

Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of the Nordic Countries

Keeping Sunday Holy

Introduction

Sine dominico non possumus! "Without this gift from the Lord, without the day of Lord, we cannot live." So replied the Christians of Abitene in Tunisia in 304, who were apprehended for offering the Eucharist on Sunday and brought before a judge. (Pope Benedict XVI in his sermon in Vienna's Stephansdom on September 9, 2007)

One of the most important signs of a healthy Christian life is keeping the Sabbath holy. From the times of the early Church, Sunday has been the day of the week on which Christians gathered together to offer the Eucharist. On Sunday, they omitted heavy labour and rested.

The Need for Rest

After hard physical or mental labour, humans need rest. Work and rest follow one another. Shorter working hours and technical aides have in many ways made the working life simpler. Meanwhile, the time spent outside of work each week has increased. Yet, increased leisure and modern technology sometimes render people restless. Oftentimes the decreased working hours result in an increased pressure to produce a greater quantity and quality of goods.

Sunday needs to be a day of physical and mental relaxation, which is free from professional work. Sunday is meant for taking care of family life, for friendships, for visiting the sick and the lonely, as well as for cultural and mental development.

In today's world there exists the danger of Sunday becoming just like any other day of the week. Particularly in service-oriented professions, ever more work is demanded on Sundays. As consumers, we have the temptation to take advantage of unnecessary services, e.g. making purchases during a store's Sunday hours, thus destroying the sacred nature of Sunday.

The Sacred Nature of Sundays

The sacred nature of Sundays should be to us Catholics a matter close to our hearts, as to it are connected essential areas of our faith. The Jewish Sabbath has become the Christian Sunday, the day on which Christ rose from the Dead and sent us the Holy Spirit. These mysteries of our salvation we remember and celebrate on Sunday.

Sunday is the Day of Resurrection

God showed us His love in the incarnation of His Son. In his earthly life, Jesus lived this love until His death, as an example to us. In His own person Christ has brought God close to us, and by his obedience all the way to death on the cross, he showed God's truth. In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-

12) he promised a future to the weak and to those who, from a human point of view, were considered failures. He demanded the circle of evil be destroyed, so that no longer would “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” (cf. Matthew 5:38-40) be valid and invited humans to a radical love of their neighbors, and to follow Him (cf. Mark 8:34-38).

“And if Christ be not risen again, then is our preaching vain: and your faith is also vain.” (1. Corinthians 15:14) In these words St. Paul explains that each act in the name of Christ would be without meaning without the Lord's resurrection, and the entire life of faith would be purposeless. At the same time, the resurrection of Christ is also a sign of His being the Lord of our lives.

Sunday is the day of the Eucharist

The cross and the resurrection tell us of the divinity of Jesus and of his limitless love for us. This unique and singular event becomes for us the present moment when we celebrate the Eucharist. In this sacrament we meet the living Christ, who was risen from the dead on a Sunday, the first day of the week. When we participate in Sunday's Eucharist, Christ takes us into His work of Salvation.

The Christians of Abitene could not conceive of living without Sunday and without Sunday's Eucharist. Do we also consider Sunday's Eucharist a great gift and the feast of our faith? Unfortunately, not everyone always knows the meaning of the Eucharist and therefore, the meaning of Sunday. This in itself is not new. The early Church confronted this problem and turned this divine invitation into an order: “On Sundays and other Holy Days of Obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass.” (CIC, can. 1247).

How can an invitation become an order? How can our faith on the whole be living and spontaneous, if it must be regulated by commands? Because faith is God's gift and a sign of His love, our faith must be a free answer to this love. In the words of the command, the Church wants to help us understand that this matter is vital. Our positive response to faith in God takes place in our hearts. There God talks to us and lets us feel His closeness.

