



THE GIFT OF SUNDAY

A theological reflection published with the ecclesiastical approval
of Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKI, for use in catechesis and prayerful reflection
with the People of God in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

*“Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life,
which the Son of Man will give you.” – John 6:27*

JANUARY 25, 2021
FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL THE APOSTLE

1. Our world has been shaken in recent times by the deprivation of the bonds of communion. We have hungered for the times of joyful gatherings with each other. We have hungered for the ability to gather for worship, knowing what it means to be starved of the Sacraments. We have become sick with an anxious fear of death, growing at times forgetful of the promised rest of heaven. We have been led to question anew the relationship of humanity to the rest of the created world that provides goods we consume in order to live, but that also exposes us to deadly forces. Recently, our world has been undergoing a forced rest that has come upon us against our will, one that has arrested the normal routines of work and activity. This imposed rest has forced many of us to question the hectic pace of our work and world that had reached a fever pitch before our lives were brought to a stand-still. We need to reassess our priorities as children of God.

2. “I will give you rest,” the Lord says.¹ Ours is a world that seeks to understand anew, now more than ever, what is meant by authentic rest, authentic communion, and authentic worship. As we emerge from the deserts of deprivation, God invites us to become reacquainted, in the opportunity of a new beginning, with his original plan and desire for a world that needs true rest and true worship. We are invited to again come to know the meaning and the gift of Sunday.

SUNDAY ORIGINATES AT THE DAWN OF TIME AND THE DAWN OF HUMANITY

3. Sunday is the one day of the week dedicated uniquely to the Lord and to worship. As such, it has its origins in the pattern of creation itself. This is made known not only by the study of the natural world, but also by the revelation of God in the Sacred Scriptures.

4. The natural world is filled with cycles and rhythms that govern every facet of life: the cycles of day and night,

of seasons changing, of growth and decay, of birth and death. Many of the creatures of the animal world, especially humans, require a regular cycle of rest, or sleep, in order to live and flourish. Additionally, men and women uniquely require rest beyond the mere biological. We require a rest that re-centers, re-orient, and re-focuses the body, mind, and soul on our Creator himself, so that we can be renewed by the regular reminder of our unique human vocation to know, love, and serve God completely.

5. The Book of Genesis describes in inspired language the same reality that is made clear in the natural world. It speaks of God who made the earth after a pattern of days, thus allowing the passage of time itself, and the cycles of nature, to be a holy and sanctifying reality. The Scriptures show this most clearly by teaching that God rests on the seventh day of creation, revealing in sacred language the deepest purpose of the cycle of rest and renewal that extends across the fabric of the universe. This cycle exists in nature to open up a needed space of contemplation of God himself, in all his wonder, and to point with a fanfare of praise and rejoicing to the one who made all things good.

6. Sunday, as a day of the Lord, originates at the dawn of time. It is inscribed in the created order. It is “inscribed by nature in the human heart to render God an outward, visible, public, and regular worship.”² Without Sunday, all of creation loses its proper interpretive key and meaning.

SUNDAY GROWS FROM A JOYFUL RELATIONSHIP

7. In the context of the fundamental relationship of creation to Creator, most especially of humanity’s relationship to God who made us uniquely in his image and likeness, we can speak of the word “obligation.” Obligation arises out of love that unites persons in relationship. Love takes the shape of obligation as it awakens the persons in

relationship to what they know they must do for the one they love. Love makes demands on the lover, which the lover freely, even joyfully undertakes because they know it is right and just. “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us.”³

8. God is the source of all life. He is the one to whom all creation, most especially the human person, points in its wondrous pattern. As we reflect upon our relationship to the God who made us, we come to realize the duty we have to render him regular, outward praise and worship. This duty to worship is linked to the pattern of rest that God placed into the created order. For the Christian, Sunday is the day of obligation and worship because it is the day of rediscovery of love, by us the creatures, for God our creator who has blessed us so abundantly. Sunday obligation flowers into Sunday rejoicing for the believer who rightly understands the love of God, and his magnificent generosity. Worship flows from wonder. For all of the same reasons, deliberately choosing not to worship or observe Sunday without good reason is a failure of love and of duty. Such a failure constitutes a serious break in our relationship to God and to each other.

