

## **The Importance of Sunday**

The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation

Saint Paul's College, Washington, DC

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Recovering the theological significance of Sunday is fundamental to rebalancing our lives. As Orthodox and Catholics, we share a theological view of Sunday and so our purpose in this statement is four-fold: to offer a caring response to what is not just a human, but also a theological question; to add a little more volume to the growing chorus of Christian voices trying to be heard in the din of our non-stop worklife; to offer brief reflections in hopes of drawing attention to the fuller expositions elsewhere; and to reinforce the ecumenical consensus by speaking as Orthodox and Catholics with one voice.

For Christians, Sunday, the Lord's Day, is a special day consecrated to the service and worship of God. It is a unique Christian festival. It is "the day the Lord has made" (Ps. 117 (118):24). Its nature is holy and joyful. Sunday is the day on which we believe God acted decisively to liberate the world from the tyranny of sin, death, and corruption through the Holy Resurrection of Jesus.

The primacy of Sunday is affirmed by the liturgical practice of the early church. St. Justin the Martyr writing around 150 AD notes that "it is on Sunday that we assemble because Sunday is the first day, the day on which God transformed darkness and matter and created the world and the day that Jesus Christ rose from the dead (First Apology, 67)." Sunday has always had a privileged position in the life of the church as a day of worship and celebration. On Sunday the Church assembles to realize her eschatological fullness in the Eucharist by which the Kingdom and the endless Day of the Lord are revealed in time. It is the perpetual first day of the new creation, a day of rejoicing. It is a day for community, feasting and family gatherings.

As we look at our fellow Christians and our society, we observe that everyone is short of time and stressed. One reason is that many of us have forgotten the meaning of Sunday, and with it the practices that regularly renewed our relationships and lives. More and more Christian leaders see the effects of a 24/7 worklife and ask "Where is the time of rest?" As members of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation, gathered October 25-27, 2012, we add our combined voice to their call.

Our purpose here is not to replace or replicate their message; it is to underscore and point to it. Anyone who looks at the 1998 Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* (The Lord's Day) of Pope John Paul II and its cascade of patristic quotations will see there is already a feast of food for thought on the meaning of Sunday. Anyone who reads the recent book *Sunday, Sabbath, and the Weekend* (2010, Edward O'Flaherty, ed.) will see there is also strong ecumenical consensus on the need to recover the meaning of Sunday-- not just for our souls, but for our bodies, our hearts, and our minds as well.

Sadly Sunday has become less of a day of worship and family and more like an ordinary work day. Shopping, sports, and work squeeze out the chance for a day of worship or rest in the Christian sense. By abandoning Sunday worship we lose out on the regenerative powers that flow out of the liturgical assembly. And when Sunday becomes detached from its theological significance, it becomes just part of a weekend and people can lose the chance to see transcendent meaning for themselves and their lives (The Lord's Day, 4).

Sunday is more than just the first day of the week. In our faith we see how it is the ultimate day of new beginnings: "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). It is the day which recalls in grateful adoration the world's first day and looks forward in active hope to "the last day", when Christ will come in glory (cf. Acts 1:11; 1 Th 4:13-17) and all things will be made new (cf. Rev 21:5. The Lord's Day, 1)."

Sunday even unlocks the mystery of time itself, for "...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 leads (The Lord's Day, 2)." The Lord's Day is the day after the last day of the week and so it symbolizes eternity as well: what St. Augustine calls "a peace with no evening (Confessions 13:50)." St. Basil the Great in his Treatise on the Holy Spirit writes, "Sunday seems to be an image of the age to come... This day foreshadows the state which is to follow the present age: a day without sunset, nightfall or successor, an age which does not grow old or come to an end (On the Holy Spirit 26:77)."

The apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II calls it a day of joy, rest, and solidarity. Joy there is, because the disciples are always glad to see the Master. God scripturally established a day of rest as a gift to us, and rest there must be for every human person. Rest is built into our nature and also withdraws us "...from the sometimes excessively demanding cycle of earthly tasks in order to renew [our] awareness that everything is the work of God. There is a risk that the prodigious power over creation which God gives to man can lead him to forget that God is the Creator upon whom everything depends. It is all the more urgent to recognize this dependence in our own time, when science and technology have so incredibly increased the power which man exercises through his work. Finally, it should not be forgotten that even in our own day work is very oppressive for many people, either because of miserable working conditions and long hours — especially in the poorer regions of the world — or because of the persistence in economically more developed societies of too many cases of injustice and exploitation of man by man (The Lord's Day, 65,66)."

As members of the Consultation, we strongly urge both clergy and laity to work cooperatively within their communities to stress the importance of Sunday for worship and family. Foremost we call for all to render thanks to God and render love towards one another — and be willing to reserve time to do both -- and avail ourselves of the riches of the Lord's Day. Appropriate authorities can be approached to schedule sports activities after 12 noon in order to give young

athletes and their families the opportunity to worship on Sunday morning. We call for our children to live in a timescape that respects the God-given rhythm of the week.

“Yes, let us open our time to Christ, that he may cast light upon it and give it direction. He is the One who knows the secret of time and the secret of eternity, and he gives us "his day" as an ever new gift of his love. The rediscovery of this day is a grace which we must implore, not only so that we may live the demands of faith to the full, but also so that we may respond concretely to the deepest human yearnings. 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 (The Lord's Day, 7).”