

The following article is a response to *Dies Domini* by Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi. Dr. Bacchiocchi is a graduate of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He recently retired as a Professor of Theology and Church History at Andrews University in Michigan.

Numbers enclosed in parentheses, e.g. (#3), refer to the paragraph number in the encyclical letter.

A LOOK AT THE POPE'S PASTORAL LETTER *DIES DOMINI*

On May 31, 1998, Pope John Paul II issued a lengthy (almost 40 pages) Pastoral Letter "Dies Domini" where he makes a passionate plea for a revival of Sunday observance, especially attendance to Sunday Mass.

This document has enormous historical significance since it addresses the critical problem of the prevailing Sunday profanation at "the threshold of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000" (#3).

The Pope is keenly aware that the crisis of Sunday observance reflects the crisis of the Catholic Church and of Christianity in general. The "strikingly low" attendance to the Sunday liturgy reflects in the Pope's view the fact that "faith is weak" and "diminishing" (#5). If this trend is not reversed it can threaten the future of the Catholic Church as it stand at the threshold of the third millennium.

The Pope states: "The Lord's Day has structured the history of the Church through two thousand years: how could we think that it will not continue to shape the future?" (#30).

This Pastoral Letter, like all papal documents, has been skillfully crafted with an introduction, five chapters which examine the importance of Sunday observance from theological, historical, liturgical, and social perspectives, and a conclusion. The scholars who undoubtedly helped Pope John Paul II to compose this Pastoral Letter, must be commended for producing a comprehensive presentation of the major issues relating to Sunday, within the space limitations of

approximately 40 pages. Since an in-depth analysis of this important Pastoral Letter would require far more time and space than is available, my remarks will focus on the three major points discussed in the document:

- (1) The Theological Connection between Sabbath and Sunday
- (2) The Biblical Support for Sunday observance
- (3) The Legislation Needed to Facilitate Sunday Observance

(1) THE THEOLOGICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN THE SABBATH AND SUNDAY

Contrary to Protestant Covenant and Dispensational authors who emphasize the discontinuity between the Sabbath and Sunday, the Pope finds the theological foundation of Sunday observance in the creational origin and meaning of the Sabbath. He writes: "In order to grasp fully the meaning of Sunday, therefore, we must re-read the great story of creation and deepen our understanding of the theology of the 'Sabbath'" (#8).

Creative and Redemptive Meaning of the Sabbath

The Pope's reflections on the theological meaning of the Sabbath are most perceptive, and should thrill especially Sabbatarians. For example, speaking of God's rest on the seventh day of creation, the Pope says: "The *Divine Rest* of the seventh day does not allude to an inactive God, but emphasizes the fullness of what has been accomplished. It speaks, as it were, of God's lingering before the 'very good' work (Gen 1:31) which his hands has wrought, in order to cast upon it a gaze full of joyous delight" (#11).

This profound theological insights into the meaning of the divine Shabbat, as a rest of cessation in order to express the satisfaction over a completed, perfect creation, and to fellowship with His creation, is developed at some length in my book *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness* pp. 66-68. For example, on page 67, I wrote: "God's cessation on the seventh day from doing expresses His desire for being with His creation, for giving to His creatures not only things but Himself."

I must confess that I am inclined to think that the Pope and/or his assistants may well have read my two books *Divine Rest* and *From Sabbath to Sunday* which were published by the Pontifical Gregorian University Press, in Rome, Italy, and personally delivered to him by Dr. B. B. Beach, Director of Inter-Churches Affairs of the General conference of SDA. Beach received a letter of acknowledgment and appreciation.

Pope John Paul II rightly emphasizes the theological development of the Sabbath from the rest of creation (Gen 2:1-3; Ex 20:8-11) to the rest of redemption (Deut 5:12-15). He notes that in the Old Testament the Sabbath commandment is linked "not only with God's mysterious 'rest' after the days of creation (cf. Ex 20:8-11), but also with the salvation which he offers to Israel in the liberation from the slavery of Egypt (cf. Deut 5:12-15). The God who rests on the seventh day, rejoicing in His creation, is the same God who reveals his glory in liberating his children from Pharaoh's oppression" (#8).

Being a memorial of creation and redemption, "the 'Sabbath' has therefore been interpreted evocatively as a determining element in the kind of 'sacred architecture' of time which marks biblical revelation. It recalls that the universe and history belong to God; and without constant awareness of that truth, man cannot serve in the world as a co-worker of the Creator" (#15).

Sunday as the Fulfillment of the Sabbath

In the light of these profound theological insights into the Sabbath as being a kind of "sacred architecture" of time that marks the Biblical revelation of God's creative and redemptive activity, one wonders how does the Pope succeed in developing a theological justification for Sunday observance?

He does it by arguing that Sunday as the Lord's Day fulfills the creative and redemptive functions of the Sabbath. These two functions, the Pope claims, "reveal the meaning of the 'Lord's Day' within a single theological vision which fuses creation and salvation" (#17). "On the Lord's Day," the Pope explains, "which the Old Testament [Sabbath] links to the work of creation (cf. Gen 2:1-3; Ex 20:8-11) and the Exodus (cf. Deut 5:12-15), the Christian is called to

proclaim the new creation and the new covenant brought about in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Far from being abolished, the celebration of creation becomes more profound within a Christocentric perspective . . . The remembrance of the liberation of the Exodus also assumes its full meaning by Christ in his Death and Resurrection. More than a 'replacement' of the Sabbath, therefore, Sunday is its fulfillment, and in a certain sense its extension and full expression in the ordered unfolding of the history of salvation, which reaches its culmination in Christ" (#59).

The Pope maintains that New Testament Christians "made the first day after the Sabbath a festive day" because they discovered that the creative and redemptive accomplishments celebrated by the Sabbath, found their "fullest expression in Christ's Death and Resurrection, though its definitive fulfillment will not come until the Parousia, when Christ returns in glory" (#18).

Evaluation of Pope's Arguments

The Pope's attempt to make Sunday the legitimate fulfillment of the creative and redemptive meanings of the Sabbath, is very ingenious, but unfortunately it lacks Biblical and historical support.

From a Biblical perspective, there are no indications that New Testament Christians ever interpreted the day of Christ's Resurrection as representing the fulfillment and "full expression" of the creation/redemption meanings of the Sabbath.

The New Testament attributes no liturgical significance to the day of Christ's Resurrection, simply because the Resurrection was seen as an existential reality experienced by living victoriously by the power of the Risen Savior, and not a liturgical practice, associated with Sunday worship.

Had Jesus wanted to memorialize the day of His resurrection, He would have capitalized on the day of His resurrection to make such a day the fitting memorial of that event. But, none of the utterances of the risen Savior reveal an intent to memorialize the day of His Resurrection by making it the new Christian day of rest and worship.

Biblical institutions such as the Sabbath, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, all trace their origin to a divine act that established them. But there is no such divine act for a weekly Sunday or annual Easter Sunday memorial of the Resurrection. The silence of the New Testament on this matter is very important since most of its books were written many years after Christ's death and resurrection. If by the latter half of the first century Sunday had come to be viewed as the memorial of the Resurrection which fulfilled the creation/redemption functions of the OT (Old Testament) Sabbath, we would expect to find in the NT (New Testament) some allusions meanings and observance.

The absence of any allusion in the NT regarding the celebration of the Resurrection on a weekly Sunday or annual Easter Sunday, indicates that such developments occurred in the post-apostolic period as a result of an interplay of political, social, and religious factors which I have examined at length in my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*, published by the Pontifical Gregorian University Press with the official Catholic imprimatur. Anyone interested to receive a copy of this research is welcomed to contact me at: samuele@andrews.edu

From a historical perspective, Sunday is never called "the day of the resurrection" until the fourth century (See, for example, Eusebius of Caesarea, Commentary on Psalm 91, *Patrologia Graeca* 23, 1168; Apostolic Constitutions 2, 59, 3).

The obvious reason is that in earliest centuries Sunday was not viewed as the fulfillment of the creative and redemptive function of the Sabbath celebrated through the Day of Christ's Resurrection. Beginning from the second century we find attempts to link Sunday with the creation-week, but, not to make the day the fulfillment of the creative accomplishments memorialized by the seventh day.

