

Proclaiming the Sabbath More Fully

By Ivan T. Blazen

Under the Latin title *Dies Domini* ("The Lord's Day") Pope John Paul II, proprietor of two earned doctorates and a poet of stature in the Polish language, has produced a document of dignity and depth. In face of the secularization of Sunday and, in places, strikingly low Sunday attendance at mass (the central element of Catholic worship), he makes an urgent appeal to Catholics everywhere to "rediscover Sunday" (sec. 7). He wishes them to return to, or deepen their experience of the observance of the first day of the week as Resurrection Sunday, the joyful day of Christ's victory, "the festival of the new creation" (sec. 8), "a day which is at the very heart of Christian life" (sec. 7). By this observance, the pope feels the community of the church and its witness to the world will be preserved and fostered (secs. 81 and 87). His special plea is to his brother bishops and priests: "I urge you to work tirelessly with the faithful to ensure that the value of this sacred day is understood and lived ever more deeply. This will bear rich fruit in Christian communities, and will not fail to have a positive influence on civil society as a whole" (sec. 87).

I do not believe that for Seventh-day Adventists this papal letter should be considered an occasion for fear or a summons to increase the tempo of eschatological expectation. As a careful reading of the document shows, the civil legislation relating to Sunday that the pope favors is not for the purpose of *requiring all* people of whatever faith to observe Sunday as a holy day, but of *allowing* Catholic Christians, in locations where Christian worship is difficult due to sociological pressures, hostility, or apathy, to follow their personal desire and religious duty to sanctify Sunday for the celebration of the Eucharist. The pope wishes the right to worship and to "enjoy the freedom, rest and relaxation which human dignity requires" to be respected and guaranteed. He does not speak of the holy days of other groups such as Friday for Muslims and Saturday for Jews, Adventists, and others, but this may be implied when he urges that civil legislation should allow "at least" one day (sec. 66).

My major concern in this response, however, is not to discuss the prospects and perceived problems of the pope's civil legislation references, especially since, in context, the precise meaning of the pope's statements shows no cause for Adventists to press the button of apocalyptic alarm. Rather, I focus upon two positive implications of the document as I see it. Two words summarize these implications: opportunity and challenge.

Opportunity

The question of opportunity is connected with the pope's understanding of the Seventh-day Sabbath. As one who grew up Catholic and never heard theological arguments in behalf of the abiding significance of the Sabbath—in fact never really heard about the Sabbath, for my catechism read, "Remember the Lord's Day to keep it holy"—I find the pope's commentary quite stunning. Calling upon the people of God to enter God's rest spoken of in Hebrews 4:9, which Christ himself entered by his Resurrection, the pope argues that to grasp fully the meaning of Sunday, "we must reread the great story of Creation and deepen our understanding of the theology of the 'Sabbath'" (sec. 8). The Sabbath is rooted in the depths of God's plan and set in the context not of ceremonial stipulations but of the moral and ethical commands of the Decalogue. As such, the Sabbath is an expression of our relationship with God (sec. 13), which is so close that in scripture it is pictured as possessing a nuptial intensity (sec. 12). This is the perspective, the pope says, that Christians today need in order to rediscover the Sabbath precept. This relationship with God, inherent in the Sabbath, is linked not only with God's rest at Creation (Exod. 20:8-11) but with his act of liberation from slavery at the Exodus (Deut. 5:12-15, and sec. 12). These two foci are anticipatory of the new Creation and deliverance from sin (secs. 59-61).

The seventh day of Creation Week was sealed by God's blessing and consecration. Thus meaning was conferred upon time. The constant return of the Sabbath ensures that "time remains open to eternity" (sec. 60). Interestingly enough, though he believes Sunday became the Lord's Day after the time of Christ, the pope calls the Sabbath during Old Testament times the Lord's Day (secs. 18 and 63, for example).

More could be said on the pope's views of the Sabbath, but this is sufficient to show his positive understanding and regard for the meaningfulness of the Sabbath, a meaning that refers not merely to the past but to the present as well. In the pope's mind, Sunday observance contains foundations laid in the Sabbath and its theology.

