

## **Blacking the Stove**

Those of “a certain age” may still be able to remember a time when certain domestic chores were religiously assigned to particular days of the week. Monday was always washing day. Once a week the front step was scrubbed (or a semi-circle of the pavement outside the front door if there wasn’t an actual step) and the stove was blacked. Sunday night was bath night.

As these chores (and having to have a bath could be a chore for some!) began to disappear so too did the domestic calendar. Coal-fired stoves and ranges were replaced by cleaner gas and electric cookers so there was no need for blacking anymore. More and more people moved out of terraced street housing and into houses with gardens and so front steps disappeared. The convenience of modern washing machines and tumble dryers meant that the weekly wash could be done any day and at any time of the day. And it’s now easier than ever to run a bath or take a shower whatever the day of the week – it’s also a little more convenient than the days of a tin bath in front of the fire!

Of course the other thing that a Sunday used to be was a day of rest (and a day for church-going), but we have seen the demise of that also.

As Christians, we are obliged “to keep holy the Sabbath day” and further, as Catholics, the Church teaches that we do this by making it a day special to the Lord by going to Mass, by resting from servile works – things that could be done on other days of the week and, in general, by making it a day of rest and relaxation in which our relationship with God is given a little more focus than might otherwise be the case.

The main points of what the catechism says on the subject of Sundays and holydays are:

The third commandment recalls the holiness of the Sabbath as a day of solemn rest, holy to the Lord.

The celebration of Sunday observes the moral commandment to render to God outward, visible, public and regular worship. The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason (we) are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation (Sundays and holydays) unless excused for a serious reason. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.

On Sundays and holydays of obligation, the faithful are to refrain from engaging in work or activities that hinder the worship owed to God. (They) should see to it that legitimate excuses do not lead to habits prejudicial to religion, family life and health. Sunday is traditionally consecrated (by) good works and humble service to the sick, the infirm

and the elderly. Christians also sanctify Sunday by devoting time and care to their families and relatives, often difficult to do on other days of the week. Sunday is a time for reflection, silence, cultivation of the mind and meditation which furthers the growth of the Christian interior life.

We should avoid making unnecessary demands on others that would hinder them from observing the Lord's Day. Traditional activities and social necessities require some people to work on Sundays, but everyone should still take care to set aside sufficient time for leisure (and their religious obligations). Employers have a similar obligation toward their employees. Christians should seek recognition of Sundays and the Church's holydays as legal holidays.<sup>1</sup>

If memory serves, when Saturday Vigil Masses were first introduced the idea was to provide an opportunity for shift workers to be able to get to Mass if they were working on a Sunday morning. I continue to feel that it would have been better for there to have been a Sunday evening Mass rather than a Vigil Mass on Saturday, so that the integrity of Sunday as the Sabbath was maintained. We can get very legalistic about a Vigil Mass fulfilling the Sunday "obligation" (and I wish we had a better word than that – we should never be celebrating the Eucharist out of obligation) if we count the Sabbath as starting from Saturday evening, but I always wonder whether people still remember that Sunday itself is the Sabbath even if they have been to the Vigil Mass. There is also the possible danger, and I repeat the word "possible", that people might use the Vigil Mass as a way of fulfilling their obligation (there's that word again) in order to have Sunday completely free from beginning to end, as if there were no other aspects to "keeping the Sabbath holy" other than going to Mass.

The major problem today, though, is that Sunday has become just another day of the week for the society around us. For the most part, everything continues to function just like any other day – a sad reflection on the perceived need to keep making money despite the day of the week (and a fear of losing business to competitors) and the equally sad fact that the majority of people hardly give a second thought to God let alone to the Lord's Day. Therefore, for them, Sunday *isn't* any different – but it should be for us. We Christians ought to have fought harder to preserve the sanctity of the Sabbath but we didn't, and now we are paying the price.

We have also done something similar with holydays of obligation.

In some countries, holydays have for a long time - and for whatever reason - been celebrated on Sundays rather than on their traditionally assigned days. When our own Bishops' Conference recently changed a number of our holydays

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para's 2168-2188

to being celebrated on Sundays, the explanation was that people were simply not going to Mass on the holydays (despite the fact that to deliberately not go was, and is, a mortal sin). One possible reason for this is that, because holydays are not holidays as they once were – not even in our Catholic schools – then it becomes all too easy for people to forget them in the midst of the busy-ness of their working week. Therefore, to try to ensure that these solemnities of the Church are shown the reverence that is due to them as major celebrations in the Church’s calendar, several have been moved to Sundays when it is hoped people *would* be at Mass.

Somehow it feels as if, by doing this, the bishops have lowered the bar, as it were. They have accommodated the poor practice of an apparently increasing number of Catholics in this country by, in terms of Mass attendance, making it possible for them to “kill two birds with one stone”. If these are the significant feasts in the Church’s calendar that the Church is saying they are, then surely they should be given their own status and importance separate from Sundays just as, traditionally, they always were.

Another day of the week that used to be significant for Catholics was Friday with its requirement not to eat meat. Perhaps the reason why the prohibition was lifted in this country was because it was no longer the act of penance that it was intended to be - and once was. These days there are so many convenient alternatives to meat that going without it for a day is hardly an act of self-denial and, indeed, a lot of people don’t eat meat anyway. And so the Friday ban on meat was lifted, but we weren’t left off scot-free.

We were told (though not, it would seem, very well, or perhaps we have since forgotten) that it is recommended that we should observe all Fridays in memory of the death of the Lord on Good Friday by keeping them as days of spiritual exercise, self-denial (which is what going without meat was all about) and almsgiving.<sup>2</sup> However, this seems to have been a *recommendation* (on the part of our Bishops’ Conference) rather than an *obligation*, and so it is observed more in the breach than the practice. Some people continue to not eat meat on Fridays, but now it is by choice rather than obligation.

If you were to talk to today’s younger generation about days for doing the wash, scrubbing the step, or blacking the stove, they would probably look at you as if you were from a different planet. But at least there is a good reason for their unknowing: these were practices that gradually disappeared (and before their time) as living conditions improved and domestic chores became less onerous. However if you talk to young Catholics about keeping the Sabbath holy, about holydays of obligation, or about not eating meat on Fridays and they look at you

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<sup>2</sup> para 1438 of the *Catechism*

blankly, I think we need to be a little more concerned. These things didn't become irrelevant, nothing better came along to make them unnecessary, they are not outmoded or outdated – and so what happened?

What happened is that catechesis has clearly failed in these areas; Church teaching has become a smorgasbord, a buffet, from which people pick and choose according to their personal taste (as they do with what constitutes sin); and aspects of traditional Catholic practice are coming in second to the “market place” as evidenced, for example, by the demise of Sunday as a special day. As the people in the prophet Samuel's day discovered to their cost,<sup>3</sup> they couldn't be (and shouldn't have wanted to be) like the other people around them. The more that this happens in our own day and age, the more we are in danger of losing our Catholic identity as the prominence - and rightful place - of our feast days and festivals diminishes.

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<sup>3</sup> The First Book of Samuel, chapter 8. God was their king but they wanted an earthly ruler.