Rather, Sunday, being the Day of the Sun, was connected to the first day of the creation-week, because on that day the light was created. The creation of the light on the first day provided what appeared to many at that time a suitable justification for observing the Day of the Sun, the generator of light.

In his Apology to the Emperor Antoninus Pius (about A.D. 150) Justin writes that Christians assemble on the day of the Sun to commemorate the first day of creation "on which God, transforming the darkness and prime matter, created the world." (67, 7).

Christians, as Cardinal J. Danilou points out, noticed early the coincidence between the creation of light on the first day and the veneration of the Sun which took place on the selfsame day (Bible and Liturgy, pp. 253, 255).

The Pope says that "Christian thought spontaneously linked the Resurrection, which took place on 'the first day of the week,' with the first day of that cosmic week (cf. En 1:1 - 2:4) which shapes the creation story of the Book of Genesis: the day of the creation of light (cf. 1:3-5)" (#24)

The linkage between the first day of the week and the creation of the light, may not have been as spontaneous as suggested by the Pope. In fact, in my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday* I submit documents and arguments indicating that such linkage most likely occurred in the post-apostolic period, when the necessity arose to justify the abandonment of the Sabbath and the adoption of the Day of the Sun. This development began during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-138), as a result of the repressive anti-Judaic legislation. In A.D. 135, Hadrian promulgated a legislation that prohibited categorically the practice of Judaism in general and of Sabbathkeeping in particular. This aim of this legislation was to liquidate Judaism as a religion at a time when the Jews were experiencing resurgent Messianic expectations that exploded in violent uprising in various parts of the empire, especially Palestine. (See *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp. 178-182).

To avoid the repressive anti-Jewish and anti-Sabbath legislation, most Christians adopted the Day of the Sun, because it enabled them to show to the Roman authorities their differentiation from the Jews and their identification and integration with the customs and cycles of the Roman Empire.

To develop a theological justification for Sunday worship, Christians appealed to God's creation of light on the first day and to the

resurrection of the Sun of Justice, both of which coincided with the Day of the Sun. Jerome, to cite only one example, explains: "If it is called the Day of the Sun by the pagans, we most willingly acknowledge it as such, since it is on this day that the light of the world appeared and on this day the Sun of Justice has risen" (In die dominica Paschae homilia, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 78, 550, 1, 52).

These considerations suggest that Christians did not spontaneously come to view the day of Christ's Resurrection as the fulfillment of the creative and redemptive accomplishments celebrated by the seventh day Sabbath. The linkage to the creation week was primarily by virtue of the fact that the creation of the light on the first day provided what many Christians thought to be a suitable justification for observing the Day of the Sun.

At this juncture I would like to respectfully pose to Pope John Paul II some important questions: If the Sabbath had been divinely established to commemorate God's creative and redemptive accomplishments on behalf of His people, what right had the church to declare Sunday as its legitimate "fulfillment," "full expression," and "extension"?

Was the typology of the Sabbath no longer adequate after the Cross to commemorate creation and redemption?

Was not the Paschal Mystery fulfilled through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ which occurred respectively on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday?

Why should Sunday be chosen to celebrate the atoning sacrifice of Christ when His redemptive mission was completed on a Friday afternoon when the Savior exclaimed: "it is finished" (John 19:30) and then He rested in the tomb according to the Sabbath commandment?

Doesn't this suggest that both God's creation rest and Christ's redemption rest in the tomb occurred on the Sabbath?

How can Sunday be invested with the eschatological meaning of the final restoration rest that awaits the people of God, when the NT

attaches such a meaning to the Sabbath? "A Sabbath rest [literally, a 'Sabbathkeeping'] has been left behind [*apoleipetai*] for the people of God" (Heb 4:9).

Augustine himself recognizes the eschatological meaning of the Sabbath, when speaking of the final Sabbath, he eloquently says that then "we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise" (City of God 22, 30).

Frankly, I find the attempt to invest Sunday with the theological meaning and eschatological function of the Sabbath, well-meaning but misguided. It ignores the three dimensional Biblical perspectives of the Sabbath: celebration of perfect creation, complete redemption, and final restoration.

