

Leisure and Free Time (2)

"In hallowing the Sabbath, in 'creating' the festive day, God has wanted to associate all men and women with his loving gaze upon the world." A new article in the series on the family and raising children.

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Leisure and Free Time (1)

God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done

in creation.[1] Within the overall unity of each person's life, work and free time should not be separated. That is why it is urgent to engage in an "entertainment apostolate,"[2] so as to counteract the tendency to view leisure time as a pure "escape,"[3] even at the cost of breaking up a person's interior unity.

God's Rest

The epitome of free time is found in festive celebrations. The monotony of everyday life is overcome in celebrating events that are decisive or defining for a group of people, be it a family or a nation. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, feast days have a religious meaning that is associated with God's joyful rest. Once creation was completed, *God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.* We could almost say that God marveled at his own work, especially at the greatness of his creature, man, called to live in

communion with him. And so, in hallowing the Sabbath, in “creating” the festive day, God has wanted to associate all men and women with his loving gaze upon the world. In some way, then, “God’s rest confers meaning upon time,”[4] both time for work and time for rest, since *God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good*[5]

For Christians, moreover, Sunday, the day of the Lord, *dies Christi*,[6] is the day *holy to the Lord in all your dwellings*.[7] Every Sunday we remember and celebrate in the Church’s liturgy the resurrection of Christ; we celebrate the new creation, the salvation of mankind, the liberation of the world, its final destination. Although the newness brought by Christ has meant that “the practices of the Jewish Sabbath are gone, surpassed as they are by the ‘fulfilment’ 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.”[8] Christ himself, “Lord of the Sabbath,”[9] explains the true meaning of the Sabbath rest; he restores “its liberating character, carefully safeguarding the rights of God and the rights of man.”[10]

Seen in this light, Sunday shows the newness of the world, of the new creation in Christ. In some way, all time has become festive time, since it is time given by God and for God. Work and leisure are closely linked, and both bring a call to contemplation and prayer. God gives us time so that we can “take delight” along with him, and unite ourselves to his rest and work,[11] admiring his Beauty and the beauty of his work.

Part of the parents' educational mission is to help children see feast days as a gift. Effort should be put into organizing the family's Sundays, or any holiday period, in such a way that obligations towards God don't appear as something strange or bothersome, introduced into plans as almost an after-thought. If children see that some fore-thought is put into how and when to attend Mass, or to receive the sacraments, then they will more easily come to understand how "free time ends up being empty if God is not in it."^[12] Benedict XVI's advice here is quite valuable: "Dear friends! Sometimes, our initial impression is that having to include time for Mass on a Sunday is rather inconvenient. But if you make the effort, you will realize that this is what gives a proper focus to your free time. Do not be deterred from taking part in Sunday Mass, and help others to discover it too."^[13]

Therefore pride of place should be given to attending holy Mass in all weekend plans. Trips or outings, especially when they are long, should be planned to ensure attendance at the Holy Sacrifice on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. On their part, “pastors have the corresponding duty to offer to everyone the real possibility of fulfilling the precept. The provisions of Church law move in this direction, as for example, in the faculty granted to priests, with the prior authorization of the diocesan Bishop, to celebrate more than one Mass on Sundays and holy days, the institution of evening Masses and the provision which allows the obligation to be fulfilled from Saturday evening onwards, starting at the time of First Vespers of Sunday.”[14]

Time for virtues

Educational opportunities offered by free time to guide children's personalities have already been discussed in a previous article.

Games, excursions and sports are not only part and parcel of young people's lives, but through them parents can come to know their children better and instill in them a desire to learn and to give of themselves to others. These desires find an outlet in a variety of activities that help form good habits, the human virtues. Thus free time no longer becomes "time for trivial pastimes" and instead becomes quality time, creative time—precious moments for children to take up and internalize their own freedom.

Educating children in the good use of leisure time involves suggesting to them activities that they find attractive and that respect their way of being. To the extent that a family shares happy moments together,

good foundations are laid for preventing harmful pastimes in the future. Joyful periods spent with parents in early childhood, when children experience the joy of giving and receiving, of being generous with others, will never be forgotten, and will help protect them when they confront the false allurements that try to lead them away from God.

