

PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

The Lord's Day: Reclaiming Sunday and Transforming the Culture

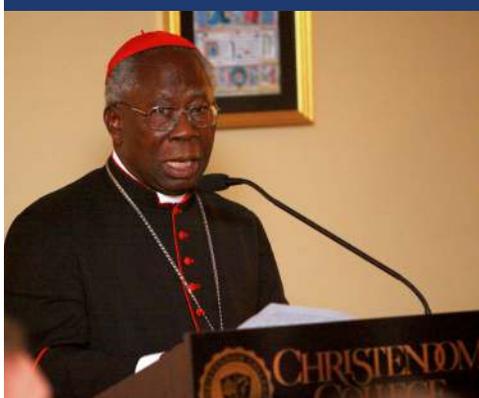


Cardinal Francis Arinze

“The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein”, sings the psalmist in Psalm 24:1. In making the incisions on the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil initial ceremony, the celebrant solemnly proclaims: “Christ yesterday and today, the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega. All time belongs to him and all the ages. To him be glory and power through every age and forever. Amen” (*Roman Missal: Easter Vigil*).

It is within the consideration of this awesome truth of God’s transcendent majesty and the duty of humanity to adore and honour him, that we focus our reflection on *The Lord’s Day: Reclaiming Sunday and Transforming the Culture*. After an introductory thought on the transit from Sabbath to Sunday, we shall consider the Lord’s day in its illuminating and comprehensive importance. Sunday is also the day of

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the Church and the day of rest for man. It follows that certain religious observances are due to be carried out by man on that great day and that several other events should also find place. On the other hand, there are engagements not ideal for Sunday. Secularism and materialism must not be allowed to blur man’s vision of the Lord’s day. These reflections

show the importance of Sunday in the Church's week and year. We shall conclude with a suggestion of what the followers of Christ can do today to promote better the observance of the Lord's day.

The Sabbath in the Old Testament

The book of *Genesis* tells us that after God had created heaven and earth "he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it" (Gen 2:2-3). In giving the Ten Commandments to Moses, God gave the Sabbath observance great importance: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, 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" (Exod 20:8-11; cf also Deut 5:13-15).

Sabbath day observance is therefore in God's plan for humanity. It is part of the Decalogue, the "ten words" which are pillars of the moral life inscribed by the Creator in the human heart. It is part and parcel of human relations with God.

From Sabbath to Sunday

The resurrection of Jesus Christ took place on Sunday, the day after the Sabbath. The mystery of the resurrection of the Lord is the rock foundation of the entire Christian Faith (cf 1 Cor 15:12-17). "Christians

saw the definitive time inaugurated by Christ as a new beginning... The Paschal Mystery of Christ is the full revelation of the mystery of the world's origin, the climax of the history of salvation and the anticipation of the eschatological fulfilment of the world" (John Paul II: *Dies Domini*, 18).

Moreover, on that first day of the week the Lord Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene (cf Jn 20:11-18), to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and then to all the Apostles (cf Lk 24), and a week later again to all the disciples this time with Thomas present (cf Jn 20:26-29). It was also five weeks after Easter that the Holy Spirit descended on the early Church on the day of Pentecost, the day the Church was manifested to the world. It was on the first day of the week that the faithful gathered at Troas with Saint Paul to celebrate the Holy Eucharist (cf Acts 20:7-12). The book of *Revelation* highlights that it was on "the Lord's day" that John received his vision on the island of Patmos.

For all these reasons, the early Church gradually replaced the Sabbath with the first day of the week as "the Lord's day".

Sunday, the Lord's Day

Every Sunday recalls the day of the resurrection. It is Easter celebrated every week to commemorate the victory of Christ over sin and death, the dawn of "the new creation" (cf 2 Cor 5:17). It looks forward to the last day when Christ will come in glory (cf Acts 1:11; 1 Th 4:13-17). "This is the day which the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps 118:24). "The resurrection of Jesus", says Saint John Paul II, "is



the fundamental event upon which Christian faith rests (cf 1 Cor 15:14)... It is a wondrous event which is not only absolutely unique in human history, but which lies at the very heart of the mystery of time” (*Dies Domini*, 2).

Saint Jerome writes that “Sunday is the day of the resurrection; it is the day of Christians; it is our day” (*In Die Dominica Paschae*, II, 52: CCL 78, 550). That is why the Second Vatican Council declares: “By an apostolic tradition which took its origin from the very day of Christ’s resurrection, the Church celebrated the paschal mystery every eighth day; with good reason this, then, bears the name of the Lord’s day or the day of the Lord...Hence the Lord’s day is the original feast day” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 106). Saint John Paul II has no hesitation in saying that “Sunday is a day which is at the very heart of the Christian life” (*Dies Domini*, 7). All time, all days belong to God. Sunday is a weekly reminder of that. It is a

day to celebrate in a special way the wonders that God has done. It is a day to keep holy.