(2) BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR SUNDAY OBSERVANCE

The second chapter of the Pastoral Letter "Dies Christi-The Day of Christ" focuses on three major alleged Biblical reasons for Sunday observance:

1. "The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead [which] took place on 'the first day after the Sabbath' (Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1)" (#20);
2. The religious gatherings on first day of the week (cf. 1 Cor 16:2; Acts 20:7-12; Rev 1:10) (#21);
3. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit fifty days after the Resurrection which occurred on a Sunday (Acts 2:2-3) (#28).

The Alleged Influence of the Resurrection

My response to these arguments will be brief because I have examined them at length in chapters 3 and 4 of my dissertation. Regarding the Resurrection we have already seen that the NT attributes no liturgical significance to the day of Christ's Resurrection, simply because the Resurrection was seen as an existential reality

experienced by living victoriously by the power of the Risen Savior, and not a liturgical practice, associated with Sunday worship.

Christ made no attempt to memorialize the Day of His resurrection when He appeared to the women first and to the disciples later.

The claim that the celebration of Christ's Resurrection on a weekly Sunday and annual Easter-Sunday "evolved from the early years after the Lord's Resurrection" (#19) cannot be substantiated Biblically or historically.

There is a nearly unanimous scholarly consensus that for at least a century after Jesus' death Passover was observed not on Easter-Sunday, as a celebration of the Resurrection, but on the date of Nisan 14 (irrespective of the day of the week) as a celebration of the sufferings, atoning sacrifice, and resurrection of Christ. The repudiation of the Jewish reckoning of Passover and the adoption of Easter-Sunday instead, is a post-apostolic development which is attributed, as Joachim Jeremias puts it, "to the inclination to break away from Judaism" ("Pasha", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, p. 903, note 64) and to avoid, as J. B. Lightfoot explains, "even the semblance of Judaism" (*The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, p. 88).

The introduction and promotion of Easter-Sunday by the Church of Rome in the second century caused the well-known Passover (Quartodeciman) controversy which eventually led Bishop Victor to excommunicate the Asian Christians (c. A.D. 191) for refusing to adopt Easter-Sunday.

Indications such as these suffice to show that Christ's Resurrection was not celebrated on a weekly Sunday and annual Easter-Sunday from the inception of Christianity. The social, political, and religious factors that contributed to the change from Sabbath to Sunday and Passover to Easter-Sunday, are discussed at great length in my dissertation.

The Religious Gatherings on First Day of the Week

In his Pastoral Letter Pope John Paul II claims 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)" (#21).

This claim cannot be legitimately supported by the texts cited of 1 Corinthians 16:1-3 and Acts 20:7-11. The first-day deposit plan mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:1-3 hardly suggests that "since Apostolic times, the Sunday gathering has in fact been for Christians a moment of fraternal sharing with the poor" (#70). The Apostle clearly states the purpose of his advice, namely, "so that contributions need not be made when I come" (1 Cor. 16:2). The plan then is proposed not to enhance Sunday worship by the offering of gifts for the poor but to ensure a substantial and efficient collection upon his arrival.

Four characteristics can be identified in the Paul's plan. The offering was to be laid aside periodically ("on the first day of every week"-v. 2), personally ("each of you"-v. 2), privately ("by himself in store"-v. 2) and proportionately ("as he may prosper"-v. 2). Why would Paul advice to lay aside the money privately at home if the church met regularly for worship on Sunday?

Paul's mention of the first day could be motivated more by practical than theological reasons. To wait until the end of the week or of the month to set aside one's contributions or savings is contrary to sound budgetary practices, since by then one finds himself to be with empty pockets and empty hands. On the other hand, if on the first day of the week, before planning any expenditures, one sets aside what he plans to give, the remaining funds will be so distributed as to meet all the basic necessities. The text therefore proposes a valuable weekly plan to ensure a substantial and orderly contribution on behalf of the poor brethren of Jerusalem, but to extract more meaning from the text would distort it.

