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The Sabbath Rediscovered

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of data about the "good old days," one must pay one's money and make one's choice. One (this one) wonders about when these good old days were—the Rome of the Emperors Otto? Or of the Borgias? The France of the Sun King? The Irish nobility under the Brehon laws (which permitted multiple wives)?

Or rural Europe for a millennium, when abortion and infanticide were the traditional means of population control?

Or Paris in the last century, where it was alleged that 70,000 infant bodies were cast into the sewers every year?

One does not take sin lightly merely because one asserts that it is not new.

The data suggest to me two brief concluding reflections:

1) The notion that all distinctively Catholic sexual morality would collapse once Catholics accepted the "contraceptive mentality" of birth control is not confirmed. Quite the contrary, a distinctive Catholic sexual moral-

ity—not completely different but still different—persists. Wise leadership might want to build on the consent that actually exists instead of denouncing the dissent that coexists. Such leaders would try to present the sexual teaching of the church in reasonable and persuasive terms rather than merely appealing to authority. They would try to reinforce those Catholics who adhere to their moral and religious norms despite enormous pressure. They would try to reassure them that they are not weird because they are different. They might even want to support the notion that pious Catholic virgins (of either gender) are not necessarily obsolescent.

2) While almost half the Catholic women in the National Longitudinal Study sample attended church services regularly in 1982, only a fifth of those who had abortions did so. There may be much healing which can and should be done.

The picture presented in this analysis is gray. Unfortunately for those who like sharper pictures, reality tends to be gray. ■

On Friday afternoon, as they watched the sky aglow with color and shadows, they sensed the greatness of the Creator.

The Sabbath Rediscovered

By THOMAS HICKS

BEING SOMEWHERE NOT FAR from 60, I feel I know less than ever before. "Enthusiastic" words enthuse less than they used to, and "profound" thoughts often seem hard to endure. So much seems familiar and somewhat hopeless.

Still, I also find I have regained some elemental excitements. For example, I have an amazed appreciation of the physical world with its bold simplicities: all the loveliness around us that goes on and on, whether we look at it or not—that "splendid waste." I relate to the line that says "Now at sixty what I see stops my heart in ecstasy. God, the wonders that there are."

Along with this renewed, insistent love of the plain world comes a renewed appreciation of values that underlie the observance of the Sabbath. The two clearly connect in my mind. I have been influenced by the writings of

Abraham Heschel and the insights and practices of certain 16th-century Jewish rabbis known as the Safed Kabbalists, who developed a rich body of lore and ritual that articulates a vision of the Sabbath very different from the view I grew up with. I learned to identify the Sabbath with public worship and, to a lesser degree, with prohibitions against work. Study of the Sabbath involved legalistic debates about what defines work. In my earlier days Sabbath-keeping was more a burden than a joy, a technique for fulfilling a commandment that prevented me from doing what I might otherwise want to do. But the Jewish Oneg Shabbat, the joy of the Sabbath, generally eluded me. Lately, my efforts to celebrate a more meaningful Sabbath revolve around some motifs rediscovered from the Jewish tradition.

The clearest meaning of the Sabbath is a memorial of the creation (Ex. 20:11). It calls us to execute the ancient biblical function of praise. The Kabbalist rabbis pointed out that the Sabbath is no time to remember sins, to confess, to pray for relief or anything we might need. It is not a day for petitions, it is a day of praise for the marvel of existence—a time to observe, to get up, go out, look

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keenly at everything so that creation does not play to an empty house.

On Friday afternoon, just before sunset, members of the Kabbalists would go out to the fields and hills to greet the incoming Sabbath. They would stand facing west as the sun receded from view, and as they watched the sky aglow with color and shadows, they sensed the greatness of the Creator and would sing Psalm 29.

I rise early on Sunday to experience that particular hush, that indescribable pause, suspense, that comes just before the break of day. In that thrilling darkness one feels the promise, and in the magical first light of day, when the first charcoal smudges the sky, one can rediscover the great earth and sense the heavenly favor, like a smile. One can then stay in touch with the rhythm of the day, the passing of time. In an image of extraordinary depth, Abraham Heschel describes the Sabbath as a cathedral made not with stones and glass, but with hours and minutes. It is a celebration of time, that marvel of creation that measures our lives. We are to remain observant of the different tinctures of light and vapor peculiar to the hours as the day moves from first flush of light to that special late afternoon slant of the sun, to the encroaching dusk when the day gathers itself in, to the hush and sorrow of the conquering darkness.

