

A Pastoral Letter on the Lord's Day

Bishop William Murphy

My Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Diocese of Rockville Centre,

“Blessed be He who has raised the great day of Sunday above all other days. The heavens and the earth, angels and people give themselves over to joy” (*Dies Domini*, 55).

In Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, we read in paragraph 106, “By a tradition handed down from the apostles, which took its origin from the very day of Christ's resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every seventh day, which day is appropriately called the Lord's Day or Sunday. For on this day Christ's faithful are bound to come together into one place. They should listen to the word of God and take part in the Eucharist, thus calling to mind the passion, resurrection, and glory of the Lord Jesus, and giving thanks to God who “has begotten them again, through the resurrection of Christ from the dead, unto a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3)¹

Thus Sunday is the first holy day. It is the Lord's day. It is the day which is accorded a special place in the life of the Church and her members. The sad reality in our present society is that most times Sunday is not given a special place in the life of Christians. Given the hectic pace at which we live life today, the many demands placed upon families where both parents work and children are involved in a myriad of activities, and the pressures of a consumer society, Sunday is often a day which looks just like any other—a day crammed with more things to “get done.”

Yet our tradition asks us to make Sunday a day of great joy and freedom from work. When the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy tells us that we *must* gather together, the “must” stems not only from a legal or moral obligation, but from the very essence of who we are as Catholic Christians. It is an obligation that originates from our inner relationship with Jesus Christ and our very identity as Catholic Christians, not from some external code. As our Holy Father Pope John Paul II urges us in his Apostolic Letter on Keeping the Lord's Day Holy, *Dies Domini*: “Sunday is a day which is at the very heart of the Christian life...I would strongly urge everyone to rediscover Sunday: *Do not be afraid to give your time to Christ!* The rediscovery of this day is a grace which we must implore, not only so that we may live the demands of faith to the full, but also so that we may respond concretely to the deepest human yearnings. Time given to Christ is never time lost, but is rather time gained, so that our relationship and indeed our whole life may become more profoundly human.”²

It is my desire then, as your Diocesan Bishop, to echo the call of the Holy Father and to offer this pastoral letter to assist all the faithful of the Diocese of Rockville Centre to *rediscover Sunday*, so that we might all respond to our deepest human yearnings and, in the process, become more profoundly human. I urge all of you to read the Holy Father's Apostolic letter *Dies Domini* and to see my words here as a simple pastoral illustration of the Holy Father's teaching in that most beautiful and most rich letter to us all.

The Human Need for Worship

It is the mystery of our existence that we become more profoundly human the more we are immersed in the life of our Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The celebration of liturgy, especially and pre-eminently the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, is the Church's praise and worship of God, praising the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit. Our worship is at the same time both an expression of the presence of God's grace in our life (since without the Spirit we could not adequately worship God) and a deepening of that grace (hence our traditional Catholic teaching on the efficacy of sacraments). Ultimately, we must always remember that it is not God who needs us to gather for worship; we are the ones who need to worship God. We need to recognize Him for who He is: God. This is the way we can become who we are called to be: sons and daughters of God created in His image and redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

One of the reasons we need to do so is because in the course of the busyness of our life we forget who we are. It is no secret that in our fast-paced, technological and de-personalized world of 2003 people feel very isolated, disconnected and perpetually fatigued. It seems as though there is always something more to do and somewhere else to go; people are burdened with a constant feeling of never being able to “keep up”. All of that leads to a certain frustration and futility that rightly causes us to ask, “Where is it all going?”

St. Augustine reminds us in *The Confessions* that “you [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”³ We cannot attend to this deepest longing to find God in the depths of our being if we do not set special time aside to nourish our souls and make room for God. Rediscovering Sunday by keeping Sunday holy cannot be seen as just something else that we do in the course of the week. No, it must be seen as the one non-negotiable, essential element that gives meaning and purpose to all the things we do the other six days of the week.

¹ *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, O.P., Gen. Ed.; Northport: Costello Publishing Company, 1975.

² Paragraph 7.

³ Book One, Chapter One.

Fortunately, we are not alone in this. The First Letter of Peter tells us that we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people he claims for his own to proclaim the glorious works of the One who called you from darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people” (2:9-10a). We need to set Sunday aside as a special day, with the celebration of the Eucharist as the central part of the day, because that is how we remember who we are. We need to gather, to listen to God’s word, to give praise and thanks in the Eucharist, and to share in Christ’s sacrifice in the Eucharistic celebration because that’s how we find the strength to be who we are supposed to be—the Body of Christ in the world, doing His work to build up God’s kingdom. Our reason for giving Sunday such prominence in our worship and in our pattern of living is because Sunday should define who we are as Catholic Christians. “The Eucharist is the full realization of the worship which humanity owes to God that cannot be compared to any other religious experience...The grace flowing from this wellspring renews mankind, life, and history.” (DD:81)

Eucharist Makes Us Who We Are

Forming and shaping us into who we are supposed to be—the Body of Christ in the world—is at the heart of what the ritual of Sunday Eucharist does for us. At every Mass we memorialize and sacramentalize the Paschal Mystery, i.e., the death and resurrection of the Lord. As one of the acclamations in the Eucharistic prayer states, “When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory.”