The time and manner of the Troas meeting reported in Acts 20:7-11 indicates a special farewell gathering occasioned by the departure of Paul, and not a regular Sunday worship custom. In fact the meeting began on the evening of the first day, which according to Jewish reckoning, was our Saturday night, and continued until early Sunday

morning when Paul departed. Being a night meeting occasioned by the departure of the Apostle at dawn, it is hardly reflective of regular Sunday-keeping. The simplest way to explain the passage is that Luke mentions the day of the meeting not because it was Sunday, but most likely because (1) Paul was "ready to depart" (20:7), (2) an extraordinary miracle of Eutychus occurred that night, and (3) it provides an additional significant chronological reference to describe the unfolding of Paul's journey.

The claim that "the book of Revelation gives evidence of calling the first day of the week 'the Lord's Day' (Rev 1:10)" (#21), cannot be supported by the usage of the phrase in the NT or contemporary literature.

The first clear designation of Sunday as "Lord's day" occurs toward the end of the second century in the apocryphal Gospel of Peter. This usage cannot be legitimately read back into Revelation 1:10. A major reason is that if Sunday had already received the new appellation "Lord's day" by the end of the first century, when both the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation were written, we would expect this new name for Sunday to be used consistently in both works, especially since they were apparently produced by the same author at approximately the same time and in the same geographical area.

If the new designation "Lord's day" already existed by the end of the first century, and expressed the meaning and nature of Christian Sunday worship, John would hardly have had reasons to use the Jewish phrase "first day of the week" in his Gospel.

Therefore, the fact that the expression "Lord's day" occurs in John's apocalyptic book but not in his Gospel-where the first day is explicitly mentioned in conjunction with the resurrection (John 20:1) and the appearances of Jesus (John 20:19, 26)-suggests that the "Lord's day" of Revelation 1:10 can hardly refer to Sunday. (For a discussion of this text, see my dissertation *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp. 111-131).

Summing up, the attempt of the Pastoral Letter to find Biblical support for Sunday worship in the NT references to the Resurrection (Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), the first day farewell night meeting at Troas (Acts 20:7-11), the first-day private deposit plan

mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:1-3, and the reference to the "Lord's Day" in Revelation 1:10, is not new. The same arguments have been repeatedly used in the past and found wanting. An important fact, often ignored is that if Paul or any other apostle had attempted to promote the abandonment of the Sabbath, a millenarian institution deeply rooted in the religious consciousness of the people, and the adoption instead of Sunday observance, there would have been considerable opposition on the part of Jewish-Christians, as was the case with reference to the circumcision. The absence of any echo of Sabbath/Sunday controversy in the NT is a most telling evidence that the introduction of Sunday observance is a post-apostolic phenomenon.

(3) THE LEGISLATION NEEDED TO FACILITATE SUNDAY OBSERVANCE

In his Pastoral Letter *Dies Domini*, Pope John Paul II devotes one of the five chapters (chapter 4) to emphasize the obligation of Sunday observance and the legislation needed to facilitate the compliance with such obligation.

The Basis of the Moral Obligation of Sunday Observance

The Pope finds the moral obligation of Sunday observance rooted in the Sabbath commandment itself, because in his view, Sunday is the fulfillment and full expression of the creative and redemptive meaning of the Sabbath. He writes: "It is the duty of Christians, therefore, to remember that, although the practices of the Jewish Sabbath are gone, surpassed as they are by the 'fulfillment' which Sunday brings, the underlying reasons for keeping 'the Lord's Day' holy-inscribed solemnly in the Ten Commandments-remain valid, though they need to be reinterpreted in the light of the theology and spirituality of Sunday" (#62)

The pope continues quoting the Deuteronomic version of the Sabbath commandment (Deut 5:12-15). The attempt to ground the moral obligation of Sunday observance in the Sabbath commandment has never succeeded. The reason is that throughout the centuries most Christians have recognized the fundamental difference between the

two days. The difference is to be found not only in their different names or numbers, but also in their origin, meaning, and experience.

In terms of origin, the Sabbath is a creational institution while Sunday is a post-apostolic, ecclesiastical creation.

