

Meditations: Friday of the Fifteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the fifteenth week of Ordinary Time.

- Meaning of the Sabbath
- Sunday, the new day of the Lord
- The Eucharist and rest

ONE DAY Jesus and his disciples were walking through a large field of

wheat and, as Matthew tells us, they were hungry (cf. *Mt* 12:1). Seeing themselves surrounded by such abundant nourishment, “his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands” (*Lk* 6:1). Jewish law allowed people to pluck a few grains of wheat with their hands from their neighbor’s field (cf. *Deut* 23:25). The controversy arose, however, because they did this on the Sabbath. When the Pharisees heard about it, they complained to Jesus: “your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” (*Mt* 12:2).

In the Book of Exodus we read that God told the people of the Covenant: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (*Ex* 20:8). The Lord referred to the Sabbath not in the context of the precepts regarding worship, but within the Decalogue itself. The inspired text explains the reason for this commandment: “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 20:11*). Over time, increasingly rigorous human rules were added to the divine precept to observe the Sabbath. In Jesus’ time, the precept had become so detailed that it listed 39 types of prohibited work.

Jesus, as the authentic interpreter of divine precepts, responded to the Pharisees’ complaint by pointing to the true – and perhaps forgotten – meaning of the Sabbath: serving God and one’s neighbor. Therefore the supreme criterion was not refraining from doing specific things. Rather than focusing on a casuistry about what is permitted or prohibited, Christ invites us to look at the deep reason why Yahweh has established the Sabbath rest: to abstain from certain occupations in order to honor

the Lord more freely. The commandment regarding the Sabbath referred to God's mysterious "rest" after his work of creating, and also to the freeing of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Therefore we can say that the observance of this day has a liberating character. The purpose of the divine law was not to bind people to countless rules, but to free them each week from the less important things in life so they could turn their eyes towards God. He wanted them to remember that they are children of the Creator of all things and of the One who frees us from every slavery.

IN THE CONTEXT of the discussion about the Sabbath, Jesus reveals the mystery of his identity. "Have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the Temple

profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the Temple is here" (*Mt 12:5-6*). The Temple had the highest dignity because it was the house where Yahweh dwelt. Only God himself was superior to the Temple. With these words Christ clearly proclaims his own divinity. At the end of the conversation He adds: "For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath" (*Mt 12:8*). Given that the Sabbath precept is a divine institution, Jesus was implicitly presenting himself as God.

Our Lord did not intend to disregard the Sabbath rest. We know that Jesus fulfilled the Law, both religious and civil. He went with his disciples to the synagogue every Saturday, paid taxes, went on pilgrimage with his family to the Temple and observed the feast days like any devout Jew. In fact, after the Resurrection his disciples continued to go to the

synagogue on the Sabbath, although they also began to meet on the first day of the week, to honor the memory of the Risen Jesus. The first day of the week had become the day of the new creation and mankind's definitive liberation.

Over time, in the early Christian community Sunday gradually replaced Saturday as the *dies Domini*, the day of the Lord. Sunday was not just another day for the Christians of the first centuries; it was the very center of their life. Therefore, centuries later, the Church established the Sunday precept. The faithful "are to abstain from those works and affairs which hinder the worship to be rendered to God, the joy proper to the Lord's day, or the suitable relaxation of mind and body."^[1] Jesus "gives us 'his day' as an ever new gift of his love . . . 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.”^[2]

TESTIMONY from the second century tells us that the first Christians gathered on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist: “On the day called the day of the sun, all those who live in the city or the country gather in one place. The memoirs of the Apostles and the writings of the prophets are read . . . Then bread and a cup of wine mixed with water is brought to the one who presides.”^[3] At Sunday Mass we let ourselves be met by God; we listen to his Word and are nourished with the Bread of Life, in communion with the whole Church. “We are also reminded, by resting from our usual occupations, that we are not slaves but children of a

Father who constantly invites us to place our hope in Him.”^[4] —

Thus Sunday is truly the “day of Christ,” and at the same time it is the “day of man.” The rest proper to this day, shared with God and the whole Church, helps us to renew our strength for our daily tasks. We give to God, through the sacrifice of his Son, all the events of the week that has ended, and those of the week that is beginning. “I have always seen rest,” Saint Josemaría remarked, “as time set aside from daily tasks, never as days of idleness. Rest means recuperation: to gain strength, form ideals and make plans. In other words it means a change of occupation, so that you can come back later with a new impetus to your daily job.”^[5] Our Lady, who surely took part in those first Sunday meetings, will intercede for us and ask God to increase in us our desire

to nourish ourselves with his Bread and his Word.

^[1] Code of Canon Law, no. 1247.

^[2] St. John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, no. 7.

^[3] St. Justin, *Apology*, 1, 65.

^[4] Francis, Audience, 13 December 2017.

^[5] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 514.

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