



*Office of the Bishop*

## **Keeping the Lord's Day**

Pastoral Letter on the Importance of Sunday in the Life of Every Christian Disciple

Most Reverend James V. Johnston, Jr.

Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph

May 31, 2020

*“Our thoughts in this present life should turn on the praise of God, because it is in praising God that we shall rejoice forever in the life to come; and no one can be ready for the next life unless he trains himself for it now.” Saint Augustine*

### **Introduction**

Why write a letter on the importance of Sunday? I had been thinking about the importance of Sunday well before the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, I had resolved to write this letter as we ended our diocesan Holy Year in January. But like many of you, during these past few months of the pandemic I have had time to think and reflect even more about what is truly important in life. Evidently, many other people have been doing the same. A recent syndicated column in the local newspaper<sup>1</sup> noted polling results indicating that Americans have become *more* religious during the pandemic, including those who had previously chosen not to identify with religion. It observed that prior to the pandemic, many of those who had rejected religion sought meaning in other things. Then this observation: “The pandemic has abruptly stripped many of those things away—work, routines, the frivolities of life—leaving us all to contemplate our role in the world and the purpose of our existence.”

The old “normal” was disrupted and much of what we were used to was suddenly removed, including the ability to worship together on Sunday at Mass. Imposing these restrictions was a very painful decision for me to make as your bishop. I am grateful for the sacrifices you have made during this time, and for the efforts you have made to be spiritually present. But as we begin to return to our public celebrations of Mass, I wish to invite all in our diocese to reflect more deeply on the value of Sunday, why God made it and what it means in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cynthia M. Allen, “Some are finding faith during COVID-19 pandemic. Is that a search for certainty?” *The Kansas City Star*, 13 May 2020.

This letter has three parts, each accompanied by a biblical story that illuminates the section's theme. I wish to reflect on how we might celebrate Sunday well as both a time to worship and as a time for rest and the renewal of relationships.

### **Part I: Pilgrims on the Way**

*“[The two disciples] recounted what had happened on the road and how they had come to know him in the breaking of the bread.”* (Lk 24:35)

The episode of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Saint Luke's Gospel sheds beautiful light upon the life of every disciple in every time and place. We are pilgrims on the way. Like those two disciples mentioned in the gospel, we too are distracted and slow to understand, sometimes oblivious to the fact that Christ is walking with us through all the peaks and valleys of life. In Saint Luke's account, these disciples came to recognize Christ's presence *“in the breaking of the bread,”* a clear reference to the Holy Eucharist.

The image of pilgrimage is a fitting description of our own passage through life. A pilgrim is traveling, on the way to a holy place, a journey often marked by the unexpected. As disciples of Jesus, as soon as we are baptized, we are each set on the road to the “Father's house” in heaven (*cf.* Jn 14:2-4). That is our destination. Perseverance is needed. Companions are needed. Prayer and grace are needed. Our pilgrimage is a project of cooperation between us and God.

In Saint John's Gospel, Jesus declared, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me”* (Jn 14:6). Here we see that not all roads lead to the Father's house—only one. Christ left us the Holy Eucharist—*his very self*—so that *he* could be our way home. For pilgrim disciples, the Sunday Eucharist *is* Jesus Christ. There, we encounter him in Word and Sacrament. We bring our needs, prayers, works, joys, and sufferings to be joined to the sacrifice during the Offertory. “The faithful are appointed by their baptismal character to Christian religious worship... Taking part in the eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with it.”<sup>2</sup>

In the Eucharist we receive his Body and Blood as *“the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die”* (Jn 6:50). He left this gift so that we could live in him and he in us as *“branches”* on *“the vine”* and that we might bear *“much fruit”* by becoming his disciples (*cf.* Jn 15:1-8).

One “fruit” that comes from being a disciple is bearing witness in such a way that one becomes a disciple maker. And you may recall that our diocesan pastoral plan, the *Mutually Shared Vision*, has as a top priority “Growing God's Family” by making disciples. As Pope Francis highlights in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, “anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love.”<sup>3</sup> The disciples on the way to Emmaus show us that the source of discipleship is the Holy Eucharist. Once they encountered the risen Lord in the breaking of the bread, they hurried back to Jerusalem to bear witness to his resurrection.