In terms of theological meaning, the Sabbath in the Scripture encompasses perfect creation, complete redemption, and final restoration.

By contrast, Sunday, according to the Fathers, includes the following three major meanings:

1. the commemoration of the anniversary of creation, especially the creation of light on the first day which was suggested by its analogy to the Day of the Sun;
2. the commemoration of Christ's Resurrection which eventually emerged as the fundamental reason for Sundaykeeping;
3. *[an answer to]* a wide range of speculations regarding the cosmic and eschatological significance of the eighth day. Such speculations, which abound in the Patristic literature, were designed to prove the superiority of Sunday, as the eighth day, in contrast to the Sabbath, as the seventh day. Eventually these speculations were repudiated in the fourth century when the necessity to prove the superiority of Sunday no longer existed (For texts and discussion, see *From Sabbath to Sunday*, pp. 278-301).

The theological arguments developed by the Fathers to justify Sunday observance hardly support the claim of the Pastoral Letter that Sunday is the fulfillment of the creative and redemptive meaning of the Sabbath and, consequently, its observance can be legitimately grounded on the Fourth (the Third for the Catholics) Commandment.

In terms of experience, the essence of Sabbathkeeping is the consecration of time. This is accomplished by giving priority to God in one's thinking and living during the 24 hours of the Sabbath. By

contrast, Sunday, originated as an early hour of worship (Justin, Apology 67) which was followed by regular secular activities.

In spite of the efforts later made by Constantine (A.D. 321 Sunday Law), church councils, and Puritans, to make Sunday into a Holy Day, the historical reality is that Sunday has largely remained the LORD'S HOUR OF WORSHIP and not the LORD'S DAY OF REST AND WORSHIP unto the Lord. The recognition of this historical reality has facilitated the anticipation of the Sunday worship obligation to Saturday evening, a practice that is becoming increasingly popular not only among Catholics but even among Protestants.

These considerations suggests that the attempt to ground the moral obligation of Sunday observance on the Sabbath commandment, is doomed to failed, simply because theologically, historically, and existentially Sunday is not the Sabbath.

The Legislation Needed to Facilitate Sunday Observance

The Pastoral Letter rightly notes that prior to the Sunday Law promulgated by Constantine in A.D. 321, Sunday observance was not protected by civil legislation (#64). In many cases Christians would attend an early morning service, and then spend the rest of Sunday working at their various occupations. Thus, the Constantinian Sunday Law, as the Pope points out, was not "a mere historical circumstance with no special significance for the church" (#64), but a providential protection that made it possible for Christians to observe Sunday "without hindrance" (#64).

The importance of civil legislation that guarantees Sunday rest, is indicated by the fact that "even after the fall of the Empire, the Councils did not cease to insist upon arrangements [civil legislation] regarding Sunday rest" (#64).

In the light of this historical fact the Pope concludes that even "in our historical context there remains the obligation [of the state] to ensure that everyone can enjoy the freedom, rest and relaxation which human dignity requires, together with the associated religious, family, cultural and interpersonal needs which are difficult to meet if there is

no guarantee of at least one day a week on which people can both rest and celebrate" (#66).

The need for civil legislation that guarantees Sunday rest, the Pope points out, was reaffirmed by Pope Leo XIII in his Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) where he speaks of "Sunday rest as a worker's right which the State must guarantee" (#66). The Pope believes that Sunday legislation is especially needed today, in view of the physical, social and ecological problems created by technological and industrial advancements.

"Therefore," the Pope concludes, "in the particular circumstances of our time, Christians will naturally strive to ensure that civil legislation respects their duty to keep Sunday holy" (#67). According to the Pastoral Letter, a Sunday Rest legislation is needed not only to facilitate the religious observance of Sunday, but also to foster social, cultural, and family values. The Pope says: "Through Sunday rest, daily concerns and tasks can find their proper perspectives: the material things about which we worry give way to spiritual values; in a moment of encounter and less pressured exchange, we see the face of the people with whom we live. Even the beauties of nature-too often marred by the desire to exploit, which turns against man himself-can be rediscovered and enjoyed to the full" (#67).

