

SECTION III: THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

Remember to Keep Holy the LORD'S Day

THE SABBATH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

On the universal calendar, Sunday has always constituted a special reference point for all social activities. Some non-Christian religions have their own day of worship—Saturday for Jews, Friday for Muslims. But in Western culture, Sunday is the day of rest and—for Christian believers—worship.

In the Old Testament, God himself, through his Revelation to Moses, outlined the norms that people should follow in worshiping him. A very detailed set of laws was established that included the institution of a priesthood, the construction of a temple, principal feasts, practices of worship, and above all, the celebration of the Sabbath.

By worshiping on Sunday, we celebrate the completion of the first creation and the new creation in Christ signified by the Resurrection of Jesus, which occurred on a Sunday.

From the very beginning of the Bible, one can see the importance of the seventh day. It is widely believed that the narration of creation as happening in seven days meant to highlight the importance of the seventh day and the obligation to dedicate this day to divine worship.

The heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And 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. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation. (Gn 2:1-3)

Later, when God had made the Israelites his people, he made laws concerning the observance of the Sabbath.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it. (Ex 20:8-11)

In this passage, we see rest as the primary purpose of the Sabbath and divine worship as secondary. But soon after, Scripture gave the Sabbath a dual purpose. It was also a day consecrated to God. The Book of Leviticus prescribed:

Six days shall work be done; but on the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no work; it is a sabbath to the LORD in all your dwellings. (Lv 23:3)

The bread of proposition—the ritual twelve loaves kept by the Jewish high priests for use as a sacrificial offering according to the Mosaic Law—would be renewed on the Sabbath,⁵¹ and specific sacrifices were to be celebrated.⁵²

Consequently, from Mosaic times, the Sabbath included rest and the obligation of sacrifice. Both requirements showed the recognition of the power of God over his entire creation and over all people.

The Gospels speak of the arguments between Jesus and the religious authorities of Israel in relation to the observance of the Sabbath. Jesus declared that the care of the sick comes before the Sabbath.⁵³ Jesus proclaimed the true meaning of the Sabbath with these words: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”⁵⁴

THE LORD'S DAY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

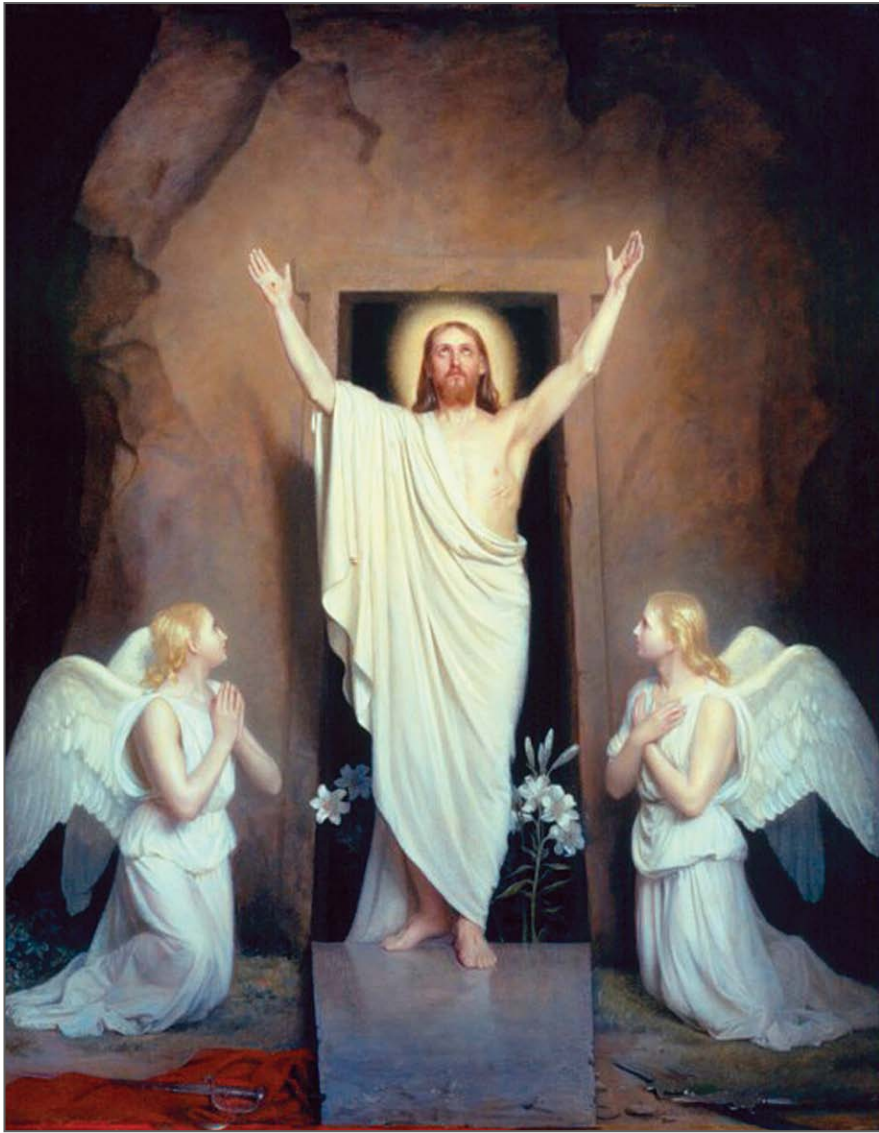
The Resurrection of the Lord on the first day of the week introduced notable changes in the practice of divine worship, but this did not come about immediately. In fact, we know that the first Christians practiced the Jewish form of worship in the Temple or the synagogue and then celebrated the liturgy of the Eucharist in their private homes. Sts. Peter and John likewise went up to the Temple at the customary hour of prayer and then celebrated the Eucharist in their homes.⁵⁵ During this early period, they were already talking about the “Lord’s Day.”⁵⁶

