

# Veneration of Holy Images: Idolatry?

*He 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... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ~ Colossians 1:15-17*

**T**HE STATUE OF LIBERTY is, in a sense, sacred to patriotic Americans. It was a gift to the United

States from France that was meant to convey to all who saw it a triumphant image of a nation that embodied the highest ideas of nationhood and human goodness. For us in the United States, it is a symbol, or icon, of our love for our country. It speaks to us of freedom, and symbolizes a light to guide troubled souls to a welcoming homeland. This statue is loved and cherished by millions; it is beloved by all who know what it means, the virtues for which it stands. And woe to anyone who would desecrate it! But with all this respect, admiration, love, and veneration, we do not worship or adore it. It is not the object of American idolatry, for we treasure and love not the statue, but what it represents.

It is the same with images — statues, paintings, mosaics, stained-glass windows — that adorn our Catholic churches and find their way into many Catholic homes. The pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the statues of our Blessed Mother and other saints, the crucifixes, the Stations of the Cross — these are but symbols, or images, that speak to us of God and holy persons. They are ways to show respect or to remind ourselves of precious indications of love and sacrifice for our sakes. We show all these blessed reminders great respect, but no matter how intense may be the demonstration of affection, there is never adoration, never worship. The Catholic Church teaches adoration of God, and God alone. Even Mary, the Mother of God, may inspire extravagant displays of devotion, but she was human and finite, and is never to be adored.

Many people have great difficulty squaring the veneration of holy images with God's commandment in the Old Testament not to make any images at all: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image,

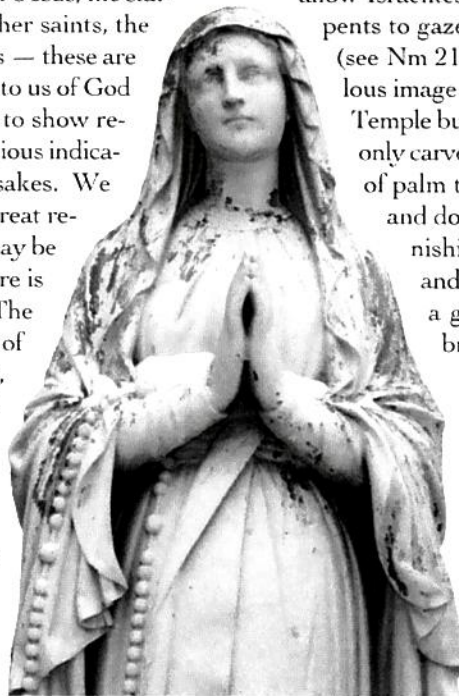
**"God's prohibition of images was not absolute."**

*or any likeness of anything that is in Heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to*

*them or serve them" (Ex 20:4-5). Idolatry was the usual practice when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, and forbidding the making of statues was part of God's plan to ensure that the Israelites worshipped him, and him alone, a plan that took many centuries to accomplish.*

Yet God's prohibition of images was not absolute. He commanded that figures of cherubim (the same kind of angels that guarded the entrance to the Garden of Eden; see Gn 3:24) be placed on either side of the Ark of the Covenant (see Ex 25:18-22). He commanded that images of the cherubim also be worked into the curtains that made up the tabernacle holding the Ark of the Covenant (see Ex 26:1) and into the veil that concealed the Ark (see Ex 26:31-33). He commanded that Moses make a serpent of brass, mount it on a staff, and allow Israelites who had been bitten by fiery serpents to gaze on it so that they might be healed (see Nm 21:6-9), the first example of a miraculous image in salvation history. He blessed the Temple built by Solomon, which contained not only carved cherubim but also representations of palm trees and open flowers on the walls and doors (see 1 Kgs 6:29-35), bronze furnishings with depictions of lions, oxen, and cherubim (see 1 Kgs 7:27-29), and a great bronze basin held by twelve bronze oxen (1 Kgs 7:44-45).