Evaluation of the Pope's Call for Sunday Rest Legislation

In evaluating Pope John Paul II's call for a Sunday Rest legislation, it is important to distinguish between his legitimate concern for the social, cultural, ecological, and religious wellbeing of our society, and the hardship such legislation causes to minorities who for religious or personal reasons choose to rest and worship on Saturday or on other days of the week.

To call upon Christians to "strive to ensure that civil legislation respects their duty to keep Sunday holy" (#67), means to ignore that we live today in a pluralistic society where there are, for example, Christians and Jews who wish to keep their seventh day Sabbath Holy, and Moslems who may wish to observe their Friday. If Sundaykeepers expect the State to endorse Sunday as their legislated day of rest and worship, Sabbathkeepers, then, have an equal right to expect the State

to endorse Saturday as their legislated day of rest and worship. To be fair to the various religious and non-religious groups, the State would then have to pass legislation guaranteeing special days of rest and worship to different people. Such legislation is inconceivable because it would disrupt our socio-economic structure.

Sunday Laws, known as "Blue Laws," are still in the books of some American States and represent an unpleasant legacy of an intolerant past. Such laws have proven to be a failure especially because their hidden intent was religious, namely, to foster Sunday observance. People resent any attempt by the State to force religious practices upon them. This is a fundamental principle of the first amendment to American Constitution, that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."

Sunday legislation is superfluous today because the short-working week, with a long weekend of two or even three days, already makes it possible for most people to observe their Sabbath or Sunday. Problems still do exist, especially when an employer is unwilling to accommodate the religious convictions of a worker. The solution to such problems is to be sought not a Sunday or Saturday Law, but rather in such legislation as the pending Religious Freedom in the Workplace Act, which is designed to encourage employers to accommodate the religious convictions of their workers, when these do not cause undue hardship to their company.

The Pope's call for Sunday Rest legislation seems to ignore that Sunday Laws have not contributed to resolve the crisis of diminishing church attendance. In most European countries Sunday Laws have been in effect for many years now. On Sunday most of the business establishments are shut down. Even most gasoline stations are closed on Sunday-a fact that can be costly to uninformed American tourists. Have Sunday Laws facilitated church attendance? Absolutely not! The truth of the matter is that church attendance in Western Europe is considerably lower than in the USA, running at less than 10% of the Christian population. In Italy, where I come from, it is estimated that 95% of the Catholics go to church three times in their lives, when they are hatched, matched, and dispatched.

The moral and religious decline in our society is due not to the lack of legislation, but to the lack of moral convictions that compel people to act accordingly.

The church should seek to solve the crisis of diminishing church attendance not by external legislation, but by the internal moral and spiritual renovation of her members. What many Christians need to discover today is that Christianity is not merely a cultural heritage that entails going to church from time to time, but a commitment to Christ.

This commitment is expressed in a special way on the Sabbath day when we stop our work in order to allow our Savior to work more fully and freely in our lives.

Closing Remarks

In closing I wish to commend Pope John Paul II for making a passionate plea for a revival of Sunday observance at a time when church attendance is dwindling at an alarming rate. The Pope's concern is legitimate because Christians who ignore the Lord on the day they call the "Lord's Day," ultimately they will ignore God every day of their lives. This trend, if not reversed, can spell doom to Christianity.

The solution to the crisis of declining church attendance must be sought, however, not by calling upon the State to legislate on the day of rest and worship, but by calling upon Christian to live according to the moral principles of the Ten Commandments.

The Fourth Commandment specifically calls upon Christians today to "Remember" what many have forgotten, namely, that the seventh day is holy unto the Lord our God (Ex 20:8-11). The Pope rightly acknowledges that the Biblical seventh day Sabbath is "a kind of 'sacred architecture' of time which marks biblical revelation" (#15). The challenge is to teach the world this vital Biblical truth.

Our tension-filled and restless society today needs to rediscover the Sabbath as that "sacred architecture of time" which can give structure and stability to our lives and relationship with God. At a time when many are seeking for inner peace and rest through magic pills or

fabulous places, the Sabbath invites us to find such inner peace and rest, not through pills or places, but through the Person of our Saviour who says: "Come unto me, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).