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Pope John Paul II

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REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY

What follows in the Pope's encyclical is entitled "From Sabbath to Sunday." It constitutes an explanation of why the Catholic Church celebrates Sunday. Chapter 2 enlarges the explanation. He uses the well-worn arguments Adventists have explored and rebutted for more than a century. Prominent in his argument are the "first day" texts, and his version of how Christians historically began to worship on Sunday, the first day of the week. As observed in the preceding passages, he argues correctly that the Sabbath is not simply a memorial of Creation: Rightly understood, it is also "a celebration of our salvation and our rest in Christ." At the least, the above passages should be helpful in sharing with Catholic friends the wonderful truths about the Sabbath that Adventists and Catholics share. Likely, they will be the ones to

ask, "Why, then, are we worshipping on different days?"

Isn't it great? They asked!

However biblical, however theologically correct, it is not likely that many Adventists will applaud an encyclical by the Pope—or, for that matter, expect it to appear in *Perspective Digest!*

Their attitude would most likely reflect that of Nathaniel's toward Nazareth: "The Vatican! Can any good thing come from there?" Granted, the Pope's "Sabbath Day" is generally Sunday—other than when referring to Old Testament passages—but in both cases, the theological insights of this remarkable person are worth perusing.

But first, a brief introduction to this third-longest serving Pope. John Paul lost his mother when he was only 8 years old. His father continued the indoctrination that produced an ardent Mariologist. His physician brother, Edmand, died of scarlet fever

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after sitting by the bedside of a patient dying from that disease. John Paul later said that the loss of his brother affected him more than the death of his mother.

The future Pope was both a good football player and talented actor who shared in the sporting activities of his friends, both Christian and Jewish. However, they soon learned he was not to be found when alcohol was consumed or frivolous flirting dominated; they eschewed swearing or telling dirty stories in his presence. When Poland was occupied by the Germans, and his Jewish friends were hauled off to concentration camps, he developed a deep commitment to religious liberty. Later, as a Cardinal, he authored a major work on Thomistic philosophy and, surprisingly for a celibate priest, one titled *Love and Responsibility*.

Two other reasons embolden me to offer the Pope's views on the Sabbath. First, both the Roman Catholic

Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church face similar problems in a changing world. Both are experiencing large accessions in the non-Western world while in Western countries, statistics are far more static. Both are seeking to limit the forces being exerted. Second, both the Pope and the President of the General Conference are objects of God's love.

A Practical Observation

The Pope's theology of the Sabbath begins with a practical observation. Until recently, he says, in traditionally Christian countries, it was easy to keep Sunday holy for two reasons: First, it was an almost universal practice, and second, even in civil society, Sunday rest was an intrinsic part of the weekly work schedule. Today, however, even in those countries giving legal sanction to the festive character of Sunday, socioeconomic conditions often modify social behavior and, hence,

the character of Sunday. Today's weekend is a period of respite, spent often far from home and often involving participation in cultural, political, or sporting activities.

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The Paschal Mystery*

Sunday is above all a celebration. It is the festal of the "new creation." But to understand this in its depth, one has to go back to the first pages of Scripture, which tell us of the plan of God in the creation of the world. It is true that the Word was made flesh in "the fullness of the time" (Gal. 4:4); but it is also true that, in virtue of the mystery of his identity as the eternal Son of the Father, he is the origin and end of the universe. As John writes in the prologue of his Gospel: "Through him all things were made, and without him was made nothing that was made" (1:3). [The Apostle] Paul too stresses this in writing to the Colossians: "In him all things were created, in heaven

and on earth, visible and invisible. . . . All things were created through him and for him" (1:16). This active presence of the Son in the creative work of God is revealed fully in the Paschal Mystery, in which Christ, arising as "the fruits of those who have fallen asleep," established the new creation and began the process which he himself will bring to completion when he returns in glory to "deliver the kingdom to God the Father, so that God may be everything to everyone" (1 Cor. 15:24, 28).

