

The Sunday Obligation
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Under the Old Law, sanctification of the Sabbath was commanded very clearly. There was no mincing of words. "Remember that thou shalt keep holy the Sabbath Day. Six days shalt thou labor, and shalt do all thy works, but on the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: Thou shalt do no work on it, thou nor thy son, nor thy maidservant, nor thy beast, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and the sea and all things that are in them, and rested on the seventh day: therefore, the Lord blessed the seventh day and sanctified it." Exodus 20:8-11.

Under the New Law, the First Day of the Week, meaning Sunday, took on great importance with the Apostles and replaced the Sabbath in significance. We read in today's Gospel the first sanction of Sunday over the Sabbath when the Apostles received the power to absolve sins. Sunday was the day that the early Church gathered for the breaking of the bread (Acts 20:7). The work of creation began on a Sunday, our Lord rose from the dead on a Sunday and the Holy Ghost came down upon the Apostles on a Sunday.

The Bible does not teach that the observance of Sunday should be like the old Sabbath. As Catholics, however, we believe that the Bible is not the only rule of Faith, but we rely also on Sacred Tradition as handed down from the Apostles. Observance of Sunday is one such item of Sacred Tradition that we can see goes all the way back the infant Church.

It is important to understand the underlying principles for this observance, particularly in today's secular society that is trying to undo any religious practices of the Faith.

- ~ In the first place, the whole of our time belongs to God. "Thine is the day and Thine is the night" (Ps 73:16). God could claim all of our time exclusively for Himself since He created us and keeps us in existence. Instead, He gave us the command to be fruitful and multiply and to subdue the earth. He wants us to work, but He also wants us to set aside time to give Him due honor and glory, and to rest.
- ~ Our very nature bids us to devote time exclusively to God. All nations have observed days for sacred rites, even before our Lord's coming.
- ~ Our real work is the salvation of our souls. We must devote time to that, just as we devote time to work, rest and recreation. There should be proper order in our lives. All things ought to be done for God's greater honor and glory, including setting aside time to reverence Him.
- ~ We must honor God with a befitting service. It is not sufficient for us to go into the forest and worship Him there in our hearts. We are not isolated beings. Yes, we should worship God in our hearts, but we should also worship Him in our community, as befits our nature as social beings. We owe a responsibility to God to worship Him publicly by attending Mass and other liturgical functions and devotions.

- ~ God expressly determined what He requires of us. Though the particular day be changed from the Sabbath to Sunday, the principle remains the same, one day in seven is to be devoted to Him.

Neglect of Sunday sanctification is a great evil. It is an injustice to God to rob Him of His glory and disobedient to Him and His Church. This grievous sin may also be a sin of scandal, setting a bad example for others.

We too easily fail to honor Sunday and often let worldly cares get in our way, ignoring our responsibilities to God. We forget that sanctifying Sunday is for the benefit of our souls. Mother Church, in her wisdom, specifies mandatory requirements for Sundays and gives counsel on ways to keep the day holy. Canon Law 1247 mandates that the faithful participate at Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of obligation and abstain from work or business that would inhibit the worship given to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day or the due relaxation of mind and body. This two-prong obligation will be discussed first in terms of the Mass.

The precept to attend Mass may be excused, in part or full, if it would cause a grave inconvenience for oneself or another, or is due to the special nature of one's work. For example, a sick adult or child who should not go out and those who take care of him have grave reason not to attend. Dangerous road conditions and severe weather that would endanger lives are grave reasons. What is not a grave reason is having a headache because you were up late having fun the night before.

Inherent to this precept is coming on time to hear the entire Mass. Tardy arrival is a serious matter. At a minimum, you must be present at one Mass from the Offertory to the end of Mass to meet the obligation. Even so, if you cannot attend a second Mass that day to the point at which you entered the first, you will have sinned and your sin will be determined by the gravity of the reason for being late.

Resting on Sunday is the second aspect of the obligation in the canon. God rested on the seventh day and so should we. Too often, the hustle and bustle of our present society keeps us from fulfilling our duties to God. Some families seldom eat together, even on Sundays, because of their activities. To hear the voice of conscience and draw closer to God, we need rest.

To assist us in understanding this aspect of the obligation, Mother Church provides counsel on ways to sanctify Sundays. These include attending other church services, such as Vespers, doing a Holy Hour, listening to pious instructions or doing extra spiritual reading. Honest recreation within limits is not forbidden as long as we are able to fulfill our Sunday duties.

Many sins flow from neglect of our basic duties to God. Spiritually, we fall into indifference, tepidity and, eventually, a loss of faith. Temporally, we lose many graces and God's blessings. Our desires conflict with our obligation: Sunday shopping, attending Sunday morning sports events, hunting, fishing and so on.

Reflect on this! Set your priorities correctly and make sure you fulfill your duties to God first. He will bless us if we are faithful. We may never be rich or famous, but we will have what we need when we need it.

The habit of going to church every Sunday is important to form early in children, especially through the example of parents and older siblings. Good habits acquired early will remain. When the habit is not there or only partially fulfilled, as when one spouse routinely fails to attend Mass, the children may come to neglect their duties to God, particularly as they reach their teenage and adult years.

Our Lord's mission was to establish a triple peace in the hearts of men. This mission was first announced by the angels at His birth, when they proclaimed: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will". It was affirmed on the day of the Resurrection when Christ, standing in the midst of the Apostles, greeted them with the words: "Peace be to you", and was reiterated again when He appeared to them eight days later. The peace Christ offers men is of a three-fold nature:

- ~ peace with God, by the observance of His commandments;
- ~ peace with our fellow men, by the practice of justice and charity;
- ~ peace within our own breasts, by keeping our passions subject to reason and our reason in harmony with Divine Law.

Assisting at Mass and sanctifying Sundays helps us obtain the peace of Christ by these means:

- ~ opening our hearts to God to be instructed by Him;
- ~ praying with our fellow men, which is an important foundation for justice and charity; and,
- ~ being instructed in God's law so that our reason can be in harmony with the Divine Law, which, in turn, will help us obey interiorly with our heart and exteriorly in action.

Faithful sanctification of Sundays and Holy Days aids us in observing God's other laws. These laws benefit our souls and lead us to the peace that only God can give. Either we will be faithful in observing His laws and grow spiritually, or we will neglect our duties and grow tepid. There is no in between.