FALLEN CREATION RECEIVES THE REMEDY OF SUNDAY

9. The Book of Genesis describes in the language of Eden the original pattern and harmony of creation oriented totally to God. It also describes how humanity’s first sin shattered this harmony. As humanity turned away from right adoration and awe of God, as humanity failed to worship God by instead choosing to worship itself, slavery entered the world. This slavery has assumed many forms since the earliest days of human history, most especially a slavery to tasks and work.
10. Tragically, humanity found itself sickened with the effects of self-worship. This sickness infected the rest of the created order as humans increasingly misused the

goods of the earth, and also misused other human beings to pursue a false illusion of rest. Rather than resting in the contemplation of God, fallen humanity instead strove after a rest we thought we could achieve by working harder. We thought we could overcome the sufferings of life, in order to rest from labor, all on our own power.

11. In response to our turning away, God moved quickly to re-establish his covenant with us his people. God gave us the law as a way to rescue humanity from our empty pursuit of a fleeting rest from labor and pain. He gave us the law to orient us properly toward right love of him and of our neighbor. The lynchpin of this law of love of God and of neighbor, of the two tablets of the commandments, is the Third Commandment: to keep holy the Sabbath as a day of worship and of rest. To the extent that this commandment has been followed, the health of humanity and the health of creation has grown toward restoration. Conversely, in times and places where it has not been properly observed due to our chasing after temporary rest by enslavement to our tasks, humanity and the wider creation have descended into a cycle of destruction.
12. In this fallen world, the remedy for this discord is the Lord’s Day. In the time of Christian revelation, the Third Commandment has taken its definitive shape in Sunday as the day of the Lord, the day of worship, and the day of rest. Sunday is the heart of the renewal of the cosmos and of the entire fallen world. The Law of Sunday, the obligation in love of Sunday, is given to rescue us from ourselves by fully redirecting our attention towards God.
13. Since the earliest days of Christianity, believers understood Sunday as a “little Easter.” Saint Augustine calls Sunday “a sacrament of Easter,” and Saint Jerome proclaims “Sunday is the day of the resurrection, it is the day of Christians, it is our day.”⁴ It is “our day” because it reminds us of the essence of who we are, a people claimed by God through the blood of Christ who rose

glorious from the grave. Death and sin shall be no more for Christ has conquered over them.

THE HEART OF SUNDAY IS WORSHIP

14. For Sunday to authentically be a remedy for the Fall of Eden, Sunday requires the act of worship. A day that exists solely for its own sake for the restful contemplation and adoration of God needs to originate in an activity that is also carried out solely for its own sake. Worship is the act of turning one's heart, mind, body, and soul to face God directly. We focus on him intentionally, acknowledging the truth that he is our God, for whom we long, for whom our soul thirsts.⁵ We recognize with our whole selves, that He made us, and we belong to him.⁶ He alone, for his unbounded love, is worthy of our highest praise and adoration. Worship is an intentionally unproductive action by any measurements of our earthly existence. It is not supposed to "produce," or "accomplish" anything in the realm of the merely material. In this way, our participation in an intentionally other-worldly activity, each week, rescues us from the slavery of production. Resting only in God, in the act of worship, immerses us in the true rest of heaven for which we long. This heavenly rest of the act of worship, the true remedy for the Fall of Eden, cannot be attained through any other earthly labors, good though they may be. A Sunday without worship cannot truly be a day of rest.

THE HEART OF WORSHIP IS THE MASS AND THE HOLY EUCHARIST

15. For Catholics, the authentic worship of Sunday takes the necessary form of participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass. "The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice."⁷ Certainly it is true that other types of personal and devotional prayer that are offered in any setting besides the Mass are of great value to growth in holiness and to giving God praise. However, the unbroken pattern of the Christian Church from its first days is one of weekly

and obligatory public prayer that follows the pattern that originates in Christ and the Apostles.

16. The essential pattern of weekly Christian prayer and worship includes by necessity these components: gathering in person together on Sunday, hearing the Scriptures publicly proclaimed in the same gathering, and offering in this same gathering prayers of blessing over the gifts of bread and wine in imitation of Christ at the Last Supper so that these gifts become his Body and Blood. These are the essential elements of Sunday Mass that are both ancient and also the necessary form of worship that God intends for us his people for our authentic rest and adoration. They bring us into essential contact with God and with each other in a way that cannot be replicated outside of the Mass, even in the most excellent other forms of private, devotional prayer.