But God does not speak to us in our hearts only; He meets us above all in His word and gives us His gifts through the sacraments. The Word of God can of course be read in private, but also the solemn proclamation and the official explaining of the Bible are needed. This necessity is met in the Liturgy of the Word, which belongs to the celebration of the Eucharist. The sacraments, especially the Eucharist, are signs, which make the communion of the church visible and strengthen it. The presence of Christ and His gift of Himself to us in the Eucharist are absolutely necessary for the strengthening of our spiritual lives, in order that we not deny these signs of love. Therefore, we must personally come to the place where Christ can be received in the Host. We must come to the celebration of the Eucharist, especially on Sunday, when the entire parish gathers together.

Sunday is the Day of the Church

Hearing the Word of God and receiving the Body and Blood of Christ at Mass is a great personal gift. As faithful, we are, however, not alone nor should we be alone. We have become believers through the Church, united to a community. When we profess belonging to the Church, we must

remain in its community so that we are where it becomes visible and concrete; that is, in the celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday.

As Christians, and in our Nordic countries, especially as Catholics, we are often alone. Therefore we need to be strengthened by the presence of our brothers and sisters in the faith, just as we can encourage them by our participation. This is especially important for youth, that they not remain alone in the faith.

The Challenge of Participating in Sunday's Liturgy

As necessary as our partaking in the Sunday's Eucharist is, in our countries it often poses a great challenge. Great distances, missing traffic connections, lack of priests, different family relationships (e.g. mixed marriages), and parents' poor example in practicing the faith all may make Mass attendance difficult. Additionally, the burden on priests is already too strenuous to offer Masses in all the possible locations each Sunday.

There are reasons which can be considered as valid obstacles to fulfilling one's Sunday obligation, such as necessary employment, illness or frailness and weakness in old age. However, the wish to take part in Sunday Mass according to one's ability and to look for God's closeness should always exist. When this wish cannot be fulfilled due to the reasons mentioned, one must seek other options. If one's own parish is unable to offer a Sunday Mass, one should, as far as possible, go to the neighbouring parish or take part in the Liturgy of the Word. Especially for the aged and the sick, seeing Mass on television or hearing it on radio may be a sensible substitute. When it is not possible to attend Mass on Sunday, one should use the Bible or the Missal and thus, through a time of devotion, be spiritually united to the Eucharistic celebration of the parish.

In Closing

Keeping Sunday holy is a necessary part of our Catholic identity. Therefore, each must do everything possible in order to bring forth the sacred nature of this day: by abstaining from unnecessary work, but especially by looking for God in the celebration of the Eucharist. If normal observance of Sunday's sacredness is impossible, we must turn to Him in other ways. As Catholics we need Sunday to nurture our faith, through which we give our witness. By defending Sunday as a feast day and the day of rest, we do not help only the Church's life: by keeping Sunday holy, we show our fellow humans how the necessary free time can be made into a meaningful and worthwhile time of physical and mental rest.

Belief in the risen Lord is the foundation of our being Christian. Sunday and its celebration of the Eucharist open and deepen this faith within the liturgical community, in which we especially are made to feel that we are the Church. Thus we urge all our faithful once again to hold Sunday as the time of mercy and salvation (cf. 2. Corinthians 6:2) and to understand that to keep it holy means giving witness of the faith and encouragement for an ever stronger effort for the spreading of the Good News in the world.

With greetings and blessings,

Your bishops in the Nordic Countries,

+ Anders Arborelius OCD
Bishop of Stockholm

+ Peter Bürcher
Bishop of Reykjavik

+ Berislav Grgic
Bishop Prelate of Tromsø

+ Czeslav Kozon
Bishop of Copenhagen

+ Bernt Eidsvig Can.Reg.
Bishop of Oslo
Administrator of Trondheim

+ Teemu Sippo SCJ
Bishop of Helsinki

+ Gerhard Schwenzer SS.CC.
Bishop Emeritus of Oslo

*In Tallinn on the feast of St. Matthew the Apostle
September 21, 2009*