

From the Desk of Fr. Tim

Sunday Obligation

“Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.” (Exodus 20:8)

Some people have the strange misunderstanding that because of Vatican II the Catholic faith and its practice have been made easier, less demanding. Some have taken this to an even more bizarre conclusion, that now the Catholic Church is more like Protestantism, more worldly, socially acceptable, less mysterious and no longer on the outside of the mainstream of Western culture.

Of course, none of this makes any sense. The Catholic Church does not establish its rule of living or its self-understanding on the basis of its social acceptability or if it appears to be more like other churches. I am sure that some people think of the Catholic Church as being very rigid while others do not. The Catholic Church considers its teaching from the standpoint of what is objectively true and what is good for her people. The Holy Father leads us like a shepherd leads his flock into good pasture.

One of the most dramatically good disciplines of the Catholic Church regards the Mass. It is the expectation that every Catholic will be present for Sunday Mass and at the few Holy Days of Obligation that are sprinkled throughout the annual calendar.

To violate this rule is considered a “grave matter,” requiring us to confess this sin in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Now, some would argue that this is an insufficient or incomplete motivation for keeping holy the “Lord’s Day”. The individualism of our age has a grip on our conscience to the degree that unless we can determine exactly why a rule is good for us, then we are less than enthusiastic about it. The Catholic perspective on life is that God has placed in the hands of men the authority, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret divine revelation. Others are quite wrong when they argue that this is not the case. Scripture itself is an adequate testimony to this truth.

And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

(Matthew 16:18-19)

This is a kind of guarantee that the Church will not be without adequate leadership. The constant testimony of the Church, the Pope and all his councils is that the Sunday obligation is at the heart of parish life.

“A parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop.” It is the place where all the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.... You cannot pray at home as

at church, where there is a great multitude, where exclamations are cried out to God as from one great heart, and where there is something more: the union of minds, the accord of souls, the bond of charity, the prayers of the priests.

(Catechism, 2179)

We cannot forget that the Mass as the focus of our gathering is not an arbitrary liturgy. At the heart of it is the invention of Christ, the Last Supper, the Cross, his giving Himself to us: *"This is my Body," "This is my Blood."* If we are truly falling in love with God and have devised to be obedient to his command, then we can never willfully choose to avoid the Mass, for whatever reason. *"Do this in remembrance of me."*

This practice of the Christian assembly dates from the beginnings of the apostolic age. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds the faithful "not to neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but to encourage one another." (Hebrews 10:25) Tradition preserves the memory of an ever-timely exhortation: Come to Church early, approach the Lord, and confess your sins, repent in prayer. Be present at the sacred and divine liturgy, conclude its prayer and do not leave before the dismissal. . . . We have often said: "This day is given to you for prayer and rest. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

(Catechism, 2178)

Of course, even if we had none of this to motivate and guide us, the Sunday Mass and the precept that directs us to it, all make perfect sense. Here we learn about God's love for us in a way that could not be handed on more perfectly. We share life in this community of faith. Our children form lifelong friendships and we share a divinely constituted society. We learn of needs both close at home and far away. We act in such a way that a difference is made in our world. There is no more efficient way to meet the needs of the poor. We gain confidence that no matter what we shall face, we will do it together. In the community of faith, Jesus' words come alive, *"I am with you always until the close of the age."* **(Matthew 28:20)**