Sunday, the Day of the Church

Sunday is a special day of the faith in Jesus Christ celebrated by his Church. On that day, believers in Jesus gather in his presence in a special Sunday assembly of the Holy Eucharist and profess their faith in Christ. Every Sunday Mass includes a recitation or singing of the *Credo*, the Symbol of the Faith. Saint John Paul II calls the celebration of Sunday “an indispensable element of our Christian identity” (*Dies Domini*, 30). The most important event in the week among the Christian community of a parish is the Sunday Eucharistic celebration by the parish priest and the followers of Christ in the parish.

Sunday is the day on which the Church shows herself as a pilgrim Church journeying towards meeting her Bridegroom, who is Christ the



Lord. In the Sunday Eucharistic celebration, the word of God is proclaimed in the readings and is explained and brought home to the assembly in the homily. This table of the word is followed by the table of the Body and Blood of Christ with which the Lord feeds his people at Mass. The celebration is concluded with the sending of the assembly on mission, because the Eucharistic celebration sends the assembly home to share with the world what they have heard, prayed, sung, meditated and received.

This explains why participation at Sunday Mass is so important in the Christian life that gradually it was recognized as a grave obligation, as witnessed by Canon 1247 of the *Code of Canon Law* and paragraph 2181 of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It explains why bishops and priests make considerable sacrifices to make Sunday Mass available to their people. It is also the reason why the Martyrs of Abitina in Proconsular Africa, during the persecution by the emperor Diocletian, preferred to be killed rather than give up their Sunday Eucharistic assembly. They said to their accusers: “Without fear of any kind we have celebrated the Lord’s Supper, because it cannot be missed; that is our law. We cannot live without the Lord’s Supper” (*Acta SS. Saturnini, Dativi*

et aliorum plurimorum Martyrum in Africa, 7, 9, 10: PL 8, 707, 709-710; quoted in *Dies Domini*, 46).

The Sunday Eucharistic celebration unites the Christian community and gives it joy. It is to be noticed that on Easter day evening, “the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (Jn 20:20). They still are glad when they gather, especially on Sunday, to celebrate the Lord’s sacrifice.

Major Focus of Sunday Observation

On Sunday the believers in Christ are expected to put aside their heavy daily work, such as the work done by labourers, servants and employees, in order to focus on higher engagements. The main activity which occupies their Sunday is the Eucharistic celebration. A Sunday without the Mass, even if it contained a nine-course luncheon, a visit to the supermarket and the watching of a national football contest, is empty.

In addition to Sunday Eucharistic celebration, a Sunday should also be marked by special attention given to other liturgical prayers such as the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayers of the Church for the different hours of the day and the night. The Second Vatican Council mentions Vespers in particular and requests pastors to associate their parishioners with them in the offering of these solemn evening prayers (cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 100). I know parishes that do this. I have been in a family in this country where the parents and their children gather on Sunday evening and pray Vespers together. On Sundays, Catholics should also make room for meditative reading of

Holy Scripture and a study of other spiritual writings more than on other days of the week. Parishes should not omit Doctrine teaching classes and the celebration of Eucharistic Benediction on Sunday evening.

Other Engagements on Sunday

In addition to the foregoing, Sunday is also a suitable day for individuals or families to visit shrines and pilgrimage centres and to take part in special conferences and in the viewing of documentaries and various recordings on religious matters. Where no priest is available for Sunday Mass over a wide area, the Catholic community should come together for a Service of the Word of God. Moreover, the sick who are in bed and other Christians who cannot go to Mass, may be able to follow a Mass over the radio or television, even if this cannot be regarded as the same as actual participation in a church.

Sunday is also an ideal day to rebuild relations in the form of family gatherings and meetings of relatives over a meal. Such a community can also engage in some type of recreation or sight seeing, or simply in the admiration of the wonders of nature around a lake or an attractive countryside.

Sunday is a beautiful day for the promotion of solidarity. Individuals and families can invite people who are lonely for a meal; they can provide food for needy families; they can visit prisoners, the sick, the old and the handicapped; and they can engage in various types of voluntary work and works of mercy. The early Christian communities were known for their attention to the poor. Saint

John Chrysostom reminds the rich of the words of Our Lord: “Whatever you did to the least of my brothers you did also to me”. “What good is it if the Eucharistic table is overloaded with golden chalices, when he is dying of hunger? Start by satisfying his hunger, and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well” (*Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 50, 3-4: PG 58, 508-509).