Already at the dawn of creation, therefore, the plan of God implied Christ's "cosmic mission." This *Christocentric perspective*, embracing the whole of time, filled God's well-pleased gaze when, ceasing from all his work, he "blessed the seventh day and made it holy" (Gen. 2:3). According to the priestly writer of the first biblical creation story, then was born the "Sabbath." The theme of "God's rest" (cf. Gen. 2:2) and the rest which he offered to the people of the Exodus when they entered the Promised Land (cf. Ex. 33:14; Deut. 3:20; 12:19; Jos. 21:44; Ps. 95:11) is reread in the New Testament in the light of the definitive "Sabbath rest" (Heb. 4:9) into which Christ himself has entered by his Resurrection. The people of God are called to enter

*The numbers indicate pages of the encyclical. All copy following, unless otherwise noted, is from that document.

into this same rest by persevering in Christ's example of filial obedience (cf. Heb. 4:3-16). In order to grasp fully the meaning of Sabbath [Sunday], therefore, we must reread the great story of creation and deepen our understanding of the theology of the Sabbath.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

(9)* The poetic style of the Genesis story conveys well the awe which people feel before the immensity of creation and the resulting sense of adoration of the one who brought all things into being from nothing. It is a story of intense religious significance, a hymn to the Creator of the universe, pointing to him as the only Lord in the face of recurring temptations to divinize the world itself. At the same time, it is a hymn to the goodness of creation, all fashioned by the mighty merciful hand of God.

"God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:10, 12). Punctuating the story as it does, this refrain sheds a positive light upon every element of the universe and reveals the secret for a proper understanding of it and for its eventual regeneration: the world is good insofar as it remains tied to its origin and, after being disfigured by sin, it is again made good when, with the help of grace, it returns to the One who made it. It is clear that this process directly concerns not

inanimate objects and animals but human beings, who have been endowed with the incomparable gift and risk of freedom. Immediately after the creation stories, the Bible highlights the dramatic contrast between the grandeur of man, created in the image and likeness of God, and the Fall of man, which unleashes on the world the darkness of sin and death (cf. Gen. 3).

(10) Coming as it does from the hand of God, the cosmos bears the imprint of his goodness. It is a beautiful world, rightly moving us to admiration and delight, but also calling for cultivation and development. At the "completion" of God's work, the world is ready for human activity. "On the seventh day God finished his work which he had done" (Gen. 2:2). With this anthropomorphic image of God's "work" the Bible not only gives us a glimpse of the mysterious relationship between the Creator and the created world, but also casts light upon the task of human beings in relation to the cosmos. The "work" of God is in some way an example [sic] for man, called not only to inhabit the cosmos, but also to "build" it and thus become God's co-worker.

Created in God's image, man was commissioned to subdue the earth and all it contains, to rule the world in justice and holiness, and, recognizing God as the creator of all things, to refer himself and the total-

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ity of things to God so that with everything subject to God, the divine name would be glorified in all the earth.

The exhilarating advance of science, technology and culture in the various forms—an even more rapid, and today, even overwhelming development—is the historical consequence of the mission by which God entrusts to man and woman the task and responsibility of filling the earth and subduing it by means of their work, in the observance of God's law.

“Shabbat”: the Creator's joyful rest

(11) If the first page of the Book of Genesis presents God's “work” as an example [sic] for man, the same is true of God's “rest.” “On the seventh day God finished his work which he had done” (Gen. 2:2). Here too, we find anthropomorphism charged with a wealth of meaning.

It would be banal to interpret God's “rest” as a kind of divine “inactivity.” By its nature, the creative act which founds the world is unceasing and God is always at

work, as Jesus himself declares in speaking of the Sabbath precept: “My Father is working still, and I am working” (John 5:17). The divine rest of the seventh day does not allude to an inactive God, but emphasizes the fulness of what has been accomplished. It speaks, as it were, of God's lingering before the “very good” work (Gen. 1:31) which his hand has wrought, in order to cast upon it a gaze full of joyous delight. This is a “contemplative” gaze which does not look to new accomplishments but enjoys the beauty of what has already been achieved. It is a gaze which God casts upon all things, but in a special way upon man, the crown of creation. It is a gaze which already discloses something of the nuptial shape of the relationship which God wants to establish with the creature made in his own image, by calling that creature to enter a pact of love. This is what God will gradually accomplish, in offering salvation to all humanity through the saving covenant made with Israel and fulfilled in Christ. It will be the Word Incarnate, through

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the eschatological gift of the Holy Spirit and the configuration of the Church as his Body and Bride, who will extend to all humanity the offer of mercy and the call of the Father's love.

