

“Remember to Keep Holy the Sabbath Day”

In his letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II reminded us of the centrality of the “universal call to holiness” that should characterize Christian life. *All the Christian faithful, of whatever state or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.* Our Faith is a way of life, a worldview and not simply a cultural expression, superficial “do-goodism” or the religious arm of a particular *ethnos*. In the Acts of the Apostles the Christians are described as followers of *The Way* because people saw that being Christian meant a difference in the way they lived. If arrested for being a Christian, would the evidence convict us?

In their Magisterium, both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI stressed the importance of personal holiness as the key to the new evangelization. Personal holiness constitutes the best witness that one can give to others and that more than anything else will draw people to Christ.

As an essential means of fostering this personal holiness Pope John Paul II issued his encyclical letter *Dies Domini* emphasizing the need to rediscover the “Sabbath Day” as a means of cultivating this sense of personal holiness in each of us. So we look at “The Lord’s Day” as both a means of personal holiness and of witness to the world.

Step in a time warp, go back 50 years or so and the following picture would present itself on your typical Sunday. The whole neighborhood would be enveloped in a tranquil silence. Few cars and no trucks on the road, parking lots at the mini-malls empty and all the stores closed. Church bells calling people to worship and the church parking lots filled with cars. Later in the day you would see families get together for a cookout or just enjoy the time together. Now return to today and something radically different presents itself.

Instead of the tranquil silence, hustle and bustle abound as clothes get washed, yard work done and of course the great American pastime—shopping. (*In God We Trust* has been replaced by *I Consume therefore I Am*). Parking lots in the mega-malls — full while the Church parking lots are mostly empty. The Sabbath is being observed, but the wrong God is being worshipped. To return to the worship of the True God, we begin by looking at the origins of the Sabbath.

In the Book of Genesis we read, *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.* (Genesis 2: 1-3) Moving on to the Book of Exodus we find, *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath day to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work...therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.* (Exodus 20: 8, 11).

The Lord God does not get “tired” from His work of creating the universe out of nothing and therefore needs a “day off” for some R&R, but instead indicates something that constitutes an important part of our covenant relationship with Him. He gave us six days for our pursuits, we, in turn; give one day back to Him in which we acknowledge Him as our Lord and Creator. We “hallow” (make holy) this day by devoting it to Him and leaving out anything of a secular or profane nature. Because God is God, we have the obligation to worship Him and acknowledge His dominion over us. Without God, we are nothing. How does one “hallow” this day?

If you live near an observant Jewish community, you will notice that following every Jewish

Sabbath (Friday sundown till Saturday sundown), no work or any type of secular activity takes place. The meals are prepared ahead of time. No laundry, shopping, cutting the grass, painting or other yard work. Delivered mail and newspapers stay in the box till after the Sabbath. The writer, when young, along with his friend took the empty garbage pails to the back of the Jewish neighbor's home (Saturday being pick up day in our town). The people dress in their best for synagogue services (contrast that with the way the average Catholic dresses for Sunday Mass) and when they return home it's not into the sweats and hand-me-down clothes; they stay in their best all day. No television, computer, radio, CD's and the like but instead walks with and time with family and friends.

While much of the above may seem "a bit much" it bespeaks their reverence for Almighty God. God gets their very best: their time (full 24 hours) and full attention (secular activities excluded).

With the Resurrection of Jesus Christ on the first day of the week, the Sabbath now becomes the "Day of the Lord" or the weekly Easter. As Pope John Paul II says in "Dies Domini" *The Resurrection of Jesus is the fundamental event upon which Christian faith rests. Therefore, in commemorating the day of Christ's Resurrection not just once a year but every Sunday, the Church seeks to indicate to every generation the true fulcrum of history, to which the mystery of the world's origin and its final destiny leads.* This proclaims our identity as Christians.

By observing the Lord's Day, we first of all proclaim our identity as Christians. By His death and resurrection Jesus Christ has freed us from sin and death and we make that Paschal Mystery our own by our assisting in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass (Christ's eternal sacrifice made present to us) and keeping holy the Lord's Day. The Holy Father expressed concern that we seem to be losing this sense of giving to God the worship that is His due. He says: *In the minds of many of*

the faithful, not only the sense of the centrality of the Eucharist but even the sense of the duty to give thanks to the Lord and to pray to him with others in the community of the Church, seems to be diminishing. Why? Most people will answer, "We're too busy." The pursuit of material things that we must someday leave behind seems to have taken precedence over "storing up for ourselves treasures that will last" (eternal life). Where do we begin?

First, we should make Sunday truly the Lord's Day. It's His, not ours. We remind ourselves that our life comes from Him and that one day we will stand before Him. This reminder turns our attention away from ourselves and to Him. We then make worship of God at Sunday Mass the priority. In many families where one of the children belongs to a sport's team, the family will rearrange the family schedule to accommodate the sport's schedule. Surely we can rearrange things to accommodate Him who died and rose again for us.

Second our deportment and demeanor at Mass should reflect what is taking place there. We arrive early enough to engage in some personal prayer before Mass begins. We dress as befitting going before "the King of Kings and Lord of Lords." (He's not my "pal" who wants me to be laid back and casual). During Mass we assist with attention and devotion.

Thirdly, we keep the rest of the day as His day. The yard work can wait. We can put off getting the new stereo until the next day and spend the time with our families enjoying the greatest gift that God has given us.

Lastly, we will be a sign of the Kingdom. The world needs people courageous enough to witness that Christ has first place in their lives. That all these things that the secular world deems so important are merely passing. Our Christian vocation calls us to be leaven in the world. The best place to begin as individuals and as a community is by "keeping holy the Lord's Day." ✠