Ultimately, of course, the action performed at Mass is first and foremost Christ’s action. That is precisely why we must gather: to allow Eucharist to make us who we are. We must gather to participate in the action of Christ. The Church comes together at Sunday Mass so that each and every member can unite his or her life, and his or her sacrifice, with Christ’s—to die with him in order to rise with him. We need to do what we do on Sunday—indeed, we need an entire day set aside to focus on it—because what we celebrate and memorialize and sacramentalize at Sunday Mass gives strength and direction for the way we should be living life every day and at all times.

This points to a certain power which we must allow Sunday to have in our life. Whether we realize it or not, the influences and forces of the world around us seek to form us and shape us. Worldly values such as materialism, consumerism, utilitarianism, a culture of death that devalues life, competition, selfishness and the praise of strength and violence as solutions to problems are but a few of the forces which impact upon the human spirit today. These forces make it all the more important that Christians consciously take time out of the normal schedule of their week to set aside a day when they will allow another, more important and more powerful, force to form their lives. Rediscovering Sunday means recapturing Sunday as a day of *spiritual formation*. With the Sunday Eucharist as its centerpiece, Sunday as a day of spiritual formation gives us the space to be attentive to the deeper values of offering our life to God and to others; to attend to the building up of unity rather than the causing of division; to taking time out to build up the bonds of family and friendship rather than mindlessly hurrying from one activity to another; to get in touch with the deeper longings of our heart, being silent so we can hear God whispering in the depths of our soul, rather than being bombarded with the pressures and responsibilities of our everyday routines and the world around us.

Sunday, then, is a day of *spiritual formation*. With Sunday Eucharist as its centerpiece, Sunday worship teaches us how to live in the world as Christ wishes. It is a day of *transformation*. Such transformation is not something that occurs for us as individuals in isolation, but it occurs as His Body, the Church. The celebration of the Eucharist shapes us more and more so that the “I” becomes “We”. This is the dying and rising that we are asked to hand ourselves over to at Eucharist. The “I” of selfishness, sin and egotistically looking out for “number one” must be transformed into the “we” of the kingdom of God, where we selflessly live in union with God and with each other, giving our lives to each other in imitation of Christ’s sacrifice. This transformation frees us to live lives of love, compassion, forgiveness, service and sacrifice. That’s how the transformative power of Sunday Eucharist makes us who we are, the Body of Christ in the world. In that way we live out our baptismal mission.

This action of transforming us to live His life together is the very reason the Lord gives Himself to us in Mass. During the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest invokes the transformative power of the Holy Spirit twice: first, to change the gifts of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ; and second, to change all those who receive those gifts into “one body, one spirit in Christ.”

In the acts of the early martyrs, we read these words of the martyrs of Arbitina who replied 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.”

Rediscovering Sunday

Given the importance of Sunday, then, what are some practical issues that we can begin to look at to help us rediscover Sunday so it holds the place it should have in our Catholic Christian lives?

First, we must remember that as Catholics we are obligated to attend Mass on *every* Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation. As described above, this obligation originates not from the external observance of law, but from the internal truth of being created to be in relationship with God. Over the past years a certain mentality has developed whereby people are comfortable with attending Sunday Mass perhaps only once or twice a month. The simple truth is that all Catholics who are not physically impaired from doing so have an obligation to participate *every Sunday and Holy Day* in the celebration of Mass. This is necessary because *every* Sunday is our preeminent day as Church; *every* Sunday is both the day of the Resurrection and the day that shapes us to be Church as we live in union with Christ and in union

with one another. It is *every* Sunday that we need to keep holy in order to live in union with Christ more deeply throughout the week. We need *every* Sunday as a day of spiritual formation to maintain a healthy and human balance in our life. I call upon everyone, and especially parents who are the primary formers of their children in the faith, to recommit themselves and their families to regular, weekly attendance at Sunday Mass.

Second, I ask all of us to recommit ourselves to proper preparation for Sunday Mass. Good liturgy does not just happen; it takes proper preparation on the part of all those who are involved. For those who participate as members of the assembly, I urge you to take responsibility for doing your part to achieve the “full, active and conscious participation” called for by the Second Vatican Council. Members of the assembly cannot be passive spectators; they must be active participants first and foremost by the participation of bringing the sacrifice of their lives and uniting them with Christ’s sacrifice on the altar. This is the primary participation to which everyone, ordained and lay, is called, according to his or her role. The outward manifestations of participation—joining in the prayers, responses, singing, processions, etc.—are all concrete expressions of this inner participation in the very heart of the Eucharistic action. And it is the heart that matters. We must have hearts open to God’s Word, hearts eager to praise Him, hearts united with Him, hearts ready to please Him.

