sabbath not only recalls God's loving creation, but also commemorates

God's liberation of his Chosen People, the Israelites, from their bondage in Egypt: "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day" (Dt 5:15). The sabbath, therefore, is a day of freedom from the bondage of work.

The sabbath is also a sign of the irrevocable covenant God made with the People of Israel, reminding them forever of their status as his people: "You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.... Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel" (Ex 31:13, 16-17). The sabbath, therefore, is central to the law of the Old Covenant, corresponding to the wisdom and will of God.

### Jesus and the Observance of the Sabbath

The Gospels record several instances when Jesus was accused of violating the sabbath. These episodes tell us several things. First, Jesus tells us that the sabbath itself should not be seen as the master of human activities: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mk 2:27). Second, he teaches that we do not violate the sabbath by the work necessary for the worship of God (see Mt 12:5; see also Nm 28:9-10). Third, he teaches that works of mercy and serving our neighbor are also not violations of the sab-

## *"Sunday worship and rest is both the memorial of God's creation and of Christ's Resurrection."*

bath (see Lk 13:14-16; Lk 14:1-5; Jn 7:22-23). He points out that even animals may be given necessary care on the sabbath (see Lk 13:15; Lk 14:5). Finally, he states unequivocally that "the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath" (Mk 2:28). Jesus has the right to interpret the divine command, declaring the sabbath as a day "for doing good rather than harm, for saving life rather than killing" (CCC 2173). This right he handed to St. Peter and his Church: "I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven" (Mt 16:19, see also Mt 18:18). It is this power of binding and loosing that gives the Church the authority to establish Sunday rather than the sabbath as the day for Christian worship and rest.

### The Origin of Sunday as the Lord's Day

On the first day of creation, God created the Heavens and the earth, separated light from darkness, and called the light day and the darkness night (see Gn 1:1-5). The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead also occurred on the first day of the week (see Jn 20:1-9). His Resurrection completed and validated his work of redemption, as St. Paul tells us: "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14). This day, therefore, is a "new creation," more important

than the day of creation itself: "The first creation finds its meaning and its summit in the new creation in Christ, the splendor of which surpasses that of the first creation"<sup>1</sup> (CCC 349). Sunday is often called in Christian writings the "eighth day" of creation, the day when the world was created anew.

For the Church,



*A child singing during the Easter Vigil Mass in which she and her mother were baptized*

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Roman Missal*, Easter Vigil 24, prayer after the first reading

then, Sunday worship and rest is both the memorial of God's creation and of Christ's Resurrection. "In Christ's Passover, Sunday fulfills the spiritual truth of the Jewish sabbath" (CCC 2175). For this reason, the Church has replaced the sabbath with Sunday worship and rest. Of all days, this is the day of which the Psalmist sings: "This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps 118:24). For Christians, Sunday came to be called "the Lord's Day."

### Sanctifying the Lord's Day with Worship

The tradition of Sunday worship has been handed down from the apostles themselves. It is first documented in Scripture itself, when the Acts of the Apostles records a group of Christians having gathered together "to break bread" on the first day of the week (see Acts 20:7). This could be understood merely as having an ordinary meal, but from other early Christian writings we know that the phrase "to break bread" referred to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, that is, to what we today call the Mass.

Very early Christian writings give unequivocal witness to this tradition. The *Didache* (pronounced DEE-da-kay), or the "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," is an extremely early work, almost certainly written before 100 AD, and possibly decades earlier. It speaks of gathering together, breaking bread, and giving thanksgiving — a very elemental description of the Mass — to be done every Lord's Day. In about 107 AD, St. Ignatius of Antioch specifically wrote of the deliberate replacement of the sabbath with Sunday: "Those who lived according to the old order of things have come to a new hope, no longer keeping the sabbath, but the Lord's Day, in which our life is blessed by him and by his death"<sup>2</sup> (CCC 2175). Around 155 AD, St. Justin Martyr wrote to the Roman emperor: "On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place"<sup>3</sup> (CCC 1345), and then went on to describe Sunday worship, unmistakably the Mass. A few centuries later, St. Jerome wrote that the pagan name of the first day of the week, the "day of the sun," was acceptable, "for today the light

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*Sunday Mass celebrated in the field by Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA*

of the world is raised, today is revealed the sun of justice with healing in his rays"<sup>4</sup> (CCC 1166).