What remained absolute until the coming of Jesus was any kind of depiction of the unseen God. With Jesus, we actually see the face of God in human form, as Jesus himself tells the apostles: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). This changed everything, as St. Paul says: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to



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give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). From the earliest days of Christianity in the catacombs of Rome, we find depictions of Jesus, his Mother, angels and saints, and scenes from salvation history on sarcophagi (stone caskets) and in paintings.

Yet there were those who believed that the Old Testament proscription of images was still in full force. Pope St. Gregory the Great wrote in the late 500s this explanation of the value of images and the reason they should not be destroyed: "Not without reason has antiquity allowed the stories of saints to be painted in holy places. And we indeed entirely praise thee for not allowing them to be adored, but we blame thee for breaking them. For it is one thing to adore an image, it is quite another thing to learn from the appearance of a picture what we must adore. What books are to those who can read, that is a picture to the ignorant who look at it; in a picture even the unlearned may see what example they should follow; in a picture they who know no letters may yet read. Hence, for barbarians especially a picture takes the place of a book" (Epistle IX, 105).

The most significant expressions of the disbelief in images in the first millennium of the Church's history were several iconoclastic (meaning "image-breaking") persecutions in the 700s and 800s in the Byzantine Empire, all that remained of the old Roman Empire. The Second Council of Nicaea, convened in 787 to pronounce clearly the Church's teaching on images in the face of their widespread destruction, stated that images confirm "that the incarnation of the Word of God was real and not imaginary"<sup>1</sup> (CCC 1160), and pronounced: "[W]e rightly define with full certainty and correctness that, like the figure of the precious and life-giving cross, venerable and holy images of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ, our inviolate Lady, the holy Mother of God, and the venerated angels, all the saints and the just, whether painted or made of mosaic or another suitable material, are to be exhibited in the holy church-

## ***"The Church uses physical images to convey spiritual realities to the soul."***



*Cathedral of Notre Dame (Our Lady) in Paris, France, built between 1163 and 1255*

es of God, on sacred vessels and vestments, walls and panels, in houses and on streets"<sup>2</sup> (CCC 1161). The Council went on to say that those who look at images are reminded of, and love more ardently, those depicted, and that true adoration is to be given to God alone. With the coming of Protestantism, iconoclasm flowered again. There was a great destruction of images in Catholic churches all over Europe, and to this day many Protestant churches are unadorned with images, or use them sparsely.

Material things have an impact on the intellect and will. They lead our thoughts to spiritual things and lead our will to prayer, following the commandments, and living a life of

love. The Church, realizing that our bodies, through our senses, affect our souls, uses physical images to convey spiritual realities to the soul. And the soul, in turn, has an impact on the body, so that what we feel strongly about, we often express outwardly in our emotions, such as joy, sorrow, and repentance. When we love someone, it is natural for us to want to have and treasure images of the beloved. The pictures, statues, and other replicas or representations of God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints are only means to help raise our minds and hearts to a God whom we do not see and to saints who have gone before us into glory. Images of Jesus remind us that, as he came in the "likeness of men" (Phil 2:7), we are "predestined to be conformed to the image of [God's] Son" (Rom 8:29).

Images of God, angels, and saints are integral parts of Catholic religious practice that promote fuller union with God, but they are not substitutes for the real things. Catholic practice and respect for images of any kind have their place, but they only represent reality. The Catholic Church does not, and never has, approved of or encouraged idolatry. The Church's icons and other instruments of memory are means by which our minds are turned toward those we love. That is their purpose, their only purpose.

(CCC 476-477, 1159-1162, 2129-2132)

<sup>1</sup> Council of Nicaea II (787) from Conciliorum Oecumenicorum decreta 111

<sup>2</sup> Council of Nicaea II from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 600 (1965)

# Profanity

*God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in Heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ~ Philippians 2:9-11*

**E**VERY ONE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS is broken daily, but the Second Commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Ex 20:7), seems to be broken by the most people with the least sense of guilt. Few can claim not to have spoken one of the names of God, including "Jesus" and "Christ," to express feelings very far from awe and praise, and many people use holy names merely as exclamations or as "fill-in" speech, with no meaning behind the words at all.

