

A Time of Grace: The Sabbath from a Christian Point of View

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As an artist who decided to paint a fresco in six days - part of the fresco each day of the week - and then, satisfied with his work signed it on the seventh day, so the Divine Artist created part of his creation each day of the week and completed it on the seventh day -by resting. The Sabbath is God's signature at the bottom of his creation.

I. The Sabbath (is the) Memorial of Creation

Let us admire the Divine Artist in action:

"In the beginning [we don't know when] God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."

Then - we don't know when after that - God said: "Let there be light." This was the first day.

On the second day God said: "Let there be a firmament."

On the third day: "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place. Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree."

On the fourth day: "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years."

On the fifth day: "Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens."

Then on the sixth day God said, "Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind ... Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness."

In six days God created all the things our senses can perceive and appreciate.

But God's work was not yet finished. God had to sign it. And He did, on the seventh day, by resting. On the seventh day He didn't create something for the senses, but rather something

for the spirit: a memorial, a day of rest, the Sabbath, the, שַׁבָּת¹ the non-action time. "Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended [not before] His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it; because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made."

God created a blessed and sanctified time. And because He blessed that portion of time - the seventh day of the week - because He sanctified it, meaning that He separated that portion of time from the ordinary time for a sacred use, that time is a time of grace.

Its observance has at the same time a material, spiritual and ethical implication: it means the recognition of God's sovereignty as Creator of the world and of the universe, His ownership over the earth and over all creation, a sign of allegiance to Him, the recognition of his love, the expression of our love for Him, as the Apostle John wrote: "We love Him because He loved us first. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 Jn 4:19; 5:3). Not a dictator but a loving father. Obedience is to our advantage. Whether we obey or not, God remains the same. We obey not in order to be saved but because we are saved. We don't obey a cold legal order but because of a loving relationship with God our Father. That's why we love Him and why we obey Him. Our acceptance to submit to his will, which is always good for us, is also rational, because everything that exists, including technical production of human intelligence, must obey a certain number of rules to continue to exist, to produce fruit, in order not to destroy itself. Thus even science should strengthen our faith. In the words of Augustine: "The more I know, the more I believe, the more I believe, the more I know." A member of our Fraternity, Göran Larsson, wrote a beautiful book a few years ago, *Bound for Freedom* in which he explains, among other things, that real freedom limits itself or accept limits. Freedom obeys. E.G.White, another personal favourite, wrote: "Love has a twin. Obedience." In observing the Sabbath we say that we believe in a God who "submits his almighty power to his infinite love."²

As a Christian I don't think I'm doing something wrong, on the contrary, when I observe the Sabbath. Because even though it has a special meaning for the Jewish people, as we'll see in a moment, the Sabbath, which was instituted at the creation of the world, when all humanity was already in Adam and Eve, the Sabbath also has a universal value: "Do not let the son of the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord speak, saying, 'The Lord has utterly separated me from His people'; nor let the eunuch say, 'Here I am, a dry tree'... even to them I will give a name (*iad vashem*) better than that of sons and daughters and to everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath" (Is.56:3,5, 7).

The well-known Rabbi Elia Benamozeg was the Rabbi of Livorno (Italy) in the nineteenth century for more than fifty years. His fundamental work is the book: *Israele e L'Humanita* (*Israel and Humanity*) known worldwide, translated into many languages and a classic on the subject. Rabbi Benamozeg says that the Noachides, obliged only by seven *mitzvot* (some of

¹ Shabbat.

² E.G. White.

them mentioned in Acts 15, as per the Council of Jerusalem in 49 AD) called the Noachide Law, can also observe other *mitzvot* from among the six hundred and thirteen to which the Jews are obliged, including the Sabbath if they wish to do so.

Even though there are similarities between Noachism and Christianity, particularly with Early Christianity, they cannot be confused. Christianity is not Noachism. But the Noachides are also *goim* as the majority of Christians today and what I want to stress here is that if Sabbath has a particular meaning for Israel, it also has a meaning for the Nations. It has both a specific and a universal meaning.

