

“THAT’S WHAT I LOVE ABOUT SUNDAY”: RECLAIMING THE CENTRALITY OF THE SABBATH

In late 2004, when my musical tastes were shifting, I came across a country song recorded by [Craig Morgan](#) entitled, “That’s What I Love About Sunday.” I was encouraged by its **clear reference** to attending Church in the first verse: “Sing along as the choir sways/Every verse of Amazing Grace/An’ then we shake the Preacher’s hand/Go home, into your blue jeans/Have some chicken an’ some baked beans/Pick a back yard football team/Not do much of anything/That’s what I love about Sunday.” Indeed— **worship** of God, followed by **family time** and **recreation**. For centuries, this formula has worked! It is the Lord’s Day. Prior to the coming of Christ, there is no precedent in non-Christian antiquity of a **Sunday celebration**. It certainly appears to be a creation **by and for** Christians when the Sabbath began to be observed on Sunday. Obviously, Easter Sunday morning had much to do with it, but the history is bit more **complicated** than that.

In Acts of the Apostles (20:7-8), we learn that the Christians “broke bread” on Sunday **evening**— Paul spoke until midnight! This is quite likely because the Sunday Eucharist was celebrated in the context of a **full meal**. While not the case today, the value of a family meal on Sundays **after Mass** is a noble tradition, based on solid historical evidence. Mass is an integral part of our Sundays, but **not the only** one worthy of mention. A letter by **Pliny the Younger** (*Ep. X, 96, ca.112 A.D.*) contains both the earliest external account of Christian worship, as well as the reasons given for the Roman persecution of Christians. Pliny’s letter used two terms to characterize the Christians, “superstition” and “political club” (*betaeria*). The evening celebrations were soon abolished because such “secret” gatherings were feared to be subversive.

Still, Pliny acknowledges that the ceremony itself (i.e., the Eucharist) “was of no special character and quite harmless, and they had ceased this practice after the edict in which, in accordance with your orders, I had forbidden all secret societies.” The Christians adapted to changing circumstances. This same letter also contains this description of the Christians: “...they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day **before it was light** (*die ante lucem convenire*), when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god...” The context for these **early morning** celebrations was undoubtedly because baptisms were conferred within that singular celebration. But the key fact here is that a **secular writer** mentions “Christ” and that the worshippers sang to him **as to a god**. Pliny was **100% correct** on that count, even if he was merely reporting his findings about Christians to the Emperor **Trajan**.

Pliny’s matter-of-fact letter contains a wealth of information about the **earliest experiences** of Sunday worship. It also raises questions: When did the Church begin to **require** attendance at Mass? What is the history of the Sunday Mass obligation? The short answer— “Not quite as early as you may think!” History teaches us that this **Sunday obligation** developed locally, organically and over many centuries. Our earliest evidence comes from the preservation of documents of local councils. It makes sense as the local bishop was the leader and communication necessitated smaller, regional gatherings. Prior to a formal obligation, **admonitions** were given towards any who frequently absented themselves from the Sunday assembly. But this is **technically** distinct from a universal prescription.

Take for example, the **Council of Elvira**, located near today’s Granada, Spain. Held somewhere around 300 A.D., it is best described as a national council, its acts signed by 19 bishops and 24 priests from five different Roman provinces. It spoke, not of an “obligation,” but rather of **penalties** after repeated absences. “If anyone who lives in the city does not attend church services for three Sundays, let that person be **expelled for a brief time** in order to make the reproach public.” (Canon 21) Ouch—they didn’t mess around! Not to be outdone by the Spaniards, in the extreme south of France, the **Council of Agde** (506 A.D.) **forbade** the faithful to leave Mass **before** the priest bestowed the **final blessing!** If they did, they may be **publicly admonished** by the bishop! Not to worry— you Cathedral folks are pretty good on this score!

The Sunday obligation only became formalized in Church law on a universal basis much later. For now, let us approach it from a different angle. An early 3rd century document entitled *Didiscalia Apostolorum* (Teaching of the Apostles) beautifully highlights the **centrality** of the Sunday Eucharist: “Leave everything on the Lord’s Day, and **run diligently** to your assembly, because it is your praise of God. Otherwise, **what excuse** will they

make to God, those who do not come together on the Lord's Day to hear the word of life and feed on the **divine nourishment** which lasts forever?" (my emphasis added) This Didiscalia's stress was on **positive reasons** to attend Mass and receive divine nourishment. Nearly 1800 years later, that approach seems wise and prudent. And it accomplishes this by asking rhetorically– what is our **excuse** for not attending? (To be continued)

- Do not become discouraged in your pursuit of virtue—it takes a lifetime. The 1st century Roman pagan poet **Ovid** wrote: “Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor” [I see better things and I approve, but I follow what is worse]. In truth, the **pursuit** of virtue takes a long time and includes much stumbling along the way. The important thing is to stick with it!
- As the **general Sunday obligation** returns next weekend (July 3-4), please note the legitimate reasons why some may remain home, listed separately on page 6 of this week's bulletin.
- In the troubled African nation of **Eritrea**, the government is **seizing control** of Catholic schools. In 2019, they did the same with Church-run hospitals. The nation's Catholic bishops have noted that they are not in competition with government organizations, but rather are exercising their legitimate rights. “We declare again that she will never cease to demand the return of the social institutions forcibly taken from her and the right to perform all the services of which she has been deprived.”
- The Cathedral parish has been blessed since 2017 by the presence of **Mike Snyder**, our Business Administrator. Mike is entering into a **well-earned retirement** after many years of service to the Church. Here, he organized our business affairs and oversaw our Safe Environment program so very ably. Our most recent **audit** was the best we have had since my 2012 arrival– largely due to his leadership.
- A **smackdown** for lockdowns. In a 4-3 decision, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that the local health officer in Madison, WI had **no authority** to cease all in-person instruction (**including religious schools**) for students in grades 3-12, instead imposing virtual learning. It ruled: “[T]hose portions of the Order restricting or prohibiting in-person instruction are unconstitutional because they violate a citizen's right to the free exercise of religion guaranteed in Article I, Section 18 of the Wisconsin Constitution...” Religious liberty matters!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector