

**Sunday Mass:
Easter All Year Long**

by Pope John Paul II

The Lord's Day—as Sunday was called from Apostolic times—has always been accorded special attention in the history of the Church because of its close connection with the very core of the Christian mystery. Sunday recalls the day of Christ's Resurrection. It is Easter which returns week by week, celebrating Christ's victory over sin and death, the fulfillment in him of the first creation and the dawn of "the new creation" (cf. 2 Cor 5:17).

In commemorating the day of Christ's Resurrection not just once a year but every Sunday, the Church seeks to indicate to every generation the true fulcrum of history, to which the mystery of the world's origin and its final destiny lead.

The fundamental importance of Sunday has been recognized through two thousand years of history and was emphatically restated by the Second Vatican Council:

"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—a day thus appropriately designated 'the Lord's Day.'"

The Second Vatican Council teaches that on Sunday "Christian believers should come together, in order to commemorate the suffering, Resurrection and glory of the Lord Jesus, by hearing God's Word and sharing the Eucharist, and to give thanks to God who has given them new birth to a living hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (cf. 1 Pt 1:3).

Sunday is a day which is at the very heart of the Christian life. The rediscovery of this day is a grace which we must implore. Time given to Christ is never time lost, but is rather time gained, so that our relationships and indeed our whole life may become more profoundly human.

Celebrating the Creator's work

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The poetic style of the Genesis story conveys well the awe which people feel before the immensity of creation and the resulting sense of adoration of the One who brought all things into being from nothing.

"God saw that [the world he created] was good" (Gn 1:10,12, etc.). Coming as it does from the hand of God, the cosmos bears the imprint of his goodness. It is a beautiful world, rightly moving us to admiration and delight, but also calling for cultivation and development. At the "completion" of God's work, the world is ready for human activity. "On the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done" (Gn 2:2).

The "work" of God is in some ways an example for man, called not only to inhabit the cosmos, but also to "build" it and thus become God's "co-worker."

The exhilarating advance of science, technology and culture in their various forms—an ever more rapid and today even overwhelming development—is the historical consequence of the mission by which God entrusts to man and woman the task and responsibility of filling the earth and subduing it by means of their work, in the observance of God's Law.

The divine rest of the seventh day speaks, as it were, of God's lingering before the "very good" work (Gn 1:31) which his hand has wrought, in order to cast upon it a gaze full of joyous delight. This is a "contemplative" gaze which does not look to new accomplishments but enjoys the beauty of what has already been achieved. It is a gaze which God casts upon all things, but in a special way upon man, the crown of creation.

All human life, and therefore all human time, must become praise of the Creator and thanksgiving to him. But man's relationship with God also demands times of explicit prayer, in which the relationship becomes an intense dialogue, involving every dimension of the person.

"The Lord's Day" is the day of this relationship par excellence when men and women raise their song to God and become the voice of all creation. This is precisely why it is also the day of rest. The interruption of the often oppressive rhythm of work expresses the dependence of man and the cosmos upon God. Everything belongs to God! The Lord's Day returns again and again to declare this principle within the weekly reckoning of time.

Day of the Risen Lord
and of the life-giving Spirit

Although the Lord's Day is rooted in the very work of creation and even more in the mystery of the biblical "rest" of God, it is nonetheless to the Resurrection of Christ that we must look in order to understand fully the Lord's Day. This is what the Christian Sunday does, leading the faithful each week to ponder and live the event of Easter, true source of the world's salvation.

According to the common witness of the Gospels, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead took place on "the first day after the Sabbath" (Mk 16:2,9; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1). On the same day, the Risen Lord appeared to the two disciples of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35) and to the eleven Apostles gathered together (cf. Lk 24:36; Jn 20:19).

A week later—as the Gospel of John recounts (cf. 20:26)—the disciples were gathered together once again, when Jesus appeared to them and made himself known to Thomas by showing him the signs of his Passion.

The day of Pentecost—the first day of the eighth week after the Jewish Passover, when the promise made by Jesus to the Apostles after the Resurrection was fulfilled by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—also fell on a Sunday (cf. Acts 2:1, Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4-5).

This was the day of the first proclamation and the first Baptisms: Peter announced to the assembled crowd that Christ was risen and "those who received his word were baptized" (Acts 2:41). This was the epiphany of the Church, revealed as the people into which are gathered in unity, beyond all their differences, the scattered children of God. It was for this reason that, from Apostolic times, "the first day after the Sabbath," the first day of the week, began to shape the rhythm of life for Christ's disciples (cf. 1 Cor 16:2).

In effect, Sunday is the day above all other days which summons Christians to remember the salvation which was given to them in Baptism and which has made them new in Christ. "You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col 2:12; cf. Rom 6:4-6).

The liturgy underscores this baptismal dimension of Sunday, both in calling for the celebration of Baptisms—as well as at the Easter Vigil—on the day of the week "when the Church commemorates the Lord's Resurrection," and in suggesting as an appropriate penitential rite at the start of Mass the sprinkling of holy water, which recalls the moment of Baptism in which all Christian life is born.

When he appeared to the Apostles on the evening of Easter, Jesus breathed upon them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:22-23). The outpouring of the Spirit was the great gift of the Risen Lord to his disciples on Easter Sunday.

It was again Sunday when, 50 days after the Resurrection, the Spirit descended in power, as "a mighty wind" and "fire" (Acts 2:2-3), upon the Apostles gathered with Mary. Pentecost is not only the founding event of the Church, but is also the mystery which forever gives life to the Church.

