

HOW TO KEEP THE LORD'S DAY

There's a time and place for everything!" How often was that saying used on us in our childhood, or so it seemed, when we were determined upon some unapproved activity. Perhaps in turn we have used it on our own children with the same finality. Despite the way in which this truth is so often abused, it has a very real relationship to the experience of God's people.

The rhythm of life it suggests is very basic to humanity. *"There is a time to be born and a time to die"* (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:1-15), and also a time to give over to the Lord. The fourth Mosaic commandment spelled this out for the Jews:

"Six days shall you labor and perform all your tasks. But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. You shall do no work on it; neither shall your sons or daughters or your servants: not even the cattle or the strangers who may be staying with you." (Exodus 19:9-10)

For the Jews, this Day of Rest came to symbolize the rest taken by the Lord Himself after creation (cf. Genesis 1:31), and was a celebration of the Creator and His works.

THE NEW CREATION

Jesus changed this concept of the Sabbath as a Day of Rest. He worked on it: teaching, healing and doing good. He violated the letter of the Law in Jewish eyes and thus earned the opposition of the leaders of Israel: *"Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for He does not keep the Sabbath'"* (John 9:16). A

New Creation was being ushered in: God's "rest" was not as final as it had seemed.

The first Christians augmented the Sabbath with a new festival, the Lord's Day, the first of the week. This was the day of Christ's resurrection, *"the day that the Lord had made"*, and it became a day on which the Christians gathered for worship, teaching and fellowship. Thus the Sabbath, festival of the first creation, took second place to the Lord's Day, celebration of the New Creation.

THE EASTERN TRADITION

In the Eastern Churches, reverence for the Sabbath – Saturday – continues. It is sanctified by the Divine Liturgy and on it we sing hymns such as the following, recalling the first creation:

To You, O Lord, Ordainer and Creator of the world, the universe offers the God bearing martyrs as the first fruits of nature. Therefore by their prayers and by the intercession of the Mother of God, preserve Your Church and our country in safety and peace: You who alone are most merciful

Kontakion for Saturdays

Perhaps it is because of this continued observance of the Sabbath that the Eastern Churches have not considered Sunday as primarily a Day of Rest, but as a Day of Worship: to be given over to the Lord and His purposes.

Today we are accustomed to a minimum approach to Sunday worship: a Divine Liturgy, preferably short. Better yet, go on Saturday night and 'get it out of the way'. A far cry from the practice of the early Church when a Sun-

day Liturgy might last all night (cf. Acts 20:7-12).

It is also hard to reconcile this attitude with our present day tradition of Sunday worship in the Eastern Churches, where the Divine Liturgy is certainly meant to be the high-point of our celebration, but not the only facet to it. In our observance, the Lord's Day begins with **Saturday Vespers**, which announces the weekly remembrance of the Lord's resurrection. It continues with **Sunday Orthros**, the morning service of the Church, and reaches its climax in the **Eucharistic Liturgy**, where the Lord comes into the midst of His faithful ones. In many churches the Eucharist then spills over into a fellowship hour, where the believers gather to enjoy one another's company in the Lord.

AN APPROACH FOR US

Clearly, in the Eastern Churches, we are urged to give the Lord much more of His day than one hour of it. Nor is this to be limited to the time spent in worship services. What keeps us from finding our 'R&R' in the Renewal and Recreation of God's People? Private prayer and reading, fellowship groups, visiting the sick or the infirm: all these make most appropriate ways of sanctifying the entire Lord's Day.

Saturday evening can be, as is intended, a time of anticipation and preparation. Attending vespers and making your confession are the most public ways of preparation. Reflecting on the scriptures, particularly the readings appointed for Sunday, or reciting the prayers in anticipation of receiving the Eucharist can easily be done at home alone or with the family. In this way our spirits are attuned to the

coming of the King of all, whose Day we begin to observe.

Sunday morning orthros or hours are often served in the churches. Otherwise we can read them privately, listen to tapes or to religious music on the radio to continue our sanctification of the Day. After the Liturgy, many people enjoy taking their meals together, prolonging the communion of the Holy Table in a gathering of love. Instead of parking in front of the TV or card table, we might more enjoy spending a Sunday afternoon with a bedridden or confined friend, advising a youth group or attending a Christian fellowship of some kind. Simply sharing a family outing with a lonely neighbor is a very down-to-earth way of continuing Jesus' practice of healing on the Sabbath! The possibilities are endless, if we are determined to love the Lord with our whole self on His Day.

Is this 'swimming upstream'? – fighting the ordinary ways of our society, where Sunday means business as usual all around us? Of course it is, but does it come as any surprise that we who *“have been baptized, anointed with the Holy Spirit, filled with His light and made holy”*, as our christening service says, should find our joy where unbelievers would not: in Him who is the source of our life? *“Do not be conformed to the spirit of this world,”* writes St. Paul, *“but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect”* (Romans 12:12).

A wholehearted observance of the Lord's Day makes a fitting witness to our willingness to entrust our whole life to Him and to *“put on the new nature created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”* (Ephesians 4:24).

ON THE LORD'S DAY

On the Lord's own day, assemble in common to break bread and offer thanks, but first confess your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure.

(Didache, 14 –70 AD)

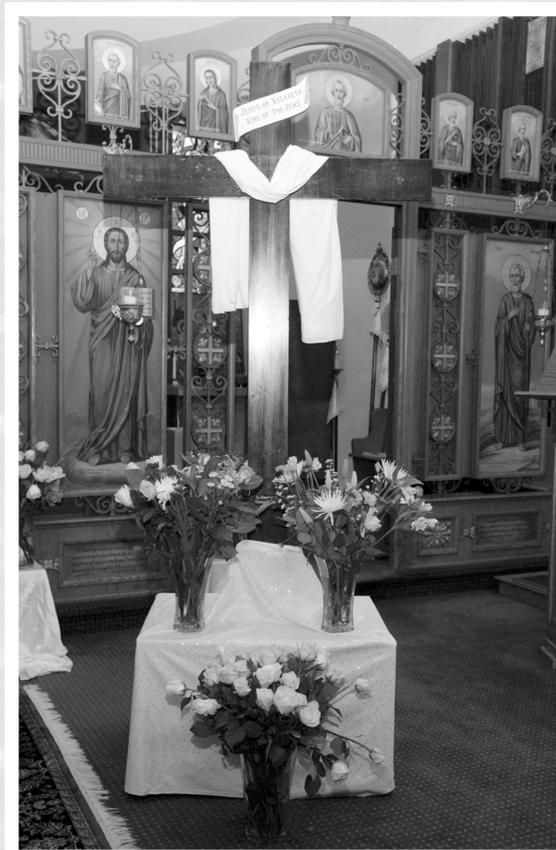
The apostles further appointed: On the first day of the week let there be service, and the reading of the Holy Scriptures, and the oblation: because on the first day of the week our Lord rose from the place of the dead and on the first day of the week He arose upon the world, and on the first day of the week He ascended up to heaven, and on the first day of the week He will appear at last with the angels of heaven.

(Teaching of the Apostles, 2 – 225 AD)

And on the day of our Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's day, meet more diligently, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus, and sent Him to us, and condescended to let Him suffer, and raised Him from the dead. Otherwise what apology will he make to God who does not assemble on that day to hear the saving word concerning the resurrection, on which we pray thrice, standing in memory of Him who arose in three days, in which is performed the reading of the prophets, the preaching of the Gospel, the oblation of the sacrifice, the gift of the holy food?

(Apostolic Constitutions 2, 7:59 – 400 AD)

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