Parents should be careful not to give the impression that vacations and free time are simply opportunities to escape or to be entertained. This doesn't mean transmitting to children a vision of free time as "only doing useful things," in the sense that it is useful to study some subject, or to learn a language, or to take swimming lessons or piano classes (activities that basically do not differ much from the kind of instruction provided by many schools). Rather it is a question of teaching them to use these periods in a balanced way. In

this sense, leisure provides situations favorable to fostering unity of life. It is a matter of fostering strong personalities in children, capable of managing their own freedom and living their faith consistently.

A great enemy in this whole area is “killing time,” because “when a Christian kills time on this earth, he is putting himself in danger of ‘killing Heaven’ for himself.”[15] Such is the approach of someone who “through selfishness backs out of things and hides away and doesn’t care”[16] about others, seeking oneself in a disordered way, without making room for God or other people. Teaching children to use their free time well calls for commitment from parents. They are always, even unwittingly, the most influential models in their children’s education, and as educators they cannot afford to give the impression that they are bored, or that they rest

by doing nothing. Their way of resting should in some way be open to resting with God, to being at the service of others. Children need to understand that leisure enables us “to relax in activities that require less effort,”[17] while learning new things, cultivating friendships, and strengthening family life.

Entertainment for young people

Many parents, and to a degree quite rightly, are wary of the pressure of a consumer society that offers all kinds of harmful and superficial entertainment. The underlying problem is the same everywhere. Young people want to be happy, but they don’t always know how, and often they don’t even know what happiness is, because no one has explained it to them convincingly, or they haven’t experienced it. For the great majority of them, the question of happiness comes down to having a

well-paid job, good health and living in a loving and supportive family. Although young people can sometimes be rebellious, they usually realize that they need to make an effort in their studies, since they understand that their future depends to a great extent on their marks at school.

All this is compatible with the desire to assert their own autonomy in organizing their free time. In some cases, they do so by following the path marked out by the entertainment industries, which often promote forms of entertainment that hinder or prevent growth in virtues such as temperance. But in the last analysis, the disorientation of young people is no different from that found in many adults: they confuse happiness, the result of a truly good life, with a fleeting sense of false joy.

Real as these deviations are, we shouldn't forget that "we all felt a tendency to rebel against our elders when we began to form our own judgment autonomously." [18] This is all part of the normal process of maturing. When asked about how they have a good time, those they are "with" is always more important than "what" they do. Young people want to be with people their own age and away from home, that is, away from their family and adults. In fact, the things they associate most closely with enjoyment are going out with friends and listening to music. Even when, as happens in many places, the acquiring of sometimes unnecessary items is viewed as a form of entertainment (shopping for clothing, mobile phones, computer accessories, video games, etc.), this activity is only an excuse to be with their friends.

It is important, therefore, to suggest ways of having a good time that truly foster happiness and the human person's flourishing. Parents can join up with other families to promote suitable places where their children can grow up humanly and spiritually while using of free time. In short, parents need to foster forms of entertainment and interests that strengthen children's sense of friendship, their responsibility to care for and encourage the people they cherish.

“Young people are always capable of getting enthusiastic about great undertakings, high ideals, and anything that is genuine.”[19]

Parents can and should count on this reality. They need to dedicate time to their children, speaking with them and giving them an example of cheerfulness, temperance and sacrifice right from their first years. Educating children, then, “is not a

matter of imposing a line of conduct, but rather of showing the human and supernatural motives for it. In a word, parents have to respect their children's freedom, because there is no real education without personal responsibility, and there is no responsibility without freedom.”[20]

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[1] *Gen* 2:3.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 975.

[3] Cf. John Paul II, *Message for the XIX World Day of Social Communications*, 19 May 1985, no. 4.

[4] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 31 May 1998, no. 60.

[5] *Gen* 1:31.

[6]Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 31 May 1998, nos. 18ff.

[7]*Lev* 23:3.

[8] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 31 May 1998, no. 62.

[9]*Mk* 2:28.

[10] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 31 May 1998, no. 63.

[11]Cf. *Jn* 5:17.

[12]Benedict XVI, *Homily at Marienfeld Esplanade*, 21 August 2005.

[13]Benedict XVI, *Homily at Marienfeld Esplanade*, 21 August 2005.

[14]John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 31 May 1998, no. 49.

[15] *Friends of God*, no.46.

[16] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 46.

[17] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 357.

[18] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 100.

[19] *Conversations*, no. 101.

[20] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 27.

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