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## A Sabbath Rhythm for our Sundays

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*In a wonderful little book entitled Disciplines for Christian Living, Fr. Thomas Ryan, c.s.p., comments on the importance of such practical spiritual habits as “exercise and play”, “prayerful living”, and “fasting”. One chapter has the surprising title: “Living with a Sabbath Rhythm”. Fr. Tom is a master at providing practical tools for Catholics to incarnate gospel living into daily life. Living with a Sabbath rhythm is what this article understands by “keeping the Day of the Lord”.*

*Keeping the Day of the Lord for too many Catholics simply means, ‘going to mass’. The Eucharist, to be sure, is the heart of our faith and the kernel of the*

*Lord’s Day. But once mass is over, even one celebrated with great fervour and joy, things seem to degenerate into more of the usual: it is a time to catch up on laundry, shopping, writing tax returns, and anything else not completed during the week. By Sunday evening, the ‘Eucharist’ is but a distant morning memory crushed by the day’s frenzied activity and we go to bed exhausted, as usual. Time has not been sanctified, Christ was an ignored visitor, and Sunday feels like every other day. Our reductionist praxis is well ingrained into the minds of some Catholics for whom the ‘mass’ is always too long and sermons excessively lengthy. Others,*

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more positive, defend the Lord with the lame argument: “Can’t you give God an hour?” Surely this is not the intent of the biblical Sabbath precept! This is hardly the tithing of our time, and good stewardship.

### A Foretaste of Eternity

The third great precept at the heart of the Torah is meant to sanctify the week, and be a foretaste of the Eternal Rest. Moses received this commandment:

“Observe the Sabbath and keep it *qadosh* (holy) [...] labour for six days, doing all your work, but the seventh is a Sabbath for the Lord. You must do no work [...] neither you, or your slaves [...] or the foreigners living with you, so that **you may rest**. Remember that **you were slaves**.” (Dt 5:12-15).

The Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel, in his little book, *The Sabbath* (1951), comments that Jews do not have “cathedrals”. Theirs is the Sabbath; not a monument of space and matter, but a cathedral of time. Time is made Holy by the seventh day rest. For the Jew, the Sabbath is a foretaste of the world to come, a dipping into eternity. Six days a week, we are under the tyranny of space and urgencies, but the seventh provides the summit of the week: sacred time. The Sabbath is the inspirer, the six days the inspired. The Sabbath is an expression within time of the longing for and the victory of the eternal work of God expressed as **rest**.

Catholics need to prayerfully recover ownership of a deeper and transformed sense of the Sabbath, not eliminate it. Our freedom in Christ is not a license to live the seven day frenzied pace of contemporary life, but to live the true leisure of God. We are not slaves! The Sabbath is for freedom, but in Christ this Holy day takes on new meaning. The Messiah did not come to abolish the third commandment, but to fill it with His presence: “I have not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it!” This Deuteronomic directive is fulfilled in Christ. This understanding grounds the Sabbath in its deepest and richest significance: it is about a day to celebrate the victorious and Resurrected Christ who is amongst us. We are not just sanctifying time, but spending that sanctified time with the Resurrected One who, at the heart of the Lord’s Day, gives us His precious Body and Blood as food, that we might taste and live in and from His Resurrected Presence during this sanctified day. This is the true Sabbath. And if God rested, then so must we... in Christ, and because of Christ.

### A Day for “Re-creation”

To the ancient rabbis, the six days of creation were completed by the arrival of the Sabbath, much as a king awaits his bride, and the bridal chamber is ready. She arrives not as a commandment but as the presence of God in their midst. How profoundly this image is fulfilled in Christian mysticism, because Jesus is the longed for bridegroom whom we

welcome in our midst. Because of this, the Saturday evening Eucharist suddenly takes on its full significance as the vesper liturgy welcoming the long-awaited bridegroom.

In his recent lovely encyclical on Christian hope, *Spe Salvi*, our Holy Father goes to great pains to insist on the “performative” nature of faith. Faith, he insists is not just “informative, faith in progress”, but “performative”. Faith is “substance” of a life already in Christ. We are not just convinced of faith truths, but already live the substance of a Resurrected life in Christ! As an example, he gives a short meditation about heaven. He notes that the expression, “eternal life” is somewhat “unfortunate”. It seems to indicate that the hereafter is simply “more of the same”, an unending calendar of déjà vu. Who wants that? Unending meetings, laundry, tasks to perform, articles to write, and taxes to pay! No, he insists, heaven is nothing like this. The afterlife with Christ is something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction which totally embraces us... a plunging into the ocean of infinite Goodness. We are made for this. We experience this in the prayer of “unknowing”. Herein is the grace of the Christian Sabbath, to sip of **this wine**.

The Christian Sabbath is a weekly glimpse and tasting of life in Christ, not as conjecture or conviction, but as

substance. We rest because the bridegroom is here. The high point of the day, the Eucharist, seals this reality at the sanctifying liturgy of Sunday. It is a day for longing for the return of the bridegroom.

The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life, a day of armistice when we surrender in our economic struggles and refuse to worship the idols of productivity and efficiency. It is a day of rejuvenation. The Lord has given us the blueprint and it is up to us to fill in the colours and designs according to the personality of our family. It could be a day of skiing, playing games, or just plain loafing. But it is the salt that stops the daily weekday discipline from rotting, the deadening feeling of “everydayness”. Christ is our life.

Keeping a Sabbath rhythm, a day of rest from Saturday sundown to Sunday evening, is a precept given by Adonai (Yahweh, the Lord), revealed in Moses, and fulfilled in Christ. It urges us to remember that chronos time (ordinary time) is punctuated by kairos time (God-given), which gives it meaning. Weekly, we catch a glimpse of the Risen Christ who delights to play with the children of God. I suspect that if Catholic families really lived the Sabbath as a day of play, of games and of laughter, the Sunday Eucharist would become an easy sell.