Professor Raniero Fontana who was a teacher here at the Ratisbonne Institute and a specialist in Noachism wrote in recent years, in addition to two important books on the subject, a very interesting article published in Italian and French, entitled: "The Shabbat of the Jews, specificity and universality" ("Le Shabbat des Juifs, spécificité et universalité") in which we read: "An interdiction for the observance of the Sabbath by non-Jews exists but it is still true that the Shabbat has a universal significance and not only a particular one. This tension between the universal and the particular is clear in the Bible itself."³ The author also quotes Ex.20 and Deut.5.

Let's conclude this first part: the Sabbath, instituted at the creation of the world has without any doubt a particular meaning for the Jewish people but it also has a universal meaning, meaning, a meaning for Christians.

II. The Sabbath is not only the Memorial of Creation. It is also the Memorial of Redemption.

The sacredness of the seventh day of the week - the Sabbath - its value, its importance and its meaning was stressed and confirmed by God at Sinai. The Ten Commandments are a gift of God to Moses for the Hebrew people and for all of mankind. They are the only part of the Bible which is not inspired - because they were written directly by God Himself: "The tablets were the work of God [like the creation] and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets" (Ex.32:16; 31:18; Deut.9:10).

The fourth commandment concerning the Sabbath is the very heart of the Ten Commandments. If we read carefully the two accounts of the Ten Commandments in Exodus and in Deuteronomy we notice that there is a slight but important difference in the recording of the fourth commandment which stresses at the same time the particularity and the universality of the Sabbath day as a time of grace:

- Exodus 20:8-11: "Remember⁴ the Sabbath day to keep it holy. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

³ SENS, n.1 1,2001.

⁴ Heb. Zhkor, in Deut. Shmor, one of the differences between the two accounts.

- Deuteronomy 5:12-15: "And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm, therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

Because the Sabbath day is connected to the Exodus as well as Creation, it has a special and unique meaning for the Jewish people.

A Christian observance of the Sabbath has nothing to do with replacement theology, or contextualisation or even less with syncretism but cannot or should not be observed independently from the Jewish people, in an appropriating way. Its unique and specific meaning for the people of Israel remains, as the entire *תורה*⁵ : "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of the circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe [in Jesus]? Will their unbelief [in Jesus] make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not!" said the Apostle Paul (Rom.3:1-3) to the Jews: In 9:1-6: Pertaining to the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law [so the Sabbath], the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God." And in Ez.20:12, 20: "I gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they may know that I am the Lord, who sanctifies them. Hallow my Sabbaths and they will be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the Lord your God."

But because of the typological Christian interpretation of Exodus, the Sabbath also has a particular meaning for non-Jews, and as such, for Christians. In fact, Exodus is considered a prototype of Redemption: from death to life, from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from slavery to freedom.

In the typology of the Exodus the sacrifice of the lamb whose blood had to be put on the doors of the houses of the Hebrews for them to be saved from the extermination of the first born of the Egyptians is of an extreme and essential importance in Christian thought and theology as the sacrificial lamb in the New Testament.

The relationship between Sabbath/Exodus/Redemption is not only a question of a sacred time but also of a sacred, redemptive act of divine grace. The sacrifice of the lamb speaks to Christians of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, "The Lamb of God" whose sacrifice for our redemption is as important, essential and necessary as the sacrifice of that lamb in that unique night, as it is written : "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin" (Heb. 9:22). Christian theology has incorporated this typology of the blood and the redemptive sacrifice of the lamb while it has not (yet?) incorporated the relationship between time (the Sabbath) and Redemption. This relationship has been transferred to Sunday.

In fact Sunday has become a weekly Easter and Sabbath a weekly *Pessah*. Judaism has maintained the time and the memory of divine deliverance but overlooked the typology of blood while Christianity has incorporated the typology of blood and overlooked the notion of

⁵ Torah.

time. Something has to be readjusted, and theology has in this respect *du pain sur la planche* (a lot on its plate).

In the same way the Church has incorporate the Ten Commandments (there is an intimate relationship between them and Sabbath) but has changed them, or if we prefer, has corrected them, or corrupted them: "A temptation of paganism is the corruption of the revelation received" said Cardinal Lustiger in his recent book *La Promesse*⁶. That's why Jean Calvin said long ago that the Holy Scriptures are: "God's authentic registers for Him to lay down His truth, so that it, couldn't perish by forgetfulness, or wouldn't vanish by mistake, or couldn't be corrupted by the audacity of men"⁷ and Martin Luther said: "Sola scriptura, sola fide."⁸

The question is: can man change or correct what God has written and so clearly expressed?