(12) In the Creator's plan, there is both a distinction and a close link between the order of creation and the order of salvation. This is emphasized in the Old Testament, when it links the "Shabbat" commandment not only with God's mysterious "rest" after the days of creation (cf. Ex. 20:8-11), but also with the salvation which he offers to Israel in the liberation from the slavery of Egypt (cf. Deut. 5:12-15). The God who rests on the seventh day, rejoicing in his creation, is the same God who reveals his glory in liberating his children from Pharaoh's oppression. Adopting an image dear to the prophets, one could say that in both cases *God*

*reveals himself as the bridegroom before the bride** (Hosea 2:16-24; Jer. 2:2; Isa. 54:4-8).

As certain elements of the same Jewish tradition suggest, to reach the heart of the "*shabbat*" of God's rest, we need to recognize in both Old and New Testaments the nuptial intensity which marks the relationship between God and his people. Hosea, for instance, puts it thus in this marvelous passage: "I will make for you a covenant on the day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things on the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in just, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord" (2:18-20).

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(13) The Sabbath precept. . . is rooted in the depths of God’s plan. This is why it is set within the Decalogue, the “ten words” which represent the very pillars of the moral life inscribed on the human heart. In setting this commandment within the context of the basic structure of ethics, Israel and then the Church declare that they consider it not just a matter of community religious discipline but a defining and indelible expression of our relationship with God, announced and expounded by biblical revelation. This is the perspective within which Christians need to rediscover this precept today. Although the precept may merge naturally with the human need for rest, it is faith alone which gives access to its deeper meaning and ensures that it will not become banal and trivialized. . . .

(14). . . . In order to grasp fully what the first of the biblical creation accounts mean by keeping the Sabbath “holy,” we need to consider the whole story, which shows clearly how every reality, without exception, must be referred back to God. Time and space belong to him. He is not the God of one day alone, but the God of all the days of humanity.

Therefore, “if God sanctifies” the seventh day with a special blessing and makes it “his day” *par excellence*, this must be understood within the

deep dynamic of the dialogue of “marriage.” This is the dialogue of love which knows no interruption, yet is never monotonous. In fact, it employs the different registers of love, from the ordinary and indirect to those more intense, which the words of Scripture and the witness of so many mystics do not hesitate to describe in imagery drawn from the experience of married love.

(15) All human life, and therefore all human time, must become praise of the Creator and thanksgiving to him. But man’s relationship with God also *demands times of explicit prayer*, in which the relationship becomes an intense dialogue, involving every dimension of the person. “The Lord’s Day” is the day of this relationship *par excellence* when men and women raise their song to God and become the voice of all creation.

This is precisely why it is also *the day of rest*. Speaking vividly as it does of “renewal” and “detachment,” the interruption of the often oppressive rhythm of work expresses the dependence of man and the cosmos upon God. *Everything belongs to God!* The Lord’s Day returns again and again to declare this principle within; the weekly reckoning of time. The “Sabbath” has therefore been interpreted evocatively as a determining element in the kind of “sacred architecture” of time which marks biblical revelation. It recalls that *the universe*

and history belong to God, and without a constant awareness of that truth, man cannot serve in the world as co-worker of the Creator.

To “keep holy” by “remembering”

(16) The commandment of the Decalogue by which God decrees observance is formulated in the Book of Exodus in a distinctive way: “Remember the Sabbath day in order to keep it holy”. . . . And the inspired text goes on to give the reason for this, recalling as it does the work of God: “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” 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 entire religious life of man and then fill the day on which man is called to rest. Rest therefore acquired 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.

(17) The connection between Sabbath rest and the theme of “remembering” God’s wonders is found also in the Book of Deuteronomy (5:12-15), where the precepts are grounded less in the work of creation than in the work of liberation accomplished by God in the Exodus: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with mighty and outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (5:12-15). Therefore, the main point of the precept is not just any kind of interruption of work, but the celebration of the marvels which God has wrought.

Insofar as this “remembrance” is alive, *full of thanksgiving and of the praise of God*, human rest on the Lord’s Day takes on its full meaning. It is then that man enters the depths of God’s rest and can experience a tremor of the Creator’s joy when, after the creation, he saw that all he had made “was very good” (Gen. 1:31). □

