

The Third Commandment

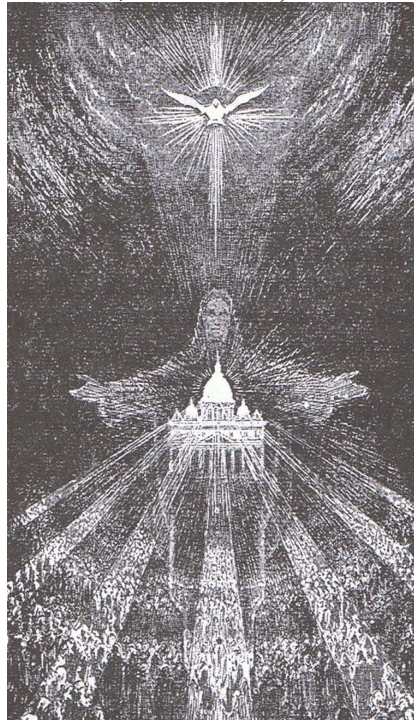
Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work.

Of all the commandments, it might seem we would get this one right. After all it commands us to rest one day, the Sabbath, each week. Yet many today find this a difficult commandment to observe. More and more, Sunday (which according to Apostolic Tradition is the day on which Christians fulfill this commandment) is more often a day of shopping and numerous activities. This also makes it a day of work for many who staff stores, restaurants, theaters and the like. What is the purpose of this commandment and why was it so important that God devoted a commandment to it?

God's own example

The first reason for this commandment underscores the fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Thus we are to rest on the seventh day because God did so in his work of creation: *Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.* (Ex 20:9-11).

Thus God's rest is the model for our rest. Since God rested on the seventh day so should we. In so resting we ought to let others rest and be refreshed, especially the poor. The Sabbath brings the grind of every day work to a halt and brings the pause that refreshes. Scripture even speaks of the Sabbath as a day of protest against the servitude of work and the worship of money (e.g. Neh 13:15-22; Amos 8:4-6).



A day of rest

All of this is an important reminder to us. We tend to judge our value based on what we do and what we have. But God has written the need for rest deeply in our being. If we live healthy lives we will sleep one third of our day (8 hours). Even beyond this we need extended periods of rest and relaxation. And God commands us to cease striving one whole day of the week. In all these ways God bids us to see our value based on who we are and whose we are.

A day for worship

Scripture also reveals the Sabbath day as a day to recall the many and marvelous saving works of the Lord, in particular the liberation from bondage in Egypt: *You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.* (Deut 5:15). In this way we also begin to see the link of the Sabbath to worship. By taking time to cease our labors we are freed to consider and experience the goodness of our God and of his saving love. Thus the Sabbath is not only about rest. It is also intended for worship of God and the receiving of his blessings.

Many claim that although scripture mandates a day of rest, there is no requirement to attend Church. But this is really not the case. Scripture links the Sabbath to “sacred assembly.” For example, *Six days shall work be done; but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest and sacred assembly; you shall do no work; it is a Sabbath to the LORD.* (Lev 23:3). Thus, notice how this text spells out that the Sabbath is not only for rest but for “sacred assembly.” This phrase, “sacred assembly” is what is meant by the word “Church.” Church means “assembly.”

Likewise, Jesus in his observance of Sabbath attended the synagogue (another word for “assembly” or “gathering”). Scripture says Jesus attended the

synagogue on the Sabbath habitually (cf Lk 4:16). Further, scripture admonishes us, *to not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another* (Heb 10:25).

For some to say that they don't need to assemble, to meet together with fellow Christians in Church on Sunday, (our Sabbath) is surely unbiblical. The Old Testament commanded it, Jesus attended, who are we to fail in this regard? We must not neglect to meet together. We must not neglect to receive Holy Communion and be instructed in the Word of God.

For these reasons, in accordance with scriptures and sound reasoning, the Church obliges all the Catholic faithful in good health to attend Mass every Sunday.

A further indication that Sunday Church worship is required of the Christian is in Jesus mandate that we receive Holy Communion. Jesus warns us not to miss receiving the Holy Communion with these words: *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you.* (John 6:53) Without the Holy Eucharist which is the Body and Blood of Jesus, we are starving ourselves spiritually. If you and I were to stop eating our worldly food we would soon grow weak and eventually die. It would be a form of suicide. It is no less true of our spiritual food. If we stop receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus in Holy Communion, we grow weak and eventually die, spiritually, we "have no life in us!" To skip Sunday Mass sets up a deadly pattern of spiritual starvation, it is a deadly thing, a

mortal sin! For this reason the Church teaches: *the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.* (CCC # 2181) It comes down to this, either we eat or we die.

Perhaps Jesus had this in mind when he told a Parable about a King who gave a banquet for his Son: *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son,³ and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come.⁴ Again he sent other servants, saying, "Tell those who are invited, Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast."⁵ But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business,⁶ while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.⁷ The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. (Mat 22:2ff)*

God's admonitions concerning the Sabbath make sense. Far too many suffer stressful, hectic lives driven by chaotic demands with little or no relief in sight. God, like a good physician orders rest and thanksgiving. Jesus reminds us that the Sabbath was made *for* man (Mk 2:27). Thus, while he dismissed the excessively legalistic interpretations of the meaning of rest in his day, he always upheld the importance and necessity of

the Sabbath and observed it himself.

A call to trust.

In the end, the call to keep the Sabbath holy is a call to trust. Although it might seem that rest is a natural human tendency, it will also be seen that the opposite is more often true. Many fears accompany the cessation of work: Will competitors surpass me while I rest? Will I fail to complete all my duties? Will others amass more wealth or power while I fall behind? How can I pay all my bills or finance my lifestyle if I do not work more hours? Will my children's college education be possible if I do not work every day? Will I lose my job or not get one at all if I do not agree to work Sundays?

In effect God says, "I want you to trust me. Take one day and set it aside entirely. Do no work on that day. Cease striving, let go of the controls. Rest, worship, consider your blessings, enjoy them and give thanks for them. Spend time with your family and friends. I promise you that you will accomplish more with the six days remaining that you ever would with all seven. Understand and trust that if you are faithful to my commandment to rest and worship on the Sabbath I will bless you." (cf Jer 17:24; Is 56:4; Dt 28:9ff; Ex 19:5). The gift of our time to God is a precious one indeed. But why should we fear to give it to the author of all time? Trust in God.

And remember, says the Lord: *Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.* (Jn 6:53)