Likewise, on “the first day of the week,” they “gathered together to break bread.”⁵⁷ On the Lord’s Day, they also took up a collection for the poor.⁵⁸

At the beginning of the second century, St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, spoke of Sunday as the day of Christian worship.

If then they who walked in ancient customs came to a new hope, no longer living for the Sabbath, but for the Lord’s Day, on which also our life sprang up through him and his death—though some deny him—and by this mystery we received faith, and for this reason also we suffer, that we may be found disciples of Jesus Christ our only teacher. (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians*, IX, 1)

The change of the day of worship also brought about a variation of name: The “Sabbath” was substituted by the “first day of the week,”⁵⁹ or the “day of the sun,”⁶⁰ and more generally, “the Lord’s Day.”



The Resurrection by Bloch. “...toward the dawn of the first day of the week,...And for fear of him [an angel] the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said.’” (Mt 28:1-6)

THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN SUNDAY

From the beginning of the Church, the Eucharist was celebrated on Sundays. The *Didache* (an anonymous first-century text) and the *First Apologia* (written by St. Justin Martyr) relate the details of the celebration of Christian worship on the Day of the Lord. These two writings even include some of the actual ceremonies that accompanied this celebration.

These celebrations took place in private homes as Sunday lacked a public character until AD 314, one year after Emperor Constantine recognized the Christian religion. He enacted laws forbidding servile work on Sunday, and on July 3 of that same year, he forbade other public activities (such as judicial action). Gradually, as much work as possible was suspended on that day. During this period, Eucharistic worship went together with a day of rest. For that reason, any work that impeded attendance at the Mass was forbidden. The first and third councils at Orleans (AD 511 and 538) emphasized the importance of attending Mass and made laws prohibiting servile work on Sunday.

Together with Sunday, the custom of celebrating other Solemnities such as Christmas and other feasts commemorating important events in the life of our Lord was very quickly introduced. Additionally, some of the days celebrating the martyrdom of saints were made Solemnities. In this way, the Christian calendar would be punctuated by the important Mysteries of Faith and feasts of Mary and the saints. However, Sunday stands out above all feasts because it commemorates the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Second Vatican Council reminds us:

By a tradition handed down from the apostles, which took its origin from the very day of Christ's Resurrection, the Church celebrates the Paschal mystery every eighth day, which day is appropriately called the Lord's Day or Sunday. For on this day Christ's faithful are bound to come together into one place. They should listen to the word of God and take part in the Eucharist, thus calling to mind the Passion, Resurrection, and glory of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God who "has begotten them again, though the Resurrection of Christ from the dead, unto a living hope" (1 Pt 1:3). The Lord's Day is the original feast day, and it should be proposed to the faithful and taught to them so that it may become in fact a day of joy and of freedom from work. Other celebrations, unless they be truly of greatest importance, shall not have precedence over Sunday, which is the foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 106)



Communion of the Apostles by Fra Angelico.
Sunday is the day on which the Church celebrates the victory of Christ's redemptive mission. For this reason, it occupies the center of a Christian's life.