Tradition preserves the memory of an ever-timely exhortation: Come to Church early, approach the Lord, and confess your sins, repent in prayer... Be present at the sacred and divine liturgy, conclude its prayer and do not leave before the dismissal... We have often said: "This day is given to you for prayer and rest. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."⁸

17. The early Christians under persecution were commanded to forsake their Sunday worship by burning incense to pagan gods instead. The Christians refused to do so, and they were martyred acknowledging Sunday as the day of the Resurrection of Christ. They went to their death exclaiming to their executioners that they could not live without celebrating the Lord's day.⁹

THE HOLY EUCHARIST IS THE BODY AND BLOOD OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

18. "At the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ's Body and Blood."¹⁰

The Church has come to know with absolute certainty that the Lord Jesus, who is true God and true man, is truly present in the Eucharist. We refer to this as the “Real Presence.”

“This presence is called ‘real’ - by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be called ‘real’ too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.”¹¹

19. Furthermore, when the Eucharist is received as spiritual food by believers who are properly disposed to receive it, Christ truly nourishes our bodies and souls with his very own Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. This is a sharing of God’s own essential presence with us, the members of his Mystical Body, in a way that cannot be replicated apart from the Eucharist. God desires to sustain us with himself. For this reason it can be said the Eucharist, as the true Body and Blood of Christ, is the source and summit of authentic rest from our earthly toil, as the food that we cannot earn but must instead freely and lovingly receive.

THE EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION RESTORES THE COSMOS

20. In the presentation of the gifts during Mass we give thanks to God for bread and wine, the “work of human hands,” which are more fundamentally “fruit of the earth,” and “of the vine”- gifts of the Creator.¹² God’s full remedy for the shattering of the original communion between God, man, and creation has come to us in the Eucharist itself, which is at the heart of Sunday. Our weekly participation in the Eucharistic celebration on the Lord’s Day brings us into regular contact with a new pattern of communion that God desires to establish across the whole created order. This pattern consists of the combining of the fruits of creation, properly cared for and recognized as divine gifts, with the dignity of human labor, to produce the essential goods of earthly

life. God in turn blesses these goods and elevates them, by infusing them with his very self, to bring about the mystical rejoining of heaven, earth, all of creation, and all of humanity in the communion of salvation:

In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value.¹³

21. This pattern of communion allows us to say with awe and conviction that the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life.”¹⁴ Its celebration and worship extends the saving bond of communion with Christ across all of space, and all of time. This lovingly joins into one Mystical Body the living, the dead, those in heaven, and those on earth.
22. This pattern of renewal that recurs in the Eucharistic sacrifice finds its essential home in the heart of Sunday itself. Sunday is the day intentionally dedicated to the restoration of the harmony of earth, heaven, labor, worship of God, and the authentic communion of the human family. Sunday without the Eucharist lacks the necessary means that God utilizes to renew the created order on his own terms. Left to our own devices and means, we ourselves cannot accomplish this restful renewal of creation, or of the human family, that in our hearts we so earnestly desire. This is why God deliberately gives us the gift and obligation of Sunday, of worship, and of the Eucharist all as one integrated practice.

THE SACRIFICES OF FRIDAY LEAD TO THE JOYS OF SUNDAY

23. Sunday is always the day of the Resurrection and the new creation, all throughout the year. However, Sunday is not the only day of the week that holds special value to the Christian. We also recognize that the glory of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday was preceded by

the loving sacrifice of the Cross on Good Friday. The Real Presence of Christ in the Mass, on the altar, is the manifestation of the whole Paschal Mystery that incorporates both Good Friday and Easter Sunday. For this reason, since our earliest days, Christians have marked Fridays throughout the entire year (not only during Lent) as days especially devoted to penance and to contemplation of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

24. The regular observance of Fridays that are days of penance helps to foster in the hearts of believers a true adoration of the Cross of Jesus Christ, a desire to be forgiven of sins, and a deep gratitude for God's mercy. These essential dispositions of the heart that are so naturally linked to Fridays are ones that a Christian must regularly cultivate if one is to be truly well-disposed and prepared to regularly participate fully in the Eucharistic celebration of Sundays.