Our culture's loss of the sense of the sacredness of God's name is nearly complete, and with it has come a loss of the sense of God in our lives at all. God gave us the Second Commandment because he knew of the direct connection between what we say and how we think and feel. There is an old saying that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." We all know how false that is; words indeed hurt because there is meaning and intention behind them. Contemptuous words show con-

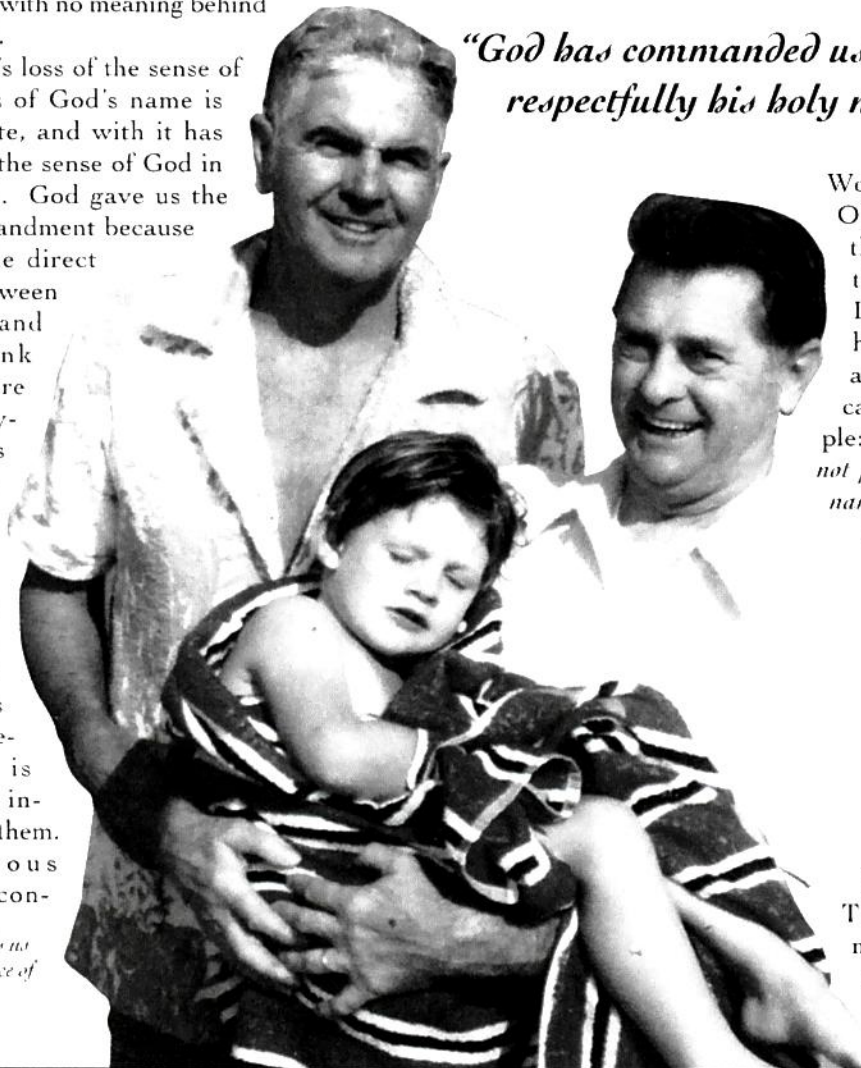
*God the Father calls us to guard the innocence of the young*

tempt; careless words show lack of care; thoughtless words show how far one is from the mind of the person speaking them. Words reflect our minds and our hearts, and they in turn shape our thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

This is the purpose behind the Second Commandment. God has commanded us to speak respectfully his holy name, and by speaking his name with respect, we learn respect for him and communicate that respect to all who hear us.