III. Because the Sabbath is the Memorial of Creation and of Redemption, because the seventh day of the week is the *Shabbath*, the rest of the Lord, because this day has been blessed and sanctified, the Sabbath is a time of grace.

The Sabbath is a time of a double grace: the grace, or the gift, of life and the grace, or the gift, to survive the condemnation of sin, which is death (Rom.6:23), the grace of existing, and the grace of subsisting, which is the grace of redemption.

It is a time of grace because it is a time of rest as the word etymologically means.

It is a time of a 'double grace' because it is a commandment, or more precisely a נזק⁹. We don't naturally like to "do nothing" (unless you practice the Italian *dolce far niente* which doesn't mean to be lazy but to take time to rest, to take time to live - and by the way in Italian, which is my mother tongue, Sabbath is still called *Sabato*: is this one of the reasons I understand the שבת so well?). Some people don't even know how to rest, or they have the feeling that they are losing, wasting time. They live in a constant atmosphere of tension and activity which turns sometimes into over-activism. We may be like the sick individual who doesn't want to take care of him/herself until he goes to the doctor and receives a prescription and only then does what the doctor says. The Sabbath is a double grace first, because the Sabbath is the "Divine Rest for Human Restlessness" as Professor Samuele Bacchiocchi wrote¹⁰ and second, because it is a commandment.

On the Sabbath, the first thing to do is to do nothing, to rest. From this point of view Lanza del Vasto was right when he said that "Sabbath is a feast without a feast."

6 Lustiger, The Promise, p.137 par.2.

7 "L'Institution Chretienne," *Labor et Fides* 1955, Vol.1 p.35 par.1.

8 Attributed to Martin Luther by Philip Schwarzerd known as Melancthon.

9 A good deed.

10 The author of *From Sabbath to Sunday*.

But Sabbath, as a time of grace, is more than that of course; it is a time of reflection and introspection, a time to put right values in the right place and to think again and again that "to be" is far more important than "to have" or "to do," to make right decisions, a time to set apart all our human worries and to rest both physically and spiritually, a time to enjoy the beauty of nature, a time of communion with God, of meditation of the Holy Scriptures, of worship, a time to enjoy the family -because other than the Sabbath, marriage is the only institution that originates in the garden of Eden.

Maybe these are some of the reasons why "the nostalgia of paradise is our punishment." Adam and Eve started their life with the Sabbath rest, with a vacation. They started their life enjoying this time of grace. On that day they enjoyed the beauty of creation and a close communion with the Creator. From this we may learn that human life may be different if we rest in the Lord first. If we trust in His grace, if we have faith in Him, receiving and renewing our strength in the Lord, the true source of our strength. All good works and activities are inspired and enabled by God's grace that inspires us and gives us wisdom. Sabbath is a time of grace.

But what is grace, in fact?

Surely as a Christian, I believe that the supreme expression of God's grace is the forgiveness of my sins and the gift of eternal life by the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus. I am not saved by observing the Sabbath but by the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus.

This concept of grace is very restrictive although correct.

I find the words of the Epistle of James very helpful in understanding grace:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning (James 1:17).

The Election of Israel is grace. The *Torah* is grace even though it contains a legal system (a legal *corpus*). The Sabbath is grace. "All is grace" says *le curé de campagne* in Bernanos' book. It would be interesting to spend time studying the meaning of the Hebrew word *Torah* and the Greek word *nomos* meaning "law" by which the word *Torah* was translated in the Septuagint. It conveys a more legalistic meaning, a meaning maintained even today in our modern translations of the Bible.

As a matter of fact, Jesus who said, "I didn't come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it," never transgressed or taught to transgress the Sabbath, not to speak of the other commandments.

The Archbishop of Paris Cardinal Lustiger says in his book¹¹ that to understand the attitude of Jesus toward the Sabbath it "depends on the way we understand the polemics concerning the Sabbath particularly in the synoptics. What is the exact aim of the debate concerning the

¹¹ See footnote 6.

