

21. July 2023

On Sabbath observance and Sunday sacredness

Mt 12:1-8

At that time Jesus went through the corn on the sabbath: and his disciples being hungry, began to pluck the ears, and to eat. And the Pharisees seeing them, said to him: Behold thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days. But he said to them: Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and they that were with him: How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the loaves of proposition, which it was not lawful for him to eat, nor for them that were with him, but for the priests only? Or have ye not read in the law, that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple break the sabbath, and are without blame? But I tell you that there is here a greater than the temple. And if you knew what this meaneth: I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: you would never have condemned the innocent. For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath.

To this day, the Sabbath - the “Shabbat” - is of great importance to the Jewish people. It is for them a feast day, a family day, a day of thanksgiving, a day of rest, the special Day of the Lord, to be distinguished from the working days. What a wise institution of God, to take us out of our usual hustle and bustle and to remind us that the most important thing is not work, but to live in loving communion with the Lord!

In our Christian tradition, Sunday has taken the place of the Jewish “Sabbath”. The “Lord's Day” - as we call it - is also a little prelude to heaven, and on this day all work should really be avoided, in order to enter into the “Sabbath rest”, which is also so holy for believing Jews.

Unfortunately, we humans run the risk of overly legalistic interpretation of God's wise precepts, and thus fail to transcend their true meaning. That is why the Pharisees and scribes were repeatedly scandalised by Jesus' actions. The precept of the Sabbath is not, in the first instance, to keep certain rules, but to understand the meaning of this holy day. This is what the Lord criticises in an overly legalistic view of the Sabbath, but without in any way questioning the value of the Sabbath itself.

We Christians in many countries have to mourn the loss of Sunday rest, which deeply disrupts the spiritual order that God has given to mankind.

Let us remember the commandment God gave to His people:

“Remember that thou keep holy the sabbath day. Six days shalt thou labour, 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 daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy beast, nor the 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” (Ex 20:8-11).

In the apparitions of La Salette in 1846, approved by the Church, the Virgin Mary also laments the non-observance of Sunday: “People do not observe the Lord's Day, they continue to work without stopping on Sundays”, says Our Lady, and she names this as one of the things that displease God very much and make the “hand of her Son” heavier and heavier...

The sanctification of Sunday means not to do unnecessary work, not to consider it as if it were just another day of the week and not to do anything that is contrary to the dignity of this day, for it is the Lord's Day.

If the Church reminds us that Sunday has been particularly sanctified by God, this serves to ensure something important in the rhythm of human life.

Sunday also reminds us of the contemplative dimension of our life. We are not only to glorify God with our active life; but there is also the intimate relationship of love with Him, the resting in His Heart, putting everything aside to be with Him. Sunday rest, explicitly addressing ourselves to God, attending Holy Mass, taking time for acts of charity for one's neighbour or for one's own soul in inner recollection. All this makes us receptive to God and corresponds to the spirit of the Sunday precept.

In this way the Lord's Day is sanctified and God is honoured. If, on the other hand, I simply continue with my normal occupations, if I do not respect this day in a special way, I am doing myself harm and rejecting what God wants to give me with the Day of Rest, for He also rested from all His works (cf. Gen 2:3). I would then be rejecting His

offer of love and also violating those instructions that He has given me for my own good.

Although in the present time sensitivity to this day of rest is being lost, we Christians must bear witness that the Wisdom of God rules this world, and in this Wisdom is included the observance of the Lord's Day.