*"God has commanded us to speak respectfully his holy name."*

We learn from the Old Testament that respect for the name of the Lord proclaims his greatness and his love and care for his people: "And you shall not profane my holy name, but I will be hallowed among the people of Israel; I am the Lord who sanctify you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord" (Lv 22:32-33). The God who made us, sustains us as we



draw every breath (see Acts 17:28), who knows all of our needs (see Mt 6:31-32), who numbers even the hairs on our heads (see Lk 12:7), who has done wonderful things in our lives and seeks to make us holy and worthy of himself, is the one to whom we owe the profoundest respect, awe, love, and worship. When we speak God's name with respect, we remind ourselves and those who hear us of this tremendous mystery of God's love and care for us. As we make a conscious effort to speak God's name with respect, we develop in ourselves an ever-stronger sense of the sacred.

There are three names that have been especially chosen by God himself for reverence. The first of these is *"I am who I am"* or *"I am"* (Ex 3:14), which God revealed to Moses. The Israelites, the Chosen People to whom God gave the Old Testament, never spoke this name, nor do Jews to this day; when proclaiming Scripture, the word YHWH (the English equivalent of the Hebrew word, which does not use written vowels) is not pronounced, but instead *Adonai* (meaning "Lord") is read instead. When speaking of God, Jews will often say *Hasbem* (meaning "the Name") out of respect for the name God himself gave them. The English word "Jehovah" is an incorrect attempt to pronounce YHWH and should not be used. The closest equivalent to YHWH in English is "Lord," and is a common name we give our Creator in everyday speech and one that is all too often abused. While the Church has never forbidden us to speak his name, every time we do so, it should only be with all reverence.

The second is "Father." In teaching us how to pray, Jesus began with these words: *"Our Father who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name"* (Mt 6:9). The names of the three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are the only ones that belong

to God in his very essence, not to him as he relates to his creatures. These names are all to be spoken with great respect. The most significant way the name "Father" is mistreated is in our careless and thoughtless "rattling off" of the Lord's Prayer. The names of the Son and the Holy Spirit are, thankfully, rarely used disrespectfully.

*"A wonderful Catholic habit is to slightly bow the head every time the name of Jesus is prayed or spoken."*



The third is "Jesus," the name the angel instructed both Mary his Mother and Joseph his foster father to give to the savior of the world (see Lk 1:31; Mt 1:21). Jesus is God the Son in human flesh, and as God and our Savior his name is due profound reverence and respect. A wonderful Catholic habit is to slightly bow the head every time the name of Jesus is prayed or spoken. This habit helps to instill in us through both word and "body language" a habit of adoration. By extension, the name "Christ," which means "the anointed one" and was therefore originally a title rather than a proper name, is to be revered as well. Sadly, both "Jesus" and "Christ" are abused daily.

It is the common human experience that knowing someone's name is the beginning of a relationship, and by introducing ourselves to someone we are offering the same opportunity. This is true of God as well. By giving us his name, God reveals himself to us, offers us the opportunity to believe in him, and initiates a relationship of intimacy and trust. By praying God's name, we offer adoration; by speaking it, we can offer praise and glory, as the Psalmist cries: *"Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord! Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and for evermore!"* (Ps 113:1-2).

The reverence due God's name is, to a lesser degree, also due his holy ones: Mary the Mother of God and all his saints. The misuse of these names

indirectly profanes God's name because it shows disrespect to those who have been his faithful servants, and therefore contempt for the One to whom they gave their hearts and lives.

In addition to everyday speech, there are special occasions when profaning the name of God is especially wrong. The most important of these is in calling on God to guarantee a promise or false oath. God has forbidden this: "[Y]ou shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord" (Lv 19:12). When we make promises or take oaths in God's name, we not only pledge our own truthfulness but God's truthfulness and authority as well. False oath-taking is not only a lie but also a way of presenting God to the world as a liar, a serious profaning of his name. This is true even when the motive is simple lack of respect, for words have power as the act of oath-taking itself implies. For this reason, we must not perjure ourselves, make an oath to do an evil deed, or take a false oath under coercion or that in some way injures the dignity of others.