Because of Jesus' Resurrection, which began God's "new creation" in salvation history, the Lord's Day is the first of all feasts in the Church's life. Our celebration of the Lord's Supper — the banquet table that the Lord has spread for us, the Eucharistic celebration of the Mass that is the center and heart of the Church's life — is where the entire community of the faithful encounter our risen Lord.

Worshipping God at Mass on the Lord's Day is an obligation to be taken very seriously, as it fulfills God's commandment to give him regular, public worship. Every week, we celebrate both our Creator and our redemption from sin by Jesus Christ. Sunday worship is foundational for our life in Christ and cannot, therefore, be optional. The first precept of the Church spells out the Catholic's obligation to attend Mass on all Sundays (and holy days of obligation). (The Sun-

<sup>2</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch, Ad Magn. 9, 1 from Sources Chrétiennes 10, 88 (Paris: 1942)

<sup>3</sup> St. Justin, Apol. 1, 65-67 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Graeca 6, 428-429 (Paris, 1857-1866); from chap. 67

<sup>4</sup> St. Jerome, Pasch. from Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 78, 550 (Turnhout, 1953)

day obligation is satisfied by attending a Saturday late afternoon or evening “vigil” Mass for the Sunday. This provision is based on the ancient Hebrew concept, found in the first verses of Genesis, that a day begins in the evening and concludes the following evening.)

Unless there is a serious reason — for example, illness, unavoidable travel to locations

where there is no Mass, dangerous weather conditions — or one is dispensed by the pastor, failure to attend Mass on Sunday is gravely sinful. For localities where no Sunday Mass is available without great hardship, one can seek at least to take part in a Liturgy of the Word, if celebrated, or engage in prayer personally, as a family, or as a group of families.

Keeping the Lord’s Day thus fulfills the moral command of the Old Covenant, taking up its rhythm and spirit in the weekly celebration of God as our Creator and our Redeemer. By participating in the celebration of Mass, we show that we belong to a community of faith, and that we are faithful to Christ and his Church. As a community, we attest to God’s holiness and to our hope of salvation, and strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### Sanctifying the Lord’s Day with Rest

God has designed us for lives that have a rhythm of work and rest. We sanctify the Lord’s Day not only by participating in the Eucharistic celebration, but also by resting. In addition to the obligation to attend Mass, the first precept of the Church requires us to “abstain from those labors and business concerns which impede the worship to be rendered to God, the joy which is proper to the Lord’s Day, or the proper relaxation of mind and body” (*Code of Canon Law*, Can. 1247).

Of course, work cannot entirely be removed from Sundays. Hospitals and nursing homes must be staffed, and children need care. However, we must be careful not to develop habits that make Sunday like any other day of



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the week. Only rarely does shopping need to be done on Sunday, and cooking elaborate meals to celebrate the day might be done partially in advance. The lawn can be mowed and the car washed another day. Children’s sports need not take up Saturday *and* Sunday. Family life has been nearly choked out of existence by the multitude of commitments

that characterize today’s society, and it takes commitment and vigilance to protect and strengthen the bonds of love in the most important of our communities, the family home. Sundays, furthermore, can offer precious time for silence, for personal reflection, and for meditation to strengthen our interior lives.

Making a greater effort to sanctify the Lord’s Day includes avoiding activities that force others to work, and perhaps themselves forego worship. Both public and private employers have an obligation to ensure that employees have needed time for rest and worship. In places where Sundays are not legal holidays, especially where there is no other weekly legal holiday, Christians are especially obliged, by the witness of their prayer, respect for the Lord’s Day, and joyful lives, to defend the importance of a weekly opportunity to rest and worship to the society as a whole.

Finally, Jesus’ example shows that good works, such as care for the sick, infirm, poor, and elderly, are ways to sanctify the Lord’s Day. Good works can also include ministries that serve the Church, such as catechesis of children and adults. When these are undertaken, they should not unduly take away from the claims of the family.

In a culture that seems to force us to live at an ever-faster pace, the Church’s reinforcement of God’s commandment to rest, relax, and enjoy the day are especially needed. We all need leisure to spend time with our families, to strengthen social ties, to expand our cultural horizons, and to deepen our spiritual lives. And God

tells us to have fun!  
(CCC 345-349, 582, 1163, 1166-1167, 1343, 1345, 2042, 2168-2177, 2180-2188)

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