Sabbath as we find it in the synoptics? The question is not to eliminate the observance of the Sabbath but on the contrary, to enhance it. Jesus presents himself as the Lord of the Sabbath. The exact and literal translation: "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath (Mt 12:6)." The Lord of the Sabbath is not a tyrant or the one who suppresses it. He fulfills it, because He observes it. How? As God observed it by resting on the Sabbath day and by enjoying his creation. It is the day in which God gives life, enjoys the man whom He created and invites him to enter into His own life by the *mitzva* to rest with Him, to participate in His creation. Sabbath is the day of the completion of God's work, the day when His creature can experience His rest. It is the day when His creature shares the joy of the Creator and recognizes the Creator of all things. Jesus, who presents Himself as the Lord of the *Shabbat* comes to announce the eschatological *Shabbat*. On that day he gives life, he heals. The discussion in the synoptics doesn't concern trivialities about what is or is not permissible. The very heart of the conflict concerns the person of Jesus. Jesus observes the *Shabbat*, and announces the coming of the final *Shabbat* when the plenitude of the life of God is given to his people. Jesus, the Lord of *Shabbat*, the envoy of God, can give life and forgive sins on that day. If it was only a casuistic question of what is allowed and what is not, Jesus' behaviour would have found many supporters among the rabbis of his time including among the narrow casuistic.¹² He continues: "The Christ made his delight, he has nourished himself with the accomplishment of the entire divine Law, he, who taught us that nothing had to be omitted of it, even the smallest commandment. He is the one who accomplishes at the same time the forgiveness of sin and the transformation of the human heart. He is this man of new heart, over whom sin has not power, who consequently can perfectly accomplish the Law which in fact, nourishes him till the end. He is the one through whom consequently, the Law no more reveals the sin, but reveals the grace."¹³

I am making an effort to present my subject in the frame of the ecumenical ideal and not to confine it to one denomination. These thoughts bring to my mind the same idea expressed by one of my very dear and precious teachers when I was a theology student, Dr Alfred Vaucher, of Valdensis origin who used to say: "Far from being a symbol of salvation by works, the Sabbath is the sign of salvation by faith: the promise of sanctification by God, the acceptance of this grace by the faithful who rest from his works of sin to taste the divine rest."¹⁴

About the beautiful text of Cardinal Lustiger I would like to respectfully make two remarks: First, if Jesus is the Lord of the *Shabbat*, the *Shabbat* is the day of the Lord, as we read in Rev.1:1. From this point of view let's remember that in the first century when the Apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation, Sunday was not yet the Christian Sunday replacing the biblical Sabbath. The justification of the observance of the first day of the week (Sunday) instead of the seventh (Sabbath) as the day of remembrance of the resurrection of Jesus (and not yet even as a replacement day) "appears in the second century, and yet very timidly."¹⁵

¹² Ibid Lustiger, pp.41,42

¹³ Ibid Lustiger, p. 96.

¹⁴ L'*Histoire du Salut*, p.296.

¹⁵ Rordorf, p.XVI par.0.

Second, even though Jesus announces the eschatological *Shabbat*, the *Shabbat* day itself will never be superseded, as we read in Is.66:22, "For as the new heaven and the new earth which I will make shall remain before Me, says the Lord, so shall your descendants and your name remain. And it shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another all flesh shall come to worship before Me, says the Lord." We read this as a Messianic prophecy regarding Jesus.

On the other hand, what about Paul and the few difficult texts in Paul's literature concerning the Law, Grace and the Sabbath? These passages exist and they may be approached from different points of view. The Apostle Peter says in this regard that in the letters of Paul there are "some things hard to understand; which unthought and unstable people twist to their destruction, as they do also the rest of the scriptures" (2Pe.3:16). Paul confirms, speaking about Melkizedek' priesthood, what can also be understood in a general way: "We have much to say and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing" (Heb.5:11).

The attitude of Paul toward the Law is not a negative one or a negation of it as such but about salvation by grace or by works. We are not saved by obeying the Law - which is only normal - but by the sacrifice of the Son of God which is grace.

Paul says: "Do we make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the Law" (Rom.3:31). If we are saved by faith, says the apostle in another passage¹⁶ should we say: "Let us do evil that good may come? as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. The Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (Rom.7:12) and so are the Sabbath and the *Torah* and particularly the Ten Commandments.