In our Lord's time on earth, the problem of false oath-taking had evidently become significant enough that in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: "[Y]ou have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by Heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Mt 5:33-37). Jesus is telling us that every oath, by its very nature, calls upon God's name for its guarantee. Piling up guarantees of one's truthfulness is itself evidence that there is a lie somewhere, as we all know from our experience of liars who continually embellish a lie in an effort to make it seem more trustworthy. It should be noted that Jesus' prohibition is not absolute, as we learn from St. Paul in his Letter to the Galatians when writing of the sincer-

ity of his conversion: "In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!" (Gal 1:20). Here we learn that oath-taking must be reserved to only the most serious of reasons.

The most terrible misuse of God's name is blasphemy; it is by its nature a grave sin. In thoughts or words, the blasphemer goes beyond disrespect to animosity or hatred of God, or defiance toward him. In deeds, the blasphemer uses God's name to carry out evil acts. Sadly, we are familiar with a great deal of blasphemy in a world that uses God's name to torture, terrorize, or kill others. We should not view this kind of blasphemy as something perpetrated only by non-Christians; the history of Christian-

ity has pages written in blood by those who claimed God's sanction for their actions. In addition to the evil of the heinous sins committed in God's name is the scandal it gives to people who turn their backs on God because of the evil done by those who claim their actions have his approval.

There are forms of speech that are similar to profanity, even though they do not directly use God's

name. The most significant is cursing, because even without using God's name directly, the curse is, in effect, calling upon God to do another person harm. It is thus indirectly profanity. Another form is vulgarity, which in everyday speech is nearly as common as profanity. While it does not offer disrespect to the name of God, it is incompatible with the dignity of the Christian, and with the dignity we should offer to all others.

"Freedom of speech" is an excellent element in civic life. However, the person who does not guard his or her tongue has not yet achieved the deep inner conversion that is the mark of the true Christian. We must consciously and conscientiously purge ourselves of profanity, blasphemy, cursing, and vulgarity. The faithful Christian instead fearlessly bears witness to the glory and sanctity of the Lord's name.

(CCC 206, 209, 2142-2155)

*"The blasphemer uses God's name to carry out evil acts."*



... Speak no evil

# The Sabbath and Sunday Worship

*And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; — it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." ~ Mark 16:1-7*

**T**HE LOVE of neighbor commanded by God in the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) is considered important by most people, but God's commandment to keep the sabbath holy (see Ex 20:8) frequently is not observed at all. And yet the sabbath is a foundational and fundamental element of God's creative activity: "And on the seventh day God finished



*Chapel of Sacred Heart Church in Bowie, Maryland, built in 1741*

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 2:2-3). We know that God, who is spirit and all-powerful, did not need to rest on the seventh day. Why, then, did he do it?

## Why God Created the Sabbath

God created the sabbath for us, his human creatures. We are created with a need to worship him and, physically and spiritually, we need rest and lei-

***"We are created with a need to worship him and, physically and spiritually, we need rest and leisure."***

sure. As with everything else about God's creation, he is mindful of our needs and sees to it that they can be met. By "resting," God not only gave us a holy example to follow, but the time and opportunity to praise him and all that he has done as well.

In the Scriptural account of God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses, God elaborated on the commandment to keep the sabbath holy: "Six days you shall la-

bor, 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 maid-servant, 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 20:9-11). Not only does keeping the sabbath imitate God's action, but keeping the sabbath is not just for a few of us, but for everyone — the whole family, employees, strangers — and even for the animals that serve us.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God's

commandment is elaborated even further. The sabbath not only recalls God's loving creation, but also commemorates

God's liberation of his Chosen People, the Israelites, from their bondage in Egypt: "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day" (Dt 5:15). The sabbath, therefore, is a day of freedom from the bondage of work.

The sabbath is also a sign of the irrevocable covenant God made with the People of Israel, reminding them forever of their status as his people: "You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.... Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel" (Ex 31:13, 16-17). The sabbath, therefore, is central to the law of the Old Covenant, corresponding to the wisdom and will of God.