This being the case, far from the pope's letter being a problem for Seventh-day Adventists, it is an opportunity for us. We can use the pope's acceptance of

a biblically based Sabbath theology as common ground on which to share with our Catholic friends in a two-way discussion of the biblical concept of the Sabbath. Study will have to be done, of course, on the supposed shift from the seventh day to the first. But if the significance of the seventh day is already agreed upon, future discussions with Catholics can be different in tone and content and, I trust, in results as well.

Challenge

Not only does the pope's letter give Adventists an opportunity for fruitful discussion with Catholics over the meaning and value of the Sabbath, it gives us a challenge as well. The pope's statements on the Sabbath are set within a strong Christocentric perspective (sec. 8). Already at the dawn of creation, he says, the plan of God, which includes the blessing of the seventh day, implies Christ's cosmic mission. The Sabbath, connected with God's acts at Creation and the Exodus, points forward to the new creation and liberation from sin made possible through the death and resurrection of Christ. Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection, comes to house within itself all the meaning that the Sabbath had, but as now transfigured by the gospel. In the shift from the seventh to the first day, the Sabbath is not abolished but, as the Old Testament Lord's Day, it is recovered, perfected, and fully revealed in the glory of the risen Christ. The pope affirms what Gregory the Great declared: "For us, the true Sabbath is the person of our Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ" (sec. 18).

According to John Paul II, Sunday is more than a replacement for the Sabbath. It is its fulfillment, extension, and full expression in the ordered unfolding of salvation history, which culminates in Christ (sec. 59). To call Sunday the eighth day, as is common in the Catholic tradition, is to give expression to the idea that the meaning of the Sabbath is not lost but finds its goal in what comes after it on resurrection day (cf. sec. 26).

The challenge to Seventh-day Adventists, who continue to maintain not only a Sabbath theology but the seventh day itself, is to flood the Sabbath with the meaning of the gospel. We need not move the Sabbath to Sunday to do this, but we need to move the significance of the day of Christ's Resurrection into the Sabbath, the only day commanded by God. We need to take seriously the meaning of Colossians 2:16, 17 where, with reference to feasts, new moons, and Sabbaths, Paul says: "These are a shadow of what was to come, but the substance is found in Christ."¹ By focusing exclusively on the ceremonial rest days in our interpretation of the word "Sabbaths," in this passage, we have devoided ourselves of a meaning that we as Adventists need

today. In the Greek Old Testament of Paul and the Colossians (the Septuagint), the ceremonial rest days, (except for the Day of Atonement) are designated by a different term (*anapausis*) than that employed constantly in either singular or plural forms for the Sabbath (*sabbaton*) in scripture, including Colossians 2:16. Here the identical word and plural form occurs as is found in the Greek text of the fourth commandment.² That the ceremonial rests were not part of the "Sabbaths" of Colossians 2:16 is evidenced by the fact that they were already included in the term "feasts" and could not be separated from them (being the first and last days of week-long feasts and entirely coincident with one-day feasts). This means that with the term "Sabbaths" in Colossians 2:16, the seventh-day Sabbath is not excluded from Paul's Christological dictum: "The substance is found in Christ." Thus the Sabbath, which we as Adventists observe, is insubstantial and without Christian reality *if it does not locate its substance in Christ*.

Ellen G. White, in a wonderful chapter on the Sabbath in *The Desire of Ages*, in which she ties the Sabbath to both Creation and Redemption, gives the Sabbath an ultimate Christological perspective when she says, "Seeing Christ in it they delight themselves in Him."³ Some good statements by Adventists have been made along these lines, but it remains for us to develop even more what the Sabbath means theologically in the light of the gospel. Without a strong Christological perspective we will in some measure be keeping a Jewish Sabbath. As beautiful as is Rabbi Abraham Heschel's book, *The Sabbath*, there is no mention of Christ, his death and resurrection, and the grace he gives.⁴ When we give ultimate expression to the meaning of the Sabbath as redemption in, and relationship with, Christ, we will truly be proclaiming the Sabbath "more fully," as Ellen White described long ago, with regard to God's last-day people.⁵

Notes and References

1. Translated from Greek by the author.
2. Exod. 10:8; also, Lev. 23:38, which distinguishes the "Sabbaths of the Lord" from the feasts with their rest days.
3. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, rev. ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1940), 289.
4. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, [1951]).
5. Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1945), 33.

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