---

<sup>2</sup> Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 11

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) [EG], 120.

In our worship together at Mass on Sunday, we truly go “*through him and with him and in him*” to the Father in the Holy Spirit<sup>4</sup>. In one sense, through Sunday worship at Mass, we go to heaven, the Father’s house, in Christ, even while we also remain here in time. This was also echoed at the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, Minister of the holy of holies and of the true tabernacle.”<sup>5</sup> As Mass concludes we are then sent into the world to bear witness to the love of God in our words and our actions.

Pilgrim disciples need Sunday and Sunday Mass to stay on the right way, to bear fruit along the way, and to get home to the Father’s house in heaven.

## **Part II: The Value of Sunday Celebrated Well**

“*As they continued their journey, he entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary [who] sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak.*” (Lk 10:38-39)

This episode recounted in Saint Luke’s Gospel highlights something beautifully profound: that Jesus loved and found it necessary to get away to be renewed by friends and to rest and recreate with them. He did that at Bethany. Bethany was a special place for Jesus. He loved Martha and Mary and their brother, Lazarus, and he enjoyed spending time with them. Truly God and truly man, Jesus needed and loved friends. In becoming human he also allowed himself to fully experience being spent, exhausted from his mission. He often went off by himself to pray, but he also went off to be renewed with friends. And it was here that he also highlighted the high value of rest and relationship in the behavior of Mary and Martha, urging the latter to invest in “*the better part.*” Bethany, therefore, is a good symbol for Sunday.

What was it that Jesus observed in Mary that was so worthy of praise? All she did was stop what she was doing and make herself present to him. Unlike Martha, Mary focused on the *person* rather than the thing or the activity, and persons take priority over things.

Sunday is a gift from God for rest and relationship. Part of that entails divine worship—our living relationship of communion with God as was noted in Part I; but *worship* of God is joined to *rest*.

Sunday rest is not merely taking a good nap at the halftime of a Chiefs game! To understand Sunday rest properly, we must refer to the Bible. Note that the foundation comes from the commandments revealed by God in the Book of Exodus: “*Remember the sabbath day—keep it holy. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the LORD has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.*” (Ex 20: 8, 11). Commenting on this passage, Pope Saint John Paul II wrote in his apostolic letter on the Lord’s Day, *Dies Domini*: “Before decreeing that something be *done*, the commandment urges that something be *remembered*. It is a call to awaken remembrance of the grand and fundamental work of God, which is creation, a remembrance which must inspire the

---

<sup>4</sup> The Order of Mass 98, *Roman Missal*.

<sup>5</sup> Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 8.

entire religious life of man and then fill the day on which man is called to *rest*. Rest therefore acquires a sacred value: the faithful are called to rest not only *as* God rested, but to rest *in* the Lord, bringing the entire creation to him, in praise and thanksgiving, intimate as a child and friendly as a spouse.”<sup>6</sup> Worship and rest are closely joined together on Sunday.

It is only in recent times that the specialness of Sunday, as being dedicated to keeping our lives rightly ordered, has been obscured. Rather than being a special day with a special purpose, it has become for many now simply part of “the weekend.” Again, Pope Saint John Paul II noted the pitfalls of this recent trend: “Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a ‘weekend,’ it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see ‘the heavens.’”<sup>7</sup>

Without celebrating Sunday well, we miss not only the heavens, but also the most important parts of our lives on earth. One of the blessings to come out of this unusual time of “sheltering in place,” with both work and school operating on sporadic hours, has been the epiphany that many have experienced within their own homes and their own families, the “domestic church.” Many parents have shared with me that they have come to learn and discover more about their children during this time. I have heard of parents going for walks and having substantial talks with their children; things that had been crowded out before. Life slowed down, and the hyper-activity within many families changed. Events, schedules, activities, games, and practices were postponed and cancelled. After mourning the loss of many good things, families were presented with a choice: to lose themselves with distractions and isolating activities, or become, like Mary in Bethany, present to each other in a new way—and in doing so rediscover “the better part.” This is what Sunday is for; being present to one another, especially in the home and around the table. As the altar is the Eucharistic table for God’s family, the Church, the dinner table is for the domestic church, the family.