THE OBLIGATION TO ATTEND HOLY MASS

The obligation for Catholics to attend Holy Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation is first derived from the Third Commandment of the Decalogue, which requires us to keep the Sabbath holy.

The second reason for this requirement concerns the importance of the Eucharistic sacrifice, the unbloody and sacramental re-presentation of Jesus' redemptive sacrifice on the Cross, which makes present the one sacrifice of Christ, and the celebration of his Resurrection from the dead. The Mass is called a "*Holy Sacrifice*, because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ the Savior and includes the Church's offering."⁶¹ In her maternal care for the faithful, the Church makes attendance at Sunday Mass obligatory because of the tremendous spiritual benefits for those who participate.

Sunday is the day on which the Church celebrates the Lord's work of Redemption known as the Paschal Mystery, which includes Christ's Passion, Resurrection from the dead, and his Ascension into Heaven.⁶² Therefore, the center and high point of a Christian's life consists in participating in the liturgical celebration of the Paschal Mystery.⁶³ As the Second Vatican Council teaches, the Eucharist is "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows."⁶⁴ The many graces that can be obtained through the liturgical participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice and reception of Communion, have a very powerful effect on the moral life. It is precisely this union with the Paschal Mystery that strengthens the individual to live the moral law and share more deeply in the life of Christ.

It is this mystery of Christ that the Church proclaims and celebrates in her liturgy so that the faithful may live from it and bear witness to it in the world. (CCC 1068).

The *Code of Canon Law* declares the importance of Sunday in Christian life and, secondly, proclaims the obligation of attending Sunday Mass and refraining from servile work.

Sunday, on which by apostolic tradition the Paschal mystery is celebrated, is to be observed in the universal Church as the primary Holy Day of Obligation. On Sundays and other Holy Days of Obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass. They are also to abstain from such work or business that would inhibit the worship to be given to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, or the due relaxation of mind and body. (CIC, 1246-1247)

Holy Days of Obligation, on the other hand, are days on which the Church commemorates the important events in the life of Christ and his Mother, or which are dedicated to celebrating important mysteries of the Faith.

Our Blessed Mother was an example of faith and a model of Christian discipleship. By the grace of God, she was preserved from the stain of Original Sin (the Immaculate Conception) and remained sinless throughout her life. As a fruit of the Redemption earned by her Son, she was taken body and soul to Heaven at the moment of her death (the Assumption).

Over the course of the centuries, the Church has established these obligatory celebrations to recall the love of God the Father through his Son Jesus Christ with the close cooperation of Mary, his Mother. Not only are these events called to mind, but they serve as an example for us to follow. These Holy Days of Obligation serve as an occasion for the Church to teach the faithful about the most important mysteries of the Faith.

Canon law lists ten days as Holy Days of Obligation for the universal Church: *Christmas; the Epiphany; the Body and Blood of Christ; the Ascension; Mary, Mother of God; the Immaculate Conception; the Assumption; St. Joseph; Sts. Peter and Paul; and All Saints Day.* However, not all of these Solemnities are Holy Days of Obligation in every country. The *Code of Canon Law* permits the bishops' conferences of individual nations, with the prior approval of the Holy See, to suppress certain Holy Days or to transfer their observance to a Sunday.⁶⁵ This is ordinarily the case when the observance of the Holy Day would create a burden on the faithful in that particular country.

In the United States, there are six Solemnities that are Holy Days of Obligation:

- ❖ The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (January 1);
- ❖ The Solemnity of the Ascension (Thursday of the Sixth Week of Easter, i.e., forty days after Easter);
- ❖ The Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 15);
- ❖ The Solemnity of All Saints (November 1);
- ❖ The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (December 8); and
- ❖ The Solemnity of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ (December 25).

Whenever January 1, the solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, or August 15, the solemnity of the Assumption, or November 1, the solemnity of All Saints, falls on a Saturday or on a Monday, the precept to attend Mass is abrogated.