RECONCILIATION AS THE PATH TO COMMUNION

25. We cannot partake of the authentic rest of the Lord's Day, or of the consumption of the food of the Eucharist, or of the fullness of the rest of heaven itself, if we are knowingly and freely persisting in serious sins. Sin infects what should otherwise be a healthy and holy communion that exists with God and also with our neighbor. A believer is divided by his or her desires if he or she persists in actions that damage communion, and foster unrest, while at the same time attempting to participate in act of Eucharistic communion and worship that exists to generate rest. This is why from the earliest days of the Christian community the regular confession of sins was mentioned as a required action, along with the regular participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice.¹⁵
26. The Sacrament of Reconciliation as a necessary means of preparation for the authentic celebration of the Lord's Day is therefore an essential element of the renewal and remedy that Sunday is intended to provide. The full joy of the celebration of Sunday, and its authentic

rest, requires the regular embrace of the penance and sacrifice of Friday. In this way, the pattern and cycle of the Christian week as a regular participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, by honoring both Friday and Sunday, comes to its perfection.¹⁶

THE JOY OF SUNDAY LEADS TO JOYFUL WITNESS

27. Christians become witnesses of faith and agents of Divine renewal for the world only to the extent that we observe Sunday so that it is clearly different than the other days of the week. On Sunday individual believers joyfully take the Mass as the pattern of an entire day spent intentionally contemplating the blessings of God. On Sunday the Christian gives thanks to God in the fullest sense, and marvels at his generosity, by joining prayers of gratitude to the offering of the Eucharist which itself means "thanksgiving." This gratitude is nourished by the Scriptures that a believer intentionally reads or hears on Sunday. This same gratitude includes thanksgiving for the gifts of creation, and a desire to praise the God who made the earth good. Gratitude gives rise to joy, and joy spreads the Gospel.¹⁷
28. A believer lives the good news of Sunday by deliberately limiting activities or routines that resemble too closely the pattern of the rest of the week, even if those weekday activities are good. Sunday involves activities that renew heart, soul, and mind in a way that the tasks of the rest of the week, even if good, do not ordinarily allow. "The institution of the Lord's Day helps everyone to enjoy adequate rest and leisure to cultivate their familial, cultural, social, and religious lives."¹⁸

SUNDAY WITNESS IS THE GUARDIAN OF JUSTICE AND MISSION

29. The ongoing redemption of society and all of creation, in the authentic pattern of Divine rest that is the foretaste of eternal salvation, requires that the good news of Sunday be lived out on a scale that is far reaching:

Sanctifying Sundays and holy days requires a common effort. Every Christian should avoid making unnecessary demands on others that would hinder them from observing the Lord's Day. Traditional activities (sports, restaurants, etc.), and social necessities (public services, etc.), require some people to work on Sundays, but everyone should still take care to set aside sufficient time for leisure. With temperance and charity the faithful will see to it that they avoid the excesses and violence sometimes associated with popular leisure activities. In spite of economic constraints, public authorities should ensure citizens a time intended for rest and divine worship. Employers have a similar obligation toward their employees.¹⁹

30. Our actions and routine on Sunday are different. In this way, Sunday is an essential guardian of justice and human dignity ensuring that persons are more important than productivity. Justice and the proper sharing of goods are only possible in a culture that firmly places its trust and hope in God's providence and generosity. Such a disposition can only arise in a society that regularly pauses from earthly labor to acknowledge the truth that without God, all of our merely human efforts at eliminating social ills only lead to more misery. A society regularly nourished by the Bread of Life, and by authentic Sunday leisure, is one in which the works of charity and mercy flourish to become a harvest of justice that God himself raises up on his earth. Being renewed on Sunday energizes us for the work of salvation.

31. In a world where as many people as possible come to recognize and observe the good news of Sunday, there emerges the valuable gift of authentic rest, of proper care for humanity, of proper care for creation, and of the necessary cultural orientation to God who is Lord of all.

Endnotes

- 1 Matthew 11:28.
- 2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec 2176.
- 3 1 John 4:10.
- 4 Cf Pope John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, sections 2 and 19.
- 5 Psalm 63:2.
- 6 Psalm 100:3.
- 7 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec 2181.
- 8 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec 2178.
- 9 Cf John F. Dedek, *Titius and Bertha Ride Again: Contemporary Moral Cases* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1974), 75.
- 10 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec 1333.
- 11 Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, sec 39.
- 12 Cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec 1333.
- 13 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec 1368.
- 14 *Lumen Gentium*, 11.
- 15 *Didache*, sections 4 and 14.
- 16 *Didache*, sections 4 and 14.
- 17 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, sections 1 through 13.
- 18 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec 2184.
- 19 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec 2187.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A special thank you to Fr. Nathan Reesman for his contribution to The Gift of Sunday Study Guide and Fr. Javier Bustos for translating this document in Spanish. We are extremely grateful for their dedication and work on this resource!