Modern Pressures Against Sunday

In the world of today there are some tendencies or forces that undermine or positively militate against the proper observance of the Lord’s day. There is religious indifference, or cynicism, or downright secularism which wants people to live as if God did not exist. There is materialism which may not have the audacity or naughtiness to deny the existence of the Creator, but which nevertheless reduces and restricts its gaze only to what can be perceived by the senses, pretends as if it did not know about spiritual and eternal realities, and ignores a consideration of stubborn realities that are death, judgment, hell and heaven. For some people, it is a question of spiritual blindness or tiredness, or simply laziness to lift up their hearts and minds.

Misled by some of these pressures, there are people who push to Sunday those activities which they did not have enough time to engage in during the week. Examples are shopping, political meetings, sports, unfinished office business, or simply the cutting of the grass around the household. Such mentalities consider Sunday just as part of the weekend.

ABOUT PRINCIPLES Animated by the joyful, lived experience of the faith, *Principles* draws on the fruits of an authentically Catholic liberal arts education to explore the ideas necessary to live a fully integrated Catholic life: one that upholds the value of human dignity, the role of virtue in private and public spheres, and the centrality of charity in both thought and action. We envision a Church—and a watching world—that embraces sound reason rooted in a robust faith.

Key Place of Sunday in the Liturgical Year

From the above considerations, it is clear why the Lord's day has a key place in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ by His Church during the Church year. The Second Vatican Council calls Sunday "the foundation and nucleus of the whole liturgical year" and decrees that "other celebrations, unless they be truly of overriding importance, must not have precedence over this day" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 106).

Every Catholic should be so convinced of the importance of the observance of the Lord's day that he or she will need no commandment to prove the key importance of the Sunday Eucharistic sacrifice. Saint John Paul II insists: "More than a precept, the observance should be seen as a need rising from the depths of Christian life. It is crucially important that all the faithful should be convinced that they cannot live their faith or share fully in the life of the Christian community unless they take part regularly in the Sunday Eucharistic assembly" (*Dies Domini*, 81). The saintly pope extolls Sunday as "an indispensable help" to Catholics in minority situations. Everywhere it is a "testimony and a proclamation" and with it the Church shows herself "the companion and support of human hope" (op. cit. 83, 84).

Christians for the Transformation of Culture

What can Christians do today for the transformation of culture? They are to begin with the simple but fundamental consideration that society comes from God. Man is neither the creator nor the centre. God is. If one desires to get a delicate and sophisticated machine to work well, one has to respect the instructions of the maker. This applies, for example, to a computer or to a 747 aircraft. If you want to fly such an aircraft from Kennedy Airport to Heathrow, but you declare that, since the vehicle was bought with your money, you will respect neither the instructions of the aircraft producers nor the regulations of the traffic controllers, then I say that I shall not only not be a passenger in such a doomed flight, but I shall not be anywhere within a hundred miles of the route of the ill-advised voyage! God is not a rival to man. He is the Creator of everything that exists. He gives each creature its nature and maintains it in existence. "Without the Creator, the creature would disappear", says the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*, 38). This is common sense. But some modern mentalities show that common sense is not very common.

To God as Creator is due the adoration of man. All humanity should bow before Him. And the

Eternal Father has decided “to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). The Incarnate Son of God is “the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (Col 1:15-16). Christendom is not an utopian idea. Jesus Christ is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev 17:14; 19:16; cf also 1 Tim 6:15). His kingdom, the Church sings on the Solemnity of Christ the King, is “an eternal and universal kingdom, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace” (*Roman Missal: Preface of Mass of Christ the King*).

Christians, therefore, make no apology to anybody when they strive to see that society acknowledges God and His supremacy. They do what they can to secure a mention

of God and Christianity in the constitution of their country because they see that history verifies this for most countries in Europe and North America. They want serious religious principles and values to be part of politics and government, customs and cultural performances, music and recreation, family and professions, private and public life. They contribute to a harmonious interplay between reason and faith, politics and religion. For them, healthy separation of religion and politics does not mean an ignoring of religious and spiritual considerations in political discourse.

The observance of the Lord’s day therefore recalls Christians to the need to share the faith in Christ. This can mean primary evangelization otherwise called evangelization *ad gentes*, or re-evangelization of once Christian and now secularized societies. “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel”, says Saint Paul (1 Cor 9:16). With all the fervour they can marshal, they are aware that the faith is proposed, not imposed. The evangelizer fully respects the freedom and dignity of the person to whom the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is proposed.

The Lord’s day is a message, a declaration, a call to action. May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles, obtain for all of us the grace to grasp the message of the Lord’s day and to live it with vigour in our contribution to transform the culture. **P**

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Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us.
Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, pray for us.