God wants us to have the blessing of setting aside our busy-ness and noticing—noticing the beauty of Creation and the One who brought it into being, noticing Jesus, who gave himself for us and our salvation, and noticing the important people he has placed in our lives, so that we can be renewed by our friendships and deepen them. This requires that we slow down, look into one another’s eyes, and open our ears to listen to the hopes, dreams, disappointments, and sufferings of our loved ones.

Importantly, Sunday is also set aside for noticing those who are often overlooked—the poor. This day is set aside for us to perform acts of charity, works of mercy, or some other Christian apostolate. And what better time to serve others in charity than after we have experienced God’s love poured out for us at Sunday Mass? As Pope Saint John Paul II noted, “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.”<sup>8</sup> Sundays celebrated well make us more human and, I might add, more happy.

Another phenomenon of modern life increasingly shaped by new technology is *disintegration*. We experience disintegration when the various parts of our life feel disconnected and scattered. We all feel this way at times. We sense that we are always playing catch-up, looking for

---

<sup>6</sup> Pope Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini* [DD], 16.

<sup>7</sup> DD, 4.

<sup>8</sup> DD, 7.



something beyond our grasp, seeking peace. Not finding it, we turn to things we hope will help us keep life together, sometimes ending up worse off as a result. Pope Francis described this well: “Sometimes we prove hard of heart and mind; we are forgetful, distracted and carried away by the limitless possibilities for consumption and distraction offered by contemporary society. This leads to a kind of alienation”.<sup>9</sup> The opposite of this disintegration and alienation is a unity of purpose in which we seek the same ultimate good in every area of our life.

One of the remedies God provides for this disintegration is Sunday. Again, we realize this most profoundly at the Sunday Mass, which “is the privileged place of unity: it is the setting for the *sacramentum unitatis* [sacrament of unity] which profoundly marks the Church as a people gathered ‘by’ and ‘in’ the unity of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>10</sup> Ideally, this unity experienced in the liturgy helps us to integrate ourselves and our relationships, especially those of the family. That is why it is ideal for families to attend Mass together on Sundays if possible.

You may have noticed when a loved one dies, we often pray, “*Eternal rest grant unto him/her, O Lord ...*”. Sunday rest is meant to prepare us not only for the Lord’s Day which comes every week, but for the Lord’s Day which will have no end. Like worship, resting in God will be part and parcel to eternity in heaven. Sunday helps us practice both now.

#### *A word about “Sunday Obligation”*

Most of us learned along the way that there is a grave obligation attached to participating in Sunday Mass (and Holy Days of Obligation). This stems in part from the 3rd Commandment. When God commands something, we should take it seriously. If he gives us the road map to the Father’s house, we do well to follow it! God does not want to lose any of his children.

But the obligation is also from our Mother, the Church, who wants to keep all her children safe and sound and on the road to heaven too. Not long ago I observed an exchange within a family who went to the lake for a getaway. Many of the children, good swimmers, wanted to go out on the lake without a life jacket. The mother insisted—no life jacket, no lake! It was an obligation she imposed to keep them safe. The Sunday obligation imposed upon us by God our Father and the Church our Mother is not given as a burden, but as a blessing, something to help keep us from drifting away from the One who is our salvation and our life. One of the tendencies of our fallen human nature is to become half-hearted about important things. That is why we attach vows, promises and obligations to the most important things in life, to make sure we do not neglect them.

Pope Saint John Paul II observed that, “The pressures of today can make it harder to fulfill the Sunday obligation; and, with a mother’s sensitivity, the Church looks to the circumstances of each of her children.” Of course, many Catholics work on Sundays. Our society depends upon medical professionals, first responders, and so many others to labor on Sunday. Some who work on the Sabbath day are able to participate in Mass (Saturday Vigil or late Sunday) even amid a demanding schedule, and some find it impossible. There is no sin in cases where one is truly unable to participate in Mass. In her pastoral concern, the Church commits to ensuring, “that, in

---

<sup>9</sup> EG, 196.