It was certainly not the intention of Paul to obliterate what God Himself said and wrote. Let me quote again Cardinal Lustiger: "The Christian experience may have occasionally drawn among certain populations a certain relativization of the commandments in the name of love. Surely, love for God and for our neighbour is the plenitude of the Law: the expression is absolutely exact, strong and beautiful. But it remains imperative that the exigencies of love have to be understood and structured by respect for the divine will. A worthwhile encounter could remind Christians that they cannot omit what God orders, and to the Jews that the commandment of love at the beginning of the *yinu* (*Shema*) animates all the attitudes flowing from it in regard to human relations with God."¹⁷

I see in this kind of thinking the hope of further, deeper reforms in a "return to the source" wished by Pope John XXIII.

IV. Sabbath and/or Sunday?

16 Rom.3:8.

17 Ibid Lustiger, p.209.

"A Time of Grace: The Sabbath from a Christian Point of View." From this point of view it wouldn't be complete to speak about Sabbath without speaking about Sunday. So: what about Sunday?

I am glad to mention at this point, Sister Maureen Fritz, a Sister of Zion, who was also a teacher at Ratisbonne and a dear member of our Fraternity who wrote in the spring 2000 a very interesting paper. She quotes Jewish sources, some of them against and a number of them in favour of Gentiles observing the Sabbath and she reaches the conclusion which is also the title of her article, "Sabbath rest and Sunday worship. We as Gentiles and as Christians are entitled to both!"

About her very interesting and well documented article I would like to make only one remark. If Sabbath is the biblical day of rest it is also the biblical day of worship. So I ask again: What about Sunday?

Willy Rordorf, in a book published about thirty years ago said: "The Christian Churches face today serious problems concerning Sunday, the traditional day of rest and of worship."¹⁸ He said this about three decades ago. The problem is not yet resolved. "The question is about the true meaning of the Christian Sunday," Rordorf says. "Is it mainly a day of rest and hence in some way a new Sabbath or is it first of all the day of Christian worship?"¹⁹

That the problem still exists is also proved by the Pastoral Letter of the Pope "Dies Domini" issued on May 31, 1998. The Letter "made an impassioned plea for more Sunday observance."²⁰ Sunday being in his point of view the day of the Lord of Rev.1:1, in his Letter he calls for the observance of it particularly in religious practice, mainly for a stronger participation in the dominical Mass. What has to be observed and underlined is that in his Letter, the biblical Sabbath, the seventh day of the week is given as a prototype to prove and to strengthen that Sunday, having replaced Sabbath, has to be taken seriously.

Let's quote again Willy Rordorf: "In the Christian Church Sunday has replaced the Sabbath, even more: it has become the heir of the Sabbath, a Christian Sabbath. This synthesis which has imposed itself more and more under the influence of official legislation of Sunday, has remained until now the foundation of our civil and religious Sunday. Not only a Christian should go to church on Sunday but also should not work, not only because Sunday is the official day of rest, but also because the commandment of the Decalogue is always valid."²¹ He then quotes Ex. 20:8.

In other words, the commandment concerning the seventh day of the week, the biblical Sabbath and day of rest is used to enforce the observance of Sunday, which is the first day of the week, and for a different reason (to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus).

¹⁸Ibid Rordorf, p.8.

¹⁹ Ibid Rordorf, p.9.

²⁰ Bradford, p.11.

²¹ Ibid Rordorf, p.9.

It would be interesting to retrace the history and the controversy about Sabbath-keeping and Sunday-keeping throughout the centuries. Let's just mention that there were Christian Sabbath-keepers all throughout Church history after the disappearance of the Ebionites in the fourth century.

Among the many Seventh-Day Adventist authors on the subject, I would like to mention again Samuele Bacchiocchi's book *From Sabbath to Sunday* in which he proves not only the value of the Sabbath but how the transfer from Sabbath to Sunday happened, how Sunday replaced the biblical Sabbath. Of note is the fact that Dr. Bacchiocchi earned his doctorate from the Gregorian University in Rome which is a very good credit for his work and also for the Gregorian University deserving indeed to be praised for its openness. But other scholars and theologians - and they are many - are also interested in the subject. This subject is not restricted to one denomination.