#### Jesus and the Observance of the Sabbath

The Gospels record several instances when Jesus was accused of violating the sabbath. These episodes tell us several things. First, Jesus tells us that the sabbath itself should not be seen as the master of human activities: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mk 2:27). Second, he teaches that we do not violate the sabbath by the work necessary for the worship of God (see Mt 12:5; see also Nm 28:9-10). Third, he teaches that works of mercy and serving our neighbor

### *"Sunday worship and rest is both the memorial of God's creation and of Christ's Resurrection."*

are also not violations of the sabbath (see Lk 13:14-16; Lk 14:1-5; Jn 7:22-23). He points out that even animals may be given neces-

sary care on the sabbath (see Lk 13:15; Lk 14:5). Finally, he states unequivocally that "the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath" (Mk 2:28). Jesus has the right to interpret the divine command, declaring the sabbath as a day "for doing good rather than harm, for saving life rather than killing" (CCC 2175). This right he handed to St. Peter and his Church: "I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven" (Mt 16:19, see also Mt 18:18). It is this power of binding and loosing that gives the Church the authority to establish Sunday rather than the sabbath as the day for Christian worship and rest.

#### The Origin of Sunday as the Lord's Day

On the first day of creation, God created the Heavens and the earth, separated light from darkness, and called the light day and the darkness night (see Gn 1:1-5). The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead also occurred on the first day of the week (see Jn 20:1-9). His Resurrection completed and vali-

dated his work of redemption, as St. Paul tells us: "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14). This day, therefore, is a "new creation," more important than the day of creation itself: "The first creation finds its meaning and its summit in the new creation in Christ, the splendor of which surpasses that of the first creation"<sup>1</sup> (CCC 549). Sunday is often



*A child singing during the Easter Vigil Mass in which she and her mother were baptized*

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Roman Missal*, Easter Vigil 24, prayer after the first reading

called in Christian writings the “eighth day” of creation, the day when the world was created anew.

For the Church, then, Sunday worship and rest is both the memorial of God’s creation and of Christ’s Resurrection. “In Christ’s Passover, Sunday fulfills the spiritual truth of the Jewish sabbath” (CCC 2175). For this reason, the Church has replaced the sabbath with Sunday worship and rest. Of all days, this is the day of which the Psalmist sings: “*This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it*” (Ps 118:24). For Christians, Sunday came to be called “the Lord’s Day.”

### Sanctifying the Lord’s Day with Worship

The tradition of Sunday worship has been handed down from the apostles themselves. It is first documented in Scripture itself, when the Acts of the Apostles records a group of Christians having gathered together “to break bread” on the first day of the week (see Acts 20:7). This could be understood merely as having an ordinary meal, but from other early Christian writings we know that the phrase “to break bread” referred to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, that is, to what we today call the Mass.

Very early Christian writings give unequivocal witness to this tradition. The *Didache* (pronounced DEE-da-kay), or the “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” is an extremely early work, almost certainly written before 100 AD, and possibly decades earlier. It speaks of gathering together, breaking bread, and giving thanksgiving — a very elemental description of the Mass — to be done every Lord’s Day. In about 107 AD, St. Ignatius of Antioch specifically wrote of the deliberate replacement of the sabbath with Sunday: “Those who lived according to the old order of things have come to a new hope, no longer keeping the sabbath, but the Lord’s Day, in which our life is blessed by him and by his death”<sup>2</sup> (CCC 2175). Around 155 AD, St. Justin Martyr wrote to the Roman emperor: “On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place”<sup>3</sup> (CCC 1345), and then went on to describe Sunday worship, unmistakably the Mass. A few centuries later, St. Jerome wrote that the pagan name of



COURTESY OF THE ARCHDIOCESE FOR THE MILITARY SERVICES, USA

*Sunday Mass celebrated in the field by Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA*

the first day of the week, the “day of the sun,” was acceptable, “for today the light of the world is raised, today is revealed the sun of justice with healing in his rays”<sup>4</sup> (CCC 1166).

Because of Jesus’ Resurrection, which began God’s “new creation” in salvation history, the Lord’s Day is the first of all feasts in the Church’s life. Our

celebration of the Lord’s Supper — the banquet table that the Lord has spread for us, the Eucharistic celebration of the Mass that is the center and heart of the Church’s life —

is where the entire community of the faithful encounter our risen Lord.

