



THE ARCHBISHOP OF BRISBANE

THE LORD'S DAY

When the COVID pandemic struck, I joined other bishops in this country and beyond in deciding for a dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass. Now that the pandemic seems to be receding, it is good for us to reflect not only upon the Sunday obligation but upon the meaning of Sunday itself.

In English, the first day of the week preserves the Roman name – the day of the sun. But from the dawn of Christianity the first day was called the Lord's Day; and in other languages that is what you find. Christians saw the Risen Christ as the true light of the world, worshipping him rather than the sun. The Lord's Day was the weekly Easter, when Christians celebrated above all the Resurrection of Christ, the pivot of all time which looked back to the first day of creation and ahead to the last day of the Lord's return in glory. Sunday recognised what we proclaim at the Easter Vigil: that "all time belongs to [Christ] and all the ages". It not only marked the succession of time but revealed time's deeper meaning.

The Lord's Day was not only the weekly Easter but also the weekly Pentecost, because the Lord not only rose from the dead on the first day of the week but he also sent the Holy Spirit on the first day. The link was made between the light of the Risen Christ and the fire of the Holy Spirit; and that link is never stronger than on the Lord's Day. Sunday is the day of encounter with the Risen Lord who breathes the Holy Spirit into the Church as he did into the disciples after his Resurrection (John 20:22), so that they could then go out on mission.

The Lord's Day was also seen as the eighth day. The Sabbath is the seventh day, the day of rest when God himself rested (cf Gen 2:2-3); and each Sabbath Jewish people pray that this Sabbath will never end, that the eighth day of eternity will come. Christians saw the day of Resurrection as that eighth day, as an image of eternity. It anticipated the End which St Augustine describes as "the peace of quietness, the peace of the Sabbath, a peace with no evening" (Confessions).

In the early centuries, Christians everywhere kept Sunday holy on a regular basis. A text of the third century says, "Leave everything on the Lord's Day and run diligently to your assembly, because it is your praise of God" (*Didascalia*). This continued even through times of persecution when Christians paid with their life for attending the Sunday assembly. As one martyr declared before the judges, "Without the Lord's Day we could not survive".

What began in those early times as a spontaneous practice later became an obligation in Church law. But that took time. Spontaneous practice became exhortation and then eventually canonical precept. In the 1917 Code of Canon Law the Sunday obligation became universal law, except in unusual circumstances like the pandemic.

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Yet law can never obscure what lies deeper still. Before his passion and death, the Lord said to his disciples, “I have longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). None of those invited had earned a place at the Last Supper. “All had been drawn there by the burning desire that Jesus had to eat the Passover with them” (Pope Francis, *Desiderio Desideravi*). Before ever we respond to the Lord’s invitation there is his desire for us. It is this which gives his invitation the urgency of a call; and it is that urgency which the Sunday obligation recognises.

Without us even realising it, the deepest reason we go to Mass on Sunday is not because we have decided or because the Church’s requires it but because “we are drawn there by his desire for us” (*ibid*). In coming to Mass, we surrender to the Lord’s love and let ourselves be drawn by him who wants to speak to our heart and share his feast with us.

The Sunday obligation may not have the power it once had, and changes in the culture have made it more difficult for many to observe. Yet people have returned to Mass now that the pandemic is receding, not so much because they feel obliged but because they feel the need and are drawn by the urgency of the Lord’s call.

Therefore, in the Archdiocese of Brisbane from Pentecost Sunday of this year (28 May) the pandemic dispensation will be withdrawn and the Sunday obligation will be restored. The obligation does not apply to those for whom it is impossible to attend Mass, those who are sick or frail or those who are caring for the sick, especially sick children. Those unable to attend Mass can honour the Lord’s Day in other ways, so that all of us, responding to the Risen Lord’s call, may say with one heart and voice, “This is the day which the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad” (Psalm 118:24).

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Francis", written in a cursive style.

Archbishop of Brisbane
4 May 2023