I've already mentioned and quoted Willy Rordorf several times. He is Protestant, a professor of Ancient Church History and of Patristic Studies at the University of Neuchatel in Switzerland and a specialist on the subject who wrote a monograph dedicated to the origins and the theological significance of Sunday. In his book published in 1972, *Shabbat und Sonntag in der Alte Kirche*, he writes that in the Church, the synthesis Sabbath/Sunday "has lasted four centuries, during which the Sabbath and the Sunday had in the Church a historical development quite independent from one another. Sometimes they have quietly co-existed, sometimes they have strongly competed against one another [the author quotes a number of texts of the New Testament and of the Church Fathers] but they have never been considered as one and same thing, as was the case in the post-Constantinian time."²² Rordorf continues: "It seems that the sabbathic Christian feasts of the fourth century are a post-Constantinian innovation."²³ Later he says, "We find in the pre-Constantinian Church all possible combinations, whose presence shows that there was not an absolute alternative: certain Judeo-Christian circles seem to have observed only the Sabbath, without even knowing about observing Sunday, others observe both; in return, the pagan-Christian Church generally observes only Sunday, without celebrating the Sabbath (but without rejecting the Sabbath because they observe the Sunday!)."²⁴

About Sabbath-keeping in the Early Church he says, "Following several indications, it seems that the traditional Judeo-Christian maintained the Sabbath also later."²⁵ The tendency to maintain the Sabbath was still present in the pagan-Christian Church, as it appears in the patristic literature. Occasionally there were complaints about this -without much success, for example from Ignatius of Antioch in his *Letter to the Magnesians*, from Tertullian in *About Prayer*. We also have echoes of the fact that mainly in the Orient but also in Milan and partly in North Africa that Saturdays (Sabbaths) were exempted from fasting, even during the period preceding Easter (Lent).²⁶ But [and this is very interesting also as a proof that the Early

²² Rordorf, *Shabbat und Sonntag in der Alte Kirche*, p.9.

²³ Ibid, p.XIII par.1.

²⁴ Ibid, p. XV par. 1.

²⁵ Ibid, p.XI par.1.

²⁶ Tertullian, *About Fast*; Augustin, *Letter 36 to Casulanus*.

Church had a difficulties separating from Judaism] it is in the fourth century -precisely the century of Constantine's decree- that witnessed a new impressive re-evaluation of the Sabbath when believers started to gather for a divine service, even to require not to work.²⁷

This is very interesting because as a matter of fact, a very important turn in Sunday's replacement of the biblical Sabbath goes back to the fourth century, to the time of the Emperor Constantine when the Church, for political, social, and religious reasons adopted the first day of the week, Sunday, as the day of rest and worship. Sunday is a heritage from the Constantinian and post-Constantinian Church. In fact, the turning point in the observation of Sunday as the substitution of the biblical Sabbath by Sunday is *The Decree of Constantine* dated March 21, 321: "On the venerable Day of the sun let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and let all workshops be closed. In the country, however, persons engaged in agriculture may freely and awfully continue their pursuits: because it often happens that another day is not so suitable for grain-sowing or for vine-planting: lest by neglecting the proper moment for such operation the bounty of heaven should be lost."

Hutton Weber, a professor at the University of Nebraska says that: "It is possible that the legislation of Constantine had no relation to Christianity; it seems, on the contrary, that the emperor, in his quality of Pontifex Maximus, simply added the day of the sun, already firmly established in the Roman empire, to the other feast days of the sacred calendar. But what commenced as a pagan institution terminated as a Christian institution; and a long series of imperial decrees -written during the fourth, the fifth and the sixth centuries prohibited working on Sunday with a growing severity."

"Assembling for the divine service, on Sabbath day, is attested only from the fourth century. The Latin translation of the Ethiopian version of the Apostolic Tradition says: *Die prima sabbati in hora oblationis, si potest, episcopus communicet omnem populum sua manu.* Commenting on the expression "Die prime sabbati" Rordorf says that the Ethiopian text evoking the sabbatical Eucharist mentions only the Sabbath and that "Die prime" is an addition in the Latin text: "It is known in fact that in Ethiopia, the Sabbath has remained the day of a Christian feast."²⁸

In a very well documented book entitled, *The Sabbath Roots, The African Connection* the African-American Charles Bradford, a Seventh-day Adventist Minister, a brilliant theologian, teacher and preacher retraces the history of sabbatarian Christianity from ancient times until today in East African countries like Ethiopia, Egypt, in West Africa ie. Ghana, North, Central and South Africa and, as he calls it, in the African Diaspora, particularly in the U.S. Unfortunately, generally speaking, says the author, theology is mainly interested and influenced by western culture and western stereotypes.

