

KEEPING HOLY THE LORD'S DAY

Michelle Arnold, Catholic Answers

We often get questions at Catholic Answers about how Catholics should observe Sunday and the holy days of obligation. Are there restrictions on the types of activities they can engage in? Is it a sin to work, shop, or otherwise engage in public activities or personal chores on a day of rest? What can we do to make Sunday or the holy days special and not just a day of no work?

First of all, it is important to distinguish Sunday and the Christian holy days of obligation from the Jewish Sabbath. Sunday is *not* “the Sabbath,” and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes this clear:

Sunday is expressly distinguished from the Sabbath which it follows chronologically every week; for Christians its ceremonial observance replaces that of the Sabbath. In Christ's Passover, Sunday fulfills the spiritual truth of the Jewish Sabbath and announces man's eternal rest in God. For worship under the law prepared for the mystery of Christ, and what was done there prefigured some aspects of Christ: those who lived according to the old order of things have come to a new hope, no longer keeping the Sabbath, but the Lord's Day, in which our life is blessed by him and by his death (CCC 2175).

Sunday should not be called “the Sabbath”; rather, it is the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, when Christ rose from the dead. Each and every Sunday is a commemoration of that first Easter Sunday.

“By a tradition handed down from the apostles which took its origin from the very day of Christ's Resurrection, the Church celebrates the Paschal mystery every seventh day, which day is appropriately called the Lord's Day or Sunday.” The day of Christ's Resurrection is both the first day of the week, the memorial of the first day of creation, and the “eighth day,” on which Christ after his “rest” on the great Sabbath inaugurates the “day that the Lord has made,” the “day that knows no evening” (CCC 1166).

General principles

What guidance does the Church offer for keeping holy the Lord's Day? Since the Church is legislating for a global community of Christians with disparate circumstances in which they live out their Christian lives, it tends not to give specific permissions or prohibitions for honoring the Lord's Day—and, by extension, the holy days of obligation—but offers general principles for Christians to consider. It is the work of each Christian to assess his circumstances and to do his best to act in accord with those principles.

The first and most fundamental obligation of Sunday and the holy days of obligation is to attend Mass. Christians are also to do their best, according to their state in life, to rest from work or business. The *Code of Canon Law* states:

On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to assist at Mass. They are also to abstain from such work or business that would inhibit the worship to be given to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, or the due relaxation of mind and body (canon 1247).

The Church provides that Catholics can meet the Mass obligation by attending Mass on either the Sunday or holy day or on the evening before at the vigil Mass.

Most Catholics understand the Mass obligation. It is the injunction to rest from unnecessary work or business that can be confusing. Does this mean they cannot shop, or eat out at a restaurant? Does it mean they cannot do their laundry or wash their car? What if they have a job that requires them to work on Sunday?

St. John Paul II, in his apostolic letter *Dies Domini*, wrote:

[Christians] are obliged in conscience to arrange their Sunday rest in a way which allows them to take part in the Eucharist, refraining from work and activities which are incompatible with the sanctification of the Lord's Day, with its characteristic joy and necessary rest for spirit and body (67).

St. John Paul II's key point is to urge Christians to arrange their Sunday rest in a way that allows them to go to Mass and to refrain from work. In other words, he is suggesting to Christians to *plan ahead*—to arrange their schedules, insofar as possible, to allow them to fulfill their obligation to attend Mass and to rest.

And how might one arrange one's Sundays?

Job obligations. Perhaps right now your job requires you to work on Sunday. Are you able to attend the vigil Mass on Saturday? Are you able to attend an early morning or an evening Mass on Sunday? Does your employer allow you to indicate to him times you would prefer to have off? You may not be able to do anything about your work schedule now, but could you resolve to keep an eye out for opportunities to change it in the future?

Home obligations. What do you ordinarily do on Sunday now? Is there a way to rearrange your weekend activities to do ordinary household work (laundry, grocery shopping, home maintenance projects, chores) either on Saturday or on some other day of the week? Perhaps you won't be able to arrange to do all of your Sunday work at other times, but could you work up to that goal by rescheduling just one chore at a time to another day?

Resting. Sunday is not a day to do nothing. As St. John Paul II noted:

In order that rest may not degenerate into emptiness or boredom, it must offer spiritual enrichment, greater freedom, opportunities for contemplation and fraternal communion. Therefore, among the forms of culture and entertainment which society offers, the faithful should choose those which are most in keeping with a life lived in obedience to the precepts of the gospel (DD 68).

If you have a family, perhaps you might wish to get together as a family to plan special family activities for Sunday. This does not mean you need to spend money. Even what otherwise might be a "chore," such as gardening or working on a home improvement project, might offer opportunities for "spiritual enrichment, greater freedom, [and] fraternal communion" when done together as a family.

If you are single, you could plan to spend the day with friends or with extended family. If you have a skill you truly enjoy, such as cooking or some other creative activity, perhaps you might offer it to someone in need. For example, perhaps you have an elderly neighbor who would enjoy a home-cooked meal. Perhaps there is a local charity that would be happy to accept hand-sewn clothing or hand-crafted toys for the needy in your community.

In short, Sundays and the holy days of obligation should be time each week, and several days throughout the year, to live out the joy of our Lord's Resurrection.

Understood and lived in this fashion, Sunday in a way becomes the soul of the other days, and in this sense we can recall the insight of Origen that the perfect Christian "is always in the Lord's Day, and is always celebrating Sunday" (St. John Paul II, DD 83).

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