The bishops of the United States have transferred the solemnities of the Epiphany and the Body and Blood of Christ to the Sundays that follow these feasts on the calendar, and have suppressed the solemnities of St. Joseph and Sts. Peter and Paul as Holy Days of Obligation in the U.S. calendar. In most U.S. dioceses, the Ascension of Jesus has also been transferred to the following Sunday (the Seventh Sunday of Easter). While remaining Solemnities, Catholics are encouraged, although not obligated to attend Mass on these days.



The Immaculate Conception by Tintoretto. Holy Days of Obligation are days on which the Church commemorates the important events in the life of Christ and his Mother, or which are dedicated to celebrating important mysteries of the Faith.

FULFILLMENT OF THE PRECEPT OF ATTENDING MASS

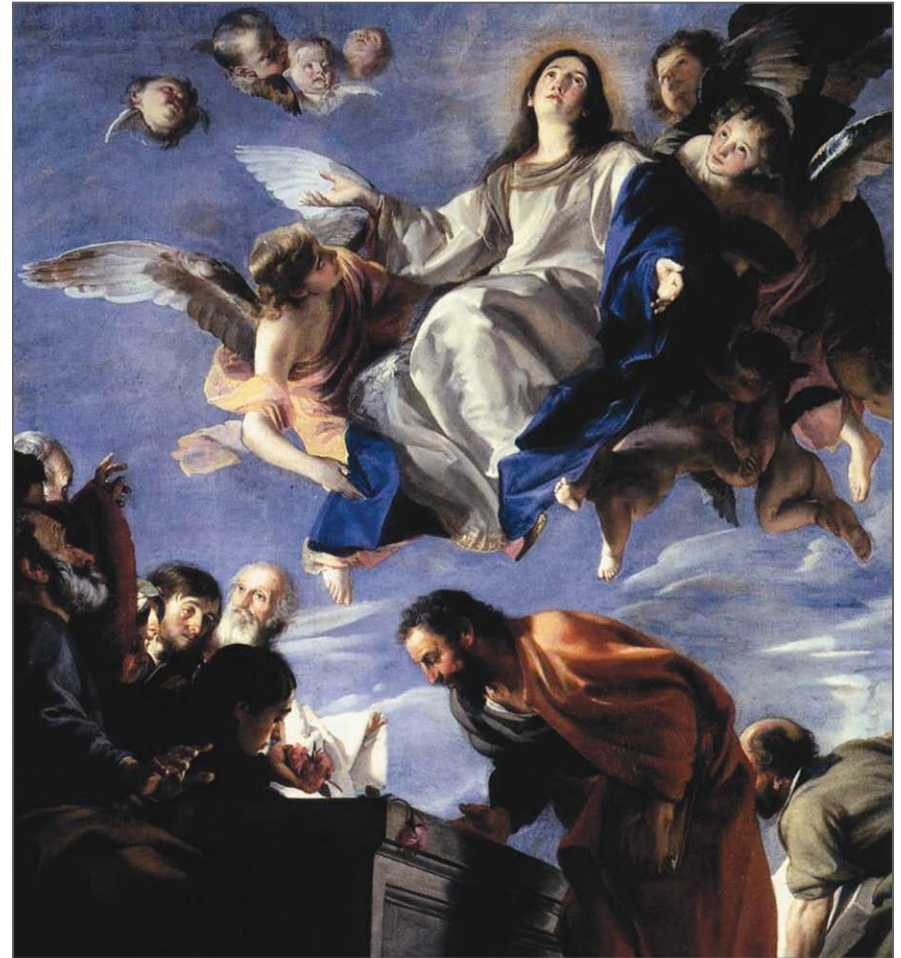
To fulfill the precept to attend Mass is a grave obligation. It serves as a means for instruction in the Faith and for obtaining graces coming from the Eucharistic sacrifice and reception of Holy Communion. Therefore, whoever does not fulfill this precept commits a grave sin, except in situations where there is a serious reason to miss Mass or in cases where it is impossible to be present at its celebration.