<sup>10</sup> DD, 36.

the normal course of life, none of her children are deprived of the rich outpouring of grace which the celebration of the Lord's Day brings."<sup>11</sup>

I wholeheartedly extend a special invitation to those who may have been away from Mass for some time. Come home. Return to the family of families that is your parish church. You are missed and you have a place among us.

### **Part III: Some Ways to Celebrate Sunday Filled With Grace**

*"They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.... All who believed were together and had all things in common... They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart."* (Acts 2:42, 44, 46)

This passage from the Acts of the Apostles is the earliest description of how to celebrate Sunday filled with Christ's grace. It describes the disciples celebrating the Holy Eucharist together, then exercising charity and sharing common life together around the dinner table. This is a fitting template for disciples today. In this final brief part of my letter I offer some observations on how we might try to devote ourselves to celebrating Sunday well and filled with grace.

First, eliminate the competition. By this, I mean taking inventory of what competes with our time and attention on Sunday. I invite each family, and each individual disciple, to examine their usual activities and approach to the Sunday Sabbath. We will likely identify good and wholesome things; and yet we might have allowed them, like invasive plants, to creep into the garden of Sunday. As your bishop, I desire to help, which is why I am mandating that our parishes and schools not schedule certain activities on Sundays commencing with the next school year.<sup>12</sup> This will entail changes, but the goal is to clear Sundays so that you and your families can tend to "the better part." Besides clearing away activities, families might also exercise some form of screen-time fasting by putting away digital devices to ensure that this day of the week is not undermined by the distractions and isolating effects which so often come with this technology.

Second, be more intentional about how you celebrate Sunday, beginning with Sunday Mass. I am fascinated by the amount of effort we put into preparing for most big events. Take a Chiefs game for an example among many. Fans do not simply go to the game. They talk about it all week. They dress for the occasion. The day of the game they go early to tail-gate and get ready for the main event, the game itself. And, they linger afterwards to savor the victory! This is true for most major celebrations, and it is a good way to think of the Sunday Mass. We can anticipate it by reading the day's Scriptures ahead of time. We can prepare our soul for worship by making a good examination of conscience and, especially if we have committed a grave sin, confessing our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We can arrive early to get our hearts and heads right and ready to turn to God. Afterwards, as we return to a new post pandemic normalcy, we can linger, first in the church to offer gratitude for what we have just encountered, shared in and

---

<sup>11</sup> DD, 30

<sup>12</sup> Most Reverend James V. Johnston, Jr., *Keeping the Lord's Day*, Instruction on Guidelines for Activities on Parishes and Schools in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, 31 May 2020.

received, and then, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, savor and talk about it with others. In a word, treat Sunday Mass as something special, because it is!

The rest of Sunday can be something special too, but we must be intentional about it by preparing ahead of time. We can plan Sunday dinner or a trip to visit the nursing home or serving sandwiches at the local homeless shelter, or simply being present to one's spouse and children. We can also be intentional about making time for prayer in our home each Sunday taking "time for reflection, silence, cultivation of the mind, and meditation."<sup>13</sup>

Sunday is about resting from work and resting in God. It is about tending to our relationships. It is also about planning and engaging in works of mercy and charity on occasion. But most things do not ever happen unless we are truly intentional about them.

These are two features of celebrating Sunday well: eliminating the competition and being intentional about Sunday Mass and what will follow.

### **Conclusion**

One final note. As we continue returning to the public celebration of Sunday Mass, all the faithful remain dispensed from the obligation to participate in Mass on Sunday due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially important for those at risk among us so that no one feels one must return to Sunday Mass prematurely. I encourage the faithful to return as soon as one feels safe to do so and eventually, I hope that it will be possible to end this dispensation when we can all safely gather together again as One Family: Restored in Christ – Equipped for Mission.

One commodity we cannot save in life is time, which is why it is the most valuable of commodities. Sunday is sacred time gifted to us by God for tending to the most important things: God and others and ourselves. When we celebrate Sunday well, keeping God first, we keep life in right order, and when life is rightly ordered there is peace.

Let us all continue the journey we are on together as pilgrims traveling home to the Father's House in heaven, marking sacred time and making progress by celebrating our Sundays well.

Gratefully yours in Christ,



Most Reverend James V. Johnston, Jr.  
Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph

---

<sup>13</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2186.