



YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST

MAY THEME - SUNDAY – KEEPING THE LORD’S DAY HOLY

By Archbishop Edward J Gilbert CSsR

On Pentecost Sunday 1998, Pope John Paul II issued an Apostolic Letter to the Church on **Keeping The Lord’s Day Holy**. The Latin title for the letter is *Dies Domini* which means the “The Day of the Lord.” The Holy Father’s Letter reviews the understanding of the Catholic tradition on Sunday, the Day of the Resurrection.

Why? To encourage believers throughout the world who are trying to live their faith, but who are faced with the very difficult challenges of increasing hostility, indifference or unresponsiveness to the message of the Gospel.

The Holy Father stated in the Letter, “it is crucially important for the life of faith that believers should come together with other believers on Sundays to celebrate the Passover of the Lord in the Sacrament of the New Covenant.”

What does Sunday Celebrate? The response is, of course, the Resurrection of the Lord. As Vatican Council II stated: “Every seven days the Church celebrates the Easter mystery.

This is a tradition going back to the Apostles taking its origin from the actual day of Christ’s Resurrection.” The Resurrection which occurred on the first day after the Sabbath (Mk 16: 2) and which is the first day of the new creation is the celebration of the fundamental event on which the Christian faith rests.

The Holy Father’s letter invites the Church to reflect on the Lord’s Day because the socio-economic changes of our time have affected social behaviour and challenged the character of Sunday.

The heart of the matter is the basic difference between understanding Sunday as “the Lord’s Day” and understanding Sunday as merely part of the secular weekend of rest and relaxation. The Holy Father asks the Church to rediscover the doctrinal foundations of Sunday.

The method the Holy Father uses to represent the doctrinal foundations for the Lord's Day is to consider the foundations under separate headings. I shall try to highlight some of the major concepts of the Apostolic Letter:

Celebration of the Creator's work

The Sunday Easter celebration is not just about the Paschal Mystery, it is about the role of the Son in creation itself. Through the incarnation, the Son became flesh and fulfilled the plan of the Father in the new creation which he will bring to completion when he returns in glory.

Therefore, there is, according to God's plan, a Christocentric perspective in all of time. After initial creation, God rested. God offered this rest to the people of the Exodus. The concept flowed into the New Testament and was applied to the definitive Sabbath - Sunday, the Lord's Day.

The Lord's Day becomes a defining and indelible expression of our relationship with God for these reasons:

- 1) because Sunday has been set apart from other days by God to allow people to praise and offer thanksgiving to the creator;
- 2) because the relationship of God's People with God demands times of explicit prayer which requires an interruption of an often oppressive rhythm of work;
- 3) because keeping the Lord's Day holy allows the human person the time to remember that everything belongs to God and that God's creation involves a liberating salvation which must be celebrated with deep gratitude.

Day of the Risen Lord and the Day of the Holy Spirit

The witness of the Gospels tells us the Resurrection took place on the "first day after the Sabbath" - a Sunday. The day of Pentecost was also on a Sunday. Gradually, Sunday began to shape the rhythm of life for the Christian community.

It was the day they celebrated the newness of the Christian mystery and slowly, it was understood to be distinct from the Jewish Sabbath. Sunday was the day above all other days and Christians were called to remember the salvation which was given them in Baptism and which has made them new in Christ.

Since the Spirit was also given on a Sunday, Sunday becomes not only the "weekly Easter" but also the "weekly Pentecost." It is therefore, the indispensable day of Faith, a day whose identity must be respected and celebrated by God's People.

The Eucharist assembly

Sunday is not only a remembrance of the past, it is the celebration of the living presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his own people. The Holy Father stresses that, "those who have received the grace of Baptism are not saved as individuals alone, but as members of the Mystical Body, having become part of the People of God."

This makes clear the importance of gathering as a community. The gathering makes visible the Church. The Eucharist both feeds and forms the gathering. For example, the Sunday assembly is an excellent opportunity for parents to share with their children at the table of the Word and the Bread of Life.

Sunday is also a day of hope. Celebrating the memorial of Christ having died, risen and ascended into heaven, the community proclaims its hope for his return in glory. The community then moves from the Mass to Mission - to be evangelisers and witnesses

Sunday: Day of joy, rest and solidarity

The Sunday Eucharist expresses the joy that Christ communicates to the Church through the gift of the Spirit and calls the assembly to celebrate the Eucharist with the same joy the Apostles had when they greeted the Lord on the evening of Easter.

Rest is necessary to keep the Lord's Day Holy. In fact, if people do not have enough free time, it is difficult for them to keep the Lord's Day Holy. This norm provides a context for understanding the laws of the Church, over the centuries, regarding work on Sunday.

The Holy Father makes an important point concerning solidarity. Eucharist requires sharing the love which is celebrated. There is no joy without love. As Christians we cannot be happy on our own. We must try to seek out others in solidarity to bring to them the joy we have celebrated in the Eucharist.

Conclusion

I know that for many readers documents can be a very challenging form of reading. However, in an effort to respond to the Holy Father's invitation to rediscover Sunday, I strongly recommend that individuals and prayer/study groups obtain the Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini*, and read it reflectively.