The only circumstance that excuses someone from attending the Sunday Eucharist (i.e., the Sunday liturgy) or a Holy Day of Obligation is qualified in the law of the Church with the adjective “serious.” Consequently, any reason for not attending Mass that is not serious can never be justified. The *Catechism* mentions illness and the care of infants as “serious reasons.”⁶⁶ For other situations, the individual should consult his or her pastor.⁶⁷

By virtue of the natural law, the closer the relationship, the greater the duty to love. God, who is the source of our being, established his relationship with us by his creative act of love. We show that love in return by setting aside proper time to worship and give thanks to God. In this way, the requirement to designate a regular time or day, dedicated to God, finds its origin in the natural law.

The Sunday requirement can be fulfilled by attending the Vigil Mass on Saturday evening (in some dioceses, this may include a wedding Mass or a funeral Mass). Similarly, one may attend Mass on the evening before a Holy Day of Obligation instead of the Holy Day itself.⁶⁸ This practice of beginning the celebration of the Lord’s Day on the evening before finds its origin in the Jewish custom of beginning the commemoration of the Sabbath after sundown on the eve of the Sabbath. This extension also affords people a greater opportunity to fulfill their Sunday or Holy Day precept, especially if certain commitments or time constraints require a wider range of possible choices.

Since attending the celebration of the Eucharist on Saturday evening is a universal norm, one may opt for it whenever desired. But one must still make sure that the meaning of the Day of the Lord is not lost. For this reason, if the obligation is fulfilled on a Saturday, one should keep in mind that there is still the obligation to observe the directives regarding work on Sunday.



Assumption of the Virgin by Cabezalero. The solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a Holy Day of Obligation, August 15.

THE OBLIGATION TO REST

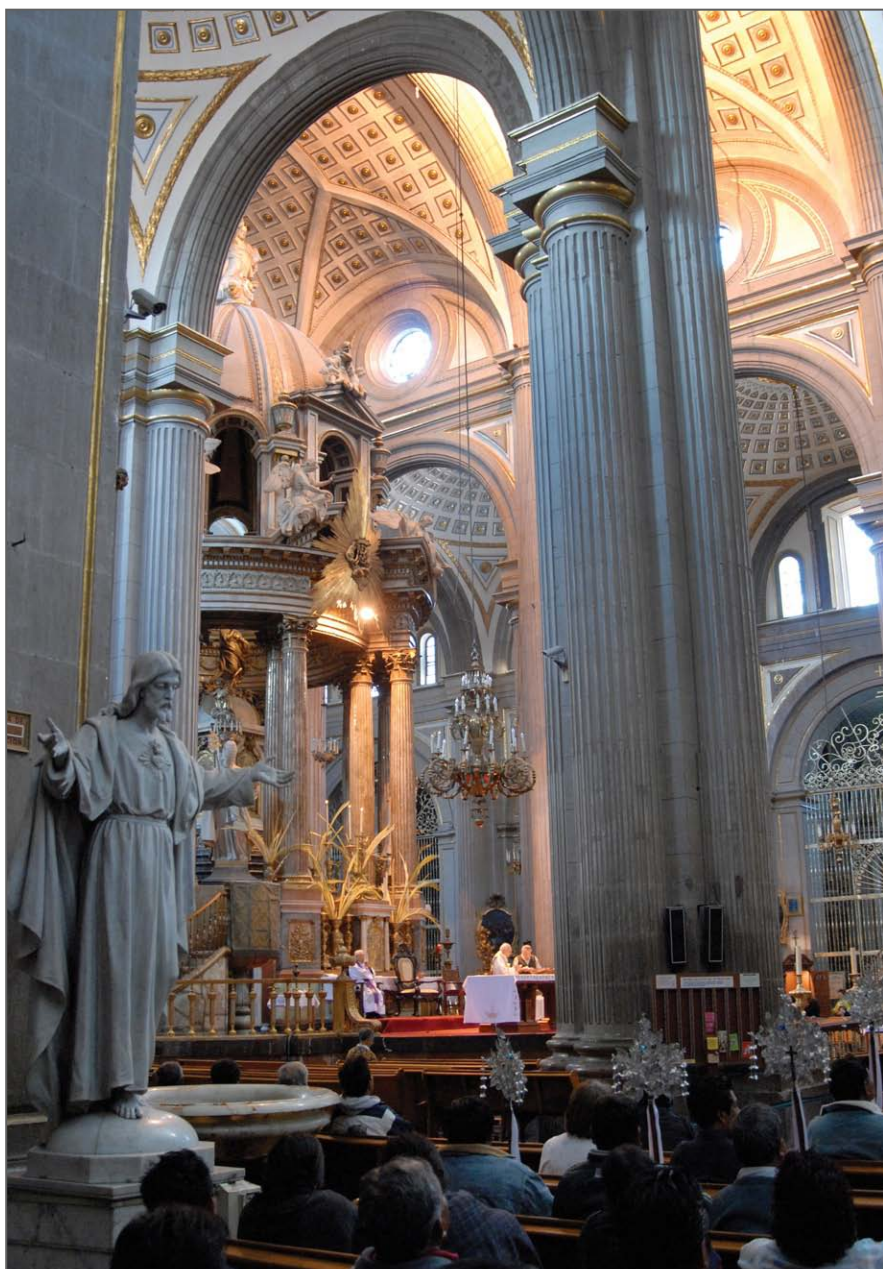
It is clear from the very beginning of our salvation history that the Lord's Day also included rest from normal daily occupations. There is a twofold reason for this. Rest facilitates the worship of God by eliminating the expenditure of energy and distractions connected to work; it also is a requirement of the human condition because it replaces lost energies and makes time for other activities along with the enrichment of the human spirit and the deepening of fraternity and friendship.