"The Christian sabbathic feasts of the fourth century [as we have said] are a post-Constantinian innovation. The new use seems to have appeared in the traditional communities of Egypt and having spread from there to Asia Minor and in Syria by the great

²⁷ Apostolic Constitutions Socrate, Ecclesiastic History.

²⁸ Ibid Rordorf, pp.XIII+162,163.

Cappadocians. While efforts were generally made not to "judaize" in spite of the sabbatical feasts, some polemic declarations of the church fathers show that this effort was not successful. A study of the medieval sources shows that the Church of the following centuries was always built on the foundations of the union of the Sabbath and Sunday set in the patristic epoch. The history of respecting Sunday at the time of the Reformation and further is still to be written.²⁹

I would like to conclude this section with a quotation which I find at the same time very interesting in its substance and because of the authority from where it comes and puzzling in its conclusion. In his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennium Aveniente* (1999), Pope John Paul II says: "In Christianity, time has a fundamental importance. It is in its dimension that the world has been created, and it is within its dimension that the history of salvation develops. Because of the relation of time with God we have the duty to sanctify it. This is why times are dedicated to God, days, weeks, as it is already the case in the religion of the Old Covenant, and as it is still done, even though in a new manner, in Christianity. Christ is the Lord of time and so every Sunday reminds us of the day of the resurrection of the Lord."

Then the Pope comes to the subject of the Jubilee, and of its social meaning (re-establishing equality among the children of Israel in giving back freedom and land to those who lost them). He quotes the book of Leviticus (chap.25) and he comments: "The source of such a tradition was strictly theological, first of all in relation to the theology of creation and to the theology of divine providence. In fact, a common conviction existed: only to God, as Creator, belongs the *dominium altum* which is to say the lordship over all creation, particularly over the earth" (Le.25:23).

A number of things could be said about this statement. With all respect for the Pope I will admit to but one remark: if to God only belongs the *dominium altum* over the earth and all creation, over space, doesn't the *dominium altum* over time belong to Him as well?

If it is so, has man the right to change what God himself instituted and wrote in the Ten Commandments?

I don't see any problem in accepting that traditionally and then theologically, Sunday has become the day of remembrance of the resurrection of Jesus. The problem is in the replacement of one day by another, of Sabbath by Sunday, which means the change of God's Law by man.

At this point of history we have reached "the time of the week of five days work, and at the time of Jewish-Christian rapprochement."³⁰ Willy Rordorf suggests to think about "the balanced position of the Churches of the fourth century -which has been forgotten."³¹ I would like to add that our time is also the time of ecumenism, of *Aggiornamento* and of "a return to

29 Ibid Rordorf, pp XIII.XIV.XIX,XX.

30 Willy Rordorf.

31 Ibid Rordorf, p.XIV par.1.

the sources" and so, for the sake of truth, only one day should be considered the day of rest and worship: the Sabbath of the Lord.

Abraham J. Heschel says in his book: *The Earth is the Lord's*: "Pagans extol sacred things, the prophets extol sacred deeds. The most precious object that has ever been on earth are the two tables of stone which Moses received upon Mount Sinai. But when coming down the mount Moses saw the people dance around the golden calf, he cast the tables out of his hands and broke them before their eyes.

The stone is broken but the Words are alive. The replica Moses subsequently received has gone too, but the Words did not die. They still knock at our gates as if begging to be engraved on the tablets of every heart."³²

In fact, the Words have been copied, engraved and printed throughout the centuries in millions and millions of Bibles circulating around the world in thousands of languages and dialects. And in whatever language the Bible has been translated the Sabbath of the seventh day of the week has not been changed.

In his book *The Sabbath* the same author says: "Sabbaths symbolize the sanctification of life, the 'to be' not the 'to have' which is built in space, even though space has also its importance and value." But he says, "time, being thingless and insubstantial appears to us as if it had no reality but it has, and so, because the Sabbath symbolizes the sanctification of time the Sabbaths are our great cathedrals."³³ I like this poetical theology.

Sabbath is a sacred time and a time of grace indeed!

³² Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's*. p. 14.

³³ Heschel, *The Sabbath*. p. 5 par.2.