

## HONORING *DIES DOMINI*- THE LORD'S DAY: REST AND THE SUNDAY OBLIGATION

Human beings are often **creatures of habit**. Most experts will tell you that habits develop over the course of time, and once settled, can be difficult to break. One significant **unknown** emerging from the pandemic concerns **habits** that formed during the period in which attending Mass was virtually impossible. As the emergency health situation has now passed, Archbishop Hebda has lifted the Sunday obligation dispensation, effective this weekend. The Sunday obligation is now back in force after more than a year. The \$64,000 question now—How have people's habits changed in that time? We shall soon find out! This week's column picks up where I left off last week, as I try to offer a little more practical context. The **precise nature** of the obligation has developed over time, even though the principle remained constant.

As St. John Paul II wrote in his 1999 letter *Dies Domini*, ("The Lord's Day" #47): "Even if in the earliest times it was not judged necessary to be prescriptive, the Church has not ceased to confirm this obligation of conscience, which rises from the inner need felt so strongly by the Christians of the first centuries." So, what changed? Honestly, people had become lax—it became necessary to articulate expectations more clearly. The legislation wasn't seen as an **innovation** as much as a formalization of what was understood. Attendance at Mass on Sunday (which is a different issue from the reception of Holy Communion,) is **obligatory** for all Roman Catholics (Code of Canon Law #1247). While the Church permits this obligation to be fulfilled on Saturday evenings, there is more to the obligation than mere attendance at Mass.

There is a **double obligation** imposed (the use of "imposed" is meant in a technical, not pejorative sense) upon Catholics. First, to attend Mass and secondly, "to abstain from works and affairs that hinder the worship to be rendered to God" (c. 1247). Tertullian is likely the first Christian writer to explicitly mention Sunday as a day of rest. He lived in the earliest days of the 3rd century. (ca. 202 A.D.) and wrote a treatise "On Prayer." In Chapter XXIII he writes: "But we, according to the tradition we have received, on the day of the Lord's resurrection, and on it alone, **ought to refrain** carefully not only from this, but from every attitude and duty that cause perplexity, **putting off** even **our daily business** (differentes etiam negotia), 'lest we give any place to the devil'" (cf. Ephesians 4:27, emphasis added). The "daily business" likely referred to commerce or trade— what we generally call shopping.

We all need rest, though our **competitive** culture makes it extremely difficult for some to "leave work" behind for even a day. This is tragic and while we can manage for a time, excessive work catches up and hits us like a ton of bricks. It was not only academics or Church leaders who discussed these issues. In fact, the Emperor **Constantine** recognized the **value of Sunday rest** as fundamental in his **imperial legislation**. In 321, he officially declared Sunday to be a day of rest, with only farmers being given an exception, whose necessary duties needn't be suspended. Do dairy farmers ever get a day off? He decreed: "All judges and urban peoples and artisans of all crafts should rest on the venerable day of the Sun." The seven-day week was brought to Rome from Egypt— *dies Solis* became our Sunday.

Vatican II's **Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy** (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) highlighted Sunday as the gathering day for the faithful who "by hearing the word of God and taking part in the eucharist, they may call to mind the passion, the resurrection and the glorification of the Lord Jesus, and may thank God who 'has begotten them again, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

from the dead, unto a living hope' (1 Pet. 1:3). Hence the Lord's Day is the **original** feast day, and it should be proposed to the piety of the faithful and taught to them so that it may become in fact a day of joy and of **freedom from work.**" (n. 106, with my emphasis). A **canonical requirement** to attend Mass was included in the 1917 Code of Canon Law.

Jesus said (John 6:53): "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you." Vatican II rightfully describes the Eucharist as the "source and summit of the Christian life." (SC, 11) May we embrace these teachings on a deeper level than a mere precept. St. John Paul II's letter *Dies Domini* gives cogent reasons behind the precept in **positive terms**. If someone truly desires to get back **into the habit** of attending Mass more regularly, I'd give them two pieces of advice. First, commit to **six consecutive weeks**. Any good habit takes that long to develop, whether dieting, exercise, prayer routines, etc. Secondly, choose the **same Mass** time as much as possible. Don't **squeeze** Mass in when it fits—rather, build the rest of your weekend around the set Mass time you have selected. We are delighted to **welcome everyone back** to Church and are here to serve all.

- If the U.S. Bishops release a document on the **meaning** of the Eucharist in the life of the Church, keep in mind several factors: it will occur at **November's** General Assembly after much discussion, apply to **all Catholics**, and will **not attempt** to set forth national norms on the denial of Holy Communion. It is not— despite the news reports— a document about President Joe Biden. To be honest, part of the blame for the confusion comes from the bishops' own messaging and part from media sensationalism, producing a narrative that seems nearly impossible to avoid.
- On the face of it, the U.S. Supreme Court **9-0 decision** overturning the City of Philadelphia's refusal to contract with Catholic Social Services for foster care (who had been placing foster children for 50 years!), is a victory for religious liberty. But the devil is in the details. **Justice Roberts** construed the decision quite **narrowly**, securing a unanimous decision, but not addressing **deeper** implications. In his concurring opinion, Justice Alito noted the decision "might as well be written on the dissolving paper sold in magic shops." Stay tuned.
- Two sure bets in life— death and taxes. I overestimated (and paid) my Minnesota taxes in 2020, such that I needn't pay in 2021! I actually prefer this to a refund. But for perspective: On July 1, 1862, **President Abraham Lincoln** signed the **first income tax** bill into law, levying a whopping **3% income tax** on most Americans, and 5% on those making over \$10,000 per year. Oh my, those were the days!
- For those who are a little more comfortable with some **social distancing**, the extreme **side sections** on both sides of church have kept **gold ropes** in place. In those sections, Holy Communion is offered only in the hand. In all other sections, both options for reception are available.
- **Fr. Stephen Hilgendorf** is offering the Noon Mass today. He was ordained to the Holy Priesthood last Tuesday (the Holy Oils haven't even dried yet!) and will serve for the Anglican Ordinariate in their Omaha, NE parish. Congratulations— Ad multos annos!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector