

# How Can You Enforce the Observance of a Day of Freedom?

By *Richard Rice*

Suppose an acquaintance of yours, a good Roman Catholic, came to you and said, "I've read the pope's letter and I'm impressed with the importance of observing Sunday in a truly meaningful way. I know that you're an Adventist and you've had a lot of experience keeping a day holy. Could you help me with my Sunday keeping?" What would you do? Would you give her a Bible study on the biblical day of rest? Would you talk about the "Mark of the Beast?" Would you invite her to spend a Sabbath with your family, so she could see what goes on? Would you offer to spend a Sunday with her family, so you could help her fill the day with spiritually helpful activities? What is the best way to bear a Sabbath witness?

With our prophetic sensitivity, it is not surprising that Adventists should take immediate interest in any public statement, from any source, religious or otherwise, on the significance of the first day of the week. But when this source is the Bishop of Rome and the statement takes the form of an apostolic letter, our response goes way beyond the level of interest, to riveted attention, profound concern, and even alarm. There's a long history that explains this, of course. But instead of retailing that, I would like to register my reaction to this document.

My reaction to the pope's letter is one of appreciation, criticism, and concern.

I appreciate the profound theological insights *Dies Domini* offers into the nature of Sabbath, Sabbath rest, and Sabbath celebration. Though many of them are derived from other sources, including Abraham Joshua Heschel, a major contributor to Adventist thought on the Sabbath, they are expressed in clear, helpful, and even inspiring ways. I also appreciate the call to greater spirituality in an age when culture generally pushes and drags us in another direction.

I am critical of many aspects of the letter's account of the way Christians changed their day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday. The role of anti-Judaism in the thinking of early Christian authorities is not acknowledged. And for Protestants, there is a noticeable lack of any biblical precedent to support such

a move. I am also critical of the religious significance the letter applies to Sunday, without any biblical mandate to back it up. I don't see how the significance of one day can be reassigned to another. After all, it's not like we're deciding to celebrate President's Day on a Monday.

At the same time, the letter reminds us that the resurrection of Jesus is the centerpiece of Christian hope and calls us to find ways of celebrating its importance. Within our community more thought on the meaning of baptism would be helpful here. I also appreciate the emphasis on the fellowship gathered around the table of the Lord as the highest expression and constitutive action of Christian community. Though Adventists, along with Protestants generally, will certainly question Roman Catholic sacramental theology, we need to reflect far more deeply than we do on the picture of the community gathering to celebrate the central moments in salvation history.

Like most Adventists, I am sure, I am concerned about the letter's appeals to authority to help preserve the sanctity of the day. They aren't numerous, but they are there, and they remind us of a history of civil support for religion that we have always objected to. The phrasing in section 67—"Christians will naturally strive to ensure that civil legislation respects their duty to keep Sunday holy"—seems innocuous enough. After all, Adventists have appealed to civil authority to guarantee their right to worship on the seventh day of the week. So, it should not surprise us that other religious communities want the same provisions to achieve their spiritual objectives. But it is one thing to permit people to practice religion and another to require them to do so. And Adventists will read Constantine's edict in A.D. 321 as a social imposition rather than Christian liberation (sec. 64).

Although the letter reminds us of our historic concern about Sunday legislation and its role as a signal of probation's close, we should be careful not to overreact to this development. Let's not forget that the letter testifies to the fact that a lot of Catholics aren't paying much attention to Sunday. It's absorbed into the recre-

ational weekend that has become an essential feature of life in industrialized countries.

In many ways *Dies Domini* reflects the increasing secularity of people with a Catholic background. And we have to wonder if a document like this will produce a religious awakening. Strong papal appeals do not necessarily result in widespread public acceptance, let alone legal enforcement. I may be wrong, but I think there are predominantly Catholic countries that permit abortion over the church's opposition, and polls show that many Catholics in the U.S. practice birth control in spite of the church's condemnation of contraception in its most popular and effective forms.

From a different perspective, Adventists may view the publication of this letter as an opportunity to reaffirm in a public way their commitment to the gift of the Sabbath. This document is one of several expressions of appreciation by Christians for the spiritual and theological significance of the Sabbath. Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, arguably the greatest theological achievement of this century, contains a wonderful exposition of the Sabbath.<sup>1</sup> In the mid-1980's, the influential German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, published his Gifford Lectures under the title, *God in Creation*. The book concludes with a chapter on "The Sabbath: The Feast of Creation." "It is impossible to understand the world properly as creation without a proper discernment of the Sabbath." "There will never be peace with nature without the experience and celebration of God's Sabbath." He even suggests that the Sabbath was not the aftermath, but the very purpose, of creation. "The whole work of Creation was performed for the sake of the Sabbath." Unlike *Dies Domini*, however, and unlike Barth, as well, for that matter, Moltmann does not try to shift the significance of Sabbath to Sunday. To the contrary, he argues, "To transfer the Sabbath commandment to the Christian Sunday is wrong, both historically and theologically." He accepts Sunday as the feast day of the resurrection, but he denies that this replaces the Sabbath. To the contrary, he insists, Christians still need the Sabbath. "We have to find a Christian way of sanctifying the Sabbath."<sup>2</sup>

An article that appeared in *Christianity Today* a year and a half ago suggests some ways to do this. In "Rediscovering the Sabbath," Dorothy C. Bass presents the Sabbath as "the most challenging and necessary spiritual discipline for contemporary Christians." She talks about the significance of the Sabbath for work and for justice. And she speaks of living in the rhythm of the Sabbath and "unwrapping the gift of the Sabbath" in

ways that will warm the heart of any Adventist.<sup>3</sup>

So, there is a growing appreciation for Sabbath in the larger Christian world. This provides us with growing opportunities to express the meaning of the Sabbath and to uphold values of the Sabbath experience. We have done a lot of thinking about the Sabbath. And we have had a lot of practice at Sabbath keeping. So, we may have opportunities to communicate the qualities, the dynamics, of the experience to fellow Christians who have come to sense a need for a real Sabbath in their own lives.

We may also appeal to the very meaning of the Sabbath as a basis for opposing any attempt to enforce a weekly day of rest. The Sabbath is a symbol of liberation as well as Creation (Deut. 5). It commemorates the liberation of the world from chaos, and the liberation of the Israelites from bondage. It confers dignity and freedom on all God's children.<sup>4</sup> How could you enforce the observance of a day of freedom?

So, this may be an opportunity for our community to express the significance of the Sabbath to the larger Christian world. We are not the only Sabbath-keeping Christian community, nor are we the oldest. But we are the largest. And when Christians turn their attention to the importance of a weekly day of rest, we have an opportunity to communicate the full significance of the Sabbath—as an expression of loyalty to God, as an expression of continuity with the biblical communities of faith, Jewish as well as Christian, and as a contribution to spiritual growth and development.

So, while there are things about this letter that concern us, let's not ignore the opportunities it may provide us to express our love for the Sabbath and all that it means.

## Notes and References

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936-77).
2. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 277, 287, 294, 296.
3. Dorothy C. Bass, "Rediscovering the Sabbath," *Christianity Today*, Sept., 1, 1997, 39-43.
4. Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 287.

---

**Richard Rice is professor of religion at Loma Linda University. His Ph.D. in Systematic Theology is from the University of Chicago. His latest book, written with Clark Pinnock and others, is *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, ILL: Intervarsity Press, 1994).  
Rrice@rel.llu.edu**