Such an event has its own powerful liturgical moment in the annual celebration which concludes "the great Sunday," but it also remains a part of the deep meaning of every Sunday, because of its intimate bond with the Paschal Mystery. The "weekly Easter" thus becomes, in a sense, the "weekly Pentecost," when Christians relive the Apostles' joyful encounter with the Risen Lord and receive the life-giving breath of his Spirit.

Eucharistic assembly:
heart of Sunday

Sunday is not only the remembrance of a past event: It is a celebration of the living presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his own people.

For this presence to be properly proclaimed and lived, it is not enough that the disciples of Christ pray individually and commemorate the death and Resurrection of Christ inwardly, in the secrecy of their hearts. 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.

It is important therefore that they come together to express fully the very identity of the Church, the *ekklesia*, the assembly called together by the Risen Lord who offered his life "to reunite the scattered children of God" (Jn 11:52). They have become "one" in Christ (cf. Gal 3:28) through the gift of the Spirit.

This ecclesial dimension intrinsic to the Eucharist is realized in every Eucharistic celebration. But it is expressed most especially on the day when the whole community comes together to commemorate the Lord's Resurrection.

Significantly, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that "the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life." For Christian families, the Sunday assembly is one of the most outstanding expressions of their identity and their "ministry" as "domestic churches," when parents share with their children at the one table of the word and of the Bread of Life.

We do well to recall in this regard that it is first of all the parents who must teach their children to participate in Sunday Mass; they are assisted in this by catechists, who are to see to it that initiation into the Mass is made a part of the formation imparted to the children entrusted to their care, explaining the important reasons behind the obligatory nature of the precept.

When circumstances suggest it, the celebration of Masses for Children, in keeping with the provisions of the liturgical norms, can also help in this regard.

Risen Lord as word and bread

As in every Eucharistic celebration, the Risen Lord is encountered in the Sunday assembly at the twofold table of the word and of the Bread of Life.

It should also be borne in mind that the liturgical proclamation of the word of God, especially in the Eucharistic assembly, is not so much a time for meditation and catechesis as a dialogue between God and his People, a dialogue in which the wonders of salvation are proclaimed and the demands of the Covenant are continually restated.

On their part, the People of God are drawn to respond to this dialogue of love by giving thanks and praise, also by demonstrating their fidelity to the task of continual "conversion." The Sunday assembly commits us therefore to an inner renewal of our baptismal promises, which are in a sense implicit in the recitation of the Creed, and are an explicit part of the liturgy of the Easter Vigil and whenever Baptism is celebrated during Mass.

Receiving the Bread of Life, the disciples of Christ ready themselves to undertake with the strength of the Risen Lord and his Spirit the tasks which await them in their ordinary life. For the faithful who have understood the meaning of what they have done, the Eucharistic celebration does not stop at the church door.

In coming to know the Church, which every Sunday joyfully celebrates the mystery from which she draws her life, may the men and women of the Third Millennium come to know the Risen Christ. *

This short presentation of the pope's apostolic letter Dies Domini is intended not as a substitute for reading the complete document but as an overview of some major points. The full text is available on the Vatican's Web site, www.vatican.va, or for sale in print at Catholic bookstores like St. Francis Bookshop, 1618 Vine St., Cincinnati, OH 45210 (phone: 1-800-241-6392).

**Next: The Bible—How the Many Versions Came About
(by Arthur Zannoni)**

Sunday Celebration:
It's More Than an Obligation

The spiritual and pastoral riches of Sunday, as it has been handed on to us by tradition, are truly great. It is clear therefore why the observance of the Lord's Day is so close to the Church's heart, and why in the Church's discipline it remains a real obligation.

Yet more than as a precept, the observance should be seen as a need rising from the depths of Christian life. It is crucially important that all the faithful should be convinced that they cannot live their faith or share fully in the life of the Christian community unless they take part regularly in the Sunday Eucharistic assembly.

Sunday is the day on which they are called to celebrate their salvation and the salvation of all humanity. Sunday is the day of joy and the day of rest precisely because it is "the Lord's Day," the day of the Risen Lord.

—*Dies Domini*, #81, 82

Living Out the Christian Sunday

Sharing in the Eucharist is the heart of Sunday, but the duty to keep Sunday holy cannot be reduced to this. In fact, the Lord's Day is lived well if it is marked from beginning to end by grateful and active remembrance of God's saving work.

This commits each of Christ's disciples to shape the other moments of the day—those outside the liturgical context: family life, social relationships, moments of relaxation—in such a way that the peace and joy of the Risen Lord will emerge in the ordinary events of life.

For example, the relaxed gathering of parents and children can be an opportunity not only to listen to one another but also to share a few formative and more reflective moments. Sunday should also give the faithful an opportunity to devote themselves to works of mercy, charity and apostolate.

If Sunday is a day of joy, Christians should declare by their actual behavior that we cannot be happy "on our own." They look around to find people who may need their help. It may be that in their neighborhood or among those they know there are sick people, elderly people, children or immigrants who precisely on Sundays feel more keenly their isolation, needs and suffering.

It is true that commitment to these people cannot be restricted to occasional Sunday gestures. But presuming a wider sense of commitment, why not make the Lord's Day a more intense time of sharing, encouraging all the inventiveness of which Christian charity is capable?

Inviting to a meal people who are alone, visiting the sick, providing food for needy families, spending a few hours in voluntary work and acts of solidarity: These would certainly be ways of bringing into people's lives the love of Christ received at the Eucharistic table. Lived in this way, not only the Sunday Eucharist but the whole of Sunday becomes a great school of charity, justice and peace.

—*Dies Domini*, #52, 72-73