The second great meaning of the Sabbath is a day set apart from other days of the week (Ex. 20:9-10; Dt. 5:13). Weekly routines are to be put aside. The Sabbath invites us to seek rest and surcease, to draw back and enter into a relaxed presence in the here and now. The Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of work. The Kabbalists maintained that even thinking of business or labor should be avoided.

IDEALLY, the Sabbath is a day of freedom, a day of independence of external obligations (I try to attend Mass on Saturday). It is to be thought of as a day at one's disposal, not a day to be confined and constrained.

Contemporary social patterns fit those of ancient Near East peoples, who would suspend normal labor to provide Market Days when the people were free to shop. I try to follow Nehemiah (13:15-21), who expressly forbade the profanation of the Mosaic Sabbath by economic activity, including marketing. By having the Sunday papers delivered, I even strive to follow the Kabbalistic advice to make the Sabbath a day on which one uses no money, the world's chief idol.

The study of Scripture is to have a place in the observance of the Sabbath, as is some contact with music and art. Things the Kabbalists say about our obligation to beauty, to music and art, echo Dante's vivid definition of art as "almost God's grandchild."

Comfort and pleasure are an integral part of the Sabbath observance. As the Kabbalists see it, we sanctify the Sabbath by choice meals, an afternoon nap, and marital intercourse is highly recommended on the Sabbath. Fast-

ing is forbidden (the church carried this over to the Sundays of Lent), and it is a sin to be sad on the Sabbath, when we are to "delight our souls with pleasure."

The prohibitions in the Torah against riding, limiting our movements to what we can do with our own power, by walking, serve to keep people within the boundaries of the family and neighborhood and to encourage socializing that should strengthen a person's ties to his or her family and neighbors.

OVERALL, the Sabbath, as Heschel points out, is best understood, not as a date, but as an atmosphere. The Kabbalists spoke of receiving the "Sabbath soul." Another spirit holds sway than on the other days of the week. There is a different climate, a different disposition. The ancient rabbis stated that as the Jew enters into the Sabbath, the Sabbath enters into the Jew.

For me, the Sabbath tends to reach its climax during the late afternoon. Just before the sun sets I begin to feel it slipping away. Monday and the long week loom ahead when I must return to my way of sticking myself into the world and perform again my impersonations of a teacher and committee member and join the others who act as if we are not the world's guests but its hosts.

However, a residue of the "Sabbath soul" endures into the ensuing week, gradually petering out, to be revived the next Sabbath. A Rabbi named Hauvim Ben Attar suggested that on each Sabbath God decides whether to continue the Creation for the next six days. When people observe the Sabbath, they justify the continued existence of the world.

Kabbalistic literature asserts that what we are depends on what the Sabbath is to us. It speaks of the Sabbath as the special treasure of those who try to experience it. With the few practices I improvised from the pages of Heschel and the Kabbalists, I try not to let the Sabbath pass me by unused. I expect my efforts appear quaint and outmoded in our desacralized society. However, I regard them as perhaps an indication that I am beginning to acquire my first smidgen of wisdom. I think age makes a difference. Carl Jung wrote how with age life passes through some transforming shadows and invites us to recover parts of our lives that have been ignored in the pursuit of narrow goals. Time can liberate us from some tyrannies and ambitions. Struggles for recognition and power die down. Things that used to matter—supremely, as it seemed—don't matter so much any more and we are more fit to give attention to the Sabbath.

So perhaps my renewed delight in the Sabbath reacquaints me with some things I have known all along. Anyway, I find in the Sabbath an ever more precious resource for my life, and delight in the beauty and joy that can envelop this day. I comprehend more than I once did Abad-Ha-am's famous encomium on the Sabbath that has rightly been quoted time and again: "More than the Jews kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept them." ■