Work that is required for the welfare and safety of the individual and for the common good is permissible on Sunday. Some of the following lines of work, though not exhaustive, would fall into that category—health care workers, restaurant workers, police, firefighters, pharmacists, and gas station attendants. However, work that habitually impedes attendance at Sunday Mass, whether on Saturday evening or Sunday, must be curtailed. For example, an athlete who is involved with a basketball tournament is not dispensed from attending Mass on Saturday evening or on Sunday. Part of being a witness to the importance of the Gospel is that Catholics insist with their employers or supervisors that they be allowed to attend Mass.

It is important that one's colleagues, friends, and family see that God comes before anything else, expressed by the firm commitment to attend Mass. The spirit behind the prohibition of work is that there be a greater focus on God and on deeds of charity. Furthermore, a day of rest contributes to both bodily and mental health.

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 the 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. Even in lay life, when possible, why not make provision for special times of prayer—especially the solemn celebration of Vespers, for example—or moments of catechesis, which on the eve of Sunday or on Sunday afternoon might prepare for or complete the gift of the Eucharist in people's hearts? (*Dies Domini*, 52)

Part of the new evangelization of re-Christianizing society needs to include restoring the observation of Sunday and Holy Days as the Lord's Day.



The only circumstance that excuses someone from attending the Sunday Eucharist or a Holy Day of Obligation is qualified in the law of the Church with the adjective “serious.”

CONCLUSION

Though it is not humanly possible to do justice to God’s infinite love for us, everyone should make a serious effort to show appreciation and gratitude for everything God the Father has done for us through his Son Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. In essence, the First Commandment invites us to love God above all things through Jesus by the assistance of the Holy Spirit in response to his unfailing love for us.

Often we think of prayer in the context of petition, asking God for those favors that we want to receive or those which we believe we need. That kind of prayer is perfectly acceptable, for God invites us to turn to him with our petitions. What is lacking sometimes in the spirituality of individual Christians is the practice of outright praise and thanksgiving to God. It is an excellent practice to make all four forms of prayer part of our regular spiritual life on a daily basis.

God’s name should be given the highest respect. Therefore, any use of God’s name must be in the context of worship and veneration. For this reason, many people have adopted the custom, when they hear his name abused, of saying a prayer of reparation to make up for the offense committed. The best rule for respecting God’s name is to use it only to give him honor and adoration.

A Christian has a serious obligation to ensure that Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation are especially devoted to the Lord. Making holy the Lord’s Day invokes the twofold duty of participation in the celebration of the Eucharist and abstention from work that would hinder the worship owed to God, the joy proper to the Lord’s Day, and the appropriate relaxation of mind and body.⁶⁹ For Christians, this commandment of the Decalogue is meant to cultivate a greater union with Jesus Christ through prayer and love for one’s neighbor.

Keeping the Sabbath holy enables us to indicate the importance of the Lord in our lives; and worshiping God on Sunday is a sign of our love for him as well as an example to others in a world that needs the witness of believers.