Worshipping God at Mass on the Lord’s Day is an obligation to be taken very seriously, as it fulfills God’s commandment to give him regular, public worship. Every week, we celebrate both our Creator and our redemption from sin by Jesus Christ. Sunday worship is foundational for our life in Christ and cannot, therefore, be optional. The first precept of the Church spells out the Catholic’s obligation to attend Mass on all Sundays (and holy days of obligation). (The Sun-

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<sup>2</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch, Ad Magn. 9, 1 from Sources Chrétiennes 10, 88 (Paris: 1942)

<sup>3</sup> St. Justin, Apol. 1, 65-67 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Graeca 6, 428-429 (Paris, 1857-1866); from chap. 67

<sup>4</sup> St. Jerome, Pasch. from Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 78, 550 (Turnhout, 1955)



day obligation is satisfied by attending a Saturday late afternoon or evening "vigil" Mass for the Sunday. This provision is based on the ancient Hebrew concept, found in the first verses of Genesis, that a day begins in the evening and concludes the following evening.)

Unless there is a serious reason — for example, illness, unavoidable travel to locations

where there is no Mass, dangerous weather conditions — or one is dispensed by the pastor, failure to attend Mass on Sunday is gravely sinful. For localities where no Sunday Mass is available without great hardship, one can seek at least to take part in a Liturgy of the Word, if celebrated, or engage in prayer personally, as a family, or as a group of families.

Keeping the Lord's Day thus fulfills the moral command of the Old Covenant, taking up its rhythm and spirit in the weekly celebration of God as our Creator and our Redeemer. By participating in the celebration of Mass, we show that we belong to a community of faith, and that we are faithful to Christ and his Church. As a community, we attest to God's holiness and to our hope of salvation, and strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### Sanctifying the Lord's Day with Rest

God has designed us for lives that have a rhythm of work and rest. We sanctify the Lord's Day not only by participating in the Eucharistic celebration, but also by resting. In addition to the obligation to attend Mass, the first precept of the Church requires us to "abstain from those labors and business concerns which impede the worship to be rendered to God, the joy which is proper to the Lord's Day, or the proper relaxation of mind and body" (*Code of Canon Law*, Can. 1247).

Of course, work cannot entirely be removed from Sundays. Hospitals and nursing homes must be staffed, and children need care. However, we must be careful not to develop habits that make Sunday like any other day of



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the week. Only rarely does shopping need to be done on Sunday, and cooking elaborate meals to celebrate the day might be done partially in advance. The lawn can be mowed and the car washed another day. Children's sports need not take up Saturday and Sunday. Family life has been nearly choked out of existence by the multitude of commitments

that characterize today's society, and it takes commitment and vigilance to protect and strengthen the bonds of love in the most important of our communities, the family home. Sundays, furthermore, can offer precious time for silence, for personal reflection, and for meditation to strengthen our interior lives.

Making a greater effort to sanctify the Lord's Day includes avoiding activities that force others to work, and perhaps themselves forego worship. Both public and private employers have an obligation to ensure that employees have needed time for rest and worship. In places where Sundays are not legal holidays, especially where there is no other weekly legal holiday, Christians are especially obliged, by the witness of their prayer, respect for the Lord's Day, and joyful lives, to defend the importance of a weekly opportunity to rest and worship to the society as a whole.

Finally, Jesus' example shows that good works, such as care for the sick, infirm, poor, and elderly, are ways to sanctify the Lord's Day. Good works can also include ministries that serve the Church, such as catechesis of children and adults. When these are undertaken, they should not unduly take away from the claims of the family.

In a culture that seems to force us to live at an ever-faster pace, the Church's reinforcement of God's commandment to rest, relax, and enjoy the day are especially needed. We all need leisure to spend time with our families, to strengthen social ties, to expand our cultural horizons, and to deepen our spiritual lives. And God

tells us to have fun!

(CCC 345-349, 582, 1163, 1166-1167, 1343, 1345, 2042, 2168-2177, 2180-2188)

***"We must be careful not to develop habits that make Sunday like any other day of the week."***