As mentioned above, however, such inner participation does not just happen on its own; a context must be created. Thus, a certain prayerfulness that conveys that it is not “business as usual” should prevail even as one drives or walks to the church building. The readings which will be proclaimed at Mass should have been read and prayed over beforehand, ideally even as early as sometime during the week; in that way, hearers can be more familiar with the word and the soil can be adequately prepared to receive the seed which will be planted through the liturgical proclamation of the readings and the preaching of the homily.

Third, families should make it a high priority to worship together on Sundays. There is no substitution for the spiritual bonding that occurs when family members regularly pray together at Mass. Such time together would encourage discussions about the Mass among family members on the ride home or later in the day, perhaps at the family meal. The readings proclaimed, reactions to the homily preached, and connections in the life of the family to a particular liturgical season are but a few of the things that can be discussed for spiritual sharing. Living the reality of the “domestic Church” in this way becomes nourishing not only for adults and older children, but also is the highest and most effective form of spiritual formation for younger children.

Fourth, I strongly call on all pastors, associate pastors and those responsible for liturgy in parishes to be sure that they are doing all in their power to be sure that liturgy is being celebrated well in their parish. The essential ritual elements of our liturgies, uncluttered and free from any inventions and innovations not foreseen by the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, should show forth clearly so that all can easily participate and the power of God’s grace at work in the ritual words and actions can clearly shine through. No one is exempt from following liturgical law. Everyone is expected to observe what the Church says and neither add to or detract from the liturgical rites in the liturgical books. Doing the rites simply and doing them well allows us to be focused on Christ’s presence and the transformative power of the Paschal Mystery and helps to prevent the liturgy from being “hijacked” by anyone’s own cause or personality. In addition, I call upon all those serving in the various liturgical ministries to be sure that they are performing those ministries well, with appropriate dignity and prayerfulness, and I urge them to grow continually in their faith and understanding of liturgy through programs of education, formation and renewal.

Fifth, I ask all those concerned with the formation of children and teen-agers to take seriously this call to rediscover Sunday. In Catholic schools, in religious education programs, in youth ministry programs, and in liturgies with children and teen-agers, we must continually reinforce the necessary place of Sunday in our Catholic life. Liturgies and other prayer experiences with young people during the week should in some way lead them toward Sunday, helping them to participate more actively in our Sunday celebrations and teaching them what it means to be formed by ritual prayer, especially the Eucharist. Experiences of religious formation throughout the week should prepare young people for their full, active and conscious participation at Sunday Eucharist.

Young people of our diocese, you know my love for you. You know my pride in you. You know my hope for you. You are an important part of the Church as we seek to restore Sunday and seek to make our Sunday worship the true center of our lives, the wellspring of our faith, and the certain commitment of our love for one another and for all humankind.

Lastly, I call to your attention something that has no easy answer, but something that I ask all the good people of the Diocese to take seriously. Many will dismiss this approach or think it is unrealistic. I ask, however, that all of us together embark on a continued process of discussion and reflection to see how we can rediscover Sunday in our fast-paced world of 2003. Work obligations, children’s involvement in sports programs, the need to use Sundays for errands and chores that cannot be attended to during the week, and the opportunity for shopping in stores on Sundays are all realistic forces, many of them legitimate, with which we must contend today. Nonetheless, I ask us to consider the serious question of how much of an important aspect of our human spirit have we lost by these distractions from Sunday worship? How much do we feel we are being drained of life and spirit because we have not kept a sacred space for Sunday? Is there not a connection between the ever-deepening dislocation and disconnection we feel as persons, and the distance that we have created between one another and between ourselves and God? Have we not lost too much because we have pushed the religious dimension of Sunday out of our lives? Think about this. Enter into a serious process of reflection and, if necessary, reorientation and reprioritizing. What needs to change in your life and in your family’s life in order to recapture the importance of Sunday in your Catholic Christian life? How can parishes assist

parishioners in this process of reflection and reprioritizing so that Sunday can be rediscovered as a holy day? What are the rhythms and routines that are crowding Sunday out of our life? What are the changes that need to be made so that Sunday can once again have its rightful special place in the life of the Church and her members?

As your Diocesan Bishop, I pledge to you my love, my prayers and my union with you as together we seek to rediscover Sunday as the heart of the mystery of our unity of sharing life with Christ and with one another.

It is my prayer that we may come to know the risen Christ, and in coming to know Him through the Sunday liturgy, we may become ever more credible witnesses of Christ's life, proclaiming his gospel of salvation and effectively building a civilization of love. (*cf. DD:87*)

Yours in Christ,

Bishop of Rockville Centre
April 20, 2003
Easter Sunday